



Unacceptable behaviour, health and wellbeing at work

Summary report 2010

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In this document, you'll find a summary of the independent study we commissioned from the University of Sheffield: 'Unacceptable behaviour, health and wellbeing at work – a cross-lagged longitudinal study'.



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Sheffield.

What's the problem?

Being the victim of unacceptable behaviour at work – violence (physical) and bullying and incivility (non-physical) – can have serious consequences on workers, who may experience stress-related ill health, and on their organisations, who may find that low staff morale and turnover affect productivity and profitability.

The British Crime Survey 2008/09 estimated that there were 305,000 threats of violence to British workers in the 12-month period leading up to the survey interviews. Although the risk of being a victim of violence is low – 1.4 per cent of working adults were the victim of at least one violent incident – the impacts for the victims can be serious. Violence in this case was taken to be ‘an incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work’.

Previous studies on unacceptable behaviour at work have focused on the prevalence, drivers and consequences of the behaviour. But we don't have a good understanding of the long-term impacts of such behaviour on employee health and psychological wellbeing. We also know very little about what kinds of actions might help limit the damage caused by these behaviours in the context of a UK workforce. Much of the previous research has been carried out in the USA. Also, differing definitions of type of unacceptable behaviour have been applied.

We commissioned Christine Sprigg and Dr Christopher Armitage and their team at the University of Sheffield to carry out research on unacceptable behaviour at work and its impact on employee health and psychological wellbeing.

The research had four key goals:

- to find out about the prevalence of bullying, violence and incivility in a large sample of employees working in a range of occupations in the UK
- to examine the relationships between work-related violence, bullying and incivility at work and employee health effects
- to look at what factors might stop or limit the impact of unacceptable behaviour on employee health
- to identify the most promising ways to limit the risks to employee health from violence, bullying and incivility in the workplace.

The team defined the three types of unacceptable behaviours as follows:

- **Violence:**¹ physical and active forms of violence and threat, such as having objects thrown at you, being spat at or bitten, or having personal property damaged.
- **Bullying:**² a non-physical and psychological form of unacceptable behaviour meaning harassing, offending or socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone's work repeatedly and regularly over a period of time. Over time the victim ends up in an inferior position.
- **Incivility:**³ milder forms of psychological mistreatment which are typically rude and discourteous.

What did our researchers do?

The team carried out the research in three stages:

- recruitment – getting organisations to take part in the project
- development – reviewing existing question sets and measurement scales and designing and piloting the questionnaire
- surveys – distributing the survey twice at six-monthly intervals and analysing the results.

The team specifically targeted those organisations in sectors known to have issues with work-related violence from external sources – such as customers, clients and patients – as well as internal sources, such as colleagues, supervisors and staff.

They recruited 10 organisations to take part in the research, representing the following sectors:

- public administration and defence
- health and social work
- education
- emergency services
- transport and communication
- utilities
- financial services.

¹ Schat A C H, Frone M R and Kelloway E K. Prevalence of workplace aggression in the US workforce: findings from a national study. In: Kelloway E K, Barling J and Hurrell J J (eds). Handbook of workplace violence (pp. 47–89). Sage Publications, 2006

² Einarsen S, Hoel H, Zapf D and Cooper C L. The concept of bullying at work: the European tradition. In: Einarsen S, Hoel H, Zapf D and Cooper C L (eds). Bullying and emotional abuse in the workplace: international perspectives

³ Andersson M L and Pearson M C. Tit for tat? The spiralling effect of incivility in the workplace. The Academy of Management Review 1999; 24 (3): 452–471.

- real estate and business.

Two emergency service and transport and communication organisations were included. To ensure that the questionnaire tool was capable of measuring the full range of unacceptable behaviour, the team looked at questions and measurement scales used in other studies as well as discussing options with experts in Europe and North America. Where questions didn't exist, new ones were developed and tested. After piloting the questionnaire, some items were removed to make it as concise as possible while allowing the researchers to gather the information they needed to tackle the problem.

The final questionnaire gathered information on:

- characteristics of the respondent employees and their organisations: position in organisations, age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, time in present job, hours worked and work patterns, union membership, training, and organisational policies for dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- unacceptable behaviour at work over the preceding six months, from violent acts, such as being kicked or punched, to bullying acts, such as having your views and opinions ignored, to lower-level acts of incivility, such as being 'put down' at work - mental and physical health experiences
- work factors that may affect the health outcome of unacceptable behaviour, such as support from colleagues and managers, workload and job demands, and individual characteristics like self-esteem, resilience and optimism.

The questionnaire was distributed to most of the participating organisations using an electronic link embedded in an email or put on a webpage. A few organisations preferred to distribute paper versions of the questionnaires.

So that the team could examine how behaviours, health effects and workplace and individual factors changed over time, employees were asked to complete the survey twice, approximately six months apart. The researchers asked the employees to fill in a number of initial questions to generate a unique identification code so that the two questionnaires they completed could be compared. This process would then allow the researchers to see how things had changed for the employees over the intervening six months.

A total of 3,652 people responded to the first survey in July/ August 2008 (T1), while 2,029 responses were received to the follow-up survey in February/March 2009 (T2), producing a large amount of useful information from a wide range of employees. In all, 69 employees fully completed every question on both questionnaires.

The team analysed the information provided by the first survey and where participants had responded to both questionnaires, carried out a comparative

analysis of the 'matched pairs'. Using the T1 information they ran a series of statistical tests to find out about:

- the prevalence of the three types of unacceptable behaviour from internal and external sources
- the impact of employment sector on prevalence
- the relationship between health and wellbeing outcomes, eg work-related depression and emotional exhaustion, and types of unacceptable behaviour
- the factors that influenced these relationships.

What did our researchers find out?

Characteristics of the sample responding to the first survey:

- The majority of respondents were from the public administration and defence (55 per cent), and health and social work (16 per cent) sectors. There was also good representation from education (13.5 per cent) and the emergency services (9 per cent).
- Most participants regarded themselves as 'employees' (69 per cent) but there was good representation of 'middle managers' (25 per cent).
- On average, respondents were in their early forties and more likely to be female and white.
- The majority of respondents (74 per cent) were educated to A-level or above.
- On average, respondents had worked in their current organisation for 14–15 years.
- Most work a 37-hour week but 40 per cent work nonstandard hours.
- The majority of respondents were union members and had been trained to deal with unacceptable behaviour by their current employer.

Firstly, the researchers examined the prevalence of each of the three types of unacceptable behaviour from both internal and external sources (Table 1).

Experienced unacceptable behaviour and source	Total respondents reporting 'frequent' acts	
	Number	%
Violence from inside (n = 2256)	84	3.7
Violence from outside (n = 2118)	220	10.4
Bullying from inside (n = 2250)	881	39.2
Bullying from outside (n = 2096)	357	17.0
Incivility from inside (n = 2269)	379	16.7
Incivility from outside (n = 2108)	150	7.1

Table 1
Percentage of respondents reporting 'frequent' experience of unacceptable behaviour over a six-month period

They found that a substantial number of participants reported that they had experienced bullying and incivility from sources within their own organisations. Far fewer participants reported they were subjected to violence from outsiders. These findings are consistent with previous studies.

The variation in frequency of reporting across the three types of unacceptable behaviour and also between internal and external sources highlights the importance of examining them separately.

Secondly, the researchers examined the differences in the prevalence of unacceptable behaviours by employment sector, yielding several findings:

- Violence from internal sources is consistently reported as the least (or joint least) frequent unacceptable behaviour. In contrast, bullying from internal sources is consistently the most frequently reported type of event.
- Respondents in the utilities sector reported experiencing the highest levels of all types of 'frequent' unacceptable behaviour (apart from bullying from internal sources).
- 48 per cent of respondents in the emergency services sector reported 'frequent' bullying from internal sources. This is the highest frequency for this type of behaviour for any sector in the study.
- 19 per cent of respondents in the public administration and defence sector report 'frequent' incivility from sources inside the organisation. This is the highest frequency for this type of behaviour for any sector in the study.

Thirdly, the researchers examined which unacceptable behaviours predicted health and wellbeing outcomes. This showed that:

- the strongest predictor of work-related anxiety is bullying at work by someone inside the organisation
- the strongest predictor of work-related depression is bullying at work by someone inside the organisation
- the strongest predictors of emotional exhaustion are jointly bullying at work by someone inside the organisation and witnessing of unacceptable behaviour at work
- the strongest predictor of post-traumatic stress symptoms is bullying at work by someone inside the organisation
- the strongest predictor of general mental strain is bullying at work by someone inside the organisation

- the strongest predictor of lack of organisational commitment is bullying at work by someone inside the organisation - the strongest predictor of levels of absence is incivility at work committed by someone inside the organisation.

The researchers concluded that the most consistent predictors of the health and wellbeing outcomes are:

- bullying from inside the organisation
- incivility from inside the organisation - witnessing unacceptable behaviour at work.

Comparing the information from the two surveys, the research team found that the only unacceptable behaviour to emerge as having a significant causal influence on the health and wellbeing of respondents was bullying from inside the organisation. Thus, bullying from inside the organisation reported in mid-2008 was found to be a significant causal influence on subsequent levels of emotional exhaustion, general mental strain and physical illness reported in early 2009.

Finally, the researchers looked at what factors might stop or limit the impact of unacceptable behaviour on employee health. In turn, this would help them identify the most promising ways of intervening to limit risks to employees' health.

They found that employees low in optimism have increased levels of emotional exhaustion when bullying is more frequent, compared to employees high in optimism. More optimistic employees appear to be somewhat protected against emotional exhaustion when bullying is more frequent.

Employees experiencing high job demands also reported higher emotional exhaustion in times of more frequent bullying. This suggests that high workload demands worsen the exhausting emotional impact of frequent bullying. In addition, those with low self-esteem experience a higher level of general mental strain when bullying is more frequent, compared to those with high self-esteem.

What does the research mean?

The most frequently reported unacceptable behaviour from the six examined (see Table 1) is bullying from inside organisations. Thirty-nine per cent of respondents had experienced at least one negative act either weekly or daily over the previous six months.

- Bullying from inside the organisation, incivility from inside the organisation and witnessing unacceptable behaviour at work are all consistently and negatively linked with employee health and wellbeing.

- Higher levels of optimism and self-esteem and lower job demands help to protect people from the negative health consequences of bullying. These are the most promising candidates for the development of successful workplace interventions to limit the health risks of unacceptable behaviour.
- Although interventions designed to enhance employee optimism and self-esteem may be a way forward in increasing employee resilience in the face of unacceptable behaviour at work, this should not divert attention from tackling the perpetrators of unacceptable behaviour. Such interventions may help to limit the damage these perpetrators do to others and promote the efficient functioning of the organisations they work in.

Don't forget

Like most research studies, this one had several limitations. Although the organisations involved covered a wide range of sectors and a large number of employees, some sectors were represented by a single organisation (as with utilities). So some caution must be exercised in over-interpreting findings related to sector.

The questionnaire was long and this affected the number of fully completed questionnaires. Some participants had concerns about being identified from the generation of the unique identification code. This resulted in fewer people filling in both questionnaires, and a consequent reduction in the data for the researchers to analyse across the two time points – this was much less than they had hoped for.

Final words

During the project, our researchers gathered information from over 5,000 employees, including many personal and poignant comments about the research itself, their reflections and their hopes for the outcomes of the research.

On the research:

- “I am really pleased someone has put together this survey & that I have had the opportunity to take part in it. I think the subject is extremely important. I think it is an aspect of work that is being ‘turned a blind eye to’.”

On their reflections:

- “Thinking more than usual about how I treat others. Thinking that other people probably have a much worse time of it than I do.”

On their hopes for the outcomes of the research:

- “I hope this survey leads to better standards of behaviour in the workplace & guidelines on how to treat people, how to speak to people, respect for other people in the workplace and dare I suggest a return to decency and politeness.”
- “I also feel a bit sad that bullying and unacceptable behaviour is happening in the workplace. There just seems to be a lack of respect nowadays. I always quote the old saying ‘treat people how you want to be treated yourself’.”

Our summary gives you all the major findings of the independent project report by the University of Sheffield. If you want to read about the study in more depth, you can download the full report at [iosh.com/research](https://www.iosh.com/research).

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