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The impact of perceived effort-reward imbalance on workplace bullying: also a matter of organizational identification

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The impact of perceived effort–reward imbalance on workplace bullying: also a matter of organizational identification

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Abstract

Work environments characterized by inadequate work conditions have been widely recognized as being particularly prone to the occurrence and exacerbation of bullying behavior. Accordingly, this longitudinal study aimed to explore whether the impact of effort–reward imbalance (ERI) on workplace bullying was mediated by a lower perception of organizational justice, and whether the association between ERI and perceptions of justice was moderated by organizational identification. In the current study, a sample of $N = 195$ Spanish employees from different occupational sectors filled in an online questionnaire at two different times with a time lag of 8 months. In line with the hypothesized moderated mediation model, results showed that organizational justice mediated the impact of ERI on workplace bullying. Moreover, the effect of perceived ERI on organizational justice was stronger for employees with low organizational identification. Overall, this study can contribute to better understanding how and when ERI boosts the risk of workplace bullying. Accordingly, early intervention designed to buffer the negative effects of ERI should focus on increasing individual levels of organizational identification.

Keywords

Workplace bullying
ERI model
effort–reward imbalance
organizational justice
organizational identification

Introduction

Workplace bullying is largely recognized as a systematic and repeated action of harassing, offending and socially excluding an individual with the main consequences of negatively affecting his/her job performance and jeopardizing his/her health (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). The large amount of studies aimed at exploring this phenomenon is justified by the seriousness of its outcomes, such as symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep problems and musculoskeletal disorders (Vignoli, Guglielmi, Balducci, & Bonfiglioli, 2015). Empirical evidence supported the situational approach to workplace bullying, and therefore deficiencies in work organization and leadership behavior may result in a stressful environment that allows workplace bullying to flourish (Samnani & Singh, 2012). For instance, management practices could shape how individuals experience feelings of shame and pride and, consequently, concur to legitimize bullying behaviors (Braithwaite, Ahmed, & Braithwaite, 2008). Consistently, the stress/emotion/CWB model (Spector & Fox, 2002) states that counterproductive work behavior (e.g. bullying behavior) represents an emotion-based reaction to stressful conditions.

The perception of unfair treatment within the workplace has been shown to trigger detrimental behavior such as sabotage (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002), withdrawal (Blader & Tyler, 2009). In line with the stress/emotion/CWB model, when employees consider the treatment received in the organizational context unfair, they experience unpleasant emotions of anger, humiliation and disappointment, and react with behaviors intentionally aimed at threatening the interests of the organization or its members (e.g. workplace bullying). The perception of low organizational justice could result from an inappropriate balance between effort and rewards within the work environment. In line with the core notion of the effort–reward imbalance (ERI) model (Siegrist, 1996), a lack of correspondence between the effort individuals devote to their job and the reward they receive in exchange may elicit severe psychological distress, which consequently affects both mental and physical health. In the current study, it has been hypothesized that a condition of high effort–reward imbalance could foster employees' perception of a lack of

3. T1 ERI	.46	.21	-.11	.02	<i>n.a.</i>			
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. T1 Organizational identification	3.09	.97	-.02	.09	-.15*	.87		
5. T2 Organizational justice	2.75	.91	.03	.01	-.23**	.17*	.90	
6. T2 Workplace bullying	1.63	1.52	-.10	.01	.28***	-.12	-.44***	.83

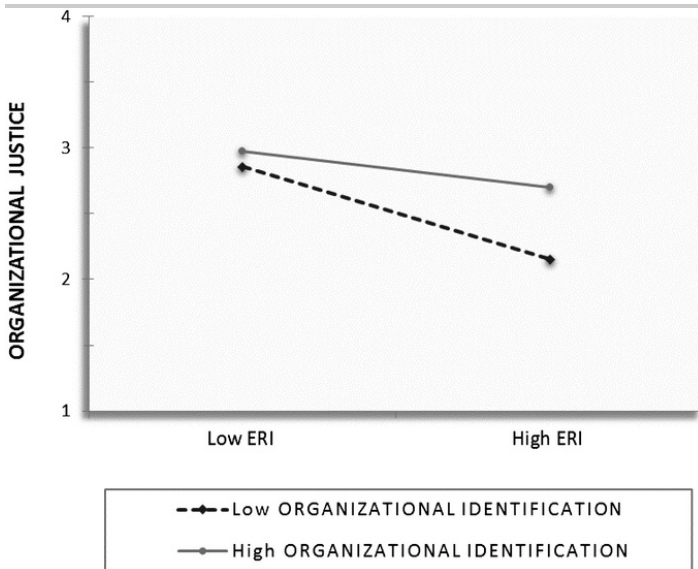
* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$.

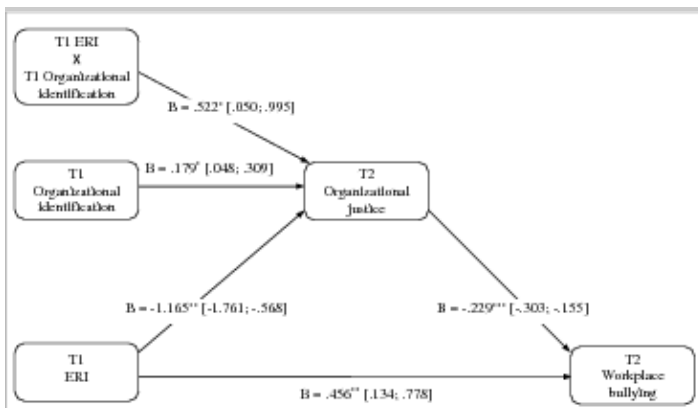
The index of moderated mediation was significant: $B = -.120$, $SE = .061$, 95% CI $[-.259; -.014]$). As displayed in Figure 1, this analysis revealed a conditional indirect effect of T1 ERI on T2 workplace bullying through T2 organizational justice, with the indirect effect significant at low ($-1SD$; $B = .383$, $SE = .104$, 95% CI $[.214; .626]$) and moderate (Mean; $B = .267$, $SE = .088$, 95% CI $[.119; .455]$) levels of T1 organizational identification.

Figure 1. Interaction of ERI and organizational identification in predicting the perception of organizational justice.



In contrast, this indirect effect was not significant at high levels of T1 organizational identification ($+1SD$; $B = .151$, $SE = .108$, 95% CI $[-.047; .382]$). This result implies that the perceived level of organizational justice mediates the relationship between ERI and workplace bullying for employees characterized by low to moderate levels of identification with their organization, although not in employees that strongly identify with their organization. These results are depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Results of the moderated mediation analysis. The relationship between ERI and workplace bullying through organizational justice was moderated by organizational identification.



Notes: ERI = Effort-Reward Imbalance ratio; [95% CI]; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The current study aimed to test a moderated mediation model with the main objective of further investigating the mechanism underlying the association between ERI and workplace bullying. The obtained results corroborate the core

assumption of the most recent theoretical perspective on workplace bullying, by showing that inadequate work conditions may give rise to a stressful environment that represents a fertile ground in which bullying can spread (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Furthermore, this research goes one step further by revealing the mediational role of organizational justice within the relationship between ERI and workplace bullying. According to our results, a high imbalance between effort and rewards may negatively influence the perception of organizational justice, which may in turn lower the threshold of bullying occurring in the workplace. Our results indicate that organizational identification may play a buffering role in moderating the detrimental effect of ERI on justice perceptions (van Knippenberg et al., 2007). As shown in Figure 2, the perception of a high imbalance between the amount of effort put into one's work and the resulting rewards (i.e. high ERI) may not undermine the perception of justice only for those employees who strongly identify with their organization. This study presents some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of self-reported questionnaires may be associated to common variance method bias. Moreover, the relatively small sample size may affect the opportunity to generalize the obtained results to the whole working population.

Conclusions

This study provides further evidence of the role played by an organizational environment perceived as stressful (i.e. characterized by a high effort-reward imbalance) in allowing workplace bullying to flourish. Moreover, this causal relationship has been empirically explained through the perception of impaired organizational justice among employees. On the other hand, our results show that measures aimed at boosting organizational identification will not only avoid a detrimental impact of ERI on perceived organizational justice, but may also decrease the likelihood of bullying behaviors occurring.

Disclosure statement

AQ2 No conflicts of interest were declared.

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