

Political skill and the job performance of bullies

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Abstract:

Purpose: Recent studies suggest that 84 percent of employees are affected in some manner by workplace bullies. The current study aims to integrate theory from social information processing and political skill to explain how bullies can successfully navigate the social and political organizational environment and achieve higher ratings of performance.

Design/methodology/approach: A questionnaire, archival performance data, and social networks methodology were employed in a health services organization in order to capture the individual differences and social perception of bullies in the workplace. **Findings:** While victims are usually targeted due to their social incompetence, on some occasions bullies can possess high levels of social ability. Due to their social competence, they are able to strategically abuse coworkers and yet be evaluated positively by their supervisor. **Research limitations/implications:** This study is the first attempt to measure the high performance of bullies who thrive in the workplace. Future research could investigate the ways in which bullies select their targets and the role of an abusive organizational climate in their subsequent effectiveness. **Practical implications:** Companies and researchers should consider how organizational interventions could serve to balance bullying behavior in a manner that limits deviant behavior while rewarding high performers. **Originality/value:** The current paper applies a social effectiveness framework (social information processing (SIP)) as a lens through which to explain bullies who maintain high levels of performance ratings. The application of this theory to bullying leads to a functional perspective of workplace deviance.

Keywords: workplace bullying | social information processing | political skill | performance

Article:

Bullying in the workplace has become all too common. As many as half of all employees in the USA have witnessed bullying at their place of employment (Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2007) and 35 percent of these employees have been the target of bullying in the workplace (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2007). The majority of academic research on bullying in the workplace has rightfully focused on the victims of such bullying and has demonstrated that victims often

experienced reduced job satisfaction (Hoel and Cooper, 2000; Quine, 1999) and increased turnover (Hoel *et al.*, 2003). While this research is critically important for understanding the personal and organizational impact of bullying in the workplace, it does not address the identification of characteristics and conditions that allow bullying to perpetuate.

The prevalence of workplace bullying offers an interesting paradox, in that bullying is an anti-social behavior for which companies and employees share disdain, yet bullying behavior appears to be pervasive in the workplace. Despite programs designed to reduce bullying in the workplace, incidents of bullying appear to affect a majority of employees (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2007). Thus, it remains unanswered why these destructive behaviors persist and why companies are unsuccessful in ridding themselves of their employees who bully.

Unlike popular characterizations of bullies as socially inept misfits who resort to bullying due to frustration and a lack of behavioral alternatives, the current study argues that many bullies are very socially skilled and use their bullying behavior strategically to coerce others into providing them the resources needed to achieve their work-related objectives. Leading scholars (e.g. Ferris *et al.*, 2007a) have offered anecdotal evidence, suggesting that bullying behavior often goes undetected by others because of the bullies' ability to understand their environments and select their targets strategically. The current study integrates these notions into theories of social information processing (SIP) and political skill and hypothesizes that bullies often leverage the fear and intimidation of their behavior to achieve their personal goals and improve their job performance.

The current study has several implications for the understanding of bullying and political skill. Specifically, this research marks the first attempt to measure the relationship between an employee's engagement in bullying activity and job performance and thus offers an initial explanation of why bullies thrive in the workplace. Bullying researchers have acknowledged that social ability plays an important role in the prediction of the perpetrators and victims of bullying (e.g. Kaukiainen *et al.*, 2002; Sutton *et al.*, 1999), but less attention has been paid to the impact these abilities may have on ensuring the success of the bully, which encourages this pattern of abuse. The current study further advances knowledge on workplace bullying by arguing that politically skilled bullies are more capable of selecting advantageous contexts in which to bully and are then more capable of choosing bullying behaviors that will be the most psychologically painful for their targets. This assertion is developed through the application of political skill theory (Ferris *et al.*, 2005, 2007b), the SIP model of social competence (Dodge, 1986), and the notion of strategic bullying (Ferris *et al.*, 2007a).

If political skill makes it more likely that bullies achieve higher job performance scores, then the current study offers a first glimpse into the potential negative aspects of political skill. To date, the construct has been associated with a number of personally and organizationally functional outcomes such as increased performance (Harris *et al.*, 2007; Kolodinsky *et al.*, 2007; Treadway *et al.*, 2007; Semadar *et al.*, 2006) and decreased stress (Perrewé *et al.*, 2004, 2005). While scholars have acknowledged the potential for political skill to be used in organizationally dysfunctional ways (e.g. Ferris *et al.*, 2007b), the leveraging of bullying behavior into performance demonstrates the first empirical test of such notions.

Workplace bullying

Workplace bullying is defined as “systematic aggression and violence targeted towards one or more individuals by one individual or by a group” (p. 381). Workplace bullying incorporates elements of aggression but is distinguished from it by the following:

- repetitive offensive or aggressive behavior;
- negative impact on the victim; and
- its harmful effects on organizational outcomes (Einarsen, 2000).

Whereas workplace bullying has burgeoning interest in the academic community, much of the work on the topic has been limited to conceptual work on the antecedents and consequences of bullying behavior. Unfortunately, these conceptual frameworks have often undergone empirical scrutiny. What few empirical advances have been made in understanding the phenomena have almost exclusively focused on the characteristics of, and impacts on, the victims of these behaviors rather than on the characteristics of the bullies themselves. Thus, there is still much that scholars do not understand about workplace bullying (Einarsen, 2000).

While the literature on bullies is relatively scarce, it has been found that particular characteristics could be found to pertain to both victims and bullies. Aquino and Thau (2009) summarized recent research on workplace victimization and related concepts such as bullying, workplace harassment, and workplace aggression. In their survey of the literature, they found that previous research suggested that targets of bullying experienced lowered levels of psychological well-being. Furthermore, victims were found to be more likely to withdraw from their organization both physically (i.e. turnover, sickness, absenteeism) and mentally (i.e. fatigue, stress, depression, anxiety).

The majority of bullying research has focused on predicting the likely victims of bullying. Many studies have worked to identify profiles of likely targets of victimization; however, there have been mixed findings. Generally, negative affect, extraversion, and neuroticism have been found in victims of bullying; however, these characteristics are also found in some perpetrators (Zapf, 1999). Results for demographic differences in experiences of bullying have been inconsistent (Aquino and Thau, 2009). Conflict style and interpersonal style have been found to impact perceptions of victimization, such that individuals who are more accommodating as well as those that are more dominating report more incidents (Aquino, 2000; Zapf, 1999).

Another personal characteristic central to bullying and victimization studies are the roles of self-esteem. In a review of aggressive behavior, Baumeister *et al.* (1996) found that aggression demonstrated a positive connection between high self-esteem and aggressive behavior. Based on these findings, it is likely that higher levels of self-esteem lead to perpetrator bullying behavior. In the bullying context, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) found that perpetrators were more likely to react to provocation with aggression than were targets or the neutral comparison group. While the results clearly demonstrate some consistency in the antecedents of bullying behavior, we know little about the outcomes that bullies experience in the workplace.

Social information processing

SIP is a broad framework of social influence in organizations and “proceeds from the fundamental premise that individuals, as adaptive organisms, adapt attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs to their social context and to the reality of their own past and present behaviors and situations” (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978, p. 226). While workplace bullying has not been approached from the SIP perspective, this view is a dominant concept in the literature on childhood bullying. Dodge (1986) framed children's social competence within the SIP model. His model articulated five processes through which children generate behavior in social interaction:

1. encoding;
2. representation;
3. response search;
4. response decision; and
5. enactment.

Encoding involves the perception of salient stimuli in the social context that are later integrated with decision rules and resident information in the representation process. At this point, the individual both searches and selects the appropriate response given their understanding of the consequences and benefits of the range of behavioral responses. Finally, the child enacts their behavior with both knowledge and accuracy with social relations and script in their environment. The quality of this enactment ultimately determines the likelihood of their social acceptance. While maintaining this general process, ensuing refinements of this model have acknowledged the non-sequential nature of the steps within the model (Crick and Dodge, 1994).

Given the interpersonal nature of the SIP model it is not surprising that subsequent research has focused on social skill or social competence in predicting incidents of childhood aggression and bullying. Indeed, “skillful processing at each step is hypothesized to lead to competent performance within a situation, whereas biased or deficient processing is hypothesized to lead to deviant social behavior (e.g. aggression)” (Crick and Dodge, 1996, p. 994). In applying this model to the workplace, we chose a specific social skill construct that has been inherently designed for workplace applications – political skill.

Political skill

Political skill is defined as “the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives” (Ferris *et al.*, 2005, p. 127) and has been shown to be both conceptually and empirically distinct from more general constructs such as emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and self-monitoring (for a review, see Ferris *et al.*, 2007b). Because political skill focuses on an employee's ability to recognize and leverage power differentials in the workplace, it may be particularly helpful in understanding the power dynamics of bully-victim relations.

Politically skilled employees are distinguished as being socially astute, capable of influencing others, sincere in their interactions, and thus good at social networking. These employees are

acutely aware of the social context within which they operate and are capable of making accurate judgments about the social motives of others. This awareness makes them more capable of selecting the appropriate influence behaviors for a given context and/or dyadic interaction. Because their influence attempts are more likely to be seen as genuine and sincere rather than motivated by personal ambition, these politically skilled individuals are capable of building broad and strong networks that facilitate their attainment of personal goals and objectives (Ferris *et al.*, 2005).

Bullies as skillful manipulators

The belief that social ability impacts the experiences of bullying has been advanced primarily in the prediction of those that bully and those that are the target of bullying behavior. Despite the suggestion by some that bullies are incapable of processing social information accurately (e.g. Randall, 1997), there is little research to substantiate this claim. Sutton *et al.* (1999) challenged these social skill deficit arguments that have permeated practical characterizations of bullies. They suggested that bullies are not social outcasts incapable of effectively engaging others and thus reduced to lashing out as a means to address their social exclusion. In contrast, bullies are likely “skillful manipulators” that are not only more capable of processing social information, but more effective in using that information to their own benefit. Their study of 7-10 year olds looked at both ringleader bullies and follower bullies who assisted and supported the bullies. They found ringleaders were more adept at understanding emotions and cognitions than were the other subjects. These results suggest that, counter to Crick and Dodge (1994), aggression is not the product of a deficit in social skill. In fact, it would appear that bullies are often more socially skilled than targets or followers.

Utilizing the SIP model, Crick and Dodge (1996) distinguished reactive and proactive forms of aggression among childhood bullies. This study specifically addressed the manner in which children (ages 9-12) make attributions about the intentions of others when faced with inflammatory situations. Reactively aggressive children were characterized as those that got angered and struck back when teased by others, whereas proactively aggressive children dominated their peers through their use of aggression. This study found that proactively aggressive children were more likely to enact instrumentally aggressive behaviors because of the more positive view of aggression in general. That is, they view aggression as an appropriate and effective mechanism for achieving their own personal goals. While this study did not directly assess the social skills of the students, the implied mechanisms of control and strategic behavior directly point to the importance of social competence in the choice and implementation of aggressive behavior specifically as it relates to the encoding and response decision aspects of the SIP model.

Distinguishing proactive versus reactive forms of aggression is at the core of Ferris *et al.*'s (2007a) conceptual work on strategic bullying in the workplace. Central to their description of leader bullying was that politically skilled bullies were distinguished by the proactive nature of their bullying (Ferris *et al.*, 2007a). Thus, leader bullying was described as “strategically selected tactics of influence by leaders designed to convey a particular image and place targets in a submissive, powerless position whereby they are more easily influenced and controlled, in order to achieve personal and/or organizational objectives” (p. 197).

While the Ferris *et al.* (2007a) model's constraint of bullying being perpetrated by a leader links closely with Tepper's (2000) concept of abusive supervision, a specific form of bullying, their positioning of bullying as a strategic behavior suggests that the interpersonal abilities of the bully may be relevant to understanding how their destructive behavior may affect overall performance. This strategic notion was also alluded to in the earlier work by Harvey *et al.* (2007), who suggested that bullies look for specific points of vulnerability in their victims, thus positioning social awareness as critical to determining the likelihood of bullying behavior. Similarly, Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2002) suggested that skilled bullies would choose the most vulnerable targets for their abuse.

SIP and political skill

Within the SIP model, these arguments indicate that politically skilled employees will be more successful in encoding the relevant stimuli in the environment and then better integrating this with social norms during the representation process. This ability is evident in research which found that the social adeptness of bullies also appears to impact the way in which they are viewed by their peers and by those in power. Boulton and Smith (1994) conducted a study in which they found that victims viewed themselves as less socially accepted and had lower feelings of self-worth than aggressors. Interestingly, bullies were more likely to be seen as leaders by their classmates.

Research also suggests that socially skilled bullies will be rated more favorably by their teachers. Within a sample of schoolchildren, Crick and Dodge (1994) found that teacher-ratings of physical bullying and deliberate social exclusion based on these social ability scores were not significant, but verbal bullying ratings were correlated positively with cognitive ability ratings. The authors concluded that the ability to understand others effectively might be useful in bullying someone effectively. Specifically, the ability to read their motivations and emotions may assist bullies in knowing how best to inflict damage on their victim. These abilities may make it more likely that skilled bullies will choose to bully in situations where their victims are most vulnerable. Sutton *et al.* (1999) maintained that “even in purely physical bullying, social cognition will still be of use in avoiding detection, or choosing the most effective time and method for each situation in terms of maximizing the victim's vulnerability and minimizing chances of hurt to themselves” (p. 443).

These results translate seamlessly to research and theory relating to political skill in the workplace. Specifically, Ferris and his colleagues (Ferris *et al.*, 2005; Ferris *et al.*, 2007b) have argued that politically skilled employees are better capable of understanding both the social context within which they operate and the motivations of other participants within that context. This suggestion served as a conceptual anchor for the strategic bullying notion advanced by Ferris *et al.* (2007a). This work implied that the political skill of the leader would impact their understanding of the political context within which the bullying behavior occurred, and thus affect the choice of reactive versus proactive bullying. It is not difficult then to suggest that politically skilled employees may be better capable of choosing contexts and victims that help them gain the scarce resources or broad coalitions needed to achieve their own personal objectives.

While gaining access to resources and having a workable coalition are important preconditions for improving one's performance, the means through which bullies obtain these conditions must be cast such that powerful others either do not see their behavior or make attributions that the behavior is out of character for the employee. Politically skilled employees are capable of engaging in such behavior. Treadway *et al.* (2007) found that politically skilled employees were able to disguise their self-serving behavior. Specifically, the supervisors of politically skilled subordinates were less likely to label subordinate reported ingratiation as such. The authors used balance theory (Heider, 1958) to explain that when supervisors detected behavior as ingratiation they experienced negative sentiments toward the subordinate and thus rated their performance lower to balance such sentiments. Further supporting the balance theory interpretation, Kolodinsky *et al.* (2007) reported that politically skilled subordinates that engaged in rational influence behavior were more likely to be liked by their supervisors and thus received higher performance ratings.

Taken together we argue that politically skilled bullies are more adept at understanding the social context of the workplace, gauging others intentions and motivations, and calibrating their behavior to match these contextual demands. Thus, it is expected that politically skilled bullies are able to use their bullying behavior to build broad coalitions of supporters and pools of resources that will facilitate their own job performance. Furthermore, because of their ability to read the social context of the workplace they are less likely to be viewed as bullying by their superiors and powerful others (Crick and Dodge, 1994). If bullying behavior is observed by important others, it is likely to be seen as either out of character for the bully and thus the result of provocation of the victim or a strategic leadership behavior that is a temporary jolt to the target designed to assist their long-term success. In cases of the later, it makes it likely that the bullying activity will not impact the bully's social standing in the eyes of powerful others (Sutton *et al.*, 1999). As such, politically skilled bullies should be higher performers than their skill deficient counterparts:

H1. The relationship between bullying and job performance will be moderated by political skill such that this relationship will be positive for highly politically skilled employees and negative for low political skill employees.

Method

Sample and procedures

The sample was drawn from all individuals employed at a mental health facility located in the Northwestern USA. The health care workers performed their duties in a residential setting and interacted on a daily basis with other to provide constant care for clients. Initially, a total of 76 professional employees completed the questionnaire, which was comprised of both self-report and social network measures. Each respondent was provided with an informed consent document, explaining that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at any time without any negative employment outcomes. To ensure their confidentiality, each respondent was given a unique, random identification number which was assigned by the researchers when the questionnaires were distributed. Sixty-nine responses

were received for a response rate of 90.1 percent; however, performance data was only available for 54 of the 69 employees. Therefore, regression analyses were conducted using a sample size of 54, which is consistent with previous studies leveraging social network approaches for understanding organizational phenomena (e.g. Casciaro, 1998; Johnson and Orbach, 2002; Kilduff and Krackhardt, 1994).

Data was collected over two time periods to increase interpretations of causation. Specifically, the control variables, bullying, and political skill were all collected at Time 1, while performance evaluations were collected at Time 2. Consistent with previous research using performance as a dependent variable (Treadway *et al.*, 2011), we allowed a three-month lag between the two time periods.

Measures

Control variables

Age, measured in years, and education were controlled for in these analyses. Education was coded as 1 for “some high school”, 2 for “high school graduate”, 3 for “some college”, 4 for “college graduate”, and 5 for “graduate degree”.

Bullying

The roster method was used to collect information on bullying networks. A list of all the employees of the organization was given to respondents, and they were asked indicate each person in their network that they considered to be a bully. Specifically, they were asked to “place a check next to the names of people you have observed doing any of the following: engaging in unfair criticisms of co-workers, withholding work-related information, excluding someone from social interactions, and/or attempting to intimidate others”.

To determine an individual's centrality with the bullying network, UCINET 6 (Borgatti *et al.*, 2002) was used to calculate the eigenvector index. The eigenvector calculation takes into account not only the direct nomination of an individual but also how connected they are to other nominated individuals; thus, direct and indirect ties are considered in this calculation. In other words, a high eigenvector score indicates an individual that is not only recognized as a bully but also well connected to other bullies. Thus, this measure indicates who the bullies are in the workplace.

Political skill ($\alpha=0.86$)

Ferris *et al.*'s (2005) 18-item measure was used to measure employee self-reports of political skill. Sample items included “I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others” and “I always seem to instinctively know the right things to say and do to influence others”. Subordinates rated their agreement with the items using a seven-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree).

Job performance

The organization provided data collected from an internal instrument to evaluate employee performance created by the company for overall performance. Performance scores could range from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 50. The average performance rating in this sample was 30.67.

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlation matrix are presented in Table I. Neither bullying ($r=0.14$, NS) nor political skill ($r=0.15$, NS) were significantly correlated with overall performance. Further, bullying and political skill were not correlated to each another ($r=0.19$, NS).

Table I. Correlations, means, standard deviations, and reliabilities

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Education	2.50	0.97	—				
2. Age	31.72	12.4	0.20	—			
3. Bullying	11.63	13.28	0.11	-0.05	—		
4. Political skill	5.03	0.73	0.10	-0.07	0.19	(0.86)	
5. Overall performance	30.67	1.78	0.38*	0.37*	0.14	0.15	—

Notes: Reliabilities are shown on the diagonal; * $p < 0:05$

The predictors were centered, then hierarchical moderated multiple regression was used to test the hypothesis (Cohen *et al.*, 2003). In the first step, we entered the control variables. In step two, we entered the main effects of bullying and political skill. Then, in the third and final step, we entered the interaction term of bullying and political skill. Moderation is demonstrated when the interaction term significantly predicts the dependent variable above and beyond the control and main effect variables (Baron and Kenny, 1986).

Table II. Multiple regression results

Step and variable	Beta coefficients	ΔR^2
<i>Step 1</i>		
Education	0.33*	
Age	0.36*	0.27**
<i>Step 2</i>		
Bullying (A)	0.46	
Political skill (B)	-0.29	0.03
<i>Step 3</i>		
A × B	0.46*	0.09*

Note: * $p < 0:05$; ** $p < 0:01$

The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table II. As shown in Table II, the control variables of education ($\beta=0.33$, $p<0.05$) and age ($\beta=0.35$, $p<0.05$) explained a significant amount of variance in overall performance ($R^2=0.27$, $p<0.01$). The main effects of bullying and political skill entered at Step 2 did not explain a significant amount of variance in the dependent variable ($R^2=0.03$, NS). Consistent with the hypothesis is the cross-product term of bullying and political skill entered in Step 3 explained a significant incremental portion of variance in overall

performance ($\Delta R^2=0.09, p<0.05$). This effect size is in the upper end of the range for moderator effects in non-experimental studies (Champoux and Peters, 1987; Chaplin, 1991) and is sufficient in size to warrant interpretation (Evans, 1985).

To examine the form of the interaction, we plotted three slopes for the final equation: one standard deviation above the mean, at the mean, and one standard deviation below the mean (Cohen *et al.*, 2003). Figure 1 presents the resulting plot. The simple slopes of the regression lines (Aiken and West, 1991) of the respondents reporting high ($t=2.44, p<0.05$) and low ($t=-2.31, p<0.05$) levels of political skill were found to be significantly related to performance. In contrast, the simple slope of the employees reporting mean levels of political skill was not significantly different from zero ($t=0.54, NS$). Thus, as hypothesized, the relationship between bullying and overall performance was strongest among employees reporting high and low levels of political skill.

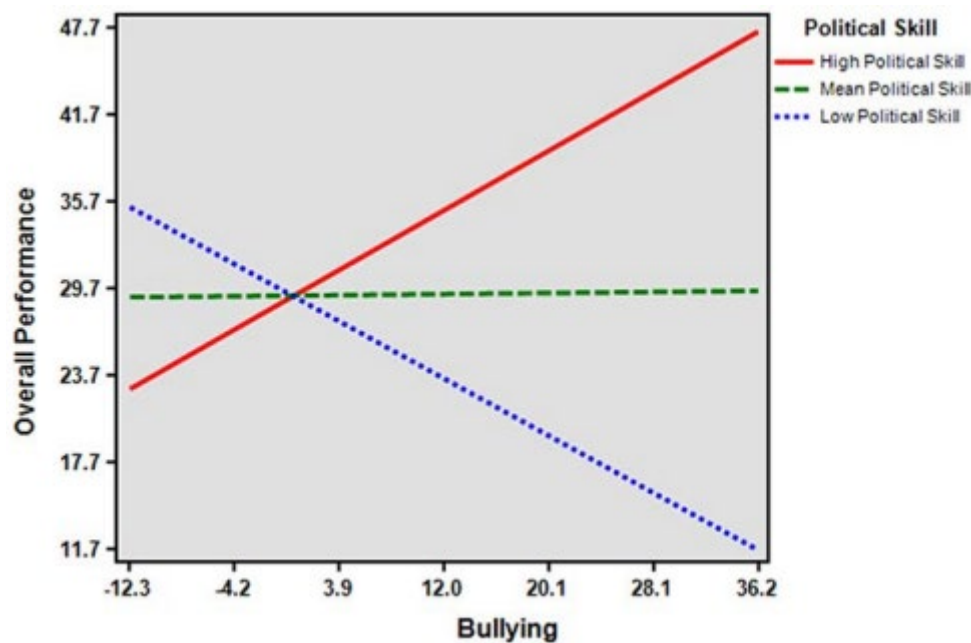


Figure 1. Bullying on job performance as moderated by political skill

Discussion

Bullying researchers have acknowledged that social ability plays an important role in the prediction of the perpetrators and victims of bullying, but less attention has been paid to the impact these abilities may have on ensuring the personal success of the bully. The current study advances the depth of knowledge on the perpetuation of bullying by demonstrating that politically skilled bullies are more capable of selecting the appropriate behaviors and contexts within which to bully and are more capable of choosing bullying behaviors that are most psychologically painful for their targets. This study marks the first attempt to measure the relationship between being a bully and job performance and offers an initial explanation of why bullies thrive in the workplace despite organizational attempts to sanction such behaviors. The current study has several implications for political skill and workplace bullying research.

Theoretical implications

This study extends theory on political skill, which, to date, is associated with a number of personally and organizationally functional outcomes such as increased performance (Semadar *et al.*, 2006) and decreased stress (Perrewé *et al.*, 2004, 2005). While scholars have acknowledged the potential for political skill to be used in an organizationally dysfunctional manner (e.g. Ferris *et al.*, 2007b), the leveraging of bullying into performance demonstrates the first empirical test of such notions. Moving forward, research would benefit from understanding how politically skilled bullies are motivated to select their targets. Specifically, we encourage scholars to attempt to assess the motivating conditions that drive employees to use their political skill in a potentially socially detrimental manner.

Surprisingly little research has been conducted to identify the motivational bases of workplace bullies. However, Salin (2003) argued that internal competition and reward systems may affect the propensity one has to bully. To the degree that bullying can be seen as a social influence behavior and that those high in need for achievement are more likely to engage in political activity (Treadway *et al.*, 2004), it is likely that employees with a high need for achievement will be more likely to respond with bullying when faced with environments that are highly competitive and the actor has determined a need to isolate and impede their rivals' success. Similar work has indicated that spousal abusers have an elevated need for power, which further suggests that these basic needs may interact with an employee's work environment and political skill to create skilled, motivated, and thus potentially more potent abusers (Dutton and Strachan, 1987).

Toward understanding the potential of skilled abusers to ostracize their rivals in the organization, previous research on social networks and victimization has identified the targets of bullying as being social isolates. Social isolates are individuals who are not well-connected to other individuals in the social network. It is often found that in instances of peer victimization in children, the target is a social isolate and have few or no social relationships (e.g. Boulton *et al.*, 1999; Hodges *et al.*, 1999). Given that politically skilled individuals are believed to be more accurate in understanding the structure and power inherent in social networks (Ferris *et al.*, 2005, 2007b), it is likely that politically skilled bullies have greater cognitive accuracy in identifying social isolates, or "easy targets", thus making them more effective as bullies.

The manner in which bullies and victims are identified in evaluating the cognitive accuracy of politically skilled abusers necessarily requires the further use of social network methodology. Traditionally, bullying has been measured by either assessing an employee's perception of overall victimization in the workplace or by asking questions regarding victims' exposure to specific bullying behaviors (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996). Offering an additional perspective on the spectrum of bullying behavior, the current study indicates that individuals have reputations for bullying. Implicitly, the current study suggests that these bullies may be able to leverage these reputations without actually bullying a particular employee. It may be the fear or apprehension that the bully's reputation creates in targets that may allow them to gain valuable resources and commitments in organizations rather than any specific act of bullying.

While research on organizational politics has considered the role of employees' subjective interpretations of political behaviors (for a review, see Ferris *et al.*, 2002), workplace bullying has not received similar attention. It could be the case that bullying behaviors typically viewed as counter-productive, such as withholding strategic information and isolating certain individuals from a discussion, actually are productive to organizational life. In instances of radical change, for instance, change agents may need to employ these exact behaviors in order to progress the strategic mission. In spite of arguments that would suggest they are negative, it is possible to see how such actions are appropriate and even necessary for organizational success. Along these lines, bullying behavior is often seen as self-serving, when, in fact, the behaviors could be beneficial to both the actor and the organization. We welcome future research that works to better parcel these differences.

Within the confines of this study we only examined the political skill of the bully and not the political skill of the perceiver. However, organizational life is characterized and perpetrated by the ongoing, social interactions of its employees. It could be the case that other highly politically skilled others may not mark highly politically skilled bullies as bullies because they note that certain actions are necessary and appropriate for organizational functionality. Better understanding of the ability of the evaluators to assess the potential value of a course of action would likely be a fruitful ground for future work.

Practical implications

As noted previously, political skill can serve individuals as a coping mechanism to the stressors of daily life (Perrewé *et al.*, 2004, 2005). Along with trying to reduce the prevalence of bullying, managers may also attempt to aid their subordinates in developing their political skill to help them in managing bullies. As described earlier, individuals who bully have the potential to be socially astute, and can, therefore, maximize their returns on social situations. Individuals who are politically skilled may have the ability to not only cope with bullying situations, but to lessen them.

It could be possible that individuals who are perceived as bullies are seen by many as charming and friendly but who are highly destructive and manipulative. Organizations should take care to address the specific behaviors of those individuals who have reputations as being bullies to find more organizationally appropriated methods of perpetuating their goals. Bullies have the potential to experience a backlash from their colleagues, which have the potential to even be violent. The media is inundated with such stories of how individuals who have become overwhelmed by their coworkers and bosses who mistreat them and resorted to physical, even deadly, action because they feel they have little recourse. Organizations would do well to proactively address these issues.

Organizations can possibly reduce the prevalence by incorporating measures of civility and camaraderie into their performance evaluations. Employees who are hoping to ascend the hierarchy based on menacing behaviors and threats may find their ascent lessened when they employ certain behaviors. Consistent with this, training and development opportunities could be designed to equip employees with the ability to identify and manage bullying behaviors, thereby

lessening the effectiveness of bullying behaviors. If bullies perceived that their once effective behaviors are now less effective, they may be more likely to alter their behaviors

Strengths and limitations

Whereas the current study's results present a meaningful use of social network analysis in organizations, the strengths and limitations must also be addressed. The results of this study build on the current network research by lending further interpretation to the meaning and functions of networks in organizations. The data used to calculate the bullying measure was based on peer evaluations of their coworkers. The high response rate further lends to the interpretability of the results, given that more complete network data yield a more accurate representation of the work relationships. Moreover, the specific measure used to represent bullying, eigenvector centrality, considers not only the direct identification of an individual as a bully, but also how connected they are to other bullies. Bullying research has yet to identify bullies in this manner and network research has not yet applied their perspective to this specific context.

Inherent in the social network method of data collection is the reduction of common method bias usually created through the use of only self-report measures. Moreover, given that bullying is a social phenomenon, the social network approach provides a more theoretically accurate approach to identifying bullies in the workplace. Further bolstering the effects found in the current study is the use of other rated performance measures. This approach to performance research helps to eliminate problems associated with common method bias. Along these lines, the use of multiple methods to collect the data also reduces the cases of common methods bias.

Having collected the control and independent variables three months prior to the dependent variable allows us to make inferences of causation. Specifically, in the domain of this study, we have some evidence to suggest that the hypothesized relationship occurs as cause and effect rather than as covariation only. Such longitudinal approaches to research allow us to better understand the causal agents of organizational phenomena, resulting in better management of such occurrences.

A final noteworthy strength is the amount of variance explained by the interaction term. Specifically, the interaction term explained 9 percent of the total variance in performance scores. Further bolstering this as a strength is the relatively small standard deviation of performance. Lowered standard deviations translate into more precise estimates, thereby increasing our confidence in the explanatory effect of the bullying – political skill relationship.

In spite of the number of strengths of this study, there are some limitations to our conclusions. The control variables we were able to include in our analyses were limited to only age and education. And, even though these variables were significant, the hypothesized relationship still held, suggesting that the hypothesized relationship is strong and might be resistant to the inclusion of other control variables. However, we do support additional research incorporating other control variables in an effort to better understand the supported relationship.

Another potentially limiting factor is the generalizability of our findings. The sample used in this study was drawn from a residential setting where individuals work very closely with one another to care for others. It is conceivable that the interactions required by different occupations, organizations, and industries could increase or reduce the potential for bullies to flourish. We would encourage replications of our model using samples drawn from different occupations and industries. Along these lines, we encourage replication of our findings using a larger sample size. While our sample size was consistent with other studies, future research could do well by addressing this potential limitation.

Conclusion

In this study, we evaluated the hypothesis that employees who are rated by their colleagues as bullies receive have higher performance ratings to the degree that they are highly politically skilled. We found support of our hypothesis using a sample where data was collected from multiple sources and multiple time sources, thereby reducing common rater variance and common times biases. Our findings have important implications for both scholars and managers, and we outlined many of those in details. It is our intent that this work will serve a fodder for future research investigating similar phenomena.

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