Title: Workplace bullying and absenteeism: The mediating roles of poor health and work engagement

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Running Head: Workplace bullying and absenteeism

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is a major problem that affects the well-being and productivity of employees. Some previous studies have found that workplace bullying is associated with absenteeism, which is a major contributor to lost workplace productivity. However, a comprehensive understanding of how different workplace bullying experiences are associated with absenteeism is currently lacking. In particular no previous studies have examined potential mediators of these relationships. The present paper aimed to provide new insights into the relationship between workplace bullying and absenteeism. In a 12-month prospective study of 500 Australian employees, we identified five distinct subtypes of workplace bullying experiences using a person-centred approach. These bullying subtypes were found to be associated with absenteeism via health impairment and lower work engagement. The findings can be used to inform HR strategies to prevent and manage workplace bullying.

Key words: workplace bullying; absenteeism; person-centred; work engagement; mental health.

Introduction

Workplace bullying, defined as prolonged, repeated exposure to negative and unreasonable behaviour from other employees (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009), is a major issue facing contemporary workplaces. An estimated 14.6% of employees have experienced recent workplace bullying (e.g., within the past six months) (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010), which encompasses a wide variety of behaviours that can be targeted towards another employee's work tasks (e.g., excessive monitoring, unreasonable workloads) and/or their personal characteristics (e.g., ignoring, spreading of rumours, and threats) (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Einarsen, et al., 2009). Bullying behaviours can also be direct or indirect in nature. Direct bullying encompasses obvious, overt behaviours such as intimidation, criticisms, and humiliation, whereas indirect bullying is more subtle and includes ignoring, gossiping, and undermining behaviours (Einarsen et al., 2009).

Workplace bullying represents a major HR issue given that it adversely affects the well-being, career outcomes, and productivity of targets, witnesses, and those accused of bullying. Targets of workplace bullying, for instance, have poorer mental and physical health (Kivimäki et al., 2003, Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Tynes et al., 2013), lower job satisfaction, greater career disruptions, feel less secure about their jobs (Glambek et al., 2014; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), and have higher turnover intentions (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Workplace bullying poses major challenges for HR professionals who are involved in developing strategies for dealing with cases of workplace bullying that are often highly complex and difficult to resolve, and managing the consequences of bullying such as staff turnover, stress-related leave, and poor staff morale (Fox & Cowan, 2015). The financial costs of workplace

bullying are also considerable, and in Australia for example, are estimated to range from AUD 6 billion and AUD 36 billion a year (Productivity Commission, 2010).

Some studies have found that workplace bullying is associated with absenteeism (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010; Kivimäki et al., 2000; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), which could contribute directly to lost workplace productivity. However, available research is limited and many aspects of the relationships between workplace bullying and absenteeism remain unclear. For example, little is known about the pathways that link different workplace bullying experiences with absenteeism. This paper contributes to the understanding of relationships between bullying and absenteeism in two ways. First, we adopted a person-centred approach to identify distinct subtypes of workplace bullying experiences. Person-centred approaches are particularly relevant from a HR perspective since there may be considerable individual differences in the type and frequency of bullying behaviours, which have varying consequences and require different strategies. Second, we investigated whether distinct workplace bullying experiences predicted absenteeism via two pathways. By utilising Steers and Rhodes' (1978) model of attendance and the Job Demands Resources Model (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) as theoretical frameworks, we proposed that motivational and health impairment pathways link different workplace bullying experiences with absenteeism.

Workplace Bullying and Absenteeism

Absenteeism – "the failure to report to work as scheduled" (p. 160) – is a major cause of lost workplace productivity (Johns, 2008). In Australia, for example, it is estimated that

absenteeism costs organisations AUD 44 billion annually (Australian Industry Group, 2015). HR professionals are integral to the management of absenteeism given their role in the development, review, and enforcement of absenteeism policies, monitoring of absenteeism data, and oversight of appropriate return to work arrangements for those who have taken long periods of sick leave (James et al., 2002).

A wide array of factors can influence absenteeism behaviour, including poor mental and physical health, low job satisfaction, and psychosocial work characteristics such as low job autonomy and poor leadership (Nielsen et al., 2006; Steers & Rhodes, 1978). Although not widely investigated, there is some evidence that workplace bullying is a contributor to absenteeism (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010; Kivimäki et al., 2000; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). For instance, a meta-analysis conducted by Nielsen and Einarsen (2012) found a modest positive association between workplace bullying and absenteeism ($r = .11$, 95% confidence interval: .08 - .15). Strategies to address workplace bullying may therefore have benefits for employees and organisations by minimising absenteeism and improving productivity.

A major limitation of existing research, however, is that very little is known about the processes by which workplace bullying influences absenteeism, beyond some studies briefly discussing stress and poor health as potential mechanisms (e.g., Kivimäki et al., 2000). Drawing on Steers and Rhodes' (1978) model of attendance, we aim to build upon existing research and investigated whether measures of health impairment (self-reported mental and physical health) and motivation (work engagement) mediated the relationship between workplace bullying experiences and absenteeism. Steers and Rhodes' (1978) model, along

with other established models of absenteeism (e.g., Nicholson, 1977; Brooke, 1986), conceptualises absenteeism behaviours on an involuntary-voluntary continuum (Nicholson, 1977; Steers & Rhodes, 1978). At one end of the continuum, external factors (e.g., poor physical or mental health) are proposed to constrain an individual's ability to attend work, which gives rise to involuntary absenteeism (Steers & Rhodes, 1978). In contrast, the other end of the continuum recognises that individuals sometimes choose to be absent from work to withdraw/escape from a stressful or negative work environment, and this reflects voluntary absenteeism (Steers & Rhodes, 1978).

Steers and Rhodes (1978) proposed two main processes underlying absenteeism behaviour – (1) motivation to attend, and (2) ability to attend. In regards to motivation, an employee's affective response to their job (e.g., job satisfaction), combined with internal and external pressures (e.g., economic, social, or personal pressures), influences their level of motivation to attend work. Thus, an employee who enjoys their job is more likely to feel motivated to attend, and will have less voluntary absenteeism (Steers & Rhodes, 1978). However, factors such as poor health, family responsibilities, and transportation problems can promote involuntary absenteeism by impairing an individual's ability to attend work (Steers & Rhodes, 1978). As discussed below, we proposed that workplace bullying can lead to higher voluntary and involuntary absenteeism by affecting an employee's: (1) ability to attend work, by promoting poor physical and mental health; and, (2) motivation to attend work, by undermining processes such as work engagement. These two pathways are examined in more detail in the following sections.

Health impairment

Health impairment is one pathway by which workplace bullying could affect absenteeism. As a significant stressor (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), exposure to workplace bullying could contribute to physical and mental health problems, and thus constrain one's ability to attend work. Existing theories of stress, such as the Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004) propose that stressors promote cognitive activation, and a cascade of physiological (e.g., increased sympathetic nervous system activity and associated hormonal changes) and psychological responses (e.g., stress, poor detachment, and rumination). Although not generally harmful in the short-term, prolonged activation (which can occur through exposure to ongoing bullying) has the potential to erode an individual's health and well-being. This has been supported by a large body of research demonstrating that individuals exposed to workplace bullying are at a greater risk of health conditions such as depression, anxiety, sleep problems, hypertension, and migraines (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Therefore, based on Steers and Rhodes' (1978) model and existing empirical evidence, we hypothesised that health impairments arising from exposure to workplace bullying would be associated with greater absenteeism by affecting one's ability to attend work.

Hypothesis 1. *Poor mental and physical health will mediate the relationship between workplace bullying experiences and absenteeism.*

Work engagement

Workplace bullying could also lead to greater absenteeism by influencing an individual's motivation to attend work. In this paper, we specifically examined the role of

work engagement – a state of optimal functioning at work, whereby individuals are energised, positively attached, and fully dedicated to their work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006). Work engagement is an important motivational factor that has been linked with numerous health and work-related outcomes including lower levels of absenteeism (Schaufeli et al., 2009). For example, because more engaged workers have greater commitment, more energy, more positive emotions, and greater pride in their work, they are less likely to choose to be absent from work.

The propositions of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) suggest a number of ways by which workplace bullying could affect work engagement. The J-DR model conceptualises work engagement as being influenced by job resources and job demands, as well as personal resources. Job resources (e.g., social support and autonomy) can promote work engagement by fostering personal growth and development, and/or by allowing work goals to be achieved (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Personal resources (e.g., optimism and resilience) foster work engagement by allowing individuals to better use their job resources, and control their work environment. Job demands can have varying implications for work engagement, prompting some researchers to distinguish between two main types of job demands (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005; Van den Broeck, De Cuyper, De Witte, & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Some job demands can be considered 'challenge' demands (e.g., time pressures, high workload) since they have a motivating effect and promote personal growth and mastery. Such demands are proposed to predict higher work engagement (Crawford et al., 2010). Other job demands such as workplace conflict and micro-management may act as hindrances, stunting personal growth and triggering negative emotions (Crawford et al.,

2010). These 'hindrance' demands could predict lower work engagement by undermining an individual's motivation and vigour at work.

Workplace bullying can be conceptualised as a hindrance demand (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2016), as it is a stressor that triggers negative emotions, hinders personal growth and development, and promotes withdrawal behaviours in the workplace (e.g., Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). As a hindrance demand, workplace bullying would therefore predict lower work engagement, which is supported by the findings of some empirical studies (Glasø, Bele, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2011; Rodríguez-Muñoz, Baillien, De Witte, Moreno-Jiménez, & Pastor, 2009; Trépanier, Fernet, & Austin, 2013). In the present paper, we aim to extend upon these findings and specifically hypothesised that lower work engagement would link workplace bullying with higher absenteeism. This is because individuals who are less engaged at work could be more inclined to take days off work as a way of coping with, or withdrawing from these adverse work environments (Schaufeli et al., 2009). This proposition aligns with the motivational processes outlined by Steers and Rhodes (1978).

Hypothesis 2. *Low work engagement will mediate the relationship between workplace bullying experiences and absenteeism.*

A Person-Centred Approach

A key contribution of this paper to the HR literature is that we utilised a person-centred approach to assess distinct subtypes of workplace bullying experiences. This is in contrast to most previous studies that have examined workplace bullying using variable-centred approaches such as self-labelling and/or behaviour experience methods (Nielsen et

al., 2010). The self-labelling method involves providing employees with a definition of workplace bullying and then asking directly whether they have experienced workplace bullying in given time period (e.g., 6 months). Behavioural experience methods involve administering questionnaires (e.g., Negative Acts Questionnaire) to assess the frequency of different negative acts in the workplace. This information is used to create continuous or categorical scores of workplace bullying experiences.

These variable-centred approaches are informative, but do not adequately capture the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of workplace bullying experiences (Leon-Perez et al., 2014; Notelaers et al., 2011). For example, personal and contextual factors can lead to very different workplace bullying experiences, reflecting variations in the type (e.g., personal versus task-related; direct versus indirect), frequency, and severity of bullying experiences (Leon-Perez et al., 2014; Notelaers et al., 2011). Furthermore, workplace bullying is not static and does not have a clear endpoint. Rather it is best conceptualised as a dynamic process, in which there can be progression among different stages (Leon-Perez et al., 2015). Conflict escalation perspectives, for instance, propose that workplace bullying arises from instances of interpersonal conflict that are not well managed and gradually escalate over time (Leon-Perez et al., 2015; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Individuals can therefore have very different workplace bullying experiences, which is a critical consideration from a HR perspective since certain workplace bullying experiences could be more harmful (e.g., frequent, direct forms of bullying), and may require tailored interventions and actions (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

Person-centred approaches such as latent class analysis may be ideal for examining workplace bullying. This is because these approaches can identify naturally occurring subtypes of bullying experiences that differ in relation to frequency, type, and severity of experiences. Some recent studies have utilised person-centred approaches to investigate the nature and outcomes of distinct workplace bullying experiences (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2009; Leon-Perez et al., 2014; Notelaers et al., 2006, 2011). The first such study was conducted by Notelaers et al. (2006), who examined workplace bullying in a sample of 6,175 Belgian employees. Using the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ), a 22 item scale that measures the frequency of different negative acts in the workplace, they performed LCA to identify 6 distinct types of workplace bullying experiences: not bullied (35%); limited work criticism (28%); limited negative encounters (17%); sometimes bullied (9%); work related bullied (8%); and, victims (3%). In a subsequent study of 8985 Flemish employees, Notelaers et al. (2011) found six similar workplace bullying classes: not bullied (30.5%); limited work criticisms (27.2%); limited negative encounters (20.8%); sometimes bullied (8.3%); work-related bullying (9.5%); and, victims (3.6%). Similar results have been reported in some other studies. In a sample of 5,288 UK employees, Einarsen et al. (2009) found evidence for seven distinct workplace bullying classes: no bullying (28%); some work criticism (25%); occasional negative encounters (15%); occasional bullying (13%); work-related bullying (10%); severe bullying (5%); and physical intimidation (3%). Importantly, Einarsen et al.'s (2009) seven workplace bullying classes differed in relation to health and organisational outcomes. That is, bullying classes characterised by more frequent and severe bullying experiences had poorer employee health, lower job satisfaction, and lower organisational

commitment compared with experiences that were less regular and less severe (Einarsen et al., 2009).

It is therefore plausible that use of a person-centred approach could provide an important insight into the relationship between workplace bullying experiences and outcomes such as absenteeism. In this paper, we therefore utilised a person-centred approach to identify workplace bullying experiences, and examined whether they were indirectly and directly associated with absenteeism. We hypothesised that more frequent and severe (e.g., direct versus indirect bullying) workplace bullying experiences would lead to higher levels of absenteeism, with these associations mediated by poor health and lower work engagement.

Hypothesis 3: *More frequent and severe workplace bullying experiences will predict higher levels of absenteeism.*

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited via an online data collection agency in Australia. This agency manages a panel of more than 350,000 Australians recruited through online and offline (e.g., telephone, postal recruitment) methods. Quotas were set to obtain approximately 1500 completed surveys at baseline, with target respondents being Australian employees aged 18 – 65 years, with quotas set to recruit a sample with a composition similar to the Australian working population (e.g., 55% male, approximately one-third part-time

employees, and a mix of industry types and job levels). Participants were sent a web-link to the survey questionnaire, which was administered via Qualtrics. Although it was not possible to determine an accurate response rate, the rate of completed and eligible surveys per invitations sent was approximately 10%, which is consistent with other studies using this approach (Evans & Mathur, 2006).

The baseline sample consisted of 1454 employees, with 561 participating in the follow-up survey administered 12 months later (38.6% follow-up). When individuals with missing data on key variables of interest (e.g., work engagement, workplace bullying) at both time points were excluded, the final matched sample included 500 employees. The characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. An attrition analysis was conducted to examine whether there were any differences in characteristics between those in the final sample and individuals who dropped out or did not provide complete data (Table 1). These analyses indicated some differences in relation to age and gender distribution; however the samples did not differ significantly in relation to marital status, education level, work hours, absenteeism, and work engagement.

[PLACE TABLE 1 HERE]

Measures

Absenteeism. Data on self-reported absenteeism data were collected at baseline and 12-month follow up via the following question: "In the past 12 months, have you taken any paid sick leave". Participants who indicated yes were then asked a follow up question to indicate the

number of days of sick leave they had taken in the previous 12-month period. This was used to create a variable of the number of sick days, with 'no' responses coded as 0 days.

Workplace Bullying. The 22-item Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (Einarsen, et al., 2009) assessed experiences of workplace bullying. This scale examines a range of workplace bullying behaviours on five-point response scales ('never', 'now and then', 'monthly', 'weekly', and 'daily'). There are several ways of scoring the NAQ-R. In this paper we examined responses to the NAQ-R using latent class analysis, as outlined in the statistical analysis section.

Work Engagement. Work engagement was assessed via the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9 (UWES-9: Schaufeli et al., 2006). This scale consists of 9-items assessing vigour (e.g., "At work, I feel bursting with energy"), dedication (e.g., "I am enthusiastic about my job"), and absorption (e.g., "I am immersed in my work"). Each item was scored on a 7-point frequency scale from never to always. Consistent with existing studies, we modelled the UWES-9 as a single factor reflected by the nine items (Fong & Ng, 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2005; Seppälä, et al., 2009).

Self-reported health. The Short-Form Health Survey 12 was used to assess mental and physical health (Ware, Kosinski, & Keller, 1995). The SF-12 consists of 12 items that assess eight domains of physical and mental health including physical functioning, pain, general health, vitality, and mental health. Responses on these items were scored to provide a composite of physical and mental health (Ware et al., 1995).

Covariates. The questionnaire collected information on sex, age, highest level of education (coded as high school, trade/diploma/certificate, and university degree), marital status (partnered versus single), and work hours (coded as 1 – 15 hours, 16 – 34 hours, 35 – 44 hours, and ≥ 45 hours per week). Psychological job demands, decision latitude, and supervisor and co-worker social support at work were measured using the Job Content Questionnaire (Karasek, 1979). Psychological job demands (α = .79) was assessed through five items examining levels of job demands (e.g., "My job requires working very fast"). Decision latitude (α = .88) was based on 9 items assessing levels of skill discretion (e.g., "My job requires a high level of skill") and decision authority (e.g., "I have a lot of say about what happens on my job"). Supervisor support at work (α = .94) was examined through four items (e.g., "My supervisor pays attention to what you are saying"), with co-worker social support (α = .88) also assessed by four items (e.g., "People I work with are helpful in getting the job done").

Statistical Analysis

Latent class analysis was performed using M*plus* version 6.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998 - 2010) to identify distinct classes of workplace bullying based on responses to the NAQ-R. These analyses involved testing a model with one class, followed by a two-class model, three-class model, and so on until the optimal number of classes was identified. Consistent with existing recommendations, the number of classes was guided by theoretical considerations and statistical criteria (Bauer & Curran, 2003; Berlin et al., 2014; Ram & Grimm, 2009). Statistical criteria included indices of model fit such as Akaike's Information

Criteria (AIC), Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC), and sample-size adjusted BIC, where lower values indicate a better model fit (Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007). Bootstrap Likelihood Ratio Tests (BLRT) were also conducted to compare model fit between sequential models; a significant BLRT indicates a better model fit relative to a model with one fewer classes (Nylund, et al., 2007). The classification accuracy (entropy) of models was also examined. Consistent with existing recommendations emphasising the importance of theoretical considerations in determining the number of classes, the distinctiveness and interpretability of the identified classes was also considered to ensure a parsimonious and meaningful solution (Bauer & Curran, 2003; Jung & Wickrama, 2008; Ram & Grimm, 2009).

The relationships between the workplace bullying classes and absenteeism were then examined. Because the absenteeism data had a zero-inflated Poisson distribution, absenteeism was treated as a count variable in the analyses. A regression model using M*plus* was conducted to examine the direct relationships between workplace bullying classes at time 1 and absenteeism at time 2, controlling for age, gender, marital status, education level, work hours, social support, job demands, job control, and time 1 absenteeism. A half-longitudinal panel mediation model (Little, 2013) was then conducted to examine whether the workplace bullying classes were significantly associated with absenteeism (Time 2) via work engagement and health (Time 1). Consistent with Hayes and Preacher (2014) dummy codes were created for the workplace bullying classes to estimate relative indirect effects. The mediation model included the covariates listed above. Because of the zero-inflated Poisson distribution, bootstrapping could not be conducted to quantify the significance of the indirect

effects. Instead, the model constraint command in M*plus* was used to examine the indirect paths.

Results

Workplace Bullying Classes

As noted above, the selection of the optimal number of latent classes should be guided by a combination of statistical criteria and theoretical considerations (Bauer & Curran, 2003; Berlin et al., 2013; Ram & Grimm, 2009). The statistical criteria (see Table 2) provided support for the 5 and 6-class solutions. For example, the BIC values (considered one of the more robust indicators of model fit) favoured the 5-class solution, whereas the AIC, adjusted BIC, and BLRT criteria supported the 6-class solution. When we inspected the characteristics of the 5- and 6-class models, we found that the 5-class model provided the most distinct, parsimonious, and meaningful solution. For example, the six class model identified a small class ($n = 20$); although there are no clear cut-offs, classes smaller than 1% of the sample or that have an $n < 25$ are problematic given the lack of statistical power and precision (Berlin et al., 2014). Furthermore, we found that this small class overlapped with one of the classes identified in the 5-class model (the 'Frequent bullying' class). In contrast, the classes in the 5-class model were sufficiently large, and revealed distinct workplace bullying classes. We therefore selected the five class model as an optimal and parsimonious solution in this paper.

[PLACE TABLE 2 HERE]

[PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE]

As shown in Figure 1A, the largest class (n = 179; 35.8%) was characterised by a very low frequency of workplace bullying experiences. As a result, this class was labelled 'No bullying'. The second class (n = 140; 28.0%) had very low rates of frequent bullying, although some types of negative acts were reported on an occasional basis (Figure 1B). These negative acts mostly encompassed indirect forms of bullying such as having information withheld (Item 1) and being ignored and excluded (Item 14). Direct forms of bullying such as intimidating behaviours (Item 9) and threatening behaviour (Item 22) were much less frequent in this class. Therefore, we labelled this second class 'Limited indirect bullying'.

The third class (n = 93; 18.6%), shown in Figure 1C, had occasional experiences of task-related bullying such as having information withheld (Item 1), repeated reminders of errors and mistakes (Item 11), and being ignored (Item 14). Few individuals in this class reported occasional or more frequent forms of person-related bullying (e.g., Items 10, 15, 20, and 22). As a result, this class was labelled 'Task-related bullying'.

Individuals in the fourth class (n = 38; 7.6%) reported a wide range of bullying behaviours on an infrequent basis (Figure 1D). This class was therefore labelled 'Occasional bullying'. The fifth class (n = 50; 10.0%) shown in Figure 1E had relatively high levels of more frequent bullying experiences compared with the other classes. As a consequence, we labelled this class 'Frequent bullying'.

Workplace Bullying Classes and Absenteeism

The amount of absenteeism for each bullying class at baseline and 12-month follow up is shown in Figure 2. At baseline, the frequent bullying class had significantly higher

levels of absenteeism compared with all of the other classes. Furthermore, the task-related bullying class had significantly higher levels of absenteeism compared with the no bullying class (p = .021). At follow-up, there was a trend for the frequent bullying class to have higher absenteeism compared with the other classes; however, only the difference between frequent bullying and no bullying reached statistical significance (p = .035). The task-related bullying profile had significantly higher levels of absenteeism compared with the no bullying class (p = .010).

[PLACE FIGURE 2 HERE]

Indirect Effects

The regression model indicated that, relative to the no bullying class, the task-related (c path: B = .51, p < .001) and frequent bullying classes (c path: B = .35, p = .001) had significantly higher absenteeism. The half-longitudinal mediation model indicated that these associations were mediated by poorer mental health. That is, the direct relationship between task-related bullying and absenteeism noted above attenuated in the presence of the potential mediators and became non-significant (c′ path: B = .12, p = .169). The indirect relationship linking task-related bullying with absenteeism via poorer mental health was significant (indirect path: B = .13, p < .001). Similarly, the direct relationship between frequent bullying and absenteeism weakened in the presence of the potential mediators (c′ path: B = .13, p = .224); the indirect path linking frequent bullying with absenteeism via poorer mental health was significant (indirect path: B .14, p < .001).

Significant indirect effects were also observed for the limited indirect and occasional bullying classes. The limited indirect bullying class was indirectly associated with higher absenteeism via lower work engagement (B = .03, p = .041). The occasional workplace bullying class was indirectly associated with higher absenteeism via lower work engagement (indirect path: B = .06, p = .024) and poorer mental health (indirect path: B = .14, p = .001). None of the indirect paths involving physical health were statistically significant.

Discussion

This study revealed five distinct classes of workplace bullying experiences that varied in relation to the type and frequency of negative acts. Approximately one-third of participants reported experiencing few negative acts in the workplace (no bullying), 28.0% reported occasional negative acts that were predominantly indirect in nature (limited indirect bullying), and 18.6% reported occasional task-related bullying (task-related bullying). The remaining two classes were smaller and were characterised by a broad array of negative acts experienced infrequently (occasional bullying class) or on a daily/weekly basis (frequent bullying class). The nature of these workplace bullying classes is consistent with some existing studies that have used person-centred approaches to capture the complex and multidimensional nature of workplace bullying experiences (Einarsen et al., 2009; Leon-Perez et al., 2014; Notelaers et al., 2006, 2001).

The results also indicated that some workplace bullying experiences predicted increased absenteeism, and that the pathways underlying these relationships varied depending

on the nature of workplace bullying. For example, the frequent and task-related classes were indirectly associated with higher absenteeism via poorer mental health, while the limited indirect bullying class was indirectly associated with higher absenteeism via lower work engagement. For the occasional bullying class, the indirect paths involving poor mental health and low work engagement were both significant. These findings are important because absenteeism is a major cause of lost workplace productivity and has negative effects on employee career outcomes (Cooper & Dewe, 2008; James et al., 2002; Johns, 2008). Existing research suggests that HR professionals could help manage absenteeism in a number of ways: some examples include interventions targeting absence cultures and the psychological contract (Iverson, Buttigieg, & Maguire, 2003), the promotion of health behaviours (Strijk et al., 2013), and implementing systems that provide employees with feedback on absenteeism behaviour (Gaudine & Saks, 2001). The present paper adds to these and other findings by suggesting that addressing different types of workplace bullying could be effective in promoting employee engagement, and/or improving mental health, and subsequently reducing absenteeism.

The frequent bullying class represents the most severe form of bullying in this sample, with employees reporting frequent direct and indirect bullying including: being monitored excessively at work; given tasks with unreasonable deadlines; being insulted; facing hostile reactions; and, being ignored. These experiences represent major stressors (Einarsen et al., 2016), which if prolonged can impair health and well-being (e.g., Ursin & Eriksen, 2004). Indicators of poor mental health such as burnout, depression, and anxiety are substantial contributors to absenteeism as they constrain an individual's ability to attend work (Cooper &

Dewe, 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2009). Therefore, frequent bullying experiences may promote involuntary absenteeism by impairing mental health. We did not observe a significant indirect effect for physical health, which is consistent with some studies reporting non-significant associations between similar bullying experiences and physical health outcomes (e.g., Reio & Ghosh, 2009). In the present paper we examined mental health using the SF-12 Health Survey which encompasses psychological distress, vitality, and social functioning, all of which are feasibly affected by workplace bullying (e.g., Estes & Wang, 2009; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Reio & Ghosh, 2009). Physical health is assessed by the SF-12 in relation to bodily pain, physical functioning, and physical role limitations; these domains may be less affected by workplace bullying (Reio & Ghosh, 2009), and/or the effects may take a much longer period of time to unfold relative to the mental health domains. Research utilising longer time lags could help clarify whether both mental and physical health link workplace bullying experiences with absenteeism.

The task-related bullying class was also indirectly associated with absenteeism via poor mental health but not physical health. Employees in this class reported experiencing negative acts that were targeted towards work tasks, such as repeated reminders of mistakes, having opinions ignored, and being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines. Although less severe and frequent compared with the frequent bullying class, task-related bullying (particularly from a supervisor to subordinate) is a common occurrence and predicts poor employee well-being (e.g., Salin, 2003). This is because these experiences reflect an unpleasant, frustrating, and/or stressful work environment (Reio & Ghosh, 2009; Skogstad,

Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2007) that, as discussed above, have the potential to undermine mental health and promote involuntary absenteeism.

A different pattern of results was observed for the limited indirect bullying class, which was associated with higher absenteeism via lower work engagement. Work engagement has received considerable attention in recent years, with evidence indicating that employees are increasingly dissatisfied, frustrated, and disenchanted with their work (Cartwright et al., 2006; Yalabik et al., 2013). The negative acts characterising this bullying class (infrequent, indirect behaviours such as being ignored or excluded, being given work below one's level of competence) reflect workplace incivility rather than severe bullying (Schilpzand et al., 2014). These experiences may not be as harmful to health and well-being compared with more severe bullying. However, the present results suggest that these experiences could undermine work engagement and promote absenteeism. This finding is consistent with research separately showing that bullying is associated with lowered work engagement (Einarsen et al., 2016; Park & Ono, 2016) and that lowered engagement is predictive of higher absenteeism (Schaufeli et al., 2009; Soane et al., 2013). Exposure to workplace incivility may promote voluntary absenteeism by undermining job attitudes and job satisfaction which are important motivational factors underlying workplace attendance (e.g., Steers & Rhodes, 1978). In addition, exposure to incivility could undermine the extent to which employees trust management and their organisation, and this may lead to absenteeism by fostering an absence culture (e.g., Deery et al., 1995; Iverson et al., 2003).

The occasional bullying class was associated with absenteeism via both poor mental health and lower work engagement. This class was characterised by a broad array of negative

acts experienced ‘now and then’ or monthly. Although occasional bullying may not be as stressful or severe as frequent bullying, it may still reflect an unpleasant work environment which over time could have a de-motivating effect and also promote strain and poor mental health. Thus, health impairment and motivational pathways could link the occasional bullying class with higher voluntary and involuntary forms of absenteeism.

Practical Implications

These findings have important practical implications for HR professionals, and suggest tailored strategies are needed to address different workplace bullying experiences, and prevent their adverse effects on mental health, work engagement, and absenteeism. Although more empirical research is needed to clarify the effectiveness of different approaches to address bullying, available literature indicate a number of potential strategies that could be utilised to address the different bullying subtypes observed in this paper.

First, less severe negative acts (e.g., the limited indirect bullying and occasional bullying classes) – which are often referred to as workplace incivility (Estes & Wang, 2008; Schilpzand et al., 2014) – are difficult to address because they are not easily recognisable compared with more severe, direct bullying. However, these behaviours require early intervention as they are harmful to employees and organisations (e.g., Reio & Ghosh, 2009), and could escalate to more severe bullying over time (Leon-Perez et al., 2015). HR professionals can help prevent and manage workplace incivility in numerous ways, such as by encouraging transformational leadership styles, providing structural support resources in

the workplace (e.g., positive feedback and autonomy), and ensuring clear communication within an organisation particularly during times of change, challenge, or uncertainty (Bakker, 2011). CREW (Civility, Respect, and Engagement at Work) is an example of a specific strategy that has been implemented to effectively address workplace incivility (Osatuke et al., 2009). CREW is a multi-component 6-month program that involves employees meeting with colleagues on a weekly/bi-weekly basis to develop effective interpersonal interactions (Leiter et al., 2011; Osatuke et al., 2009). These meetings are designed to be inclusive and empowering for employees, and are supported by trained facilitators and a toolkit of 40 structured exercises and discussion topics that cover active listening, conflict resolution techniques, and brainstorming. CREW has been found to be effective in improving workplace civility, and other relevant outcomes more positive attitudes towards work and increased work engagement (Leiter et al., 2011). HR professionals could therefore implement existing programs such as CREW to address incivility and foster work engagement to minimise absenteeism.

Conflict escalation perspectives suggest that task-related conflict needs to be addressed early because it can escalate to more personal and severe workplace bullying (Leon-Perez, 2015; Zapf & Gross, 2011). A variety of strategies could be implemented by HR professionals to address task-related bullying. For example, there is evidence that management styles focusing on problem solving are more effective in addressing task-related conflict compared with styles that avoid problems or wait for them to resolve (Leon-Perez et al., 2015). HR professionals could utilise tailored coaching approaches to develop and encourage more adaptive problem solving skills among managers (e.g., Saam, 2010). For

individuals accused of bullying, coaching may be effective in fostering more positive interpersonal relationships with subordinates and colleagues, and minimising task-related bullying (Namie & Namie, 2009). It is also important to note that task-related bullying often occurs in response to changes in the work-environment, such as changes in management, technology, or the workforce (Skogstad et al., 2007). These changes promote uncertainty and insecurity which increase the likelihood of task-related bullying behaviours (Skogstad et al., 2007). Thus, during periods of organisational change, HR professionals need to be proactive in implementing strategies such as those listed above to prevent task-related workplace bullying (D'Cruz, Noronha, & Beale, 2014; Skogstad et al., 2007).

Finally, in cases where frequent bullying does occur, it is important that clear and decisive action is taken to address these behaviours. This is often difficult because HR professionals face substantial barriers in dealing with more severe forms of bullying, including a lack of clear workplace bullying definitions and policies, lack of support from senior managers, and fear of negative repercussions from taking action (Fox & Cowen, 2015). It is therefore important that HR professionals are supported by clear organisational policies and managers who are committed to addressing workplace bullying (Fox & Cowen, 2015). This could also have flow-on benefits for preventing the escalation of indirect, occasional, and task-related bullying by fostering a climate for conflict management (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2016).

Limitations

There are some important methodological issues that warrant consideration. First, absenteeism was determined from self-report questionnaire items. Compared to more objective measures, self-reported absenteeism is less accurate with individuals tending to underreport the amount of absenteeism. Despite this, self-reported absenteeism data have good rank-order convergence with objective data (Johns & Miraglia, 2015), which means the magnitude of the observed relationships is unlikely to have been affected. An important limitation of our absenteeism measure is that we were unable to distinguish between the frequency and duration of absenteeism spells. Although there is some conjecture (e.g., Johns & Al Hajj, in press), research indicates that the frequency of absenteeism spells reflects voluntary absenteeism, whereas the duration of spells reflects involuntary absenteeism (Brooke, 1986). Being able to capture more detailed information on the nature of absenteeism could have allowed for a more thorough investigation of the health impairment and motivational pathways linking workplace bullying with absenteeism.

Second, quotas were set to recruit a sample with characteristics that were comparable to the general population and there were few differences between participants who dropped out over time and those who remained in the study. However, it is unlikely that the present sample is representative of the general working population. Future research in this area may benefit from recruiting more representative samples where possible, or recruiting from specific organisations. Third, this paper utilised data from two time points, which is the minimum for exploring mediation over time (Little, 2013). Ideally, the associations should be measured using three or more time points as this would provide an improved insight into the

temporal associations between workplace bullying, work engagement and health, and absenteeism.

Conclusion

The present paper contributes to existing research by clarifying the relationships between workplace bullying and absenteeism, and demonstrating that different forms of negative acts can influence absenteeism via poor mental health and work engagement. Less severe and less frequent workplace bullying experiences may promote greater absenteeism via lower work engagement. More severe and frequent bullying could contribute to greater absenteeism by impairing mental health. These findings represent a significant contribution to the HR literature, and have important implications for the prevention and management of workplace bullying. This study also underscores the importance of using person-centred approaches to capture the complexity of workplace bullying experiences. Although more direct forms of workplace bullying are increasingly visible in the workplace, it is important to acknowledge that more subtle forms of bullying are also pervasive and could negatively affect employee outcomes via their effects on motivational processes such as work engagement.

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Table 1. Characteristics of participants in the final sample compared with those who were excluded due to missing data.

	Final Sample (n = 500)	Excluded participants (n = 954)	P value
Age, mean (SD)	41.28 (8.88)	39.55 (9.61)	< .001
Gender			< .001
Male	299 (59.8)	479 (50.2)	
Female	201 (40.2)	475 (49.8)	
Marital Status			.661
Single	156 (31.2)	287 (30.1)	
Partnered	344 (68.8)	667 (69.9)	
Education			.195
High school,	95 (19.0)	217 (22.7)	
Trade/diploma/certificate	163 (32.6)	313 (32.8)	
University degree	242 (48.4)	424 (44.4)	
Work hours			.893
1 – 15 hours	79 (15.8)	149 (15.6)	
16 – 34 hours	104 (20.8)	210 (22.0)	
35 – 44 hours	199 (39.8)	384 (40.3)	
≥ 45 hours	29 (5.8)	66 (6.9)	
Absenteeism, mean (SD)	2.90 (4.53)	3.42 (5.72)	.078

Work engagement, mean (SD)			39.92 (11.29)	40.03 (11.50)	.862
Classes	AIC	BIC	Sample size Adjusted BIC	BLRT p value	Entropy
1	18739.02	18925.33	18785.67	-	-
2	13746.68	14123.54	13841.05	< .001	.98
3	12498.39	13065.80	12640.46	< .001	.98
4	11864.22	12622.18	12054.01	< .001	.97
5	11524.58	12473.09	11762.08	< .001	.95
6	11354.53	12493.58	11639.74	< .001	.96
7	11273	12603.25	11606.57	< .002	.95

Table 2. Model fit indices for the latent class analyses.