Bullying in the Academic Work Environment:

A Case Study of PhD Students and Research Professors

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Abstract ;

This research paper focuses on bullying in the academic work environment, specifically among PhD students and research professors. The study aims to understand the theoretical aspects of workplace bullying and examine how Algerian legislation addresses this issue. Through a survey conducted on a sample of PhD students and research professors, the study aims to identify bullying behaviors and common manifestations of bullying in the academic environment. The survey was distributed among members of the University Professors Club Facebook page, with a total of 230 participants. The findings suggest that bullying often takes a collective form, targeting individuals or groups. The bullying group becomes a dominating force, using various means to serve their own interests while excluding others. The study sheds light on the negative phenomenon of bullying in academia, providing key insights into its dynamics.

1. Introduction

The disclosure of workplace violence has witnessed a significant increase, undoubtedly attributed to the widespread use of information and communication technology, which has provided virtual spaces for expressing work-related suffering. This negative phenomenon has garnered increased attention in professional, social, and media circles. The question arises as to why work, which is meant to satisfy human needs, has become a source of suffering despite the advancement in addressing the material conditions of work. Psychological factors have not received the same attention as the material conditions from unions, employers, and managers.

While Western countries have shown considerable interest in researching this field, the study of workplace bullying remains limited in developing countries. The scientific research field in Algeria has witnessed a lack of studies on this phenomenon. Considering the broad range of work-related suffering, we have chosen to examine the topic of bullying in the academic university environment due to its significance in impeding the academic performance of professors and researchers, as well as obstructing the functions of the university, including pedagogical, research, and community relations.

The academic work environment in higher education is characterized by multiple stakeholders, academic and administrative hierarchies, and diverse disciplines, making it a space for various positive and negative practices. As a result of the academic and administrative hierarchies, it has become prone to bullying by one party against another. Despite its prevalence in academic environments, bullying remains a silenced phenomenon, making it difficult to acknowledge and gather evidence of such behaviors due to underreporting and the potential harm to the victim and the university's reputation.

In both work and academic environments, terms such as rudeness, disrespect, difficult individuals, negative behavior, and mistreatment are often used to describe bullying behavior. These terms serve to downplay the issue by minimizing the importance of bullying and its impact on those who fall victim to it.

The significance of the current research problem stems from the insufficient attention given to the phenomenon of bullying experienced by academics, which negatively affects their performance and, consequently, the performance of academic institutions as a whole. The psychological and physical effects on the victims cannot be disregarded.

No one is immune to bullying in the academic work environment, as it can come from anyone within that environment and

can target anyone belonging to it. However, in this study, we will focus on supervisors and professors from various academic ranks.

Based on the aforementioned, our study aims to:

- Familiarize ourselves with the phenomenon of workplace bullying from a theoretical perspective.

- Understand how Algerian legislation addresses the phenomenon of workplace bullying.

On a practical level, our study aims to:

- Identify the bullying behaviors experienced by researchers and university professors.

- Highlight common manifestations of bullying behavior in the academic environment.

- Identify the parties involved in bullying and their victims.

- Explore coping strategies employed by the victims.

To achieve these goals, we conducted a survey to gather opinions from doctoral students and researchers regarding this negative phenomenon. The survey targeted a sample of doctoral students, professors, and researchers who are members of the "University Professors Club" Facebook page. The study included 230 participants from this page.

The multiplicity of terms and a single phenomenon:

There are multiple terms used to describe the phenomenon of psychological violence in the workplace, and they vary from one culture to another and from one country to another. A set of commonly used terms has been identified in legal texts enacted by different countries in their legislation concerning psychological violence in the workplace.

The term "Mobbing" is used to refer to bullying, cruelty, ill-treatment, and the use of force. Additionally, the term "Workplace Bullying" is commonly used to denote pressure exerted by a person in a position of power. Sometimes, the term "l'abus du pouvoir" is used to indicate the arbitrary actions of those in authority. Another term, "Harassment au travail," is used to encompass all forms of workplace harassment. Furthermore, the term "violance psychologique au travail" is used to describe psychological violence in the workplace.

2. *The concept of bullying*

Article L1152-1 of the French Labor Law addresses psychological harassment in the workplace, stating that it is prohibited to subject any employee to repeated acts of psychological harassment that aim at or

result in deteriorating their working conditions, undermining their rights and dignity, affecting their physical and mental health, or jeopardizing their professional future.

The first and third articles of UN Convention No. 190 emphasize that the term "violence and harassment" in the world of work refers to a range of unacceptable behaviors, practices, or associated threats, whether they occur once or are repeated, that are intended to or may result in physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm. This includes violence and harassment that occur within the context of employment or are related to it, or that arise from it.

Scientifically, workplace bullying is defined as repeated practices directed towards one or more employees that are unwanted by the victim. These intentional behaviors cause humiliation and distress, and they have a detrimental impact on job performance and create an unfavorable work environment (Tambur, Merle, Vadi, & Maaja, 2012, p. 757).

It is also known as extreme and negative behavior that spreads in the work environment with the aim of continuous mistreatment. It arises due to power imbalances, causing distress, humiliation, and other negative effects on individuals (Fox & Cowan, 2015, p. 116).

Psychological violence in the workplace is defined as any repeated and harmful act that affects the dignity of an employee. It can take various forms, particularly through insults, contempt, threats, blackmail, sometimes explicit accusations, as well as half-words, meaningless hints, unjustified acts of revenge, and continuous criticism directed more towards the personal characteristics of the employee rather than the work itself. Therefore, psychological violence is an imposed and deliberate suffering in the workplace, perpetrated by one or more individuals using all means related to relationships, the organization, and the content of work, distorting them from their intended goals and directing them towards harming the employee. Psychological violence in the workplace manifests through intentional or unintentional desire to cause harm and destruction (Angelo, 2002, p. 06).

Bullying represents a form of aggressive behavior that occurs when someone is subjected to continuous negative behavior that causes him or her pain. It results from an imbalance of power between two individuals, where one is referred to as the bully and the other as the victim. Bullying can take physical, verbal, or emotional forms (Muawiyah, 2009, p. 89).

Bullying in the workplace is a negative phenomenon characterized by a set of features, including:

- **Repeated occurrence:** Bullying is distinguished by its daily repetition, setting it apart from other negative behaviors and interactions. It persists over a long period, particularly if it remains unchecked and unaddressed by management. In such cases, bullying tends to escalate over time, intensifying the victim's experience. Although victims may struggle to articulate their experience, they can express feelings of discomfort or severe annoyance caused by this behavior. They may lack the appropriate language to label their bullying experience, but they are fully aware that they are being attacked.

- **Intent and deliberation:** Bullying behavior is not accidental but rather intentional. Witnesses and victims confirm that the bullies purposefully engage in their actions and harm, persistently doing so whenever an opportunity arises, especially in situations where there is an imbalance of power between the bullies and the victims.

The purpose of bullying is to inflict harm on the victim, both psychologically and socially, with its effects extending to stress and an increased desire to leave the workplace. Bullying behavior is not accidental but rather intentional, as witnesses and victims affirm that the bullies deliberately engage in their actions and harm, persistently doing so whenever an opportunity arises, especially in situations where there is an imbalance of power between the bullies and the victims.

The dimensions of workplace bullying, as mentioned by researchers such as (Brotheridge & Lee, 2010), are as follows:

- **Undermining:** (Brotheridge & Lee, 2010) refer to undermining as the humiliation of workers in front of others and devaluing their worth to justify aggression towards them. The oppressive manager or supervisor justifies their dominance and aggression by belittling the individuals, claiming their immaturity and lack of understanding of the organization's interests. This fosters a condescending view of them, considering them ignorant and lazy, which manifests as direct or indirect harm, humiliation, or disrespect to the worker through harassment, mistreatment, and devaluing their work within the organization.

- **Work Undermining:** (Brotheridge & Lee, 2010) argue that work undermining erodes employees' sense of control over their work, leading them to feel a lack of distributive and procedural justice. They are rewarded without regard for their performance, excluded from decision-making processes, subjected to mistreatment, assigned tasks below their skills and abilities, subjected to constant criticism of themselves or their work, deprived of information about their

work, ridiculed, denied their rights, pressured, ignored, excessively monitored, and their role minimized.

- **Verbal Abuse:** Verbal abuse serves as a means of exerting power, control, and dominance over others. This means that the aggressor feels a greater sense of power when they insult or belittle the victim in one way or another. The attack can take the form of shouting, sarcasm, and hurtful jokes. Verbal abuse represents an aggressive or inappropriate language that makes the worker feel threatened and fearful.

- **Public Shouting:** This aggressive behavior involves raising one's voice, speaking in a harsh tone, and using socially unacceptable language. It leaves a negative impression on employees. While it is a common behavior, it is one of the worst ways to interact with workers, keeping them in a constant state of tension. It contributes to their feelings of embarrassment, low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, and awkwardness. This negative feeling affects other coworkers who witness the mistreatment of their colleagues, leading to their fear of becoming victims themselves.

- **Continuous Criticism:** It involves criticizing the worker for every little thing, every action, word, or behavior, often without justification and in a continuous manner. This weakens the worker's personality and dignity, diminishing their desire to work. Continuous criticism undermines performance, contributes to psychological harm, and destroys the morale of employees.

3. *Characteristics of leaders who engage in workplace bullying*

Characteristics of leaders who engage in workplace bullying, according to (Al-Obeidi, 2015, p. 106), are as follows:

- **Continuous Critic:** This type of leader engages in constant harassment or continuous bullying of individuals, believing that they are incompetent.

- **Uncooperative:** This leader withholds information and resources from employees to hinder their ability to accomplish their tasks, making them constantly reliant on their services.

- **Abusive:** This leader mistreats employees and, in return, manages to avoid punishment, leading to the collapse of the employees and their eventual submission.

- **Snake Head:** This leader appears to be friendly and compassionate towards employees but works behind the scenes to harm them and get rid of them.

4. *Factors and Causes of Workplace Bullying*

Several attempts have been made to explain the phenomenon of workplace bullying based on the results of studies and research conducted by researchers (Zein al-Din, 2015). These attempts identified the following factors and causes:

- **Perception of Incompetence:** When individuals feel a lack of competence or inadequacy, instead of working to improve their skills and abilities, they target those who are more competent than them in order to bring them down and become equal to them. This ensures that they do not appear as the losers when compared to their colleagues in the workplace. They create problems for the chosen victim, diverting the attention of colleagues and managers away from their own incompetence. This method has seemingly helped incompetent employees to retain their jobs over the years. Over time, the victims feel disappointment, frustration, loss of motivation, resentment, and alienation.

- **Focus on Weak Management:** The role of management is twofold: ensuring optimal workflow according to plans, laws, and goals, and caring for employees, meeting their needs, and solving their problems. However, when management abandons its responsibilities related to employees and becomes biased, creating a hostile and problematic work environment,

employees become targets for those who hold power, practicing violence and harassment against them.

- **Focus on Personal Traits of Bullying Victims:** Through research and investigation into the characteristics of individuals who were classified as bullying victims in the workplace, it was found that they possessed several positive qualities that made them the subject of envy, jealousy, and sometimes hatred. As a result, they became targets of bullying to eliminate them. Some of these qualities include:

  o The ability to perform assigned tasks well and excel over others.

  o Popularity among colleagues in the work environment.

  o The ability to provide personal or professional advice and possess exceptional expertise.

  o Distinguished values and principles.

  o Integrity and honesty in work and the absence of destructive weaknesses.

  o Refusal to align with dominant individuals in the workplace.

  o Clear independence in thought and action.

  o Consistently maintaining a sense of distinction and uniqueness.

o Competence, intelligence, and excellence.

The presence of these individual or collective qualities poses a threat to those with low self-esteem, evoking a desire to break down these positive attributes in exceptional individuals within their personal and professional circles. Bullying then becomes a form of retribution against these qualities (Naisa, 2016).

5. Legislative measures against workplace bullying

Due to the seriousness of workplace bullying, many countries around the world, especially Western countries, have enacted numerous legislative texts that define psychological violence in the workplace as a punishable crime. However, such legislative texts are absent in many third-world countries, including Algeria, where there is no explicit law or provision that criminalizes psychological violence in the workplace or imposes penalties for its commission. As a result, many victims resort to silence and submission to workplace bullying or ultimately leave their jobs.

Algerian legislation does not explicitly address violence and bullying in the workplace. There are no provisions that specifically discuss the concept of psychological violence in the workplace or harassment in general. However, some provisions can be interpreted as implicitly

prohibiting individuals, in all their roles in society, from subjecting others to such phenomena. For example, the Algerian Constitution (1996) states in Article 34 that "the state guarantees the inviolability of the individual and prohibits any physical or moral violence or any encroachment on human dignity." Article 35 further states that "the law punishes violations committed against rights and freedoms and any harm to the physical and moral integrity of individuals."

Additionally, Article 30 of the Public Service Law emphasizes the obligation to protect employees from threats, intimidation, insults, defamation, or attacks during the performance of their duties or on the occasion thereof. Furthermore, Article 6 of the Labor Law states that "workers have the right, within the employment relationship, to the respect of their physical and mental well-being and their dignity, and protection against any discrimination in the occupation of a job, except for their qualifications and entitlement."

While Algerian labor legislation includes some legal provisions that ensure the protection of workers from occupational hazards, including violence in its various forms, the focus is primarily on developing their capacities and preserving their physical and mental well-being in the workplace. Occupational health and the role of occupational physicians play an important part in ensuring the psychological

and physical well-being of Algerian workers. The Labor Law, in its section on health protection and occupational medicine, states that the task of occupational physicians is to preserve the physical and mental comfort of workers in all professions, protect them from hazards that may lead to accidents, occupational diseases, or any harm to their health.

It is important to note that while Algerian legislation does not explicitly address workplace bullying, existing legal provisions can be interpreted to provide some level of protection to employees. However, there is a need for more comprehensive and explicit legislation that specifically addresses workplace bullying, defines it, and imposes penalties for its occurrence.

6. Bullying in the academic work environment Field study results

6.1 Through surveying doctoral students, the results showed that:

- 85% feel weak in the university environment.

- 80% have experienced bullying in various forms.

The reasons for feeling weak, according to their statements, are:

- Control by the doctoral training team and administration. This type of treatment occurs in their first year of

training, where they lack the opportunity to discuss with the training team and are subjected to treatment that is not suitable for their academic level, similar to undergraduate students.

As for the supervisory relationship, according to the respondents, it is characterized by the supervisor's dominance and control over the student researcher. The supervisor tends to impose their opinion, diminish the value of the student's work, and limit their participation in conferences and events.

- 72% have experienced bullying behaviors from professors, which include situations of arrogance, undermining the scientific value, and persistently questioning the student's credibility, leading to feelings of humiliation.

- 43% have experienced bullying behaviors from the student's thesis supervisor, including doubting the information presented in the doctoral thesis, destructive criticism of their work or personal life, delays or neglect in evaluating their submitted work, and excessive control over the student's scientific output.

6.1.1 Effects of bullying on student researchers

- 63% of those who experienced bullying stated that it had an impact on their psychological well-being.

- The most common psychological effects reported by the victims are psychological pressure, loss of self-confidence, frustration, fear of expressing opinions, and decreased morale.

- 70% of those who experienced bullying stated that it affected their performance. They lost interest and passion in research, became more hesitant in completing their theses, experienced a decrease in motivation and a slower pace of progress.

- 52% of those who experienced bullying stated that it affected their relationships in the academic environment. It led to isolation and withdrawal from relationships with their peers and professors. They also developed a fear of attending scientific gatherings and engaging in scientific discussions, losing their ability to express opinions due to fear of ridicule and devaluation.

- 40% of those who experienced bullying stated that it affected their physical health. They became more prone to headaches, chronic migraines, and experienced disrupted sleep patterns due to continuous pressures in the academic environment. It also led to loss of appetite and weight loss.

Regarding personal strategies used by the victims among researchers, the majority (80%) showed determination in their research, perseverance to complete their theses, and coping with the pressures exerted by bullies by being indifferent to their actions. They focused on their goals, avoided confrontation, and preferred to remain in the background.

6.1.2 Reporting and complaining about bullying practices

- Regarding reporting bullying incidents, 98% of the respondents stated that they did not report the incidents to any party. This was due to their prior knowledge of the futility of complaints and their fear of retaliation, which could hinder their research progress and create difficulties for them.

6.2 Through questioning the professors

We arrived at the following results:

- 79% of the respondents stated that they have experienced bullying in the academic environment during their academic career.

6.2.1 Bullying areas and manifestations on professors

In the personal domain:

- 40% of those who experienced bullying stated that they were subjected to personal criticism, annoyance by their colleagues and superiors at work, threats, hostile reactions, mocking looks, and ridicule.

In the administrative domain:

- During meetings, bullying behavior is more evident, as 69% of those who experienced bullying stated that they face interruption while speaking, lack of opportunity to express their opinions, belittlement of their presented ideas, and undermining their credibility.

- 52% of them stated that they face increased surveillance, repeated inquiries, deprivation, and withholding of information related to their rights and the development of their academic and professional careers.

In the Pedagogical domain:

- Regarding lesson assignments, 54% of those who experienced bullying acknowledged that bullying behavior is reflected through assigning excessive pedagogical burdens beyond the required workload and randomly distributing teaching hours in the weekly program, causing pressure on the professors.

- 43% of them stated that they are compelled to teach common core subjects, which often have a large number of students and bring additional burdens and pressures.

- 41% of them admitted that they are forced to teach subjects that are not aligned with their choices. Regarding guiding master's students, 46% of them expressed the dominance of the powerful group and those who stand with them over excellent students, determining the number of students they desire, and assigning those with lower levels to them. Most of those who experienced bullying were excluded from assuming pedagogical responsibilities such as being a department head or specialty supervisor, which were monopolized by the powerful group.

- 60% of them confessed that they face intentional pressure in pedagogical burdens to distract them from conducting research work, indirectly preventing their presence and academic promotion.

In the research domain:

- 69% of the victims stated that this domain is largely subject to the network of relationships woven by

professors within the narrow academic environment of their university and the broader environment of other universities.

- According to the statements of 51% of the victims, bullying behavior is manifested through isolating professors and marginalizing them from participating in scientific activities such as conferences and important meetings, regardless of the quality of their work. In the field of scientific publication, local publishing, according to 70% of the victims, is subject to personal criteria rather than scientific ones, where professors exclude and procrastinate in reviewing and publishing their articles. As for the credibility of committees and scientific councils, 80% of the victims stated that they are excluded from them, considering that their members are elected and they are marginalized, not chosen by colleagues. They also admitted that there is rarely equality in handling professors' files, and the members and those who support them dominate all privileges.

In terms of the relationship with the environment:

- Bullying behavior in this domain, according to 57% of the professors who experienced bullying, is represented by the isolation of the powerful group, which usually consists of groups that exert pressure on the invitations extended by the academic, economic, and social environment to academics for cooperation, consultation, or openness.

6.2.2 Strengthened Parties in the Academic Environment

Approximately 70% of the professors who have experienced bullying have identified that the parties engaging in bullying are almost all parties, especially professors in positions of responsibility and those who surpass them in academic rank, including some colleagues at the same rank. This is because it is sufficient for a professor to be outside their circle of relationships and community for bullying to be exerted upon them, primarily in the form of marginalization, isolation, and humiliation.

6.2.3 Consequences of bullying

Psychological effects resulting from bullying, suffered by 75% of the professors who have experienced bullying, include:

- Psychological pressures and feelings of suffering and suffocation from a selective work environment based on unfair, non-transparent, and non-objective criteria.

- Feelings of frustration, work-related stress, and anticipation of failure.

As for the social effects, 71% of the professors who have experienced bullying suffer from:

- Imposed and selective isolation, fear of establishing social relationships, and avoidance of pressures, problems, and conflicts. They tend to apply the principle of staying within the classroom and avoiding confrontation beyond the university.

Furthermore, the impact of bullying on performance is significant, according to 79% of the professors who have experienced bullying. It leads to professors being confined to pedagogical obligations to avoid penalties, neglecting their involvement in research activities, which become subject to bullying, pressure, and personal relationships.

Given that a significant percentage of university professors belong to the age group of forty years and above, the health effects of bullying are significant. It has been found that 60% of them experience an increase in blood pressure, diabetes, loss of concentration, sleep disorders, and eating disorders.

6.2.4 Strategies applied by professors to avoid or minimize the effects of bullying

According to the majority of those who have experienced bullying, these strategies include:

- Seeking to join scientific bodies such as scientific committees or councils to defend their interests, although achieving this is rare due to the election process being associated with supportive networks.

- Resorting to focusing solely on teaching and leaving the university immediately afterward.

- Some individuals, particularly those under the age of 50, consider seeking opportunities for transfer to other universities.

- Those nearing retirement prefer to leave the university altogether.

6.2.5 Complaints and grievances against bullying

Regarding the disclosure of being subjected to bullying, none of the professors who have experienced bullying took the initiative to file a complaint or expose these practices. This is because the bullying group or one of its members belongs to influential groups, leading the victims to believe that such disclosure would further tighten the noose around them.

7. CONCLUSION

According to the study results, it is evident that bullying behavior in the academic environment takes various forms, predominantly marginalization, exclusion, and hindering the victim's academic and

research progress. They employ tactics that weaken the person and strip them of their unique characteristics to make it easier for them to control and manipulate them as they please.

Bullying can manifest overtly or covertly, either publicly or through undisclosed practices. Typically, bullying behavior targets victims who do not hold any administrative positions or responsibilities in scientific bodies. They lack the means to raise their concerns and respond to the bullying.

The victims suffer from bullying behaviors but find no means to defend themselves against the attacks. Some of them resort to avoidance and evasion, while for others, bullying becomes a motivation to break free from control and achieve academic advancement. Scientific and academic institutions often become sources of exclusion, marginalization, and favoritism towards friends and loyal individuals. Bullying is evident through bureaucratic and hierarchical structures in administrative and scientific contexts.

Bullying tends to have a collective nature, usually directed against an individual or a group of individuals. The strengthened group becomes a dominating force within the academic environment, utilizing all means and structures to serve their own interests and exclude others.

Bullying in the academic environment is an overlooked problem, as victims do not file complaints against the bullies. Consequently, these negative behaviors continue to be reproduced without any deterrent.

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