

A Scoping Review of Bullying and Harassment in Voluntary Organisations

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Background

Workplace bullying is a serious problem for workplaces, experienced by on average, 14.6% of workers. We were interested to see if bullying and harassment were less prevalent in the voluntary sector, given that the nature of the work undertaken by voluntary organisations gives them exposure to situations of injustice and ill-treatment and thus they will have an awareness of the impact and outcomes from abuse with concomitant skills to see and deal with bullying situations internally. We were interested to explore if any studies have been undertaken that reveal dynamics at play in the voluntary sector which could be applied to increase the effectiveness of intervention across organisations generally. While studies on bullying have been conducted across many occupational sectors, it appears that the voluntary sector has not received systematic attention. In the context of limited empirical study and likely research gaps regarding the influential factors in the context of voluntary organisations, a scoping review is indicated. Therefore, a scoping review was undertaken on adult-to-adult bullying in voluntary organisations to address this deficit in the academic literature.

Aims and Objectives

We followed the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework to conduct a scoping review in order to;

1. Examine the extent of and nature of workplace bullying and harassment in voluntary organisations.
2. Synthesise findings to explore the organisational, structural and contextual factors that are relevant to an understanding of bullying and harassment in voluntary organisations.
3. Outline key research directions for workplace bullying and harassment in voluntary organisations.

Design and Methods

The review, using COVIDENCE software, screened 636 records on title and abstract, assessed 44 articles for eligibility, arriving at 16 articles for full text review. Characteristics of the articles were extracted and charted, and a synthesis of the articles undertaken. Articles were both empirical and conceptual.

Results

All studies were published between 2000 and 2022. Five studies were undertaken in the US, four in the UK, 3 across a number of International NGOs, one in Australia and one in Pakistan. Less than half (6) of the papers mentioned a theoretical stance. There were eight peer reviewed papers, four reports, three dissertations and one book chapter. The sampling was predominantly staff in voluntary organisations including fundraisers. A range of methods were employed; documentary analysis (2), interviews (7), focus groups (1), surveys (7) and case studies (1). Contrary to expectation, prevalence estimates for bullying were broadly similar to those for organisations generally, however sexual harassment appears to be a serious problem, especially regarding fundraisers who 'span' the space between voluntary organisations and philanthropic donors. The synthesis identified organisational, structural and cultural factors which were themed as follows; *'Typical and atypical power relations'*, *'Exploitation of virtuosity'*, *'Dissonance, defensiveness and denial'* and *'Extreme dependency and pathologies of power'*. We concluded the context of being 'voluntary' renders bullying and harassment particularly complex, in respect of both manifestation of bullying or harassment and the response to it within the organisation, driving a self-perpetuating process involving dissonance and denial with potentially potent effects on those who experience or witness it.

Dissemination

Preliminary results were presented at the International Workplace Bullying and Harassment Conference in San Diego, September 2022. A publication is being prepared for *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* Journal.