Employees' perceptions and experiences of bullying in the workplace

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Abstract

Globally, workplace bullying is a growing concern in the world of work. Workplace bullying may have devastating effects on employees as well as organisations. On an individual level, it may result in physical and psychological conditions. On an organisational level, it may have consequences for productivity, staff turnover, morale and motivation of employees, among other things. The purpose of this research was to determine the perceptions and experiences of workplace bullying among employees in the workplace, in South Africa. The study was conducted within a positivistic research paradigm and a quantitative research design was used. The target population consisted of students enrolled for the MBA qualification at selected business schools in South Africa. The business schools were selected on an availability basis. From the research results it became evident that employees in South Africa are subjected to workplace bullying to a considerable degree. More than half of the respondents indicated that they have experienced workplace bullying of a personal and work-related nature. It is of utmost importance that workplace bullying, as a work-related issue, is addressed effectively. The role of human resource practitioners is of utmost importance to counter bullying in workplaces.

Key phrases

Bullying behaviour; employees; MBA students; negative actions; organisations and workplace bullying

1.   INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying is a growing epidemic in the world of work (Magee, Gordon, Caputi, Oades, Reis & Robinson 2014:9; Salin 2003:3). It is an increasing phenomenon and occurs across organisations and occupations (Pietersen 2007:59). Over the past two decades, research into bullying, emotional abuse and harassment at work received substantial attention across the world and has emerged as a new field of study in Europe, America, Australia and South Africa (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper 2004:i). Workplace bullying is

defined as "repeated actions towards people at work which have the effect of humiliating and mentally distressing them" (Watson 2017:380).

Workplace bullying affects organisations and employees in a number of negative ways. On an organisational level, it may lead to a lack of trust, lower productivity, increased levels of sickness absence, higher turnover of staff and low morale and motivation (Bingham 2016:195; Du Plessis 2017:232; Gobind 2015:158). On an individual level, it has a "deleterious psychological effect on those bullied" (Watson 2017:380). It may have physical (e.g. restlessness, insomnia, eating disorders, high blood pressure) and psychological (e.g. anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, trouble with relationships, post-traumatic stress disorder) effects (Du Plessis 2017:232; Gobind 2015:158). Workplace bullying may even result in employee suicide (Einarsen *et al.* 2004:21; Gobind 2015:158). It may also result in extreme costs for the employer, including sick leave, replacement costs, health insurance costs, workers' compensation claims and legal costs (Gobind 2015:158-159; Leymann 1990:123; Magee *et al.* 2014:24).

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and experiences of workplace bullying among employees in the workplace, in South Africa. A number of socio-demographic variables were used to determine whether there are differences in the experiences of bullying among employees who have different socio-demographic characteristics.

The article begins with a conceptualisation and contextualisation of workplace bullying, followed by a discussion of enabling factors for workplace bullying, theoretical frameworks to analyse workplace bullying, socio-demographic variables of workplace bullying and ways to address bullying in the workplace. Thereafter, the empirical results are presented and discussed. The article concludes with practical recommendations to counter and manage bullying behaviour in the workplace.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a theoretical review of literature on workplace bullying.

3.1 Conceptualisation and contextualisation of workplace bullying

Workplace bullying and workplace harassment have certain commonalities, and workplace bullying is considered a type of workplace harassment (Wärnich, Carrel, Elbert & Hatfield

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2018:499). Workplace harassment "is a form of discrimination based on a variety of things, that may include, among others, affectional preferences, gender, race, religion, ability and disability" (Wärnich *et al.* 2018:499). Workplace harassment can occur in several forms, such as verbal, written or non-written communication. It can also be physical in nature.

It is difficult to define bullying behaviour in the workplace, as different behaviours and acts may be perceived as bullying in different countries, organisational contexts and occupations (Parzefall & Salin 2010, cited in Watson 2017:380). The term 'workplace bullying' is often used conversely with other terms such as 'mobbing', 'harassment', 'deviance', 'incivility' and 'aggressive behaviour' (Magee *et al.* 2014:18). The term 'bullying' is the preferred term in most English-speaking countries (Einarsen *et al.* 2004:5). According to Parzefall and Salin (2010, cited in Watson 2017:380), "bullying is completely in the eye of the beholder". "Bullying behaviour is something that must be related to the employees' expectations which prevail in any given work setting as to whether certain actions are to be judged as 'bullying' or not" (Watson 2017:380). According to Einarsen and Raknes (1997), bullying emerges when individuals persistently over time perceive themselves as being the target of unwanted negative actions and practices where the victim of bullying cannot defend him- or herself against the bullying. It is important to note that bullying is not about single and isolated events, but about behaviours or acts that are repeatedly and persistently directed towards one or more employees (Einarsen *et al.* 2004:7). Salin (2003:3:6) emphasises that there is a major difference between normal conflict and bullying. Bullying can be portrayed as a certain subset of conflicts. Conflict can be a single incident, can occur between parties of equal power, can be resolved relatively fast and may even have positive outcomes (Zapf & Gross 2001:499). Conflicts underlying bullying consist of repeated conflict episodes, last for a long time, occur between parties of unequal power and have negative outcomes for the victim (Zapf & Gross 2001:499). Time is not crucial in conflict, but is a distinctive characteristic of bullying (Leon-Perez, Medina, Arenas & Munduate 2015:251). According to Zapf and Gross (2001:499), on average, the duration of bullying cases is longer than two years.

Workplace bullying is also referred to as psychological violence (Meyer & Kirsten 2014 cited in Du Plessis 2017:231). Bullying acts or behaviours aim to inflict 'dignitary harm' on the victim by hurting, humiliating, intimidating, tormenting, pressuring, mocking, isolating or degrading the victim (Du Plessis 2017:231; Ehrenreich 1999, cited in Hodson & Sullivan 2012:65; Wärnich *et al.* 2018:499). Acts of bullying can be done very subtly, openly, privately or publicly (Werner 2016:338).

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Examples of bullying acts or behaviours include shouting and screaming, abusive or insulting name calling, false accusations, criticism, unprofessional conduct, negative eye contact, being the target of practical jokes, social isolation, physical intimidation, withholding information, excessive monitoring or micro-managing, unrealistic expectations, work overload, removing responsibilities and blocking potential training and development (Einarsen, Hoel & Notelaers 2009:32; Gobind 2015:156; Meyer & Kirsten 2014, cited in Du Plessis 2017:231).

O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire and Smith (1998, cited in Einarsen *et al.* 2009:32) divide the above-mentioned acts and behaviours into direct (e.g. shouting) and indirect (e.g. social isolation) bullying. Hodson and Sullivan (2012:65) and Einarsen *et al.* (2009:32) make a further distinction with reference to the workplace setting. Hodson and Sullivan (2012:65) identified three major types of bullying acts or behaviours: obstructionism, expressions of hostility and overt aggression. Obstructionism refers to behaviour such as causing intentional delays in someone elses' work, interfering with someones' work or refusing to share resources or equipment. Hostility includes behaviour such as staring, dirty looks and belittling, obscene gestures, spreading gossip or rumours and ridicule (e.g. mockery, laughter and sarcasm). Overt aggression refers to behaviour that includes threats, assaults, destroying needed resources or destroying the personal property of a person (Hodson & Sullivan 2012:65). Einarsen *et al.* (2009:22) distinguish between work-related bullying, person-related bullying and physically intimidating bullying. Work-related bullying includes acts or behaviours such as being ordered to do work below ones' level of competence and excessive monitoring of work. Person-related bullying corresponds with the hostility dimension referred to by Hodson and Sullivan (2012:65) and physically intimidating bullying corresponds with the overt aggression dimension of bullying referred to by Hodson and Sullivan (2012:65). The following section discusses factors that encourage hostile work environments and, consequently, bullying.

3.2   Enabling factors for workplace bullying

Berlingieri (2015, cited in Watson 2017:381) points out that workplace bullying cannot be separated from social dimensions within and outside the workplace. The employment relations context should always be considered when examining workplace bullying (Hoel & Beal 2006, cited in Watson 2017:381). Employees may bully for various reasons, including the need for power, an obsession to control the environment and being threatened by anothers' competency, popularity or experience (Gobind 2015:159). Bullies are insecure due

to their low self-esteem, and see any perceived threat as a threat to themselves, personally as well as professionally. Bullies belittle others in order to boost their own self-worth and ego (Gobind 2015:160).

According to Salin (2003:10), a perceived power imbalance (formal or informal) between the involved parties is essential for bullying to take place. Without a power imbalance, the target (person towards whom the aggression is directed) can resist the attacks and prevent the bullying from occurring (Salin 2003:10). Although bullying in the workplace can take place between workers and co-workers (Salin 2003:7; Watson 2017:381), the most common form of workplace bullying is that of subordinates by their superiors (Du Plessis 2017:232; Watson 2017:381). Victims find it difficult to defend themselves, implying the presence of an imbalance of power between the parties (formal or informal) (Watson 2017:381). Bullying is also regarded as a form of coercive power (Bingham 2016:33). Coercive power is used to affect obedience by using explicit or implicit threats. Coercive power is derived from the holders' position within an organisation (e.g. manager) (Bingham 2016:33). Cleveland and Kerst (1993, cited in Salin 2003:10) indicate that power imbalances can also be created by situational and contextual characteristics and do not necessarily result from formal power differences. Consequently, power differences associated with traditional gender roles and minority status may influence bullying behaviour, as traditionally, women and minorities are perceived to have less power and status.

Certain work circumstances and factors encourage hostile work environments and, consequently, bullying behaviour. These may include ineffective job descriptions, lack of clear goals, role conflict, lack of control over ones' own job, inappropriate or inadequate communication, low morale, lack of stimulating and challenging tasks, poor supervisors, restructuring, changes in management or in the composition of the work group (increased workplace diversity) and pending retrenchments (Gobind 2015:159; Salin 2003:14, 19-20). A lack of clear policies on workplace bullying or standards of behaviour results in a greater risk of bullying (Magee *et al.* 2014:20). Dissatisfaction and frustration with working conditions, organisational climate and internal communication may provide the necessary conditions for bullying (Salin 2003:14-15). An organisational culture that treats bullying as a 'normal' and an acceptable way of doing things may also encourage bullying behaviour (Salin 2003:13). Organisations are more likely to be sites of workplace bullying when their culture includes emphasis on winning, greed, privilege, power and management by fear (Watson 2017:381). Sometimes, organisations that have low trust-low commitment human resource management practices have been characterised as "bullying organisations" (Watson

2017:381). Low trust-low commitment human resource management practices refer to a management strategy in which the employment relationship is "an arms-length and calculating instrumental one"; employees are directly controlled, closely supervised and monitored (Watson 2017:180). Some organisations use bullying as a tactic to get rid of unnecessary employees without having to pay redundancy costs (Bingham 2016:66). The organisational context (e.g. the nursing context) may contribute to bullying behaviour (Ariza-Montes *et al.* 2013, cited in Werner 2016:338). For example, Hoel and Cooper (2000:10) found that bullying differs to a great extent between sectors and occupations. The authors (Hoel & Cooper 2000:10) suggest that the prevalence of workplace bullying is higher within the prison service, post and telecommunications, school teaching and the dance professions.

From the above it is evident that a multitude of factors, ranging from individual to organisational factors and contexts, may contribute to workplace bullying. The next section discusses theoretical frameworks aiming to explain workplace bullying.

3.3   Theoretical frameworks to analyse workplace bullying

This section discusses a review of two theoretical frameworks that are often used to understand and address bullying in the workplace. The complexity of bullying requires that more than one theoretical lens be used to help understand this phenomenon and to inform effective prevention and intervention strategies and programmes.

3.3.1 The Leymann model

The interest in bullying as a workplace issue originated in Scandinavia in the 1980s, when Professor Heinz Leymann, a family therapist, started to investigate direct and indirect forms of conflict in the workplace (Einarsen *et al.* 2004:4). Leymann (1990:119) used the term 'mobbing' to describe bullying behaviour in the workplace. According to Leymann (1990:120), acts of bullying should occur at least once a week for more than six months to be regarded as an operational definition of bullying at work. Leymanns' model differentiates between the following four stages of bullying over time (Leymann 1990:121; Zapf & Gross 2001:500):

- Stage 1: Critical incidents. Bullying starts with a typical triggering situation, which is most, often a conflict. The source of conflict may be unknown and the duration of this stage may be short.

- Stage 2: Bullying and stigmatising. In this stage, bullying activities may comprise a number of behaviours that are targeted at a person. The person is stigmatised and becomes the victim of bullying.

- Stage 3: Personnel management. In this stage, management becomes involved, and the case becomes 'official' in the organisation. Management often misjudge the situation as being the fault of the subjected person (the victim) and tend to accept the bullys' negative view of the victim. The subjected person (the victim) ultimately becomes marked and stigmatised. Colleagues and management tend to hold personal characteristics of the victim responsible for the situation and seek or create explanations for why bullying occurred and developed.

- Stage 4: Expulsion. The expulsion from the organisation is the final stage of bullying. The threat to be expelled results in serious illnesses for the victim. The victim tends to seek medical or psychological assistance. Some professionals may not believe the victim and may misdiagnose the victim. Some of these diagnoses include paranoia, manic depression and character disturbance. Leymann (1996, cited in Zapf & Gross 2001:500) also includes this misdiagnosis as an extra stage in his model.

The Leymann model argues strongly against individual factors as antecedents of bullying, but instead suggests that the following four organisational factors are seen as the main factors: deficiencies in leadership behaviour, deficiencies in work design, the victims' socially exposed position and low department morale (Einarsen *et al.* 2004:16). According to the Leymann model, the victim is unable to solve the problem and consequently expulsion of the organisation follows. The model does not focus on conflict-management or stress-management strategies (Zapf & Gross 2001:501).

3.3.2 *The conflict escalation model of Glasl*

The conflict escalation model of Glasl is used as a model suitable to explain how conflict may escalate into bullying (Einarsen *et al.* 2004:20; Zapf & Gross 2001). This model suggests that conflict in organisations is unavoidable and under certain circumstances can be beneficial; however, if allowed to escalate, conflicts may become extremely harmful and destructive on both an individual and an organisational level (Einarsen *et al.* 2004:20). The model distinguishes between three phases and nine stages (Bomers & Peterson 1982:123; Einarsen *et al.* 2004:20; Jordan 2000:Internet; Zapf & Gross 2001:502):

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- Phase 1: Rationality and control. In the first stages of a conflict, some degree of cooperation exists and the parties are still interested in a reasonable resolution of the conflict situation. Although tensions are presented, the parties cooperate to solve the problems in a controlled and rational manner. However, as the tensions escalate, this becomes increasingly more difficult. The three stages include: 1) attempts to cooperate and incidental slips into tensions; 2) polarisation and debating style; and 3) interaction through deeds instead of words.

- Phase 2: Severing the relationship. This phase is achieved when the origin of the conflict has more or less disappeared and the relationship between the parties has become the main cause of tension. This phase is characterised by distrust, lack of respect, explicit hostility and exclusion of each other. The parties find it extremely difficult to solve any conflict together. The three stages include: 4) concern for reputation and coalition; 5) the loss of face (a persons' status in the community); and 6) the dominance of strategies of threat (damaging actions).

- Phase 3: Aggression and destruction. This phase is characterised by destructive confrontations. The other party is viewed as having no human qualities and is regarded as the enemy. Any attempt to achieve positive outcomes is blocked. In securing their own survival, the parties would risk their own welfare to damage or destroy the other. According to Glasls' model this third phase would hardly be reached in an organisation. The three stages include: 7) systematic destructive campaigns against the sanction potential of the other party; 8) attacks against the power nerves of the enemy; and 9) total destruction and suicide.

Zapf and Gross (2001:502) point out that bullying in its final stage is a borderline phenomenon between phases 2 and 3. Glasls' model offers strategies for third-party interventions related to stages of escalation (Bomers & Peterson 1982:132). Leymanns' and Glasls' models are in agreement that bullying escalates and becomes worse over time, and in the end has severe consequences for the individual.

4. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

This section discusses the effect of some socio-demographic variables on workplace bullying.

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4.1   Gender and workplace bullying

Although workplace bullying is experienced by both women and men, previous research indicates gender differences in terms of the following: targets of bullying (Namie 2017:5; Tuttle 2014:Internet), reporting of workplace bullying (Hoel & Cooper 2000:12) and responding to workplace bullying (Salin & Hoel 2013:242). The majority of bullies are men who target women (Namie 2017:5; Tuttle 2014:Internet). Female bullies mostly target other women (Tuttle 2014:Internet). More women than men tend to report being bullied (Hoel & Cooper 2000:12). Research indicates that women and men differ in their coping strategies; women tend to seek help, while men tend to use assertive strategies by confronting the bully (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson 2004:329). In comparison to the above findings, Cunniff and Mostert (2012:8) found that in six sectors in South Africa (financial, mining, government, manufacturing, academic and call centres), men and women indeed experienced statistically significant differences on bullying dimensions. The prevalence of direct and indirect bullying behaviour by supervisors and direct bullying behaviour by colleagues is higher among men than women in the respective organisations. Research conducted by Yildirim and Uysaloglu (2012:638), among employees of a logistic company in Turkey, revealed no significant gender differences in terms of perceptions of mobbing (bullying). Ortega, Høgh, Pejtersen and Olsen (2009:421) also found no significant gender differences in the prevalence of bullying among respondents included in the second Danish Psychosocial Work Environment Study performed during 2004/2005.

4.2   Age

Researchers all over the world are uncertain whether age has any effect on the experiencing of bullying in the workplace (Cunniff & Mostert 2012:4). Hoel and Cooper (2000:12) found that age seems to be of little importance concerning the prevalence of bullying, in a study conducted across a number of occupations and industrial sectors in Britain. However, the authors indicate that younger employees and those in the middle-age band tend to experience slightly more bullying than older employees. This finding is confirmed by Cunniff and Mostert (2012:4), who found that younger employees in six sectors in South Africa experience higher levels of bullying than older employees. In comparison, Yildirim and Uysaloglu (2012:639) found no significant differences between the responses of three age groups (18-22, 23-28 and 29-34) in their study on perceptions of mobbing. Ortega *et al.* (2009:421) found no significant age differences in the prevalence of bullying.

4.3 Education level

Research conducted by Ortega *et al.* (2009:421) revealed that unskilled workers reported the highest prevalence of bullying and managers/supervisors the lowest. Cunniff and Mostert (2012:11) found that employees with lower education levels experienced more workplace bullying than employees with higher education levels. This finding is also confirmed by Moreno-Jiménez, Muñoz, Salin and Benadero (2008:101), who found that employees working in the transport and communication sector of the city of Madrid with an elementary level of education reported significantly more bullying than employees with secondary and higher levels of education. Yildirim and Uysaloglu (2012:640) found no significant differences in the mobbing perceptions of employees with an associate, undergraduate and graduate degree.

4.4 Level in organisation

Research conducted by Hoel and Cooper (2000:12) reveals bullying affects managers and those without managerial responsibility equally. However, the same research reveals that managers or persons in superior formal positions were reported as perpetrators in most of the incidences, followed by peers or colleagues, subordinates and clients. Lately, Namie (2017:10) also found in the Workplace Bullying Survey of the Workplace Bullying Institute in the USA that most of the bullies were bosses; most of the perpetrators had a higher rank than their targets, followed by peers and subordinates. Salin (2001, cited in Moreno-Jiménez *et al.* 2008:97) found that mobbing among business professionals is related to hierarchical status, with the tendency of employees on lower hierarchical levels to report more bullying than higher-level employees. In comparison to the above results, Ortega *et al.* (2009:421) found that most of the bullied respondents in their study (71.5%) indicated that they had been bullied by co-workers.

4.5 Length of service

Yildirim and Uysaloglu (2012:639) found no significant differences between employees who were employed in the company for one to five years and the ones who were employed for six to ten years in terms of their mobbing perceptions. However, Moreno-Jiménez *et al.* (2008:102) found that employees with the most work experience reported significantly fewer bullying behaviours than those with a few years (5-7) of work experience.

From the above it is evident that previous research revealed mixed results regarding the relationship between the mentioned socio-demographic variables and workplace bullying.

This research explored the relationship between a number of demographic variables and workplace bullying, which is reported under the Empirical results section.

5.   ADDRESSING WORKPLACE BULLYING

Managers and human resource practitioners have to address bullying in the workplace (Pietersen, cited in Du Plessis 2017:231). Employers are responsible for the safety and well-being of their employees during working hours (Gobind 2015:162). Research conducted by Namie (2017:18) revealed that in 54% of cases, workplace bullying only stops when the target loses his or her job, in 36% of cases when the perpetrator loses his or her job and in 23% of cases when the target quit his or her position. The role of human resource practitioners is of utmost importance to counter workplace bullying. A zero tolerance anti-bullying policy, which details the procedures to follow in case of being bullied, should be in place (Gobind 2015:158; Wärnich *et al*. 2018:499). These policies and procedures should be in line with the organisations' grievance and disciplinary procedure (Wärnich *et al*. 2018:499). Organisations should educate employees about workplace bullying, how to report it and its effects (Gobind 2015:158), and communicate the message that the organisation has a zero tolerance attitude towards any kind of harassment (Wärnich *et al*. 2018:499).

All complaints should be documented, investigated and filed (Gobind 2015:163). Managers need to investigate when greater volumes of grievances are made, in particular when grievances concern a specific person or group (Gobind 2015:158). Resignations in general, and specifically constructive dismissal, as well as requests for transfers should be examined for the underlying cause of the decision. Furthermore, frequent absence due to sickness without a valid sick note should also be investigated. These may be indicative signs of workplace bullying (Gobind 2015:158). Snell (2017, cited in Wärnich *et al*. 2018:500) indicates the need for a code of good practice to deal with workplace bullying in South Africa.

To establish the prevalence of workplace bullying in organisations, Visagie, Havenga, Linde and Botha (2012:64) suggest using operational and self-identification methods. The operational method includes using a behavioural checklist in which the occurrences of various negative acts over a period are counted. This method aims to measure the exposure to negative acts, without requiring from employees to label themselves as victims of bullying. In the self-identification method, a definition of bullying is given and employees are allowed to identify themselves as the victim of bullying.

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Magee *et al.* (2014:35) suggest that organisations should adopt a risk-management approach to prevent workplace bullying. As already indicated many organisational factors contribute to workplace bullying and therefore increase the risk of it. A risk-management approach encourages a more objective and comprehensive approach. The following steps should be included in such an approach (Magee *et al.* 2014:35):

1. Risk identification. Organisations should identify and recognise the different sources of risk for the manifestation of workplace bullying in their organisations.
2. Risk assessment. Identified risks need to be assessed in relation to their severity (e.g. influence), probability of occurrence and degree to which the risk can be controlled and/or managed.
3. Risk evaluation. Risks need to be scored, categorised and prioritised in terms of which need to/should be addressed by the organisation.
4. Risk management. Appropriate approaches (e.g. avoid, mitigate, transfer or accept the risk) need to be identified and implemented.
5. Monitoring and evaluation. Processes should be in place to continually monitor risks and evaluate risk-management approaches.

From the sections above, it is evident that workplace bullying is a growing concern in the world of work and that various factors enable and perpetuates workplace bullying. Workplace bullying should not be tolerated and organisations should take active steps to counter bullying in the workplace. The sections to follow present the research methodology followed and discuss the empirical results of the research.

6. RESEARCH DESIGN

6.1 Research approach

The study was conducted within a positivistic research paradigm. The ontological approach of objectivism and the epistemology of empiricism informed the study. A quantitative research design was used.

6.2 Research method

6.2.1 Target population and sampling

The target population consisted of students enrolled for the MBA qualification at selected business schools in South Africa. The business schools were selected on an availability basis, referred to as convenience sampling. Convenience sampling involves selecting those

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cases that are the easiest to obtain for the sample (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell 2010:69). All students enrolled for the MBA qualification during the period 2012-2016 were included in the survey. Data were collected over a period of four years to ensure a good response rate to generalise the results to the population of interest. In total, 402 responses were received.

6.2.2 Instrumentation and data collection

Data were collected through a web-based survey (SurveyMonkey), using a coded questionnaire that consisted of a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The Negative Acts Questionnaire developed by Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen and Hellesøy (1994), cited in University of Bergen (2009) and Hoel (1999), cited in University of Bergen (2009) for measuring perceived exposure to bullying and victimisation at work was adapted to better fit the purpose of the study and to enhance the understanding of the individual items. The Negative Acts Questionnaire is free to use for non-commercial research projects (University of Bergen 2009). The questionnaire used for this study included three sections. Section 1 included 13 biographical questions on age, gender, marital status and years in position, among other information (see Table 1). Section 2 consisted of 24 statements on a five-point Likert scale focusing on individual experiences of negative behaviours that occurred over a period of a year in the workplace. Section 2 included questions such as "In the last year has someone at work withheld information that affected your performance?" Section 3 consisted of six statements on a five-point Likert scale focusing on perceptions of negative behaviours carried out by female managers over a period of a year in the workplace. Section 3 included questions such as "Women managers will withhold information that affects your performance". Afriforte, part of WorkWell, the Research Unit for Economic and Management Sciences at North-West University, assisted in creating and managing the web-based survey.

6.3   Analysis and reporting

The data collected were processed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 24). A factor analysis was conducted to explore the underlying structure of workplace bullying. Cronbachs' alpha coefficient was used to determine internal reliability. In addition, descriptive statistics, correlations, t-tests and ANOVAs were used to analyse the data. Regarding the descriptive statistics, the following response categories were used: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree. Mean scores of above 2.5 indicate that the majority of the respondents were subjected to the negative behaviours weekly or more often over a period of a year in the workplace, as mentioned in

the statements contained in the factors. Mean scores below 2.5 indicate that the majority of respondents did not experience the negative behaviours as mentioned in the statements contained in the factors. Cohens'd-values were used as effect size to determine whether differences in means were important in practice, where d = 0.2 were considered as small, d = 0.5 as medium and d = 0.8 as large effects (Cohen 1988). Cohen (1988) recommends that correlations of 0.1, 0.3 and 0.5 can be interpreted as small, medium and large correlations, respectively.

6.4   Ethical considerations

The researchers adhered to the ethical standards suggested by Babbie and Mouton (2011:520): voluntary participation, informed consent, privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. No student was forced to participate in the study; participation was voluntarily. Students could pick a moment that suited them best and completed the survey in their own time.

7.   EMPIRICAL RESULTS

This section presents the empirical results of the research.

7.1   Biographical data

Table 1 presents the biographical information of the respondents.

Table 1:   Biographical information of the respondents

Biographical variable	Response category	Frequency	Valid percentage
Gender	Male	255	63.6
	Female	146	36.4
Age	Younger than 20 years	1	0.2
	21–30 years	77	19.2
	31–40 years	204	50.7
	41–50 years	102	25.4
	51–60 years	18	4.5
Marital status	Married	268	66.8
	Divorced/separated	30	7.5
	Widowed	4	1.0
	Single, never married	99	24.7
Highest qualification	High school	12	3.0
	Bachelors' degree	158	39.4
	Postgraduate degree	231	57.6

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Sector (area) of work	Private sector	273	68.8
	Public sector	112	28.2
	Entrepreneur	12	3.0
Employment status	Full-time	379	95.2
	Part-time	4	1.0
	College/university student	1	0.3
	Self-employed	11	2.8
	Not employed	3	0.7
Number of years in position	Less than a year	44	11.1
	1–5 years	217	54.5
	6–10 years	80	20.1
	More than 10 years	57	14.3
Number of employees working for organisation	Fewer than 25	43	10.8
	26–100	46	11.6
	101–500	79	19.8
	501–1 000	35	8.8
	More than 1000	195	49.0
Level in organisations	Worker	60	15.1
	Middle management	190	47.7
	Senior management	125	31.4
	Other	23	5.8
Income group per annum	Less than R150 000	20	5.0
	R150 001–R250 000	43	10.8
	R250 001–R350 000	68	17.1
	R350 001 and more	266	67.1
Feelings about the economy	Positive	175	44.0
	Negative	97	24.3
	Neutral	122	30.7
	Don't know	4	1.0
Feelings about the future	Positive	286	73.7
	Negative	45	11.6
	Neutral	57	14.7

Source: Calculated from survey results

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7.2   Validity and reliability: Workplace bullying

A factor analysis was conducted of the 24 items on a five point Likert scale in Section 2 and the six items on a five point Likert scale in Section 3 of the questionnaire, measuring individual experiences of negative behaviours that occurred weekly or more often over a period of a year in the workplace. Principal component analysis and oblimin rotation were used to determine the dimensionality of the workplace bullying instrument used. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO) measured 0.95 and indicated that the sample size was adequate for factor analysis. The KMO value should be 0.6 or above to be considered suitable for factor analysis (Pallant 2016:187). The p-value of Bartletts' test of sphericity returned a value smaller than 0.05 (p-value = 0.000), indicating that the correlation between statements was appropriate for factor analysis Field (2005). Five factors (hostility, female manager hostility, discouragement, aggressiveness and unreasonable expectations) were extracted through Kaisers' criteria Field (2005) that explained 62.74% of the total variance. The Cronbachs' alpha coefficient for all the factors measured above the required 0.7, showing high reliability and internal consistency. Table 2 presents the validity and reliability of the measuring instrument: workplace bullying.

Table 2:   Validity and reliability of workplace bullying

Pattern Matrix[a]						
		Component				
		Hostility	Female manager hostility	Discouragement	Aggressiveness	Unreasonable expectations
		1	2	3	4	5
S2q7	Over the last year, someone at work insulted you about your person, attitudes or private life.	0.705				
S2q9	Over the last year, someone at work made you the target of spontaneous anger (or rage).	0.648				
S2q14	Over the last year, someone at work communicate a hostile reaction when you approach.	0.638				

S2q15	Over the last year, someone at work criticised your work.	0.611				
S2q6	Over the last year, someone at work ignored you.	0.605		-0.330		
S2q8	Over the last year, someone at work shouted at you.	0.588				
S2q16	Over the last year, someone at work ignored your opinions and views.	0.572				
S2q13	Over the last year, someone at work repeatedly reminds you of your errors or mistakes.	0.559				
S2q5	Over the last year, someone at work spread gossip about you.	0.558		-0.336		
S2q2	Over the last year, someone at work humiliated you in connection with your work.	0.552		-0.352		
S2q19	Over the last year, someone at work made allegations against you.	0.546				
S2q12	Over the last year, someone at work hinted to others that you should quit your job.	0.545				
S2q10	Over the last year, someone at work finger-pointed you.	0.490				
S2q20	Over the last year, someone at work monitored your work excessively.	0.394				
S2q21	Over the last year, someone at work pressured you not to claim something which by right you are entitled to (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement).	0.355				
S3q5	Women managers will bully other employees.		0.909			
S3q6	Women manager will bully other woman employees.		0.816			
S3q2	Women managers humiliate you in connection with your work.		0.745			
S3q4	Women managers remove key areas of responsibility from you.		0.708			
S3q3	Women managers order you to do work below your level of competence.		0.671			
S3q1	Women managers withhold information which affects your performance.		0.667	-0.309		
S2q1	Over the last year, someone at work withheld information which affected your performance.			-0.693		
S2q4	Over the last year, someone at work removed key areas of responsibility from you.			-0.528		
S2q3	Over the last year, someone at work ordered you to do work below your level of competence.			-0.463		-0.425
S2q24	Over the last year, someone at work threatened you with violence.				0.849	
S2q22	Over the last year, someone at work excessively				0.770	

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	teased you.					
S2q11	Over the last year, someone at work invaded your personal space (e.g. shoving, blocking the way).				0.618	
S2q17	Over the last year, someone at work told practical jokes about you.				0.583	
S2q18	Over the last year, someone at work gave you tasks with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines.					-0.755
S2q23	Over the last year, someone at work exposed you to an unmanageable workload.					-0.647
	Cronbachs' alpha	0.935	0.897	0.719	0.780	0.772
	Inter-item correlations	0.490	0.598	0.461	0.496	0.629
	Factor mean	2.69	2.52	2.86	2.02	2.72
	Factor standard deviation	0.94	1.01	1.10	0.78	1.17

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalisation

a. Rotation converged in 16 iterations

Source: Authors' own construction

Fifteen statements loaded on Factor 1: Hostility. The factor loadings ranged from 0.355 to 0.705. The statements included in the hostility factor focused on individual experiences of negative behaviours of a personal nature that occurred over a period of a year in the workplace. The mean score of the hostility factor calculated 2.69, indicating that the majority of the respondents were subjected to negative behaviours of a personal nature in the workplace. The factor showed high reliability and internal consistency with a Cronbachs' alpha coefficient of 0.935.

Six statements loaded on Factor 2: Female manager hostility. The factor loadings ranged from 0.667 to 0.909. The statements included in the female manager hostility factor focused on individual experiences of negative behaviours exerted by female managers over a period of a year in the workplace. The mean score of the female manager hostility factor calculated 2.52, indicating that a slight majority of the respondents' experienced negative behaviours exerted by female managers in the workplace. The factor showed high reliability and internal consistency with a Cronbachs' alpha coefficient of 0.897.

Three statements loaded on Factor 3: Discouragement. The factor loadings ranged from -0.463 to -0.693. The statements included in the discouragement factor focused on individual experiences of negative behaviours that occurred over a period of a year that discourage

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employees from thriving in the workplace. The mean score of the discouragement factor calculated 2.86, indicating that a noticeable majority of the respondents experienced negative behaviours that discourage them in the workplace. The factor showed high reliability and internal consistency with a Cronbachs' alpha coefficient of 0.719.

Four statements loaded on Factor 4: Aggressiveness. The factor loadings ranged from 0.583 to 0.849. The statements included in the aggressiveness factor focused on individual experiences of negative behaviours of an aggressive nature that occurred over a period of a year in the workplace. The mean score of the aggressiveness factor calculated 2.02, indicating that a minority of the respondents experienced negative behaviours of an aggressive nature in the workplace. The factor showed high reliability and internal consistency with a Cronbachs' alpha coefficient of 0.780.

Two statements loaded on Factor 5: Unreasonable expectations. The factor loadings ranged from -0.647 to -0.755. The statements included in the unreasonable expectations factor focused on individual experiences of negative behaviours of an unreasonable nature that occurred over a period of a year in the workplace. The mean score of the unreasonable expectations factor calculated 2.72, indicating that a significant number of respondents experienced negative behaviours of an unreasonable nature in the workplace. The factor showed high reliability and internal consistency with a Cronbachs' alpha coefficient of 0.772.

7.3 Correlations between age, qualification, years in position, number of employees and workplace bullying

A correlation (Spearman rank correlation) test was used to test the correlations between age, qualification, years in position, number of employees and workplace bullying. The results are reflected in Table 3. Medium to large positive correlations between 0.471 and 0.706 were found between the five factors of workplace bullying. The p-value measured smaller than 0.05 in all instances. A small negative correlation was found between the number of years in position and the female manager hostility factor (p-value = 0.041; r = -0.104). This suggests that the respondents experienced more female manager hostility (or person-related bullying) the shorter the duration of employment.

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Table 3:   **Correlations between age, qualification, years in position, number of employees and workplace bullying**

Correlations		Age	Qualification	Years in position	Number of employees	Income	Hostility	Female manager hostility	Discouragement	Aggressiveness	Unreasonable expectations
Hostility	Correlation coefficient	0.026	-0.027	-0.021	0.076	-0.069	1.000	0.610[**(c)]	0.600[**(c)]	0.706[**(c)]	0.620[**(c)]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.600	0.587	0.673	0.131	0.170		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	398	398	398	398	397	398	389	398	396	393
Female manager hostility	Correlation coefficient	-0.012	-0.052	-0.104[*(a)]	-0.059	-0.041	0.610[**(c)]	1.000	0.497[**(b)]	0.527[**]	0.509[**(c)]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.809	0.302	0.041	0.249	0.423	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	389	389	389	389	388	389	389	389	389	389

Discouragement	Correlation coefficient	0.013	0.002	-0.021	0.068	-0.055	0.600**(c)	0.497**(b)	1.000	0.471**(b)	0.528**(c)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.789	0.972	0.676	0.175	0.271	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
	N	398	398	398	398	397	398	389	398	396	393
Aggressiveness	Correlation coefficient	-0.018	-0.009	-0.043	0.021	-0.061	0.706**(c)	0.527**(c)	0.471**(b)	1.000	0.487**(b)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.716	0.854	0.394	0.674	0.227	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
	N	396	396	396	396	395	396	389	396	396	393
Unreasonable expectations	Correlation coefficient	-0.069	-0.063	0.008	0.013	-0.098	0.620**(c)	0.509**(c)	0.528**(c)	0.487**(b)	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.169	0.216	0.871	0.790	0.052	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	N	393	393	393	393	392	393	389	393	393	393

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

(a) Small effect: r = 0.1, (b) medium effect: r = 0.3 and (c) large effect: r > 0.5

Source: Calculated from survey results

7.4 Effect of gender on workplace bullying

The results of the t-tests indicated no statistically significant differences between the means of men and women for all the factors of workplace bullying. The p-value for all the factors measured above 0.13.

7.5 Effect of age, qualification, number of years in position, employment level and feelings about the future on workplace bullying

The results of the ANOVAs indicated no statistically significant differences between the means of the different categories for age (p-values > 0.2), qualification (p-values > 0.4), number of years in position (p-values > 0.1), employment level (p-values > 0.09), feelings about the future (p-values > 0.1) and the factors of workplace bullying.

7.6 Effect of marriage on workplace bullying

The results of the ANOVAs indicated no statistically significant differences between the means of the different marriage categories for the factors hostility, female manager hostility, aggressiveness and unreasonable expectations, as the p-values measured above 0.09 in all instances. However, significant differences were found between the means of the different marriage categories for the discouragement factor, as the p-value was 0.003. The Games-Howell test indicated significant differences between the means of respondents who were married (mean = 2.84) and those who were divorced/separated (mean = 2.29; p-value = 0.03). The effect size indicated a medium effect (d = 0.51). Furthermore, the Games-Howell test indicated significant differences between the means of respondents who were divorced/separated (mean = 2.29) and those who were single and never married (mean = 3.07; p-value = 0.003). The effect size indicated a medium to large effect (d = 0.69). For the hostility factor, the results of the effect size also showed a medium effect (d = 0.44) for respondents who were divorced/separated (mean = 2.41) and those who were single and never married (mean = 2.82).

7.7 Effect of sector (area) of work on workplace bullying

The results of the ANOVAs indicated no statistically significant differences between the means of the different sectors (areas) of work categories and the factors of workplace bullying. The p-value for all the factors measured above 0.08. However, the results of the effect sizes for the unreasonable expectation factor showed a large effect for respondents who were entrepreneurs (mean = 1.90) and those who were working in the private (mean = 2.73; d = 0.71) and public (mean = 2.73; d = 0.70) sectors.

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7.8 Effect of number of employees working for an organisation on workplace bullying

The results of the ANOVAs indicated no statistically significant differences between the means of the different categories for number of employees in an organisation with regard to the hostility, female manager hostility, aggressiveness and unreasonable expectations factors, as the p-values measured above 0.3 in all instances. However, the ANOVAs indicated statistically significant differences between the means of the different categories related to the number of employees for the discouragement factor, as the p-value measured 0.013. The Games-Howell test indicated significant differences between the means of organisations that had between 26 and 100 employees (mean = 2.41), those that had between 101 and 500 (mean = 3.06; p-value = 0.004; d = 0.6) and those that had more than 1 000 employees (mean = 2.88; p-value = 0.023; d = 0.4). The effect sizes showed a medium effect. Although the p-value for organisations that had between 26 and 100 employees (mean = 2.41) and those that had between 501 and 1 000 (mean = 3.06) was 0.073, the effect size showed a medium effect (d = 0.53).

7.9 Effect of income group per annum on workplace bullying

The results of the ANOVAs indicated no statistically significant differences between the means of the employment levels and the factors of workplace bullying. The p-value for all the factors measured above 0.07. However, the results of the effect sizes for the female manager hostility factor showed a medium effect (d = 0.41) for respondents who received an income of R150 001 to R250 000 (mean = 2.76) and those who received an income of R250 001 to R350 000 (mean = 2.39). Furthermore, a medium effect (0.51) was also evident for the aggressiveness factor between respondents who received an income of less than R150 000 (mean = 1.86) and those who received R150 001 to R250 000 (mean = 2.27).

7.10 Effect of feelings about the economy on workplace bullying

The results of the ANOVAs indicated no statistically significant differences between the means of the different categories (positive, negative and neutral) for the factors hostility, female manager hostility, aggressiveness and unreasonable expectations, as the p-values measured above 0.05 in all instances. However, the ANOVAs indicated statistically significant differences for the discouragement factor, as the p-value was 0.037. The Games-Howell test indicated that the means of the negative (mean = 3.09) and neutral (2.72)

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categories differed significantly; the p-value was 0.026. The effect size indicated a small effect (d = 0.34).

7.11   Effect of feelings about the future on workplace bullying

The results of the ANOVAs indicated no statistically significant differences between the means of the different categories (positive, negative and neutral) for all five factors, as the p-values measured above 0.05 in all instances.

8.   DISCUSSION

This research aimed to determine the perceptions and experiences of workplace bullying among employees in South Africa. A number of socio-demographic variables were used to determine whether differences exist in the experiences of bullying among employees who have different socio-demographic characteristics.

A factor analysis was conducted on the scale items measuring perceptions of individual experiences of negative behaviours that occurred weekly or more often over a period of a year in the workplace, in other words workplace bullying. Bullying behaviour is regarded as repeated mistreatment and also abusive conduct (Namie 2017:1). Five factors (hostility, female manager hostility, discouragement, aggressiveness and unreasonable expectations) were extracted and used to measure workplace bullying. Cronbachs' alpha coefficient was used to determine the internal reliability of the scale. All values were above the required 0.70, indicating high reliability and internal consistency.

The statements contained in the hostility factor related to hostility as described by Hodson and Sullivan (2012:65) and person-related bullying, as described by Einarsen *et al.* (2009:32). The statements contained in the discouragement and unreasonable expectations factors related to obstructionism as described by Hodson and Sullivan (2012:65) and work-related bullying, as described by Einarsen *et al.* (2009:32). The statements contained in the aggressiveness factor related to overt aggression as described by Hodson and Sullivan (2012:65) and physically intimidating bullying as described by Einarsen *et al.* (2009:32). The statements contained in the female manager hostility factor related to negative behaviour of a personal nature as well as work-related bullying, but exerted by female managers.

From the descriptive statistics it was evident that the mean scores of the hostility (2.69), female manager hostility (2.52), discouragement (2.86) and unreasonable expectations (2.72) factors were above 2.5, indicating that more than half of the respondents were subjected to bullying behaviour of a personal nature (53.8%) as well as work-related bullying

(55.8%) in their respective workplaces. Furthermore, the highest mean scores were obtained for discouragement (2.86) and unreasonable expectations (2.72) and the lowest mean scores for female manager hostility (2.52) and aggressiveness (2.02). It can be deducted that most MBA students were subjected to work-related bullying that causes intentional delays in their work and that discourages them from thriving in the workplace. The results are in line with previous research conducted, which indicates that work-related bullying is more commonly experienced than person-related bullying (Magee *et al.* 2014:19). Furthermore, slightly more than half of the respondents experienced bullying behaviour of their female managers and slightly fewer than half of the respondents (40.4%) experienced negative behaviour of an aggressive nature in their workplace. Although fewer than half of the respondents indicated that they experienced negative behaviour of an aggressive nature in the workplace, the number is still astonishingly high, and this should alert organisations that workplace bullying is a phenomenon and issue in the workplace that should be recognised and thoroughly addressed.

A correlation test was used to measure the linear association between age, qualification, years in position, number of employees and workplace bullying. Moderate to strong positive relationships between 0.471 and 0.706 were found between the five factors of workplace bullying. The strongest positive relationship was found between hostility and aggressiveness (p-value = 0.000; r = 0.706), indicating that the more negative behaviour of a personal nature experienced, the more negative behaviour of an aggressive nature is experienced. No significant relationships were found between age, qualification, number of employees, income and the five factors of workplace bullying. A weak negative relationship was found between the number of years in position and female manager hostility (p-value = 0.041; r = -0.104).

T-tests, ANOVAs and effect sizes were used to measure the effect of gender, age, marriage, qualification, sector of work, number of years in position, number of employees, employment level, income, feelings about the economy and feelings about the future on the five factors of workplace bullying. The empirical results indicated very few significant differences between the means of the mentioned socio-demographic variables and the factors of workplace bullying. No statistically significant differences between the means of the different categories for gender, age, qualification, sector of work, number of years in position, employment level, income and feelings about the future were found. Previous research conducted also reveals no significant differences in the prevalence of workplace bullying by gender (Ortega *et al.* 2009:421; Yildirim & Uysaloglu 2012:638), age (Ortega *et al.* 2009:421; Yildirim & Uysaloglu

2012:638), employment level (Hoel & Cooper 2000:12) and number of years in position (Yildirim & Uysaloglu 2012:638). However, the ANOVA tests indicated statistically significant differences between the means of the different categories for marriage (p-value = 0.003), number of employees (p-value = 0.013) and feelings about the economy (p-value = 0.037) for the discouragement factor.

The means of respondents who were single and never married (mean = 3.07; p-value = 0.003; d = 0.69) and those who were married (mean = 2.84; p-value = 0.03; d = 0.51) differed significantly from those who were divorced/separated (mean = 2.29). The effect sizes indicated a medium (d = 0.51) to large (d = 0.69) effect. It can be deducted that respondents who were divorced/separated experienced fewer work-related bullying behaviour that is discouraging in nature than those respondents who were single and never married as well as those who were married.

Significant differences between the means of organisations that had between 26 and 100 employees (mean = 2.41), those that had between 101 and 500 (mean = 3.06; p = 0.004; d = 0.6) and those that had more than 1 000 employees (mean = 2.88; p = 0.023; d = 0.4) were found. It can be deducted that respondents from organisations with between 26 and 100 as well as more than 1 000 employees experienced work-related bullying of a discouraging nature to a lesser degree than respondents of those organisations with fewer than 25 and between 101 and 500 employees.

Regarding feelings about the economy, the means of the negative (mean = 3.09) and neutral (2.72) categories differed significantly (p-value = 0.026). The effect size indicated a small effect (d = 0.34). Those respondents who held negative feelings about the economy experienced more work-related bullying behaviour that is discouraging in nature than those who were neutral about the economy.

9.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the research it became evident that employees in South Africa are subjected to workplace bullying to a considerable degree. More than half of the respondents indicated that they have experienced workplace bullying of a personal and work-related nature. Workplace bullying has serious implications for organisations and employees and affects them in a number of negative ways. Leymanns' and Glasls' models clearly indicate the devastating effect of bullying and/or conflict on individuals and organisations. It is of utmost importance that workplace bullying, as a work-related issue, is addressed effectively. The role of human resource practitioners is of utmost importance to counter workplace bullying.

Against this background, the following strategies are suggested to prevent and manage workplace bullying.

Employers should develop a policy statement that emphasises zero tolerance for workplace bullying. The policy statement should outline the procedure to follow for reporting incidents. Details of the policy should be communicated to all employees. Workplace bullying complaints should be dealt with thoroughly and appropriately. Prompt disciplinary action should be taken against anyone guilty of workplace bullying and the victims should be protected in all instances.

A risk-management approach should be adopted to prevent and manage bullying behaviour in organisations. The following steps suggested by Magee *et al.* (2014:35) should be included in such an approach: risk identification, risk assessment, risk evaluation, risk management and monitoring and evaluation.

Ongoing research should be conducted by organisations, academia, research institutions and so forth to reveal the prevalence of workplace bullying in organisations and to increase awareness of this work-related phenomenon.

Human resource practitioners should be educated to effectively deal with workplace bullying issues in organisations. A code of good practice to deal with workplace bullying in South Africa should be developed.

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