Social Bullying in Nursing Academia: A Phenomenological Study

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As a result of participating in this session, the participant will be able to

1. Discuss the significance and background information on social bullying in nursing academia.
2. Describe the purpose and methodology of the study.
3. Describe the themes and sub-themes and their implications for mental health recovery of nurse academics, their recruitment, and retention.

Learning Objectives

Persistent, demeaning, downgrading activities incorporating vicious words and cruel acts that undermine self-esteem (Adams, 1992; Beasley & Rayner, 1997).

Quine (2001) notes it shares 3 elements with racial and sexual harassment. Bullying is defined by its affect on the recipient, not intention of bully. There must be a negative effect on the victim. It must be persistent.

Definition of Social Bullying

Namie and Namie (2009, 2011) describe it as a status-blind harassment that is 4 times more prevalent than illegal racial or sexual forms.

72%: the perpetrator is a boss who controls every aspect of the reign of terror

Bully’s goal is to control his/her targets. When employers become aware of bullying, the behavior towards the target usually escalates.

Disclosures

The speakers have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Time to give feedback

Why did you choose this session on social bullying?
Have you experienced social bullying? How did it make you feel?
Have you witnessed social bullying? How did it make you feel?
How do you define bullying versus incivility?

Please complete the handout questions and discuss with person next to you.
Bullying is Indirect and Direct

- Bullying is often indirect, but can involve direct physical, verbal, or emotional abuse.
- Behaviors include: nonverbal innuendo, verbal affront, undermining activities (Bartholomew, 2006)
- Bullying is malicious and psychologically damaging and an inherent component of workplace violence (Yildirim, 2009)

Social Bullying in Academia

- Workplace bullying is becoming more common in academia. Competent faculty have been driven out of academia (Keim & McDermott, 2010).
- The Chronicle of Higher Education has published on this topic (Piper, 2008).
- Twale and DeLuca (2008) have published a book on Faculty Incivility

Twale & DeLuca (2008)

- Academic Bully Culture
  - Selected bullying behaviors include: indulging in self-promotion; showing intolerance or disrespect to others; giving lame alibis or rationalizations for action; and procrastinating.
  - Tenure system may enhance bullying behaviors

Limited Research on Academic Bullying

- Wilkin (2010). Grounded theory dissertation saw two coping behaviors in academics who were bullied: confrontation and avoidance of the bully.

Academic Victims of Bullying

- Were perceived as weak.
- Had satisfactory teaching evaluations and publications in sufficient numbers.
- Publications may not have been in the "right journals"
- Bullies are threatened by fellow academic's qualification and scholarship

Bullying in Nursing Academia

- Nursing faculty have described personal or have witnessed experiences of being disrespected and devalued.
- Themes: relational aggression, lack of support, devaluing based on educational preparation, betrayal, splitting, and boundary violations (Kolanko, Clark, Heinrich, olive, Serembus, & Sifford, 2006).
- Glass (2001; 2003) research in USA and Australia, saw themes of vulnerability.
Goldberg (2006; 2008) questioned whether high faculty turnover was related to bullying. Notes it may be about turf protection. What do you think? Question yet to be answered by nursing research.

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Social Bullying Versus Incivility

- Bully controls the reign of terror, when to attack, when to hold back, the place, the audience (power differential)
- Persistent targeting behavior
- Pales in comparison to incivility
- Malicious and psychologically damaging.

- Rude behavior
- Gossiping
- Excluding others
- Rolling eyes in disapproval
- Does not occur persistently
- Less psychologically damaging
- Between peers; horizontal; lateral

Social Bullying
Incivility

The purpose of our study was to investigate the phenomenon of social bullying. We wanted to know the experience of academic nursing faculty and administrators who had been socially bullied.

We used Colaizzi’s phenomenological method to describe the social bullying experience.

Data sources: interviews and authors’ field notes. All tapes were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The purposive sample (N=16) was selected using the following criteria:
1. Experienced social bullying in academic worksite.
2. Functioned as a nursing educator or nursing education administrator.
3. The ability to communicate in English

Information related to the purpose of the study was provided at the first meeting. Interviewing continued until saturation occurred and when data analysis identified no new information.

Sample was predominantly women (N=15, 93%); White (N=14, 88%); Majority were not tenured (N=14, 88%) and over 50% were assistant professors.

Ethical Considerations: La Salle University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study. Informed consent was given orally and in writing. Confidentiality was ensured by de-identification of data. All tapes destroyed at study end.

Following consent, we collected brief demographic information.

- Interview questions were:
  1. Please describe your personal experience of social bullying while working as a nurse educator or nurse academic administrator.
  2. Include anything that helps us understand what it is like to be socially bullied.
  3. Can you tell us more about how it felt?

- Tapes were 60–90 minutes in length.
Researchers read the transcripts and made notations. Data analysis took place in stages with review of transcripts and listening to audiotapes. Read all interviews and got a sense of what was said and of the whole interview. Extracted significant statements and phrases and organized into thematic structures. Formulated meanings from significant statements and phrases. Repeated the previous steps for each participant’s descriptions, organized the aggregate, formulated meanings into theme clusters, and searched for themes that fit together under major themes.

Used the theme clusters to exhaustively describe the experience and wrote and reviewed the full description of the experience. Returned the descriptions to the original source and returned many times to the original transcripts to ensure accuracy. Validated findings with participants and incorporated new data. Returned descriptions to some participants who discussed their reactions.

To establish trustworthiness:
1. Credibility was addressed by audiotaping interviews (prolonged engagement).
2. Verifying transcript accuracy (member checks by selected participants).
3. Researchers bracketed possible biases.
4. Thick description of data provided for transferability.
5. Audit trail established; expert in qualitative nursing research supported confirmability and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1992).

Bullying Tactics/Tricks of the Trade
Psychological Responses
Bully Culture
Fighting Back Strategies
Physical Responses
Targeting
Cyber–bullying
Power and Control
Leadership and Management

Subthemes included:
- Withholding information
- Gossiping
- Silencing
- Isolating
- Acting covertly
- Lying and manipulating
- Physically bullying behaviors
- Sabotaging
- Creating unrealistic workloads
- Personal slandering

Findings: Bullying Tactics/Tricks of the Trade

Themes

Data Analysis: Colaizzi (1978)

Data Analysis: Colaizzi (continued)

Trusworthiness

Findings: Bullying Tactics/ Tricks of the Trade

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- Physically bullying behaviors
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- Creating unrealistic workloads
- Personal slandering
Several described instances where they tried to defend faculty colleagues for bad evaluations or unfair administrative perceptions. Administrators refused any discussion, “the facts speak for themselves.”

Faculty tried to approach bullying as a systems issue; administrators denied any culpability.

Verbal abuse and demeaning comments silenced faculty

Withholding information included: minimal orientation for new faculty or established faculty switching to another assignment.

“It became quite clear that there was much information being withheld…I would ask questions and be humiliated asking questions that being a new faculty member I didn’t know.”

Subthemes:
1. Humiliation
2. Depression and going to therapy
3. Alienation: I can’t be me
4. Over-functioning and over-vigilance
5. Trapped
6. Fearful and defenseless
7. Self-blame: Something is wrong with me
8. Overcompensating to avoid bullying

A frequently mentioned subtheme.

Bullying experience was painfully depressing, with some entering psychotherapy to deal with it. In some cases, the therapist counseled the individual to “get out” of the job.

Participants felt personally and professionally “shaken.”

Participants felt alienated from peers, discouraged, unsupported and victimized.

“Industry pressured to resign. Just give it up. Just resign.”

“I can’t stay in a place where I can’t be me.”
Over-functioning/Over-vigilant

- Some faculty were made to feel that the only way to respond to the anticipated bullying was to be over-functioning in their job and over-vigilant to any problems.
- They saw the experience as emotionally draining.
- They would do anything to prevent some type of error from occurring.

Indicator Statements

- "It's very physical, very emotional and very draining. When I'm not at work, I'm checking my emails to put out brush fires and I can't even take a week off...I'm entitled to 4 weeks vacation a year and I barely take a week off...I don't get my rest either."

Bully Culture

- Subthemes
  1. Academic bully culture
  2. Lack of teamwork/no collegiality
  3. Authority/totally authoritarian
  4. Mobbing/cliques
  5. Old guard versus new faculty
  6. Inconsistent chain of command
  7. Impotence/ineffectiveness of Human Resources (HR)
  8. Confronting the bully culture

Academic Bully Culture: Indicator Statements

- Noted a culture of distrust
  "I'm not safe in bringing up my issues and my concerns to her because she's not interested in hearing them."

- Noted a culture of collusion.
  "You work there as long as you can until you can't take it any longer and then you leave. You can't make a difference."

Authoritarian: Indicator Statements

- Participants described environments as "totally authoritarian, totally constrictive...there are individuals who don't want to discuss...they want to shut you up."

- If participants tried to talk, the Dean would say, "that's subordination, let's fire her."

  "One Dean took this firm wide leg stance, shaking her finger at me and calling me a young lady, and saying this bullying problem doesn't exist."

Fighting Back Strategies

- Subthemes
  1. Leaving academia
  2. Identifying supports
  3. Using documentation
  4. Staying invisible
  5. Participating in outside professional activities
  6. Reframing to not blame oneself
  7. Holding your ground
  8. Healing oneself/resiliency
  9. Building a future
Leaving Academia: Indicator Statements

- “I am not sad to leave that work situation which became totally oppressive and unsupportive and you cannot function in any job environment where you do not have support.”
- Some anticipated leaving, “I’ve been told by many people over the years to keep your bags packed.”
- “It’s expensive any time you have faculty turnover. In an environment where bullying is going on a volatile work environment...a lot of negativity...general unhappiness and a lot of mobility exists.”

Staying Invisible: Indicator Statements

- Staying invisible helped.
- “People have told me, just lie low for a while. It’ll blow over and then she’ll start picking on someone else.”
- “At the end of the day we said, okay, we are gonna have to agree to disagree. It was okay. In this circumstance, it’s taken as a private hit—that you are in disagreement, you are hard to work with. So stay under the radar.”

Physical Responses

- Subthemes:
  1. Objective physical signs
  2. Subjective symptoms
  3. New diagnoses
- Indicator statements:
  - “I would say to my boss, ‘I’m just so stressed. All I ask is that you treat me fairly like you treat everybody else. I mentioned to her that my hair is falling out as thin as it is...it was like she thought it was funny.”
  - Hypertension, depression, GERD, eczema, angina

Targeting

- Subthemes:
  1. Targeted for: Speaking up
  2. Targeted for: Student evaluations
  3. Targeted for: Promoting or resisting change
  4. Questioning was described as dangerous
  5. Blaming through excessive scrutiny

Targeted for: Speaking Up; Targeted for Student Evaluations

- Faculty were especially targeted at faculty meetings.
- “Bullies are easily threatened; they behave as if you are the problem.”
- “I was in the organization for 8 years, even as an administrator, but what the students said at least in the Dean’s eyes came before anything I was saying.”

Blaming Through Excessive Scrutiny

- “If you look at us, we’ll look at you.”
- “I had not felt targeted before but I was definitely targeted at that point so as to blame me for something. My course grades were reviewed, they reviewed my grades more often than others, they questioned that my grades were too high or too low, the item analysis was not good, whatever.”
- “Everything was under scrutiny...It gave no ability to have any kind of real creative process happening. The end result was nasty negative comments, blaming the faculty, and “enduring mediocrity.”
Cyber-bullying

- Subthemes:
  - 1. Using email as a bullying tactic
  - 2. Using email as a distancer
  - 3. Using email as a controller of ideas and management ability

Power and Control

- Subthemes:
  - 1. Methods of control
  - 2. Power inequities
  - 3. Tenure status issues
  - Autocratic decision making, "their way or the highway."
  - Administrative and faculty bullies were described as "terrorists."
  - Abuse of power with unrealistic workloads
  - Critical information was not always shared.
  - Administrators could do whatever it wanted to faculty

Power and Control: Indicator Statements

- "That’s what bullying is, it’s control."
- "They are always in charge."
- "They can do whatever they want to me."

One-sided decision making was a common complaint though lip-service was paid to faculty input.

Leadership and Management

- Subthemes:
  - 1. Hostile dean behaviors
  - 2. Supportive dean behaviors
  - 3. Destructive faculty behaviors
  - Hostile dean behaviors were frequently described. Participants perceived deans as lacking emotional intelligence.

Leadership and Management: Indicator Statements

- "She just doesn’t have the emotional intelligence to realize that she is bullying...if I had said to her today, you’re bullying me, she wouldn’t stop because she just doesn’t see it that way."

- Deans are described as exploding. "There are times that we have a very collegial conversation, but if she is pressured, she just explodes."

Leadership and Management: Indicator Statements

- Deans cut off discussion. "There is no incivility in this room, and among the faculty. There never has, there never will be, and we will not talk about that, and this is the end of the discussion."

- Deans were described as "frenzied." "I went to a colleague who I trust and said I really feel bullied in the worst way and she said I don’t think the dean realizes it’s bullying. She gets frenzied."
Several described the Queen Bee Syndrome. “the faculty used the term about the Queen Bee being the dean, but she really was a hornet.” The deans were described as being passive or pretending to be laissez-faire, but actually authoritarian. Supportive dean behaviors were reported. “I think there are deans who really do care about the faculty.”

Social bullying experience generated organizational, physiological, psychological and interpersonal components of 9 major themes. The themes and subthemes agree with the literature in other disciplines and also in the variety of tactics to control their targets. There is a lack of nursing research on bullying in nursing academia, but instead the focus is on incivility of faculty and students. More qualitative and quantitative research is needed. The authors are conducting another qualitative research study on faculty resiliency to bullying.

Phenomenology cannot address the prevalence of bullying in nursing academia, but only that it exists. The sampling method included only people who self-selected as having been bullied in the workplace. The sample included more untenured faculty and those at the lower rank of assistant professor. Most participants were female and most of them worked in baccalaureate and higher degree programs.

The participants were asked to describe their experiences with being victims of bullying but not what they did to overcome or cope with the bullying. Some fighting back strategies were described but these were not the focus of the research question.

Social bullying is a terrible and terrifying experience. It occurs in the academic workplace and in nursing academia. The courage to change the bully culture is needed. If it does not occur, it will affect faculty turnover during a time of faculty shortage. The nursing profession, future students, and patients deserve a change for the better and they deserve it NOW.
Questions? Reactions?

- What are your reactions to the themes and subthemes?
- Suggestions for the future?
- Questions?
- See references on handout

Research Team

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