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Intra- Gender Dynamics Beyond Numbers: Challenges Faced by Female Employees in Female-Dominated Workplaces

A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Bullying is humiliating, damaging, and cruel. However, its significant impact on the psychological well-being of the victim is often overlooked. In addition, bullying within the workplace affects productivity, staff turnover, morale, and motivation of employees. This paper is based on the thesis that was compiled which explored the effects of female-to-female employee bullying within a female-dominated workplace at the Department of Social Development, Gauteng Province. The study adopted a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design to explore participants' perspectives on their experiences, actions, and events. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 10 participants who were employees working in a female-dominated workplace at the Department of Social Development, Gauteng Province. Semi-structured interviews were used for collecting the data which was then analysed using semi-structured interviews. The study findings contribute to filling the research gap on female-to-female workplace bullying in South Africa. Therefore, this paper addresses the challenges that female employees experience in a female-dominated workplace while they strive for success and reach the glass ceiling.

Keywords

bullying, bullyism, patronising, female-dominated workplace, employees

INTRODUCTION

Employment forms a critical part of human survival and growth. Therefore, the employment relationship is a source of growth. According to Botha (2019), employment relationships can be described as a complex combination of human interactions across various roles. However, different forms of workplace bullying such as verbal, written, or physical, often occur (Botha, 2019). The common narrative in relation to workplace bullying suggests that men bully women employees. This is often described as men exercising hegemonic masculinity over women. Some employees develop a negative perception of workplaces after experiencing bullying, whether related to their personal characteristics or work-related.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Approach

The qualitative approach is employed for this study. This research approach was suitable in all stages of the study, which aims to understand and interpret the effects of bullying among female employees. Weiten (2021) states that qualitative approach allows a researcher to collect and explore rich data. It enables the researcher to better understand people's subjective experiences. The qualitative approach relies on small sample sizes, with data typically collected through open-ended interviews, field notes, and observations. The collected data is analysed using patterns and themes (Weiten, 2021).

Denzin (2000) states that, despite its limitations, the qualitative research approach is regarded as one of the most adaptable research approaches as it saves time for the researcher. Therefore, with the adoption of the qualitative research approach, the researcher was able to gain in-depth data which she deeply analysed to gain in-depth information regarding the effects of bullying on female employees (Pope & Mays 2020).

Research Design

The use of the phenomenological research design in the study enables the identification of core aspects of human experiences, as described by participants. Therefore, the researcher must understand what the participants have in common based on the narratives that they provided during data collection (Denzin, 2020). The phenomenological study's main purpose is to ensure transparency and set aside biases, to avoid preconceived assumptions about people's experiences, and feelings while focusing on participants' responses to a particular situation (Weiten, 2021). A phenomenological study is rooted in a philosophical framework and involves specific methods and procedures, focusing on a small group of subjects. This approach requires extensive and prolonged engagement to uncover patterns and relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Population and Sample

The research population for the current study consisted of female employees working in a female-dominated workplace at the Department of Social Development, Gauteng Province, aged between 30 and 45 years, and with a work tenure ranging from 2 to +5 years. The Department of Social Development, Gauteng province, consists of cluster offices that provide social services to communities within their areas. Therefore, this study focuses on Gauteng regional office and three cluster offices in Soweto. This population was relevant as they could provide rich data about workplace bullying experiences that some of it hindered their career growth and affected their work performance. Furthermore, they shared data about workplace bullying incidents involving current or former colleagues who left the organisation due to such experiences.

Sample and Sample Size

From the sample, there is a sample size which can be described as the specific number of participants included in a study. The current study focuses on a sample of female employees working in a female-dominated workplace. Summer (2010) specified that in a study, it is crucial to outline the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which are used to specify the participants. The sample for this study included 10 female employees who were social workers aged 30 to 45 years with 2 to +5 years of work experience in the Department of Social Development. The study's exclusion criteria were female employees working in the departments such as HR, and Head office. This includes the female securities, cleaners, and transport offices working in the Department of Social Development regional and cluster offices. Pseudonyms were used to replace the participants' real names to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality.

Sampling Procedures

Nyamongo (2023) defines a recruitment strategy as a project-specific plan designed to identify and enrol individuals who will participate in the study. The study adopted the volunteer sampling procedure. This procedure highlights the specific criteria for how potential participants will be screened, the specific location where the study will be conducted, and the research approach that will be employed.

Research Instruments

The research instrument for this study was the interview guide. However, according to Creswell and Creswell (2022) in a qualitative study, the researcher is regarded as the critical instrument. This is due to the researcher being the one to interview participants and take notes. Therefore, the researcher serves as the device used to collect (Creswell and Creswell, 2022).

The interview guide using semi-structured interviews was effective in reaching the main aim and secondary objectives of the current study as it focused mostly on the dynamic experiences of the participants. The interview guide allowed the researcher to explore unanticipated themes, which strengthened the research findings.

Pre-Testing

Pre-testing is the process of evaluating the research instrument on a small sample of participants before conducting the actual study. The aim of conducting pre-testing is to highlight challenges that might occur in the actual study such as language barriers, cultural beliefs, and words that might be unclear. It is also used to consider the time frame set for the research instrument (Denzin, 2020).

For the current study, the researcher conducted one pre-test interview with the individual who met the criteria and possessed similar characteristics as that of the target population. Conducting the pre-test allowed the researcher to identify any challenges that could hinder the process of conducting the study. It also enabled the researcher to refine the interview guide by determining whether the questions were clear, and answerable. Additionally, it helped the researcher to monitor any challenges that might occur with the language and the approach used for the interviews. The researcher highlighted that the questions were clear and answerable however, they were submitted to the supervisor who provided feedback on the pre-test interview and guidelines on how the interviews could be conducted with the main participants.

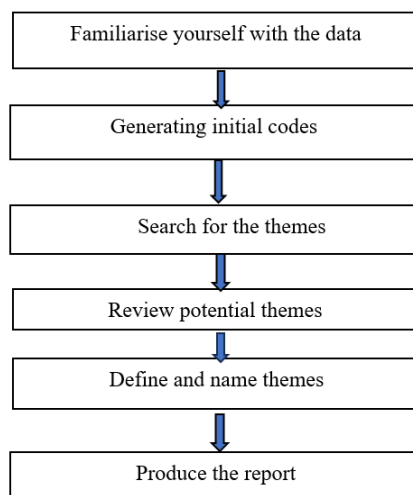
Method of Data Collection

The study employed face-to-face in-depth interviews as the primary method for data collection. Weiten (2021) defines primary methods of data collection as the direct form of gathering data which includes interviews, questionnaires, surveys, and experiments. However, Leedy and Ormrod (2001) highlight the disadvantages of face-to-face interviews which are the impracticality of conducting the process when the sample is bigger. Face-to-face interviews are also time-consuming and costly. The current study used face-to-face in-depth interviews as the method of data collection. These interviews were conducted in a private office known by the participants and the researcher. This enabled the researcher to collect rich data on the experiences of workplace bullying for female employees. The researcher used audio recordings, with prior permission obtained from the potential participants, to record the interviews. This approach ensured the accuracy of the data collected.

Note that the methods differ and depend on the used research approach (Weiten, 2021).

Method of Data Analysis

The data for this study was analysed using the thematic data analysis method Braun and Clarke (2021) defined thematic data analysis as an effective method for identifying, analysing, and reporting the patterns within the collected data. In addition, thematic data analysis helps to minimise and organise the data to further assist in interpreting the aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2021).



Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness also known as rigor, refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretations, and methods used to ensure the quality of the study (Connelly, 2016). To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, four principles were incorporated, these are credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability, all of which are discussed below;

Credibility - Shenton (2004) describes the confidence of the researcher in the study's findings. In the current study, the researcher aimed to maintain clarity and transparency in the use of research methods while confidently presenting findings that are accurate and trustworthy.

Confirmability - This principle refers to the neutrality or the degree of findings that are consistent and can be repeated. Confirmability can be demonstrated by providing an audit trail that outlines the details of each step in the data analysis process and showing whether the researcher was biased or not when interpreting the findings (Connelly, 2016). In the current study, the researcher ensured that the audit trail provides accurate data collected from the participants without being biased.

Dependability - Dependability refers to the consistency of findings even if the study is repeated in the same context, with the same sample (Connelly, 2016). In the current study, the researcher aimed to establish dependability by thoroughly reviewing and examining the research process and data analysis, ensuring the findings are consistent and can be repeated.

Transferability - Transferability measures whether the research findings can be generalised or transferred to another context. Transferability can be compared to external validity. Hence it refers to the extent by which the results can be applied to other studies like the current study (Connelly, 2016). In this dissertation, the researcher provides thick descriptions to ensure that the findings can be generalised or transferred to other contexts.

Ethical Consideration

Salkind (2021) states that ethical issues refer to the standards or norms considered when conducting a study, which helps to distinguish between right and wrong. Ethical consideration determines the acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (Salkind, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Ross (2019), a female-dominated workplace can be defined as the pink-collar profession, where females are considered less respectable as compared to other fields of work.

One participant highlighted that, *“The intimidation that is placed on other employees at work”* (Bluecorn, females, 6 years of work experience).

Another participant’s definition includes an in-depth explanation of the workplace bullying and its consequences, as follows:

“I understand workplace bullying as the negative acts that occur within the workplace which may include, but are not limited to intimidation, unconstructive criticism, deliberate sabotage, and demeaning feedback to name a few. These actions can result in the development of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, long-term stress, and demotivation to name a few” (Mbali D., female, 4 years of work experience).

Refiloe (female, 5 years of work experience) said that *“Workplace bullying is the negative acts directed toward employees for example intimidating, undermining employees, setting them up for failure and constantly reminding them of old mistakes.”* In addition, another participant shared the consequences of workplace bullying related to females by stating that:

“Where the dominant is females the kind of identified bullying is emotional not physical. Emotional can be seen in a gangsterism form of groups and use of name- calling to identify you for example body shaming. Attaching the name to the character or personality” (Goodness, female, 4 years of work experience).

Belinda’s response included the experience or observation within the workplace, as follows:

“I do understand bullying; we do experience bullying in the workplace more especially by managers in the workplace. It can be gossiping with other officials; it can be by demeaning other officials and by failing to credit the work that is done by the employees or the officials” (Belinda, female, 7 years of work experiences).

“I, myself had been the victim previously. Workplace bullying is basically when you have colleagues who taking advantage of you, who I can give examples, like having colleagues wanting you to do things that are not within your work scope or forcing you to do their work. Speaking with you in the language or terms that are not professional just because for instance in my case, my age, so they took advantage because of my age” (Nonduduzo, female, 4 years of work experience).

The researcher probed on her response for clarity on whether her experience of workplace bullying was about work, physical character, or just a personal matter which happened within the organisation. She responded:

“Both, people have insecurities, when you portray a certain character, dressing in a particular, you know so not everyone will like you and they will always look for something to bring you down” (Nonduduzo, female, 4 years of work experience).

The above findings showcase participants’ knowledge regarding workplace bullying. Upton (2010) argues that bullying is a form of violence, which can be emotional. Hence, it is important to identify various types of violence (Upton, 2010).

In addressing this title, the researcher observed that the participants understood the type of workplace they were in and the challenges that were embedded within it. The participants shared their personal experiences regarding the female-dominated workplace. Cunliffe (2011) indicated the contradictions in the findings of gender differences and bullying in South Africa. However, it was reported that South African females in the health sector are the most vulnerable to workplace bullying. They also highlighted that workplace bullying among females is undermined, as it is perceived to be expected from men. The findings indicate that while females are aware of workplace bullying, the challenges and pressure within their work scope often expose them to situations where they either become perpetrators or victims of bullying. Calitz’s (2014) study, which focused on social workers, indicates that occupational stress can be caused by the internal environment (individual), external factors (work or environment), or the nature of work. These factors include poor working conditions, low compensation, lack of resources, a lack of support, and the increasing demand for service delivery. Bernstein and Trimm (2016) mentioned that victims of bullying suffer from psychological well-being, which causes an increase in the level of anxiety and fear, lowered self-esteem, and efficacy with lowered belief and confidence in their professional competence. Therefore, social workers experience stress, bullying, a decrease in job satisfaction, burnout, and a lack of job engagement due to these stressors. However, the findings indicate the need for intervention in the form of support for employees in a female-dominated workplace to avoid toxicity.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the effects of workplace bullying among female employees working in a female-dominated workplace, focusing on social workers. The objectives of the study were successfully accomplished. The study identifies the lack of knowledge on workplace bullying, the visibility of Department of Social Development, Gauteng policies, the lack of the standardised coping mechanism, and ignoring some of workplace bullying cases. The lack of awareness among female social workers hinders them from utilising support mechanisms provided by the department, causing them to rely on their own coping strategies to remain productive. It is critical to address the awareness, as it will help uplift social workers’ morale, boost the social work profession in general, enhance productivity, reduce excessive turnover, address mental health challenges, and curb the abuse of sick leave and absenteeism.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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