Effectiveness of individual and organizational strategies to address workplace bullying

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Paper presented at the New Zealand Psychological Society Conference, Auckland, 7 September 2013

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What is *bullying*?

 "a situation where a person feels they have **repeatedly** been on the receiving end of **negative actions** from one or more other people, in a situation where it is difficult to defend themselves against these actions. These negative actions could be physical or non-physical (e.g. verbal abuse). A one-off incident is <u>not</u> defined as bullying." (Einarsen et al., 2003)

Key features: negative, repeated, perceived, unjustified

Related concepts:

- Aggression
- Harassment
- Violence
- Incivility
- Anti-social behaviour
- 'Mobbing' – any different from bullying?

How assessed?

- **Behavioural measures** (e.g. Negative Acts Questionnaire)
- **Self-labelling**, with or without definition of bullying

Why is workplace bullying important?

Exposure to workplace bullying is a "more crippling and devastating problem for employees than all other kinds of work-related stress put together"

(Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003a, p. 3)

Bullying affects …
- Target
- Observers
- Whole organisation via increased absenteeism, turnover, decreased performance, productivity

Potential investigation costs
- time, money, public image, etc.

The research

New Zealand workers in 4 sectors – health, education, hospitality, travel

Survey of employees N=1733 (27 organisations); 78% women

Independent variables:

Bullying (Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised)

Criterion variables

Strain(GHQ-12)

Wellbeing (positive affect)

Bullying

Respondents who had experienced at least 2 negative acts at least weekly for at least 6 months:

$N = 308$ (17.8%)

Relatively high by international standards

These respondents are the focus of the current study.

The most frequently reported negative acts were:

(a) Having necessary information withheld

(b) Being ordered to work below one's level of competence,

(c) Being exposed to an unmanageable workload

Compared to non-targets

Targets perceived:

Less constructive and more laissez-faire leadership
Less supportive supervisors and colleagues
Less effectiveness of organisational strategies

Targets experienced:

More stress and less wellbeing

More intentions to leave

Worse self-reported job performance

Targets used:

The same amount of problem-focused coping

More self-distraction coping

More resigned coping

Among the targets of bullying (n=308)

Higher levels of wellbeing and less strain were associated with*:

- More perceived organisational support
- More perceived effectiveness of organisational strategies
- More supervisor and colleague support
- Less laissez-faire leadership
- More constructive leadership
- BUT wellbeing was **not** related to the use of personal coping strategies (problem-focused, distraction, acceptance)

(Overall levels of wellbeing were lower and strain was higher for targets than non-targets)

* r statistic; $p < .01$

Which factors buffered the negative effects of bullying?

Personal factors i.e. coping
Resigned coping
   (e.g. "carried on working and pretended the problem didn't exist")
Selective coping
   (e.g. "told yourself that it could be much worse")
Problem-focused coping
   (e.g. "did something to solve the problem")

Resigned coping (avoidance)
   No
Selective coping (re-appraisal)
   No
Problem-focused coping (taking steps)
   No

What about organisational factors?

Perceived organisational support?
(7 questions e.g. "help is available from my organisation when I have a problem")

No

Laissez-faire leadership?
(8 questions, e.g. "fails to interfere until problems become serious")

No

Perceived effectiveness of organisational strategies?
(13 strategies e.g. "encouraging open and respectful communication between people")

Yes

Constructive leadership?
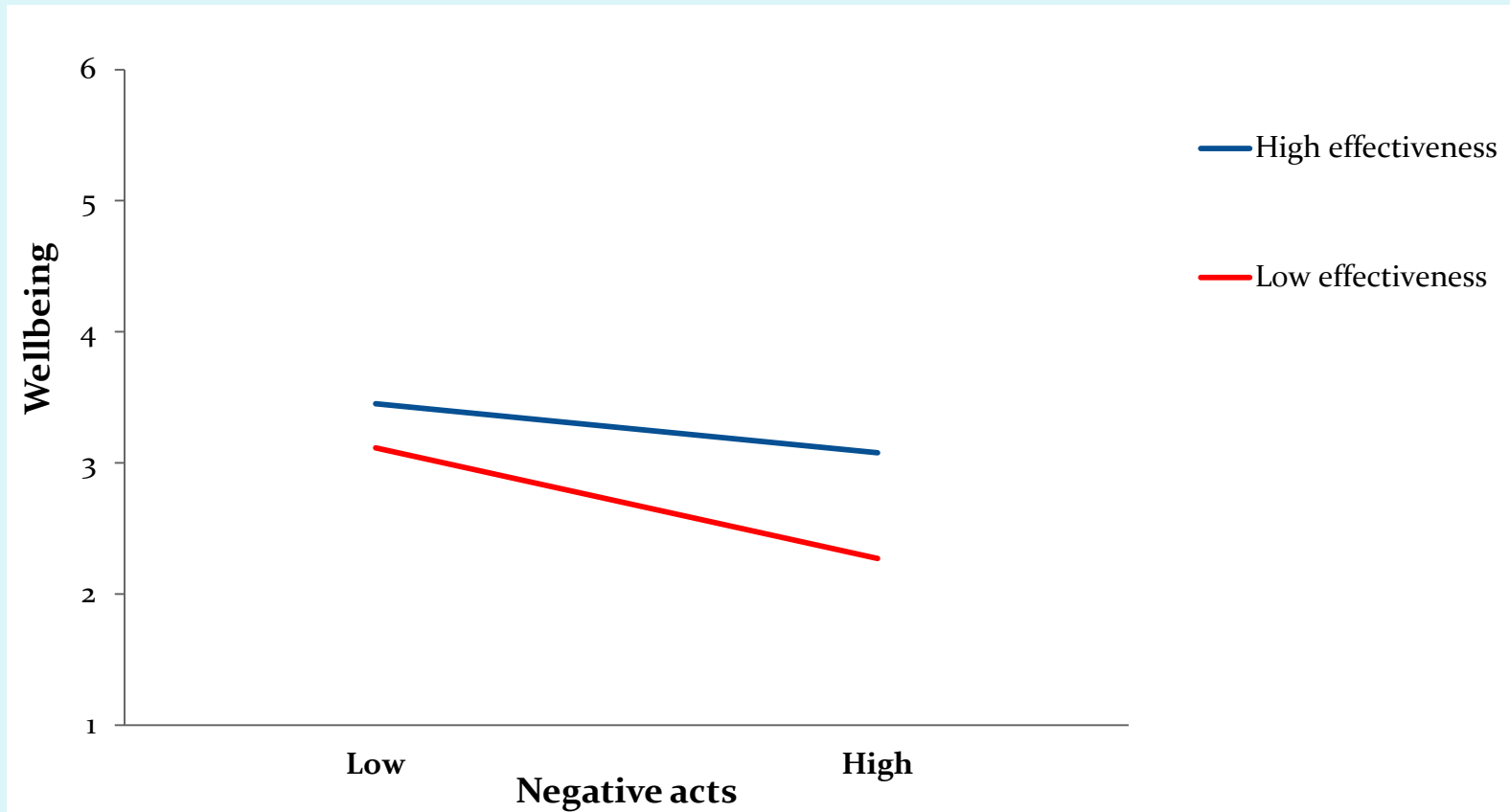(6 questions e.g. "sets clear goals for work")

Yes

Personal coping strategies did not buffer the effects of bullying on wellbeing.

Constructive leadership and
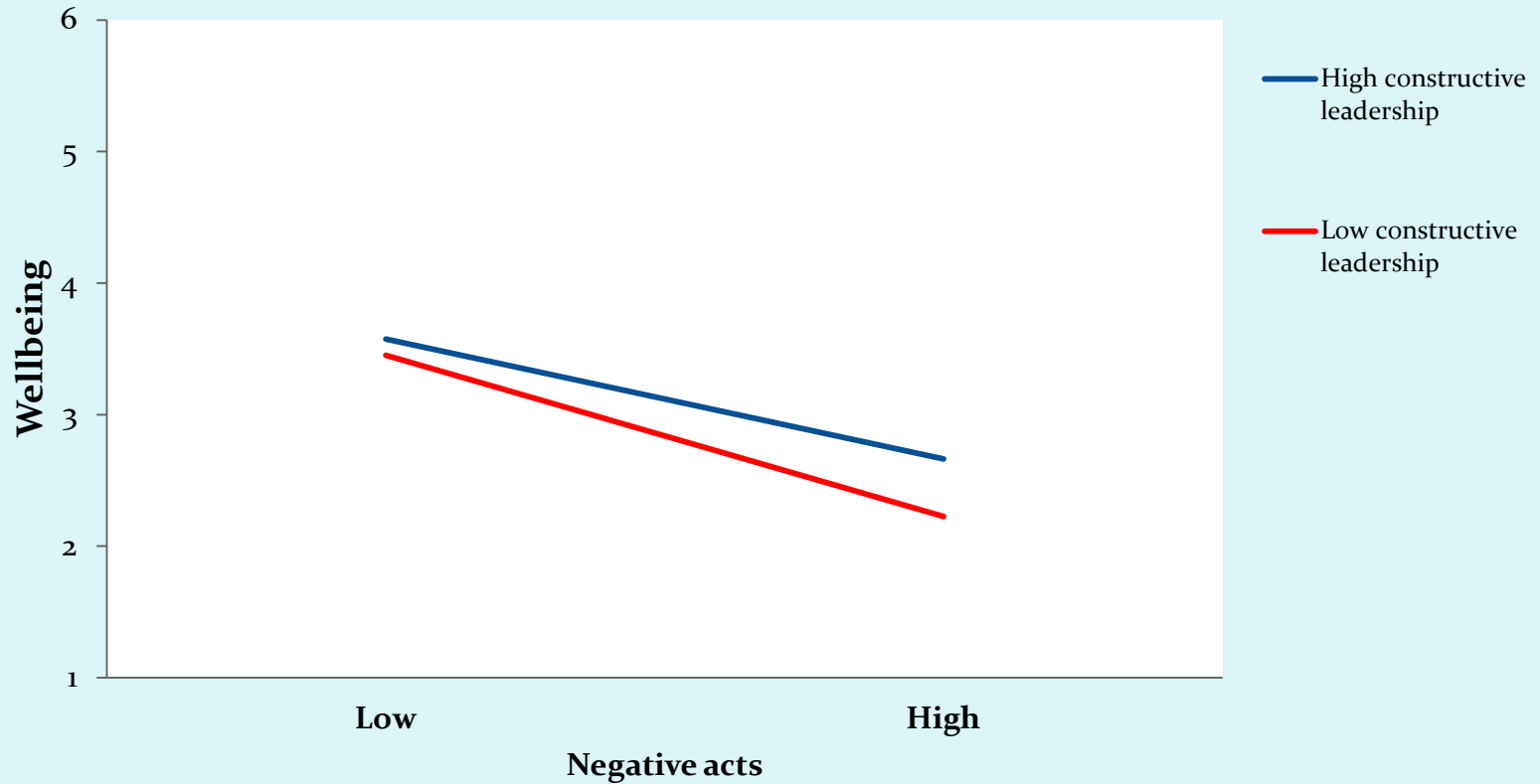
perceived effectiveness of organisational strategies

did significantly buffer the relationship between bullying and wellbeing

Perceived effectiveness of organisational strategies

DV: Wellbeing	Beta
Negative acts	-.353***
Effectiveness of org. strategies	.325***
Interaction	.162**
Adj. R2 = .32	$F_{(3,273)} = 43.41$***

Constructive leadership

DV: Wellbeing	Beta
Negative acts	-.351***
Constructive leadership	.285***
Interaction	.10*
Adj. R2 = .26	$F_{(3,273)} = 36.85$***

Conclusions

Bullying is often seen as an individual problem (personality clash) to be solved by those involved

BUT

better wellbeing was associated with organisational *not* personal factors.

Leadership is important.

Organisations need strategies that are seen to be effective.

We need more organisational 'best practice' case studies/ success stories.

Thank you

References and coefficients are available on request

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Gardner DH

2013