



# Prevalence of Workplace Bullying among IT Professionals in India: A Comparison of Self-labelling and Behavioural Experience Method

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## Abstract

Workplace bullying is persistent exposure to repeated negative behaviours at workplaces. Scholars have highlighted that it is a serious issue and is prevalent across the globe. This research aims to assess and compare the prevalence of bullying based on two measurement methods, to identify the prevalent bullying behaviours and to identify the perpetrators of workplace bullying. Data were collected from 190 employees working in Information Technology companies in India. Results indicate higher levels of prevalence of bullying using behavioural experience (40.5%) as compared to the self-labelling method (17.4%). The results highlight that the difference between the number of victims and non-victims based on two measurement methods were statistically significant. Hence, the study suggests that a combination of two methods has to be used while measuring the prevalence of bullying. Results suggest that work-related behaviours were more common as compared to person-related, intimidating and career-related behaviours. Results also show that supervisors were the main perpetrators of bullying, indicating that downward bullying is predominant than horizontal and upward bullying.

**Disciplinary:** Management Sciences (Human Resource Management, Organizational Behaviour).

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## 1 Introduction

Workplace bullying (WB) is a phenomenon in which individuals experience persistent and recurring negative behaviours at workplaces. The presence of this phenomenon in contemporary

working life has devastating effects on the victims (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). WB can lead to depression, anxiety, psychosomatic complaints (Ciby & Raya, 2018; Hauge et al., 2010; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002;), post-traumatic stress disorders (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004), and burnout (Srivastava & Dey, 2020). WB has negative repercussions on work-related factors like job satisfaction (Hauge et al., 2010), affective commitment (Ciby et al., in Press) and turnover intention (Ciby et al., in Press; Coetzee & van Dyk, 2018), hence affecting employees directly and the organization indirectly. WB is considered a serious issue whose prevalence has been reported globally. A meta-analysis results highlight that at least one out of every ten workers were exposed to WB globally (Nielsen et al., 2010). The prevalence of WB is reported to vary across different studies based on the measurement methods and its criteria (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). Mainly there are two methods for measuring the prevalence of WB, i.e. self-labelling and behavioural experience method. A systematic review suggests that most of the studies have used either one of the two methods or have combined these two methods to measure the prevalence of WB (Ciby & Raya, 2015). The use of combined methods is especially significant as they provide complementary information, especially in countries in which the phenomenon has yet to be fully explored (Petrović et al., 2014). A combined approach allows for a more thorough understanding of negative behaviours that can be classified as WB (Petrović et al., 2014).

Besides measurement methods, the prevalence of WB might vary across diverse cultures globally (Einarsen, 2000). Researchers suggest that WB is more common in cultures with high power distance as compared to low power (Ciby & Raya, 2015; Einarsen, 2000). In a similar vein, a systematic review on WB prevalence reveals alarming rates in high power distance countries such as Asia-Pacific, and Middle Asia regions (León-Pérez et al., 2021). Given the cultural context, it is crucial to comprehend the prevalence of WB in countries with high power disparity like India. However, limited studies have examined the prevalence of WB in India (Ciby, 2016; D'Cruz & Rayner, 2013; Gupta et al., 2017; Rai & Agarwal, 2017). We intend to address this gap.

The extant research has studied the prevalence of WB by drawing data from the general working population, multiple sectors, or the health sector (Zapf et al., 2020). The findings from these sectors cannot be generalised to other work environments (Marcello, 2010). The industry-specific researches are much needed to understand the scope and nature of WB, as well as to devise preventive and remedial measures. One such less researched industry is Information Technology (IT) (Marcello, 2010). Ciby and Raya (2014) pinpointed that the lack of WB studies in India necessitates exploring sectors that are highly competitive with high turnover rates, long work hours and constant work pressure. This qualitative research among Indian IT professionals revealed that though the victims were subjected to negative behaviours in their everyday lives, the majority could not identify it as WB. It further calls for future research to examine the presence of WB among IT professionals in India. We answer this call in this study by examining and comparing the prevalence of WB using two measurement methods, identifying prevalent behaviours and identifying the perpetrators of WB.

## 2 Literature Review

WB is a serious problem in workplaces across the globe that involves persistent exposure to negative behaviours. WB is defined as

*“harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. In order for the label bullying to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time” (Einarsen et al., 2020, p.15).*

Its important characteristics are (1) negative behaviours, (2) their frequency and duration and (3) perception of the power imbalance between victims and perpetrators. The negative behaviours could be any behaviours that are common in everyday work life (Leymann, 1996). The core characteristic of WB is the frequency and duration of the behaviour(s) rather than the nature of the behaviour(s) (Einarsen et al., 2020). Frequency is the recurrence of bullying behaviours and duration is the period of such recurrence (Rayner et al., 2002). Prolonged exposure to recurring negative behaviours distinguishes WB from other workplace deviant behaviours like workplace violence, workplace incivility, workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behaviours (Jan & Rahman, 2019; Leymann, 1996; Tariq & Amir, 2019). Victims have difficulty in defending and stopping the situations of bullying due to the real or perceived power differences between perpetrator and victims (Einarsen et al., 2020; Salin, 2003). Extant literature shows variations in the prevalence of WB, this can be due to differences in measurement methods, organizational culture and industries as well as cross-cultural differences across countries (Einarsen, 2000; Mikkelsen & Einarsen 2001; Zapf et al. 2020).

### 2.1 Measuring the Prevalence of WB

Researchers suggested that measurement methods and their criteria have contributed to variations in the prevalence of WB (León-Pérez et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2009). The most commonly reported methods of measuring the prevalence of WB are:

#### (1) Self-labelling method

This is also known as the subjective method of measuring bullying. This directly measures the perception of being victims of WB. After defining WB, the participants are asked if they were victims of WB in a given period (Escartin et al., 2009; Hoel & Cooper, 2000).

#### (2) Behavioural experience method

The behavioural experience method is also known as the perceived exposure method. The behavioural experience method measures the perception of exposure to negative behaviours by indirectly asking individuals how many times they are subjected to the given list of negative acts during a time (Agervold, 2007; Gupta et al., 2017). Leymann’s (1996) operational criteria are widely used to identify victims of WB. According to these criteria, individuals subjected to a minimum of one negative act weekly in a span of 6 months are classified as victims of WB.

Researchers have recommended the use of both the measurement methods to understand the prevalence of WB as they provide information about subjective perception of being victims of WB as well as about objective perception of exposure to negative behaviours (Nielsen et al., 2009;

Rai & Agarwal, 2017). In a meta-analysis, 11% prevalence was reported for studies using self-labelling on a global basis, whereas 15% was reported when using the behavioural method (Nielsen et al., 2010). This emphasizes how WB prevalence differs based on measurement methods. Thus, this study intends to examine and compare the prevalence of WB using both self-labelling and behavioural methods among IT professionals in India.

## **2.2 Prevalent Bullying Behaviours**

WB behaviours are classified into three: (i) work-related (ii) person-related and (iii) physically-intimidating behaviours (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011). Most of the researchers across the globe have reported several work-related bullying behaviours such as exposure to unmanageable workload, withholding information that affects your performance, tasks given below the level of competence, opinions being ignored, and unrealistic deadlines were highly prevalent in the workplaces (Galanaki & Papalexandris, 2013; Marcello, 2010; Salin, 2001). Thus, this study intends to find out the most common bullying behaviours among IT professionals in India.

## **2.3 Perpetrators of Bullying**

Extant literature suggests that perpetrators of WB can be supervisors (downward bullying), subordinates (upward bullying) and/or peers (horizontal bullying) (De Cieri et al., 2019; D'Cruz & Rayner, 2013). Studies suggest that downward bullying (supervisors or managers) is the main form of bullying (D'Cruz & Rayner, 2013; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Rai & Agarwal, 2017). In a similar vein, systematic reviews indicate that supervisors and managers could be the perpetrators in 50-70% of cases of WB (Rayner & Keashly, 2005; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). However, researchers also suggested that downward and horizontal bullying (colleagues and superiors) are equally prevalent in organizations (De Cieri et al., 2019; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). The variations of perpetrators of WB suggested in extant research could be explained by cross-cultural differences (Rayner & Keashly, 2005; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). D'Cruz et al. (2016) highlighted that downward bullying is more common in countries with high power disparity such as India. Thus, this study intends to identify the perpetrators of WB among IT professionals in India.

Thus, this study's objectives are to find WB prevalence based on both self-labelling and behavioural method among Indian IT professionals, to compare the WB prevalence rates measured using two measurements methods (*Hypothesis: Prevalence of WB based on self-labelling and behavioural experience methods are different*). This study also identifies the main perpetrators of WB and identifies the prevalent negative bullying behaviours among IT professionals in India.

# **3 Methodology**

## **3.1 Data Collection**

This research was carried out among IT professionals in India. A self-reported online questionnaire was used to collect the data during January-February 2020. The online survey link was forwarded to the employees of various IT companies through email. Participation in this study was voluntary and a consent was obtained from them. The sampling criteria were IT professionals

having more than six months work experience in the current job. A total of 220 responses were received, 190 were complete and used for this study. Table 1 gives the sample characteristics.

**Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N=190).**

Characteristics	% (N)	Characteristics	% (N)
Gender		Type of Company	
Men	55.8% (106)	Service-based company	60.5%(115)
Women	44.2% (84)	Product-based company	39.5%(75)
Age		Current job experience	
21-30	65.3% (124)	0.6 - 3 years	50% (90)
31-40	32.1% (61)	4 -8 years	40% (76)
41-50	2.6% (5)	years	8.4% (16)
		≥ 15 years	1.6% (3)
Marital Status		Educational Qualification	
Single	38.4% (73)	Engineering	62.1% (118)
Married	61.6% (117)	Other Graduate Degree	3.1% (6)
		Masters Degree	34.8% (66)

## 3.2 Measures

The research instrument was divided into three parts. The first part had an inventory of 30 negative bullying behaviours to measure WB based on the behavioural experience method. The second part had one question on measuring WB based on the self-labelling method and one question on identifying the perpetrators of WB. The third part collected demographic information.

### 3.2.1 WB - Prevalence of victims

WB was measured using two methods: behavioural experience and self-labelling method.

#### 3.2.1.1 Behavioural experience method

The prevalence of WB was measured indirectly using a list of 30 negative behaviours (Ciby, 2016). This scale has reported four forms of bullying acts for IT industry: work-related (for example “being exposed to an unmanageable workload”), person-related (for example “spreading of gossip and rumours about you”), intimidating (for example “being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger”) and career-related (for example “taking ownership of your work without giving due credit”). Participants were asked how often they were subjected to the given list of negative acts in the past 6 months. Response categories “never”, “rarely”, “monthly once or twice”, “weekly once”, and “daily” were coded from 1 to 5. Cronbach’s alpha for 30-item inventory was 0.95, indicating high internal consistency. Based on Leymann operational criteria, respondents were classified as WB victims if they were subjected to at least a single negative act weekly for a six months span (Leymann, 1996).

#### 3.2.1.2 Self-labelling method

The prevalence of WB was estimated directly. The participants were given operational definition of WB. It is defined as:

*“repeated behaviours directed against one or more workers, that are unwanted by the victim, that may be carried out deliberately or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offence and distress, and that may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment” (Einarsen et al., 2020, p. 10).*

Based on this definition, they were asked to respond to a single item question of whether they were victims of WB in the past six months. The five Likert-scale options were: “no”; “yes, rarely”; “yes, monthly once or twice”; “yes, weekly once or twice”; “yes, daily”. This one-item question is reported to be a valid measure for prevalence of WB (Nielsen et al., 2009).

### **3.2.2 Prevalent Bullying behaviours**

The prevalent bullying behaviours were identified from the behavioural experience measurement method. In this method, respondents gave information about how frequently they were exposed to the 30-items scale in the last six months. Behaviours that indicated a frequency of exposure at least weekly were considered as prevalent bullying behaviours.

### **3.2.3 Perpetrators of WB**

Perpetrators of WB were identified by asking a single-item question about what are the sources of bullying. The options given were supervisors, peers and subordinates. The participants could choose multiple options.

## **3.3 Data Analysis**

SPSS statistics (v.20) was used to perform data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to describe WB prevalence using two methods, prevalent negative bullying behaviours and perpetrators of WB. Cross tabulations and chi-square analysis were used to compare the prevalence of WB using two measurement methods.

# **4 Results**

## **4.1 Prevalence of Victims of Bullying**

### **4.1.1 Self-Labeling Method**

When the respondents were given the definition of WB, 17.4 % (N=33) reported themselves to be victims of bullying at least occasionally. Out of these victims, 6.9% reported being bullied frequently (at least weekly). 82.6% reported that they had not been bullied in the previous six months.

### **4.1.2 Behavioural Experience Method**

Leymann’s (1996) operational criteria (subjected to a minimum of one negative act weekly in last six months) was used to identify the victims in this method. Out of 190 respondents, 40.5% (N=77) were classified as victims of bullying and the remaining were non-victims.

## **4.2 Comparison of Two Measurement Methods of Bullying**

The prevalence of WB was 17.4% in the case of the self-labelling method and 40.5% in the case of the behavioural method. On cross-tabulation of prevalence rates of both the measurement methods, 14.2% (N=27) of the participants were classified as victims based on both self-labelling and behavioural methods, 3.2% (N=6) of the self-labelled victims were classified as non-victims

based on behavioural method (see Table 2), 26.3 % (N=50) of the participants who were classified as victims based on behavioural method were classified as non-victims in the self-labelling method.

Chi-square analysis results showed that the difference between the number of victims and non-victims based on two measurement methods were statistically significant ( $X^2=28.3$ ,  $df =1$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Hence, the hypothesis is accepted. Specifically, a significantly higher prevalence rate of victims was reported on using the behavioural method as compared to the self-labelling method.

**Table 2: Comparison of measurement methods**

Self-Labeling	Behavioural Experience		Total
	Victims	Non Victims	
Victims	27 (14.2%)	6 (3.2%)	33 (17.4%)
Non-victims	50 (26.3%)	107 (56.3%)	157 (82.6%)
Total	77 (40.5%)	113(59.5%)	190 (100%)

### 4.3 Prevalent Negative Behaviours

Five most prevalent behaviours identified in this study were: “excessive monitoring of your work” (17.4%), “being ordered to do work below your level of competence” (16.3%), “being exposed to an unmanageable workload” (12.1%), “being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines” (11.5%), “someone withholding information which affects your performance” (10%) and “having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks” (10%).

### 4.4 Perpetrators of WB

Results show that supervisors or managers were more frequently reported as the perpetrators of bullying (59%), followed by peers (34%), and subordinates (7%).

## 5 Discussion

This study results showed that WB is prevalent among Indian IT professionals. This study measured the prevalence of WB using two methods. The self-labelling method identified that 17.4% of the respondents were victims of WB. In comparison with the studies that have used the self-labelling method, the prevalence rate identified in this study was higher than the study among Norwegian employees (8.8%, Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996), Spanish employees (10%, Escartin et al., 2009), and US employees (9.4%, Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

The behavioural experience method identified 40.5% of participants as victims of WB. The research in India have reported similar prevalence rates in the ITES-BPO sector (42.3%, D'Cruz & Rayner, 2013), multi-sector (46%, Gupta et al., 2017) and managers from multi-sector (44%, Rai & Agarwal, 2017). The studies among Turkish employees (55%, Bilgel et al., 2006), and Pakistani telecommunication employees (52%, Bashir & Hanif, 2011) showed higher prevalence rates. However, studies among Norwegian employees (14.3%, Nielsen, et al., 2009), South Korean employees (5.7%, Seo et al., 2012) reported lower prevalence rates as compared to this study results. These variations in the prevalence of WB can be attributed to the cultural differences among these countries (Einarsen, 2000).

In congruence with the previous studies, prevalence based on self-labelling is much lower than the behavioural experience method (Rai & Agarwal, 2017; Salin, 2001). The low level of

prevalence of self-reported victims indicates that the awareness of the phenomenon might be much lower among IT professionals in India (Ciby & Raya, 2014; D'Cruz & Rayner, 2012). The lower prevalence rates in self-labelling may also be because of the fact that certain negative behaviours are considered as part of their work culture. Hence, the employees could not differentiate it as bullying. Salin (2001) rightly pointed out that employees may be hesitant to label themselves as victims of bullying, as the word bullying has negative connotations attached to it. The study displayed that the most prevalent forms of bullying among Indian IT professionals were related to one's work tasks. These findings are consistent with previous research from different industries (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Marcello, 2010; Salin, 2001). This study results indicated that downward bullying predominates horizontal and upward bullying. This is in agreement with previous studies, which have reported that supervisors are the major bullies in the organizations (Galanaki & Papalexandris, 2013; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Rai & Agarwal, 2017).

Considering cross-sectional research design, small sample and self-reported measures, the findings of this research need to be understood with caution. Future studies can validate the current findings with larger samples from the same or different sectors of employment. The lack of industry-specific studies in WB in India calls for future research.

## **6 Conclusion**

This study adds to bullying literature by estimating the presence of WB among Indian IT professionals. The results highlight that the difference between the number of victims and non-victims based on two measurement methods were statistically significant. Specifically, a significantly higher prevalence rate of victims was reported on using the behavioural method as compared to the self-labelling method. Fewer employees were able to identify themselves as victims of WB. Although, victims are subjected to negative behaviours in their everyday lives, yet they don't label it as bullying as there is high acceptance of negative behaviours in high power distance cultures like India. Hence, the study suggests that a combination of two methods has to be used while measuring the prevalence of WB as both complements each other (one labels victims and the other identifies the negative bullying behaviours). The study result throws light on the alarming rate of prevalence of the phenomenon among the Indian IT employees, which needs much wider attention by researchers, human resource practitioners and policymakers.

## **7 Availability of Data and Material**

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding authors.

## **8 Acknowledgement**

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