

Workplace Relationships on Work Harassment for Italian Nurses

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There is limited research about bullying in countries in the European Communities. Paoli and Merllié (2001) argue that nine per cent of European workers perceive some form of bullying, with countries like Italy experiencing lower levels of bullying at around four per cent. While it has been noted that the situation is worse in the public sector, especially in nursing (Di Martino et al., 2003), little is known of the workplace factors where ill-treatment was present. According to the 2009 estimates of the Ministry of Economy, the Italian National Healthcare Service employed 734,182 people, of which 56.7% were nurses. To contribute to evidence-based research and management practice, it is important to understand how workplace ill-treatment, such as work harassment, impact on these employees.

Einarsen et al. (2011) define work harassment as the management practice that gives employees high workloads and high accountability over a persistent period of time. Previous research has been conducted on work harassment of nurses and its relationship with cost-cutting policies and increased accountability and workloads for employees (Farr-Wharton et al., 2011). This paper examines the relationship between the quality of the workplace relationships, work harassment and its impact on job satisfaction and engagement of Italian nurses. The contribution of the paper is that there are few Italian studies about the impact of work harassment and recent financial pressure is likely to increase nurses' workload.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) can be used to explain workplace relationships. LMX theory focuses on the quality of the relationship between supervisors and their subordinate (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Hoel and Cooper (2001) suggest that the majority of bullying in organisations occurs at the supervisor level, but it is not clear whether this is true for Italian nurses. Another workplace factor is perceived organizational support (POS). It is defined as an

employee's perception of the extent to which the organization values the work done and cares about them (Allen et al., 2003). Saks (2006) argues that POS predicts the engagement of employees. Wayne et al. (1997) have identified that POS is an antecedent of the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship.

Work harassment happens when a great power distance gives consent to those with power to act aggressively to colleagues or subordinates (Einarsen et al., 2011). Work harassment can also happen as a consequence of a low perception of support in the workplace from supervisors and colleagues (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005) and negatively impacts perception of engagement. Past research identifies the link between reforms associated with reductions in per capita spending and increased workloads and resultant impacts on their outcomes for Australian and English nurses, however, it is unclear whether the same is true for Italian nurses.

The above factors have been shown to impact on employee attitudes such as job satisfaction and engagement (Farr-Wharton et al., 2011). Job satisfaction is "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job" (Locke, 1976:1300). It is expected that work harassment will lead to job dis-satisfaction. May et al. (2004) define engaged employees as enthusiastic and energetic, perceiving their work meaningful. Previous research identified that management practices and the work environment are antecedents of engagement and it is expected that work harassment will result in less engagement.

METHODS

Data were collected from Registered Nurses working in 4 public and 2 private acute care hospitals in Northern Italy. A copy of the survey and cover letter were sent to the hospital director. Respondents were promised anonymity. Respondents returned the completed surveys directly to the researchers. The response rate was approximately 52.1 percent (777 completed surveys from the 1,489 distributed). The measures used to operationalize the constructs in the

path model were generated from the extant literature and presented using statements to be rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = strongly disagree, ranging to 6 = strongly agree. Data analysis was conducted using *SmartPLS* (Ringle et al., 2005). Validity and reliability checks were undertaken prior to data analysis. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were also undertaken. Common method variance checks were undertaken by using Harman's one factor test and the incorporation of a single method factor in the path model.

RESULTS

The majority of the respondents were female (77.2 percent). Half of the respondents were in the age group of 30-45 years old. All of the respondents had at least an undergraduate qualification. The path model has a large goodness of fit (global goodness of fit index of 0.40) and the R-square of the dependent variable is 54.8 percent (See Figure 1). The path from POS to work harassment was not statistically significant. There was a statistically significant path from POS to Engagement (coefficient=0.27, t-statistic=6.067, $p<.001$) and LMX (coefficient=0.525, t-statistic=13.751, $p<.001$). The path from LMX to work harassment was found to be negative and statistically significant (coefficient=-0.177, t-statistic=2.259, $p<.05$) while the path from LMX to Engagement was positive and statistically significant (coefficient=0.197, t-statistic=3.818, $p<.001$). The path from LMX to job satisfaction (coefficient=0.10, t-statistic=3.411, $p<.001$). There were two statistically significant paths from work harassment to Engagement (coefficient=-0.132, t-statistic=2.705, $p<.01$) and job satisfaction (coefficient=-0.086, t-statistic=2.139, $p<.01$). The path from Engagement to job satisfaction was positive and statistically significant (coefficient=0.67, t-statistical=25.605, $p<.001$).

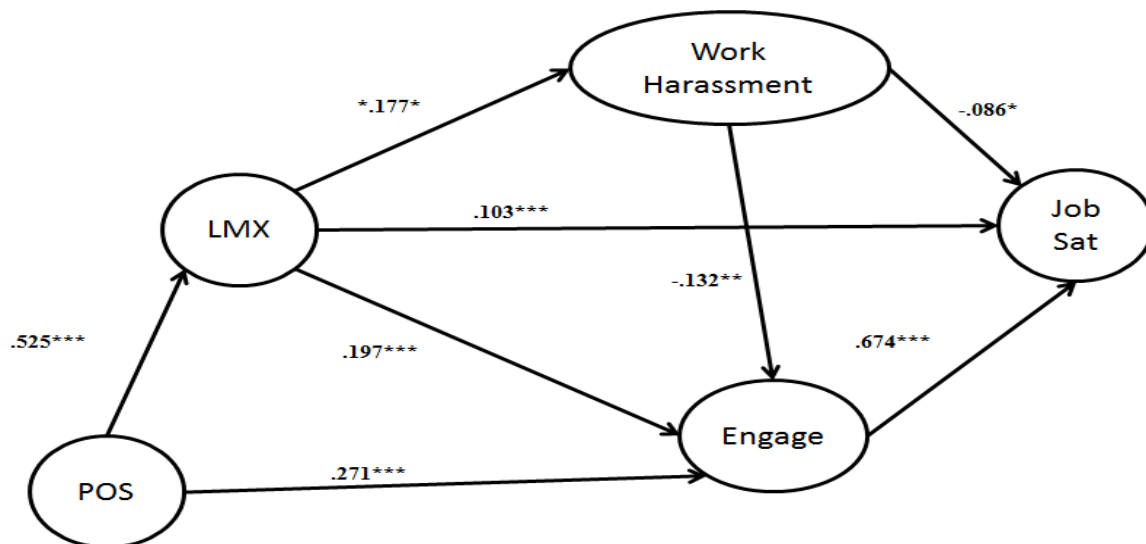
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results indicate that POS is not a contributor to work harassment. Unlike findings from other countries (Einarsen et al., 2011), there was a reverse relationship between LMX and

work harassment. This is important because the findings indicate that LMX results in higher level of engagement and job satisfaction. On the other hand, the negative relationship between LMX and work harassment, means that work harassment can be minimized by high quality LMX. Also work harassment has an inverse relationship with engagement showing new evidence that work harassment can negatively impact on engagement. Saks (2006) asks for more research to identify other workplace relationships that impacted engagement, and this study has responded to that.

The other contribution of this paper is that it supports previous research identifying the link between LMX, engagement and job satisfaction (Farr-Wharton et al., 2011; Saks, 2006) for Italian nurses. Further, the implication of these findings is that work harassment negatively impacts nurses' outcomes and therefore, could undermine productivity and organizational effectiveness. Consequently, if senior management seeks to have a workplace characterized by high engagement and job satisfaction, in addition to applying job design principles, management has to focus on workplace relationship strategies in order to reduce work harassment.

Figure 1. Results of path model



* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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