A review of research trends in the bullying of higher education employees, 2012–2022

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this review is to explore and identify gaps within the trends that have occurred in research relating to the bullying of higher education employees.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematized review procedure following preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines was used to search for and review literature for inclusion in the study. Studies were evaluated against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Included studies were then put through a critical appraisal process before being inductively coded using the NVivo software. Codes were then grouped into classifications, which were further grouped into themes.

Findings – The review identified three major themes among the included studies: (a) cause and effect, (b) demographic examinations and (c) institutional approaches to bullying. On their own, each theme stands as a pillar of the research trends explored in the decade of publication included in this review, highlighting several of the many approaches that could be taken when conducting bullying research. Within each theme, findings converge to provide insight to the actual landscape of bullying occurrences among higher education faculty.

Originality/value – Although there are a number of studies exploring bullying among employees in the field of higher education, to the best of the author’s knowledge, this is one of the first papers to identify the themes of that research, ultimately summing up our current understanding of the phenomena and where the gaps in our knowledge lie.

Keywords Bullying, Research trends, Higher education, Faculty, Workplace bullying, Systematized review, PRISMA

Bullying, a type of incivility involving repetitive, aggressive behavior and a real or perceived power imbalance that lasts at least six months in duration, happens in workplaces worldwide (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, 2019; Palmer et al., 2023). Physical, verbal or social acts can be a part of bullying, which can have lasting effects for both the victim and the perpetrator (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, 2019). Although bullying is frequently discussed in a school setting, bullying can occur well after people have departed school. However, this lack of discussion can lead to a reduction in antibullying efforts. This can be particularly problematic when paired with the knowledge that bullying affects over half of the American workforce (though that percentage is continuing to rise) through participation as a perpetrator, victim or observer (Namie, 2021).

Bullying is the most commonly reported mistreatment in the academic workplace (Rosen et al., 2016), with closer to two-thirds of American higher education employees affected (Hollis, 2017) than the half that are affected in the general American workforce (Namie, 2021). This is in part due to a lack of policy, at institutional, state and national levels,
addressing workplace bullying as a prohibited form of harassment. Additionally, power structures inherent in academia create an environment that is ripe for abuse in the form of bullying (Hollis, 2017). Although there is variation between academic field, with variations between behaviors and impacts, bullying is present regardless of discipline (Moss et al., 2022). The purpose of this review is to explore and identify gaps within the trends that have occurred in research relating to the bullying of higher education employees. The review was guided by the following research question:

**RQ1.** What are the research trends in bullying of higher education employees by other higher education employees from 2012 to 2022?

**Methods**

To identify studies for this review, Scopus was searched through the [institution] Libraries’ subscription. The database was searched for the terms “bullying” and “higher education OR college OR university” and “employee OR faculty OR staff OR teacher” and not “school bullying OR student” in the article title, abstract or keywords fields. Filters were used within Scopus to limit the search results to journal articles available in the English language with publication dates between 2012 and 2022. A search results set of 82 articles was exported to a spreadsheet for evaluation, with the fields title, year, author keywords, abstract, authors, source title, volume, issue, start page, end page and DOI included for each article.

Once in the spreadsheet, the articles’ title and abstract were checked against inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles were eligible for inclusion if they focused on bullying research, their study population was higher education employees (faculty/staff) who bullied one another and they were published as journal articles. Studies were marked for exclusion if they were not published in English, if they discussed the bullying of students, if they focused on K-12 settings, if there were nonjournal article publication types, if they focused on nonbullying forms of violence (such as incivility, harassment, lateral violence or mobbing) or if they occurred in a hospital setting. Nonbullying forms of violence were excluded from this review due to variance in definitions globally. Studies that included these forms of violence using a definition that applies to bullying were anticipated (through preliminary searching) to be included with a specific mention of the term “bullying” within their abstracts or research questions. A validity check was conducted by two individuals to ensure the studies met the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and 23 articles were found appropriate for inclusion (see Table 1). Full text was then retrieved, with one article being unavailable. The full text of the remaining 22 articles was then analyzed by the author to ensure continued fit with the stated criteria, and an additional four articles were deleted due to being non-English language (n = 1), not about bullying (n = 2) and of the research summary publication style (n = 1). This left 18 studies for inclusion in the review (see Figure 1).

An assessment of quality (also known as critical appraisal) was conducted for each of the 18 articles meeting the inclusion/exclusion criteria. This assessment looked at the methods, results and discussion of each article to ensure the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Frequencies of exclusion criteria applied to results extracted from Scopus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion criteria</td>
<td>No. of studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbullying focus</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital setting</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-12 setting</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student bullying</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative bullying</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a journal article</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Authors’ own creation
adequate information about the methods was present and methods were appropriate for the scope of the study; the scope of the article focused on bullying of higher education faculty and staff; the use of appropriate analysis was applied; and connections between data, interpretation and conclusions were clear.

No articles failed the appraisal, and all 18 continued on to analysis. After the final set of articles for inclusion was selected, the NVivo platform was used to apply inductive coding to the findings (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020). This process involved
tagging topical (e.g. “age” or “prevalence of bullying”) and methodological (e.g. “Nordic questionnaire for psychological and social factors at work use” or “Workplace Bullying Scale use”) tags to each article (see Appendix). The inductive codes were then grouped into classifications that contained similar codes. For this process, codes were arranged into categories by similarity. For example, many methodological tags were clumped into a category of “measured used,” and some of the topical tags were put into categories such as “causes” and “policy.” These classifications were then further grouped into themes based on similarities between categories, which were used to organizing the findings.

Findings

Although this review included studies published in the 10-year period from 2012 to 2022, studies were not published in every calendar year (see Figure 2). The frequency of study publication did not follow a discernable pattern or trend, nor was there consistent amount of publishing on the topic completed each year. Generally, years were either low publishing (1 article) or high publishing (4+ articles).

The studies included in the review primarily used quantitative methods, with less than a third making use of qualitative methods (see Figure 3). Authors made use of questionnaires (n = 13), interviews (n = 4) and content analysis (n = 1). Not every study used a previously developed and validated measure, though 11 did (Anjum and Muazzam, 2018; Anjum and Muazzam, 2019; Anjum et al., 2019; Badenhorst and Botha, 2022; Björklund et al., 2021; Coyne et al., 2017; Erkutlu and Chafra, 2014; Giorgi, 2012; Glambek et al., 2020; Goodboy et al., 2022; Malik and Björkqvist, 2019). The most frequently used measure was the Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised (Badenhorst and Botha, 2022; Coyne et al., 2017; Erkutlu and Chafra, 2014; Giorgi, 2012; Glambek et al., 2020; Goodboy et al., 2022). Quantitative studies had sample sizes ranging from 141 to 2,384, whereas the sample sizes of qualitative studies ranged from 7 to 20 (see Table 2). A total of 16 studies took place outside the USA (see Table 2).

All of the included studies explored bullying in the general sense; that is, they did not differentiate between lateral bullying, bullying up or bullying down. The foci of the included

![Figure 2](image-url)
studies were varied. Six of the studies focused on different things that could contribute to or shape the bullying experience, such as gender, group identification or psychosocial factors (Anjum and Muazzam, 2018; Badenhorst and Botha, 2022; Björklund et al., 2021; Glambek et al., 2020; Anjum and Muazzam, 2019; Goodboy et al., 2022). Five of the studies looked into effects of bullying on various factors (e.g. turnover intention, employee health) (Anjum et al., 2019; Anjum and Muazzam, 2019; Giorgi, 2012; Malik and Björkqvist, 2019; Qi et al., 2022). Four of the studies explored the prevalence of bullying within their sample populations (Anjum and Muazzam, 2018; Anjum and Muazzam, 2019; Coyne et al., 2017; Giorgi, 2012). Three of the studies explored moderating effects of different factors, such as ethical leadership and coping strategies, on bullying outcomes (Anjum et al., 2019; Erkutlu and Chafra, 2014; Malik and Björkqvist, 2019). Two of the studies examined institutional policies surrounding workplace bullying (Meaney and Armstrong, 2019; Rockett et al., 2017), and two focused on organizational responses to bullying (Hodgins and McNamara, 2017; Hodgins and McNamara, 2019). Single studies focused on the escalation of bullying behavior (Krishna and Soumyaja, 2022), organizational chance (Spagnoli et al., 2017) and cyberbullying (Coyne et al., 2017).
Researchers are largely exploring the connections between different factors (of cause, moderation or effect) as they relate to the workplace bullying experience. Research questions are about the effect of various factors on the prevalence/severity/experience of bullying. In fact, this type of question was present in seven of the included studies (Anjum and Muazzam, 2018; Badenhorst and Botha, 2022; Björklund et al., 2021; Glambek et al., 2020; Goodboy et al., 2022; Qi et al., 2022; Spagnoli et al., 2017). Four studies asked questions about mediating or moderating effects on the bullying experience or its outcomes (Anjum et al., 2019; Erkutlu and Chafra, 2014; Malik and Björkqvist, 2019; Qi et al., 2022), and three asked about the outcomes themselves (Malik and Björkqvist, 2019; Coyne et al., 2017; Giorgi, 2012). Three studies asked questions about organizations and their responses (Hodgins and McNamara, 2017), with two focusing specifically on organizational policies (Meaney and Armstrong, 2019; Rockett et al., 2017). A single study asked a research question about the bullying mechanisms themselves, specifically the escalation process of the behavior (Krishna and Soumyaja, 2022).

The review identified several themes among the included studies. These themes encompass the topics of:

- cause and effect;
- demographic examinations; and
- institutional approach to bullying.

On their own, each theme stands as a pillar of the research trends explored in the decade of publication included in this review, highlighting several of the many approaches that could be taken when conducting bullying research. Within each theme, findings converge to provide insight to the actual landscape of bullying occurrences among higher education faculty.

**Cause and effect**

Although a number of causes, moderators and effects of bullying were explored in the included studies, there are likely many unexplored and/or confounding factors that can influence employee experiences relating to bullying. Continued exploration of the topic may increase our understanding of these factors. In the existing literature, poor social climate was found to increase the likelihood of bullying more than when the climate was supportive and comfortable climate. A lack of manager support, which is common among poor social climates, was independently found to make bullying more likely (Björklund et al., 2021). Not belonging to an in-group, or being nonprototypical, was found to increase the chances of being bullied (Glambek et al., 2020). Experiencing role conflict or a mismatch with job duties led to more bullying, as well as being in a climate that is low in innovation (Björklund et al., 2021). Though not predictive of bullying, gender was found to predict the severity of the bullying behaviors experienced (Anjum and Muazzam, 2018).

Although many studies looked at factors that led to increased bullying, some results demonstrated factors that reduce bullying. A work-group that has established antibullying norms is less likely to have bullying behavior present than those without norms (Glambek et al., 2020). Additionally, ethical leadership makes bullying less likely by increasing psychological safety and psychological contract fulfillment (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2014). A supportive boss can counteract a number of negative workplace factors and facets of organizational climate to reduce bullying prevalence (Goodboy et al., 2022).

The effects of bullying were clearly explored in a number of studies. Bullying was found to make the health of the victim worse by increasing sleep problems, exhaustion, anxiety and depression, though the specific pathways of the bullying-to-health-disturbance effect are yet to be explained (Hodgins and McNamara, 2017; Giorgi, 2012). It has also been shown
to be a predictor of both physical and mental strain (Anjum and Muazzam, 2019; Anjum et al., 2019; Coyne et al., 2017). When negative experiences are more common in the workplace, the experienced strain is stronger (Coyne et al., 2017). This is particularly problematic because increased strain can exacerbate the effects of bullying in other ways (Spagnoli et al., 2017). Bullying also increased job satisfaction and, in turn, turnover intention (Coyne et al., 2017; Qi et al., 2022).

Demographic examinations

Gender was the most commonly explored demographic characteristic in relation to bullying prevalence and severity (Anjum and Muazzam, 2018; Anjum and Muazzam, 2019; Anjum et al., 2019; Badenhorst and Botha, 2022; Coyne et al., 2017; Giorgi, 2012). There was disagreement about the gendered differences in experiencing bullying. Some studies found females are more likely to experience bullying than males (Anjum and Muazzam, 2018; Anjum and Muazzam, 2019; Anjum et al., 2019). Other studies found no differences between the genders (Badenhorst and Botha, 2022; Coyne et al., 2017; Giorgi, 2012). Females did tend to experience a greater degree of severity in bullying behaviors (Anjum and Muazzam, 2018).

A variety of other demographic factors were explored in small proportion by the included studies. Three studies explored contract status of employees (such as adjunct and temporary status) (Anjum et al., 2019; Badenhorst and Botha, 2022; Giorgi, 2012), though only one study showed a significant difference between academic and support staff categories in relation to exclusion and harassment/belittlement (with support staff showing higher levels of both types of bullying) (Badenhorst and Botha, 2022). Two studies examined age, though found it caused no significant difference in the experience or degree of bullying (Anjum et al., 2019; Coyne et al., 2017). Two more studies examined duration of employment (Badenhorst and Botha, 2022; Giorgi, 2012), with Badenhorst and Botha (2022) demonstrating a small positive correlation with managerial misconduct and a small negative correlation with humiliation/belittlement. Two studies looked into marital status as well as rank in the workplace and found no relationship between either factor and bullying (Anjum et al., 2019; Badenhorst and Botha, 2022). Single studies explored degrees and qualifications (with a negative correlation between highest degree received and hostility experiences) (Badenhorst and Botha, 2022), amount of work experience (with no significant relationships found) (Anjum et al., 2019) and tenure (with no significant relationships found) (Coyne et al., 2017).

Institutional approach to bullying

When a work-group has established antibullying norms, bullying is less likely to occur in the workplace (Glambeck et al., 2020). However, bullying still occurs in many higher education institutions. Informal processes are often a first step to address the bullying behavior, but they make people cynical, as they were not found to have satisfactory outcomes (Hodgins and McNamara, 2017). However, both participants and administrators find informal processes to be quicker and less cumbersome than their formal counterparts (Rockett et al., 2017).

Formal processes are also not well-loved by victims, who frequently find the response of their organization exacerbates the problem (Hodgins and McNamara, 2017). In general, they are found to be a disproportionate investment of time given their possible outcomes (Rockett et al., 2017). Bullying policies in general were found to lack language specifying that they applied to faculty and staff. They also do not always include a formal definition of bullying (Meaney and Armstrong, 2019). Additionally, bullying policies can be limited in what behaviors they address and how they respond to accusations (Hodgins and McNamara, 2019). Victims also find human resources to be biased toward managers or
higher-ranking personnel, leading to an imbalance in investigation and follow-through on issues of bullying (Hodgins and McNamara, 2017; Hodgins and McNamara, 2019). By allowing employees to be a part of the policymaking and review process, investment and trust in these processes may be increased.

Discussion

The purpose of this review was to explore the trends in research on the bullying of higher education employees in a 10-year period from 2012 to 2022. The findings presented in the previous section highlight the themes of cause and effect, demographic exploration and institutional approaches to bullying that emerged in exploring the included studies. These themes further divided into a focus on the model of bullying (through cause and effect and demographic exploration) and the policies and responses to bullying incidents (through institutional approaches to bullying).

It was surprising to find only four of the included studies established the prevalence of bullying among their sample populations; however, this suggests prior research has established that workplace bullying of higher education employees does, in fact, occur. Instead, many of the included studies explored models of workplace bullying in higher education that incorporated contributing factors and outcomes. These models, in addition to other statistical analyses, looked at a range of work climate factors, demographic characteristics and health impacts to provide an array of knowledge related to workplace bullying. Findings were generally in agreement about the relationships between workplace factors and levels of bullying. But despite the range of demographic characteristics considered, there was little agreement in which factors were or were not, suggesting further work is needed to establish norms, which may be dependent on geographic or cultural region. The current research landscape has provided us with ample explanations of what can influence the levels of bullying an individual experiences; however, it lacks consensus and results that can be applied broadly across countries, employment categories and academic fields. We have also seen detailed explanations of consequences that can occur, from increased turnover intention to decreased health outcomes. These results generally show more consensus and applicability across contexts. Overall, however, we are missing a picture of what successful antibullying efforts and interventions look like.

Studies exploring policies and responses to bullying were in agreement that policies are lacking enough details for sufficient enforcement to be possible. Both formal and informal responses, whether hinging on policy or not, were met with cynicism, though administrators had higher opinions of both types than victims did. This inconsistency in policy, response and value of response calls for a reevaluation of bullying policy and a policy reform that increases enforceability through clear definitions and named consequences.

Limitations

As with all studies, this review was not without limitations. First, there was a wide geographic distribution of the studies. Although this allows for a wide array of experiences to be included, it impacts generalizability due to differences in the culture of higher education in the different nations studied. These differences can account for workplace norms, cultural differences in relation to bullying and hierarchy structures within institutions of higher education. Second, despite the wide geographic distribution of studies, literature not published in English was not considered for inclusion due to the linguistic limitations of the researcher. Next, this review focused solely on bullying and did not incorporate other forms of workplace violence. Other forms of workplace violence, such as incivility, lateral violence and mobbing, may inform our understanding of bullying and may be discussed interchangeably with bullying by authors. Finally, the studies included within this review
were limited to those published between 2012 and 2022, which excludes some foundational bullying studies as well as the newest research.

Conclusion

Research on the bullying of higher education employees spans a range of foci and traverses the globe. In 2012–2022, research has united around exploring how workplace and demographic factors relate to bullying and how bullying policy and responses are structured and embraced. This research has provided a snapshot of what workplace bullying looks like among academic employees. Going forward, there needs to be a focus on increasing antibullying effectiveness to decrease the prevalence of bullying in academia. Involving employees in all steps of antibullying efforts, such as policy formation/review, design of reporting processes and training initiatives, to name a few efforts, will increase buy-in and engagement in establishing an antibullying culture. Supportive, ethical leadership is critical toward the establishment and maintenance of health workplace norms for a bully-free environment.

References


Appendix. Codebook

1. Level 3:
   - Cause and effect.
   - Demographic examinations.
   - Institutional approach to bullying.
   - Measures used.
   - Non-US.

2. Level 2:
   - 1 Age.
   - 2 Causes.
   - 3 Effects.
   - 4 Measures used.
   - 5 Non-US.
   - 6 Personal characteristics.
   - 7 Policy.
   - 8 Responses.

3. Level 1:
   - A19 Age.
   - A19 Contract status.
   - A19 Committee on publication ethics inventory use.
   - A19 Coping.
   - A19 Effects.
   - A19 Less work experience.
   - A19 Marital status.
   - A19 Non-US.
   - A19 Rank.
   - A19 Workplace Bullying Scale use.
   - A19 Workplace Bullying Strain Scale use.
   - AM18 Gender.
   - AM18 Non-US.
   - AM18 Predictors.
   - AM18 Prevalence.
   - AM18 Workplace Bullying Scale use.
   - AM18 Effects.
   - AM19 Gender.
   - AM19 Non-US.
   - AM19 Physical strain.
   - AM19 Prevalence.
   - AM19 Workplace Bullying Scale use.
   - B21 Non-US.
   - B21 Predictors.
   - B21 Nordic Questionnaire for Psychological and Social Factors at Work use.
   - B21 Workability Index use.
   - BB22 Contract status.
- BB22 Degrees and qualifications.
- BB22 Duration of employment.
- BB22 Gender.
- BB22 Marital status.
- BB22 Negative acts questionnaire – revised (NAQ-R) use.
- BB22 Non-US.
- BB22 Rank.
- BB22 Relationship between factors.
- C17 Age.
- C17 Cyber negative acts questionnaire use.
- C17 Gender.
- C17 General Health Questionnaire use.
- C17 Job satisfaction.
- C17 Mental strain.
- C17 NAQ-R use.
- C17 Non-US.
- C17 Positive and negative affect schedule scale use.
- C17 Predictors.
- C17 Prevalence.
- C17 Tenure.
- E14 Brown et al.’s Ethical Leadership Scale use.
- E14 Mediators.
- E14 NAQ-R use.
- E14 Non-US.
- E14 Predictors.
- E14 Psychological contract fulfillment.
- E14 Psychological safety.
- G12 Contract status.
- G12 Duration of employment.
- G12 Effects.
- G12 Gender.
- G12 NAQ-R use.
- G12 Non-US.
- G12 Predictors.
- G12 Prevalence.
- G12 UNICLIMA Questionnaire use.
- G20 NAQ-R use.
- G20 Non-US.
- G20 Predictors.
- G22 Job Content Questionnaire use.
- G22 Job Stress Measure use.
- G22 Mediators.
- G22 NAQ-R use.
- G22 Predictors.
- HM17 Effects.
- HM17 Formal response.
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