

## **Workplace Bullying and Job Satisfaction: The Moderating Effect of Perceived Organizational Support**

Amy C. Francis  
Business Management and Administration  
University of North Carolina at Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Bryan Schaffer

### **Abstract**

Over the past twenty years, the empirical research on workplace bullying has grown considerably into an international phenomenon. Workplace bullying research indicates the presence of workplace bullying often results in a variety of unfavorable consequences for victims, witnesses and employers. Most often, workplace bullying is associated with a decrease in job satisfaction, loss in productivity and increase in intention to leave. Workplace bullying refers to instances in which an employee is exposed to reoccurring behaviors, in the form of psychological abuse, over a prolonged period of time, such as excessive criticism and humiliation. Moreover, the definition includes employees' perceptions that, as targets of bullying, they do not have the power to defend themselves. To date, research on workplace bullying has been varied and widespread, ranging from the prevalence and causes of workplace bullying to the relative impact of bullying on individual and organizational outcomes. However, few studies have assessed the moderating effect of *perceived organizational support* (POS) on the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction and intention to leave. Therefore, the purpose of this review is to examine the literature on workplace bullying and propose that workplace bullying has a negative correlation to job satisfaction and a positive correlation to intention to leave. Moreover, this review will propose that, in the presence of POS, as a moderating variable, it will diminish the effects of workplace bullying in relation to job satisfaction and intention to leave. From a managerial perspective, this review highlights the potential negative effects of workplace bullying and emphasizes the importance of establishing and sustaining workplace cultures of support. As such, these types of cultures are conducive to maintaining a workforce with high levels of morale and employees who are committed to staying with their current employers.

**Key words: workplace bullying, job satisfaction, perceived organizational support**

### **1. Introduction**

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, "a bully could cost a Fortune 500 company an astounding \$24,000,000" in lost productivity and turnover, and an additional "\$1.4 Million for litigation and settlement costs."<sup>27</sup>

Workplace bullying is a unique phenomenon suggested to be a more powerful workplace stressor than traditional stressors, such as intense job requirements, heavy workloads or inability to affect or control decisions.<sup>17</sup> Previous research indicates workplace bullying is different from typical job-related stressors because it is not considered to be a common experience associated with a particular occupation, instead it involves the systematic targeting of an individual, one who is often humiliated in front of coworkers, overly criticized, or intentionally excluded.<sup>2, 28</sup> Moreover, workplace bullying occurs with frequency and over prolonged periods of time, during which the victim

feels powerless to remedy the situation, resulting in higher, negative psychological and work-related outcomes.<sup>17</sup> However, some studies suggest certain industries may be more susceptible to higher incidences of workplace bullying, such as healthcare<sup>19</sup>, finance<sup>15</sup>, education<sup>21</sup>, and manufacturing<sup>36</sup>. Nonetheless, the research on workplace bullying is extensive and investigates the phenomenon from a variety of perspectives, ranging from how it should be defined, its causes and its consequences, with few studies assessing the moderating effects of certain variables on individual and organizational outcomes. However, most studies conclude that the presence of workplace bullying, in spite of its causes, or even our perceptions about it, results in a number of unfavorable consequences for both the individual and the organization, warranting legitimate concerns for managers, leaders and organizations alike.<sup>2, 34</sup>

Several studies suggest workplace bullying results in a number of individual psychological and work-related outcomes, such as increased anxiety, depression<sup>17</sup>, post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>28</sup>, absenteeism<sup>17</sup>, increase in intention to leave<sup>1, 8</sup> and a decrease in job satisfaction<sup>1, 25</sup>. However, the targets of bullying are not the only ones who suffer, previous research suggest that witnesses of bullying, and even those accused of bullying<sup>32</sup>, report similar consequences, such as increased stress, changes in work attitudes and a decrease in job satisfaction<sup>25, 32</sup>.

Several studies also indicate workplace bullying results in negative outcomes for organizations as well, such as decreases in job performance, excessive absenteeism, reduced organizational commitment, low morale, and decreases in job satisfaction.<sup>17, 30, 34</sup> Furthermore, if a bullied target does have the resources to file a complaint, beginning with their direct supervisor or Human Resources department, the number of individuals who are effected by workplace bullying increases significantly, resulting in even greater loss of productivity and increased financial costs.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, workplace bullying effects more than just the individual target, it affects witnesses, co-workers, the accused, management, Human Resources and eventually the entire organization.

From a possible solutions perspective, some studies have examined the moderating effects of certain variables on workplace bullying, such as the moderating effect of coping strategies<sup>20</sup>, psychological detachment<sup>29</sup>, and leadership and emotional intelligence<sup>19</sup>. However, few studies have assessed the moderating effect of *perceived organizational support* (POS) and how it may reduce the negative consequences of workplace bullying, especially as it relates to job satisfaction<sup>30</sup> and intention to leave<sup>8, 38</sup>. Accordingly, a study conducted by Djurkovic, McCormack and Casimir, suggest that the presence of POS, which is often in the form of organizational policies, procedures and programs, diminishes the unfavorable impact of workplace bullying on job satisfaction and intention to leave, but mostly for targets of bullying and less so for witnesses.<sup>8</sup>

As previously mentioned, most researchers have concluded that the presence of workplace bullying has serious managerial and organizational implications. As a result, several studies suggest organizations should take a proactive approach and develop their own anti-bullying policies and procedures, if not from a responsibility or ethical perspective<sup>26</sup>, then at least to avoid possible litigation<sup>30, 34</sup>. In addition, workplace bullying has received widespread publicity, which has prompted legislators and support groups to propose anti-bullying legislation in order to provide adequate legal support for victims and encourage organizations to take action.<sup>26, 34</sup> However, it appears some organizations and legislators are struggling to embrace the imposition of anti-bullying policies and statutes because workplace bullying is complex and difficult to define, which may result in the interference of certain company cultures and leadership styles.<sup>12, 34</sup> Additionally, there is concern that new policies and laws will lead to an excessive rise in bullying complaints and litigated cases.<sup>34</sup>

The majority of workplace bullying research indicates there is a positive relationship between the presence of workplace bullying and the presence of unfavorable outcomes for individuals and the organization. In addition, these studies agree that the consequences of workplace bullying often begin by impacting the psychological well-being of the target first, resulting in anxiety and depression, which then leads to a decrease in job satisfaction and increase in intention to leave. As a result, the organization is impacted by losses in productivity, excessive use of sick time, and overall decreases in morale. Consequently, this review seeks to highlight and examine the literature on workplace bullying as it relates to job satisfaction and intention to leave; first, by proposing workplace bullying will have a negative relationship to job satisfaction and second, workplace bullying will have a positive relationship with an increase in intention to leave. Furthermore, we propose that the presence of POS will lessen the unfavorable effects of workplace bullying on job satisfaction and intention to leave (Figure 1).

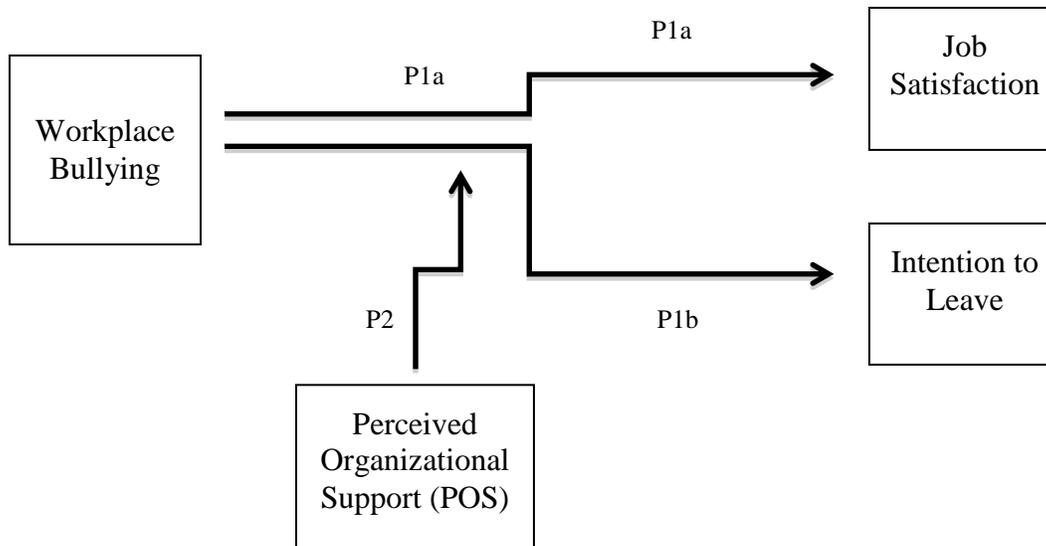


Figure 1. The effects of workplace bullying on job satisfaction and intention to leave will be diminished by the presence of POS

## 2. Workplace Bullying

Empirical research on workplace bullying began during the 1980's, gaining notable attention from several international studies conducted by Heinz Leymann, who recognized certain workplace behaviors shared similar characteristics to the behaviors found in childhood bullying, resulting in negative consequences, some as severe as post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>22, 23</sup> Since then, research on workplace bullying has been extensive, ranging from how it should be defined and its prevalence rates to examining the causes and consequences of workplace bullying in relation to individual and organizational outcomes.

Workplace bullying typically occurs when employees face "repeated and prolonged exposure to various forms of predominately psychological mistreatment," and is characterized as one who is "teased, badgered, and insulted, and who perceives himself or herself as not having the possibilities or resources to retaliate in kind."<sup>17</sup> Some of the forms of psychological abuse, or bullying behaviors, are defined as someone who is humiliated in front of others, someone who is excluded from valuable work information and someone who is ignored by coworkers or supervisors.<sup>2, 17</sup> In addition, workplace bullying behaviors are distinguished from other negative workplace behaviors, such as workplace harassment, because of their frequency and duration.<sup>2, 25</sup> Several studies have indicated that higher frequencies of bullying behaviors, over an extended period of time, will lead to more severe psychological and work-related outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, targets of workplace bullying often feel isolated and lack the resources to defend themselves, making the consequences of workplace bullying potentially more damaging.<sup>8, 17</sup>

Researchers have grappled with how workplace bullying should be defined and measured, which is primarily due to the subjective nature of respondents, the identification of bullying behaviors and the difficulty in determining the intent of the perpetrator.<sup>2</sup> In response, researchers have suggested there are certain behaviors that, if they occur once, may not necessarily be bullying behaviors but, when combined with frequency and duration, they become bullying behaviors, which may reduce some subjectivity and help address the issue of intent.<sup>2, 25</sup> Moreover, in order to further reduce subjectivity and provide additional clarity when assessing for the presence of workplace bullying, researchers ask respondents if they have been bullied or not, and if not, then have they witnessed any of the bullying behaviors.<sup>2, 25</sup>

In response to the challenges of defining and measuring the prevalence of workplace bullying, most researchers use the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ), which is an adaptation of the Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror (LIPT) questionnaire, created by Leymann, consisting of forty-five bullying-type behaviors.<sup>2, 9, 25</sup> In addition, the NAQ operationalizes workplace bullying by considering frequency and duration; however, it uses a smaller set of identified bullying behaviors, containing three main components: 1) a list of behaviors that define workplace

bullying; 2) indicators for how often and how long the target has been experiencing bullying behaviors; and 3) whether or not they perceive themselves as being bullied and, if not, have they witnessed workplace bullying (See Table 1).<sup>2, 25</sup> However, there are several concerns with regards to comparing the prevalence rates of workplace bullying when using the NAQ and other surveys, which results from the differences in how workplace bullying is defined and measured, along with the impact of certain professions, hierarchy and cultural differences, suggesting there are several factors to consider and control for when examining and comparing bullying prevalence rates.<sup>2,3</sup> As such, previous research indicates the prevalence of workplace bullying varies greatly, and whether the study was conducted in the United States or internationally, the prevalence of workplace bullying can range anywhere from 3.5% to 53%.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, a five-year study suggested that approximately 97% of employees have experienced some type of bullying behaviors at work.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, according to Mattice, the presence of one workplace bully can result in an additional \$83,000 in unnecessary financial costs to the organization.<sup>27</sup>

Table 1. example of survey to assess prevalence of workplace bullying<sup>2</sup>

The following questions describe various acts which may be perceived as bullying. Have you been exposed to any of these acts at work during the last six months?	Almost daily (%)	2-3 Times A week	2-3 Times A Month	Never/Rarely %
Someone willfully withholds information, making it difficult for you to perform your work properly?				
Someone unjustly criticizes your work performance?				
Unjustified telling off/verbal abuse?				
You are made fun of in front of others?				
Someone ignores or makes fun of your attitudes and opinions?				
Malicious jokes?				
Someone makes fun of you and/or your private life?				
Being ignored when asking someone a question or when trying to talk to them?				
Social exclusion from co-workers?				
You sense that someone is slandering or spreading rumors about you?				
During the previous six months, did you witness anybody being bullied at your workplace?				
During the previous six months, have you been subjected to bullying at your workplace?				

As previously mentioned, the research on workplace bullying also considers the causes and consequences of bullying. Several studies indicate that the causes of workplace bullying may be the result of aggressive management and leadership styles<sup>3</sup>, certain demographic considerations, such as age, gender and ethnicity<sup>33</sup>; the presence of vulnerable personality traits and low self-esteem<sup>14</sup> and, the presence of traditional workplace stressors, such as high job demands, heavy workloads, role ambiguity and role conflict<sup>4</sup>. However, the research on the consequences of workplace bullying has received less attention, with the majority of studies assessing the negative impact on psychological and physical health and lost productivity due to decreases in

overall well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.<sup>3, 17, 33</sup> And, even fewer studies have assessed the moderating effects of certain variables on the unfavorable outcomes for individuals and the organization, which may provide additional insights or possible solutions for managers, leaders and organizations.

This review will focus on the consequences of workplace bullying since previous research suggest the impact to individual well being results in numerous physical and financial costs for the employee and employer.<sup>3, 17</sup> Furthermore, this review will examine the presence of *perceived organizational support* (POS) since previous research suggest it may diminish the unfavorable consequences of workplace bullying, supporting the assertion that managers and organizations must address this phenomenon.<sup>8, 30</sup>

### 3. Workplace Bullying And Job Satisfaction

Few studies have assessed the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction and often include additional psychological and work-related outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, intention to leave, absenteeism, job rating, and work stress.<sup>1, 17, 25</sup> Previous studies suggest job satisfaction is comprised of a number of characteristics that, when combined, create the full concept of job satisfaction, which may also have its own set of psychological and work-related implications.<sup>7, 39</sup> According to Wanous and Lawler, the concept of job satisfaction is measured by what is gained or lost in the following categories: self-respect, growth opportunities, job security, social interactions, independence and financial reward.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Wanous and Lawler's definition of job satisfaction appears to be supported by the current methodology for measuring job satisfaction.<sup>39</sup> According to a validated scale developed by Schriesheim and Tsui, job satisfaction is measured by assessing the following criteria, using a Likert-type scale: 1) the essence of one's job; 2) supervisor performance; 3) relationships with co-workers or peers; 4) level of pay; and, 5) opportunities for advancement or promotion.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, given the definition of job satisfaction, when compared to the behaviors that define workplace bullying, it is reasonable to suggest that workplace bullying may have a direct effect on job satisfaction. For instance, if an individual is excluded from receiving valuable work information, it is likely to affect their self-respect, how co-workers perceive them, their opportunities for advancement and their ability to receive pay increases.

As previously mentioned, there are additional factors to consider when assessing job satisfaction due to the presence of traditional workplace stressors, such as "job demands, decision authority, role ambiguity, and role conflict."<sup>4, 17</sup> One study, conducted by Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen, controlled for traditional workplace stressors and concluded there was a 3% increase in the number of respondents who experienced a decrease in job satisfaction when workplace bullying was added into the model, suggesting that traditional workplace stressors do effect job satisfaction, but even more so in the presence of workplace bullying.<sup>17</sup> However, some studies include job-related stressors, when assessing for workplace bullying, since other studies have indicated that some of these stressors, in particular, role ambiguity and role conflict, are linked to some of the causes of workplace bullying.<sup>3, 25</sup> As expected, these studies reveal that the targets of bullying consider their work environment to be less favorable than those who are not bullied; however, it is difficult to discern to what degree of dissatisfaction is related to workplace bullying or the other types of work stressors.<sup>3</sup> Similar findings suggest that the witnesses of bullying report a decrease in job satisfaction as well, but to a lesser degree than those who are bullied<sup>25</sup>; however, one study found that the outcomes may be worse for some witnesses because the incident reminds them of previous bullying experiences<sup>18</sup>.

As a result of the previous studies, we propose that workplace bullying has a positive correlation to a decrease in job satisfaction. In addition, given today's current working environment, we further propose that in order to gain additional clarity between the relationship of workplace bullying and job satisfaction, it is necessary to control for traditional work-related stressors.<sup>4</sup>

*Proposition 1a: Workplace bullying, when controlling for other work-related stress factors, will have a positive relationship to a decrease in job satisfaction.*

## 4. Workplace Bullying And Intention To Leave

Similar to the studies relating to job satisfaction, even fewer studies have assessed the relationship between workplace bullying and intention to leave. Although, a number of studies have considered the concept of intention to leave as one of the defining characteristics of organizational commitment.<sup>16, 24</sup> Moreover, research on organizational commitment suggest there is a positive correlation between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, indicating a possible negative relationship to intention to leave; however, researchers indicate it is difficult to determine if job satisfaction causes organizational commitment, yet most researchers agree there is a clear, positive relationship between the two variables.<sup>24, 37</sup> One study suggest that intention to leave and intention to stay have been used synonymously and yet, these two constructs should be considered distinct because some studies indicate that intention to leave has a stronger relationship to employee turnover, which is results in a cost to organizations, than intention to stay.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, intention to leave is generally defined as the willingness of an employee to remain with his or her employer.<sup>5</sup> However, despite its simple definition, several studies have chosen different scales for measuring intention to leave, such as the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire<sup>1</sup> or by including one or two questions within a larger survey asking the respondent if he or she will seek different employment over the next few months or year.<sup>5, 8, 17</sup>

The results of the few studies specifically measuring workplace bullying and intention to leave are at odds. According to the Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen study, after controlling for typical job-related stressors, workplace bullying resulted in an approximate 1% increase in intention to leave, which possibly indicates that an increase in intention to leave may be more strongly impacted by other types of work-related stressors.<sup>17</sup> One study found that the relationship between workplace bullying and intention to leave was much stronger, but it also examined the causes of workplace bullying concurrently, such as heavy workload, job insecurity and job stress, which may have contributed to a stronger relationship between the two variables.<sup>1</sup> In the latter study, Djurkovic, McCormack and Casimir examined the relationship between workplace bullying and intention to leave; however, the researchers included a moderating variable, *perceived organizational support* (POS), which generally represents how employees feel about their employer based on how they are treated.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the study revealed a strong positive relationship between workplace bullying and intention to leave and, in the presence of POS, with employees who had a favorable view of their organization, it decreased intention to leave to a negligible level.<sup>8</sup> However, POS had little effect on intention to leave when employees viewed their organizations as being indifferent to their well being, or they felt they were not supported at all, suggesting that not all forms of organizational support has a diminishing effect on the negative consequences of workplace bullying, especially as it relates to intention to leave.<sup>8, 30</sup>

As such, previous studies indicate there is a relationship between workplace bullying and intention to leave; however, research also suggests it is necessary to consider the associations between intention to leave, intention to stay and organizational commitment. Moreover, similar to job satisfaction, traditional workplace stressors should be controlled for when examining intention to leave because it is important to separate workplace bullying behaviors from work-related stressors, or work harassment.

*Proposition 1b: Workplace bullying, when controlling for other work-related stress factors, will have a positive relationship to an increase in intention to leave.*

## 5. The Moderating Effect Of Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support (POS), which is often in the form of organizational policies, procedures and programs, is defined as employees' "beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being."<sup>10, 31</sup> Some studies suggest there is a positive link between the presence of POS and various individual and organizational outcomes, such as an increase in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and a negative relationship to a decrease in intention to leave; however, some studies argue there is little to no relationship between POS and organizational outcomes.<sup>5, 31</sup>

Nonetheless, organizations have been placing considerable emphasis on creating better work environments to attract and retain top talent, and reduce overall costly turnover.<sup>5</sup> As such, given the widespread publicity of workplace bullying and its potential negative outcomes, some organizations have developed anti-bullying policies and procedures<sup>34</sup>; however, few studies have assessed whether or not the presence of POS actually diminishes the

consequences of workplace bullying, though a number of studies have examined the relationships between POS, job satisfaction and intention to leave<sup>5, 31</sup>.

One of the first studies to examine workplace bullying and the moderating effect of POS in relation to job satisfaction and intention to leave was conducted by Quine.<sup>30</sup> The results of the study support previous research that suggest the presence of POS improves individual and organizational outcomes which arise from a stressful work environment and, in particular, the stress related to workplace bullying.<sup>30</sup> More specifically, the study suggests POS improved job satisfaction and decreased intention to leave for bullied employees who felt they were supported by their organization; however, for those employees who felt they were not supported by their organization, there were no improvements to negative outcomes.<sup>30</sup> As previously mentioned, a study conducted by Djurkovic, McCormack and Casimir, investigated the relationship between workplace bullying, POS, and intention to leave, which resulted in similar findings found in the study by Quine, further suggesting that the presence of POS diminishes the negative effects of workplace bullying on intention to leave.<sup>8, 30</sup> The last study considered the moderating effect of POS and anti-bullying programs on workplace bullying as they relate to perceived job performance, individual well being and organizational commitment.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the results of this study indicate that POS improves how bullied targets view their work performance and how anti-bullying programs lessen the negative impact to individual well being and organizational commitment.<sup>6</sup>

In response, we propose that effective perceived organizational support (POS) may serve as a possible solution for organizations to diminish the unfavorable effects of workplace bullying on job satisfaction and intention to leave. However, similar to job satisfaction and intention to leave, the presence of other factors should be considered, such as traditional workplace stressors and, according to another study, the perceptions of support from co-workers.<sup>6</sup>

*Proposition 2:* Perceived organizational support (POS) will diminish the unfavorable individual and organizational outcomes that result from the presence of workplace bullying.

## **6. Discussion And Future Research Implications**

Due to the widespread publicity of workplace bullying and the call for managers, leaders and organizations to take action, the main purpose of this review was to examine the literature on workplace bullying as it relates to two unfavorable workplace outcomes, a decrease in job satisfaction and an increase in intention to leave. These unfavorable outcomes are the result of systematic, targeted behavior towards certain individuals, effecting individual well being, reducing productivity and costing organizations money. Therefore, the other purpose of this review was to investigate the presence of perceived organizational support (POS) and how it might diminish the unfavorable outcomes brought about by the presence of workplace bullying and provide a possible solution for organizations.

The conclusions of this review found that it is reasonable to suggest workplace bullying is another type of workplace stressor, one that leads to similar psychological outcomes as traditional workplace stressors, but considered to be more stressful because it involves the targeting of an individual, making the experience exclusive. Workplace bullying is indeed having some type of an effect on individuals and the organization; however, due to the limited research on the consequences of workplace bullying, it is difficult to suggest to what degree workplace bullying is affecting these outcomes. This review also found that the presence of POS does diminish the adverse effects of workplace bullying on job satisfaction and intention to leave, but only for employees who perceive the organization as supportive; although, if the employee believes the organization is not supportive, then POS has little to no effect on workplace outcomes. Consequently, this review concludes that not all POS is effective, but it can affect employee productivity and overall commitment, making POS a relevant consideration for organizations.

With regard to future research, this review highlighted some of the complexities surrounding the study of workplace bullying, job satisfaction, intention to leave and POS. In terms of workplace bullying, the Negative Acts Questionnaire is mostly supported by recent research as the best method for measuring the prevalence of workplace bullying; however, when comparing the prevalence rates of one workplace bullying study to another, it is important to consider the variables that were controlled for, such as traditional workplace stressors, demographics, national culture, corporate hierarchy and industry. As previously mentioned, traditional workplace stressors have been found to reduce job satisfaction and intention to leave and, if they are not controlled for, it would be very difficult to determine which type of workplace stressor is having the greatest impact on these two outcomes.

For workplace outcomes, job satisfaction and intention to leave, there are several issues to consider as well, such as Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory and the interrelationship between intention to leave and organizational

commitment. Herzberg's theory, which was not considered by this review, could be included when assessing job satisfaction because the theory suggest there are certain workplace factors that, when present, create job satisfaction and, when absent, create job dissatisfaction.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is suggested that the factors found in Herzberg's theory be examined along with the factors that define job satisfaction because it may be unclear as to which workplace factors are contributing to job satisfaction or job dissatisfaction, making it more difficult to examine the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction. Similarly, the interrelationship between intention to leave and organizational support suggest that previous studies have not emphasized the separation of these two concepts, rendering comparisons between studies less meaningful.

The challenges related to POS arise from the conclusion that not all POS is effective and there may be additional moderators, such as the perception of support from co-workers. This review found conclusive evidence that not all bullied employees, within the same organization, viewed their organizational support in the same manner, suggesting that, even if organizations develop anti-bullying policies, procedures or programs, the bigger issue may be the result of how organizations implement these efforts. Moreover, the perception of support from co-workers could influence the overall perception of POS due to the relationship that emerges between bullied individuals and co-workers. And lastly, future research should consider the effect of traditional workplace stressors when assessing for POS since they result in similar outcomes to workplace bullying, making it difficult to determine if POS is actually achieving the desired outcome of diminishing the effects of workplace bullying, which is a manageable problem, instead of attempting to reduce workplace stressors that are inseparable from the job itself.

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