SAPPHIRE COHORT – CASE STUDY 2: BULLYING AND INCIVILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

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BACKGROUND

Despite the progressive introduction of anti-discrimination laws, sexual and gender minorities still face frequent instances of workplace bullying and harassment (Ellison and Gustone, 2009; Drydakis, 2014; Hoel et al., 2014) as well as subtler forms of prejudice, discrimination and negative treatment (Zurbrügg & Miner, 2016). These stressors are collectively referred to in the academic literature as 'workplace incivility' (Cortina et al., 2013).

According to Pearson et al. (2005), workplace incivility is a low-key, low-intensity act that includes—but is not limited to—jokes, innuendo, insults, rude comments, use of inappropriate language, etc. Marco and colleagues (2015) found that, out of these, jokes appear to be the most predominant form of workplace incivility perpetrated by heterosexual employees against employees with diverse sexual and gender identities. Other studies have shown sexual-minority women are more likely to experience workplace incivility than sexual-minority men (Zurbrügg & Miner, 2016).

The reviewed literature suggests that fully understanding the workplace stressors faced by the Sapphire Cohort requires investigating both their experiences of conspicuous negative acts—such as bullying—and of more covert forms—such as jokes and innuendo. In the analyses presented below, we investigate the predictors of instances of bullying and jokes/innuendo against members of the Sapphire Cohort, and whether individuals with certain sexual and gender identities within that cohort are more likely to be the target of these aggressions. We also look at the costs of these aggressions for the employees and the organisation to offer insights into the effects of bullying and incivility.

PREDICTORS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING AND JOKES/INNUENDO

We first investigate the predictors of bullying and jokes/innuendo in the workplace for the Sapphire Cohort. The analyses use data from the 2020 Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI) Employee Survey. The Sapphire Cohort sample consists of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) employees who identify, or may be perceived, as women (*n*=3,087). This includes cisgender women, trans women, and non-binary people who may be perceived as female or feminine (regardless of their gender identities).

In our study, experiencing bullying is measured by a variable that takes the value one when employees report that they have been the target of bullying/harassment targeting their gender diversity or sexual orientation in the past year, and the value zero otherwise. Similarly, jokes/innuendo is measured by a variable taking the value one when employees reported being exposed to unwanted jokes/innuendo targeting their sexual or gender identity in the past year, and the value zero otherwise.

To gain an understanding of the predictors of bullying and jokes/innuendo in the workplace, we estimated two multiple regression models. In the first model, the outcome variable is the measure of workplace bullying described above. In the second model, the outcome variable is the aforementioned measure of exposure to jokes/innuendo. The explanatory variables in these regression models are measures of sexual identity, gender identity, leadership support[1] and colleague support[2]. The variable measuring leadership support captures

[1] This is an index measure derived by combining information on variables capturing the presence of executive allies in the organisation, endorsement and communication of inclusion initiatives by leaders and executives, regular communication of inclusion initiatives and visible signs of organisation support for employees with diverse sexuality and gender. We combined these variables by taking the mean response for each employee.

[2] This is an index measure derived using individuals' response to a cluster of 15 questions asking about their support for inclusion initiatives, understanding the importance of active allies, being comfortable around people of diverse sexuality/gender and understanding their challenges, understanding that any jokes targeting diverse sexuality/gender and

organisational initiatives and executive support aimed at fostering the workplace inclusion of gender and sexuality diverse employees. Meanwhile, the variable measuring colleague support captures colleagues' understanding and acceptance of, and engagement with, inclusion initiatives.

Table 1 below reports the results of two multilevel logistic regression models of bullying and jokes/innuendo using the 2020 AWEI Employee Survey data.[3] The odds ratios give the estimated effect of a given explanatory variable on the odds of being bullied (Column 1) and being the target of jokes/innuendo (Column 2), respectively. Odds ratios greater than one indicate that a given factor is associated with a greater chance of being bullied or being at the receiving end of jokes/innuendo, whereas odds ratios smaller than one indicate that a given factor is associated with a lower chance of these events happening. Stars are used to denote those associations that were statistically significant.

Table 1: Odds ratios from multilevel logistic regression models of being bullied and being the target of jokes/innuendo

	Model 1: Being bullied	**Model 2: Being the target of jokes/innuendo**
Explanatory variables		
Gender identity		
Cis woman *(reference group)*		
Transgender woman	3.24**	2.63**
Non-Binary/Agender/Other	4.46***	4.30***
Sexual identity		
Lesbian/Gay *(reference group)*		
Straight	0.69	0.43
Bisexual/Pansexual/Queer/Other	0.41***	0.38***
Organisational factors		
Leadership support index	0.62***	0.53***
Colleague support index	0.47	0.38**
Number of employees	**2,517**	**2,517**

Source: 2020 AWEI Employee Survey

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

The results reveal important findings regarding the identity and organisational support factors associated with bullying and incivility at work. Concerning *sexual identity*, employees who identify as bisexual, pansexual and queer are significantly less likely to report being bullied at work compared with those who identify as lesbian or gay (odds ratios = 0.41). They are also significantly less likely to report being exposed to jokes/innuendo (odds ratio = 0.38). This may be because employees who identify as bisexual, pansexual and queer are less likely to be out at work, and hence less likely to be targeted by perpetrators. Additional analyses (not presented here)

other unfavourable interactions are unacceptable in the workplace, etc. We first derived the average of each employee's score for these questions and then use this information to generate a mean score across all employees within each organisation.

[3] The specific model that we estimated was a multilevel logistic regression model. Logistic regression was required because the outcome variables are on a binary/dichotomous metric. A multilevel version of the logistic model was applied to account for the fact that the AWEI Employee Survey has a multilevel structure, with employees (Level 1) nested within organisations (Level 2).

confirmed this explanation: in a regression model including only Sapphire-cohort employees who are out to 'most' or 'all' of their colleagues, the differences between gay/lesbian and bisexual/pansexual/queer employees in bullying and exposure to jokes/innuendo disappear.

Concerning *gender identity*, bullying and jokes/innuendo are significantly and substantially more commonly experienced by trans than cis women – with associated odds ratios of 3.24 and 2.63, respectively. Further, those who identify as non-binary or agender are also significantly and substantially more likely to experience bullying and jokes/innuendo in the workplace compared to cis women (with odds ratios of greater than 4 in both models).

The analyses also revealed that some organisational factors act as buffers that reduce the likelihood of being bullied in the workplace or at the receiving end of jokes/innuendo. This applied to both leadership support and supportive colleagues. The incidence of bullying and exposure to jokes/innuendo was significantly reduced with greater leadership support (odds ratios of 0.62 and 0.53, respectively) and support from colleagues (odds ratios of 0.47 and 0.38, respectively). However, the odds ratio on the colleague support variable in Model 1 was not statistically significant.

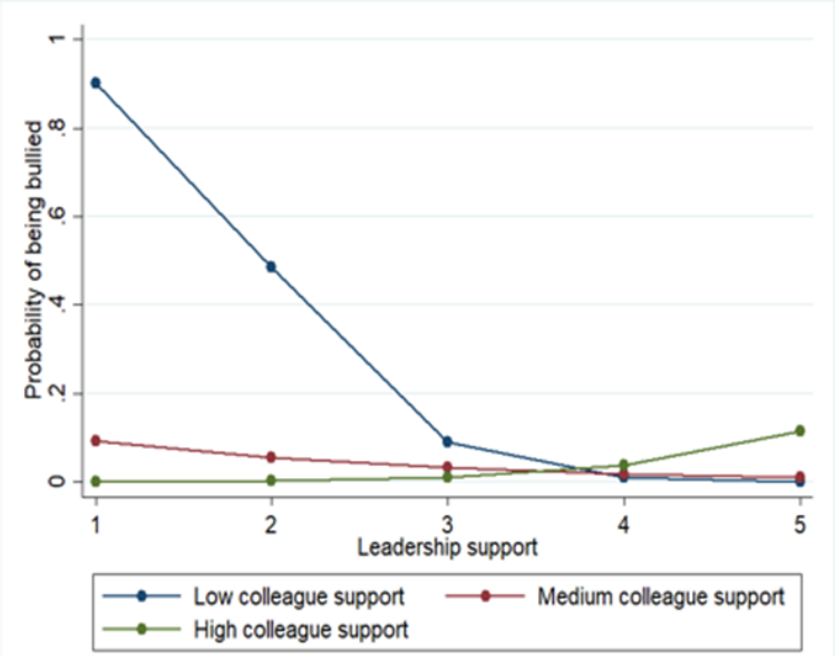
LEADERSHIP SUPPORT AS A BUFFER

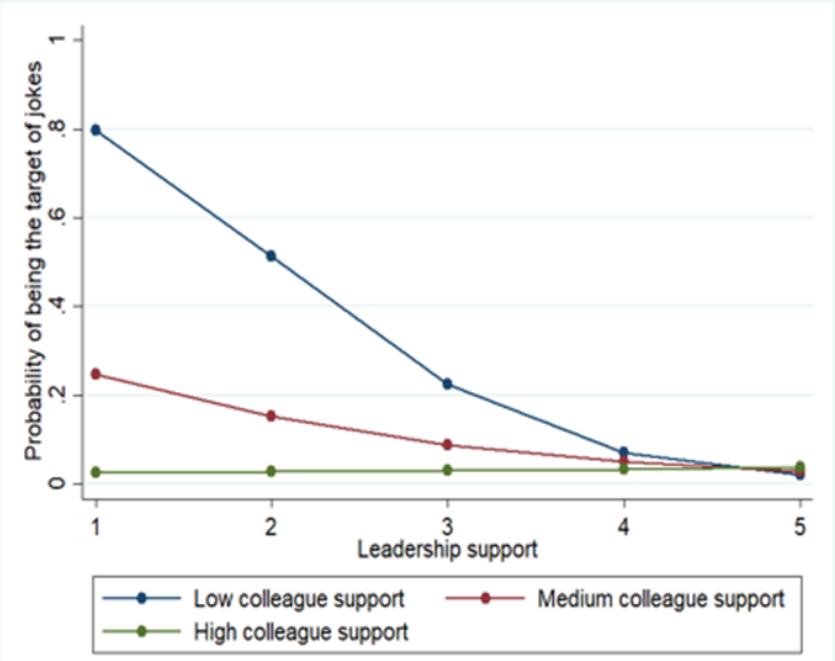
A second set of analyses was conducted to understand whether strong support for diversity and inclusion among leaders and executives could act as a 'buffer', preventing workplace incivility towards members of the Sapphire Cohort when employee support for inclusion initiatives was low. This was accomplished by fitting additional regression models similar to those presented in Table 1, but that also included interaction terms between the variables capturing leadership support and colleague support. For simplicity, we present the key results from these models in visual form (Figure 1).

Our results confirm that the level of leadership support makes a substantial difference to the probability of being bullied in organisations in which colleague support for diversity and inclusion is low. We find that when leadership support is high, the probability that members of the Sapphire Cohort will be bullied at work is low regardless of colleagues' attitudes. However, low colleague support results in high chances of being bullied at work when leadership support is also low.

We find the same pattern of results for jokes and innuendo targeting members of the Sapphire Cohort. When leadership support is high, the probability of being the target of jokes is low irrespective of the level of colleague support. However, when leadership support is low, there is a high probability of being the target of jokes and innuendo at work when colleagues do not support diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Figure 1: Predicted probability of being bullied and being exposed to jokes/innuendo





Source: 2020 AWEI Survey

These results underscore the importance of leadership support in reducing bullying and jokes/innuendo within the workplace. Leadership support is not only beneficial in and of itself, it also exerts a positive effect by modifying the influence of colleague support. Specifically, when employees in an organization hold less supportive attitudes towards their gender and sexuality diverse co-workers, greater levels of leadership support appear to signal that bullying and jokes/innuendo will not be tolerated.

THE COSTS OF BULLYING AND JOKES/INNUENDO

Our regression results reveal that some members of the Sapphire Cohort are more likely to experience bullying and incivility in the workplace. A growing number of studies show that such unfavourable experiences in the workplace negatively impact employees' job satisfaction, their interactions with colleagues, and their intent to remain in the organisation (Jex, 2002; Bowling and Beehr, 2006; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2009; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012). Thus, these findings matter also from the employers' point of view. As explained by Drydakis (2019) and Porath and Pearson (2013), workplace bullying and incivility have tangible costs not only for the gender and sexuality diverse workers who are at the receiving end, but also for the organisation. For example, such unfavourable interactions may reduce work effort, quality of work, worker productivity and even staff turnover (Drydakis, 2019; Porath and Pearson, 2013).

In a final analysis, we empirically explored these tenets. Specifically, we analysed the associations between Sapphire Cohort members experiencing workplace bullying and jokes/innuendo and their productivity and wellbeing. To accomplish this, we examined the pairwise correlations between the variables capturing being

bullied or exposed to jokes/innuendo and variables capturing worker productivity, engagement, and other indicators of workplace wellbeing.

The results, reported in Table 2, reveal negative and statistically significant correlation coefficients (ranging from −0.03 to −0.08) between being bullied and all of the indicators of workplace wellbeing. That is, Sapphire Cohort members who are bullied at work are less likely to feel productive, engaged, authentic, accepted, belonging and mentally well at work. We find similar associations between exposure to jokes/innuendo and the different indicators of workplace wellbeing amongst members of the Sapphire Cohort (with correlation coefficients ranging from −0.07 to −0.13). Taken together, these analyses provide strong evidence of the deleterious consequences that workplace bullying and incivility have on Sapphire Cohort members.

Table 2: Correlation coefficients between workplace bullying and incivility with measures of productivity and wellbeing at work

Variables	Being bullied	Being the target of jokes/innuendo
Being productive	-0.03***	-0.07***
Being engaged	-0.08***	-0.11***
Being authentic self at work	-0.06***	-0.07***
Feeling mentally well	-0.07***	-0.11***
Feeling accepted	-0.08***	-0.08***
Feeling a sense of belonging	-0.08***	-0.13***

Source: 2020 AWEI Employee Survey

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

HIGHLIGHTS

- Negative workplace interactions and prejudice towards sexual and gender minority employees not only manifest through explicit acts of bullying, but also through subtler forms of workplace incivility – such as being the target of jokes and innuendo.
- Trans women, non-binary and agender employees are all more likely to be at the receiving end of unwanted jokes/innuendo and bullying at work than cis women. Among these groups, non-binary and agender employees report the highest likelihood of experiencing these aggressions.
- Bisexual, pansexual and queer employees are less likely to experience both bullying and incivility than lesbian and gay employees because they are less likely to be out to colleagues.
- Inclusion initiatives and a supportive culture act as buffers against workplace bullying and incivility. Additionally, leadership support appears to signal to unsupportive employees that bullying and jokes/innuendo against Sapphire Cohort members will not be tolerated.
- Workplace bullying and incivility are negatively correlated with the engagement, productivity and wellbeing of Sapphire Cohort members, which underscores the business case for employers to intervene and stop these behaviours.

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