Workplace Bullying in Clinical and Educational Settings

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The phenomenon of workplace bullying (WPB) is not new, but it is becoming a greater concern for both employees and employers in health professions. First recognized as a type of organizational conflict in the 1960s, several terms have subsequently been used to describe this phenomenon, including mobbing, harassment, victimization, emotional abuse, and bullying. Fox and Stallworth reported that 97% of 262 individuals had encountered ‘workplace psychological violence’ within the previous five year period. Male and female victims reported experiencing WPB in similar proportions; however, the majority of males reported having been bullied by males, whereas females reported having been bullied in almost equal proportions by both genders.

The healing orientation of health-care workers reported they had experience with psychological workplace aggression. Athletic trainers and therapists (ATs) routinely interact with individuals on a variety of levels within an organization, which are often made difficult by the pressures of the sports environment. Gender discrimination is another workplace issue that has been recognized as a concern in intercollegiate athletic programs. A review of the athletic training literature reveals a lack of research pertaining to WPB. The purpose of this report is to educate potential victims by defining the WPB construct, providing examples, identifying its consequences, and presenting possible coping and/or management techniques.

Definition of Workplace Bullying

WPB occurs when repeated unreasonable or offensive behaviors or actions are directed toward an individual in the workplace. The phenomenon does not refer to a singular act, but rather involves repeated incidents that demonstrate disrespect or unfair behaviors toward an individual. Einarsen defined bullying in the workplace as “ . . . when someone, persistently over a period of time, is on the receiving end of negative actions from one or several others, in a situation where the one at the receiving end for different reasons may have difficulties defending themselves.”
him- or herself against these actions” (p. 379). Acts of WPB are intended to humiliate, degrade, or undermine a person’s work performance. WPB is often characterized by repetition and escalation of aggression over a long period of time, which can be viewed as a misuse of power. WPB may be confused with other workplace issues, such as discrimination, due to its recent emergence as a concern. Figures 1 and 2 summarize distinctions among different workplace issues.

**Examples**

WPB involves actions that are persistently negative and designed to maintain a level of power differential between the bully and the victim. Rayner and Hoel related five categories of WPB that include: (1) threat to professional status, (2) threat to personal standing, (3) isolation, (4) overwork, and (5) destabilization. In the context of athletic training, a bullying coach can threaten the professional standing of a competent AT victim by questioning his or her knowledge of an athlete’s well-being in front of a team. A lack of professional competence certainly requires intervention, but the issue should be addressed without undermining the status of the AT. Assuming the AT is competent, questioning by the coach is a technique used to reduce the athletes’ respect for the AT. Threats to personal standing can occur when a supervising AT gossips about a subordinate’s personal life in the workplace. Although activities in the personal life of an AT may present an inappropriate distraction in the workplace, gossiping can damage the individual’s reputation and acceptance by others. A bullying athletic director can use verbal tirades to isolate a Head AT victim, thereby persuading other athletic department employees to shun the victim or risk facing similar treatment. WPB can be exhibited by excessive work assignments, such as scheduling an assistant AT for morning treatments, afternoon treatments, practices, and evening treatments for every day of the week while the Head AT and other staff ATs are given time off. As another example, an athletic training faculty member could create a destabilized

![Figure 1](image-url)  
*Figure 1  Defining workplace bullying.*