

# ASSESSMENT OF BULLYING INCIDENTS ON CONSTRUCTION WORKERS' WELLBEING AND PERFORMANCE

MBATHA SIYABONGA <sup>1</sup>, CETYWAYO OYENA <sup>2</sup> and IRUKA C. ANUGWO <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Department of Construction Management & Quantity Surveying, Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, Durban University of Technology (DUT), South Africa.

Email: <sup>1</sup>20353351@dut4life.ac.za, <sup>2</sup>21960176@dut4life.ac.za, <sup>3</sup>IrukaA@dut.ac.za

## Abstract

There are increasing incidents of bullying in the construction industry workplace which potentially pose a health risk and low performance among construction workers in South Africa. Therefore, it is strategically important that employers, employees, and policymakers become consciously aware of the challenges associated with bullying and strive to create effective and strategic policies to identify the main causes and potential remedies to prevent bullying from occurring in the construction industry workplace. Thus, the aim of the study is to evaluate the major effects of bullying on construction workers' well-being and performance in South Africa. Thus, this study adopted a systematic review research approach which 17 academic publications were critically and systematically reviewed under subject matter bullying and its impact on workers' well-being and productivity in the construction industry. The study also reveals that bullying in the construction industry does have a negative impact on individuals/workers as it has the potential to cause people to suffer from depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts, which would potentially lead to poor performance. The study concludes that there is a need to create extensive awareness of issues of bullying and its impact on workers' well-being and productivity, in order to foster an organizational culture and good leadership that would promote and maintain a positive workplace environment free from bullying, intimidation or any ongoing negative behaviours that might lay the foundation stone for a bullying culture in the construction industry.

**Keywords:** Bullying, Construction Industry, Strategies to Prevent Bullying, Worker's Well-Being, and Productivity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to International labour organisation (2006), violence at work emanating from bullying and mobbing, threats, emotional black mail, sexual harassment, and homicide is on the raise globally. Bullying in the workplace can cause challenges such as an increase in job insecurities for the bullied, sick leaves, intention to quit the job, and exclusion from social work-related process, negative well-being, low work progress and low self-esteem (Virza, Ewardi, Lestari and Kadi, 2021:808). SABPP (2018) states that workplace bullying can be in forms such as verbal, social, or psychological abuse that may emanate from the business owners/employers, manager's employees, colleagues, and subordinates or a group of workers.

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) (2021), states that workplace bullying is a situation where repetition of inappropriate behaviour, direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical or otherwise, conducted by one or more persons against another or others, at the place of work and/or in the course of employment, which could be reasonably regarded as undermining the individual's right to dignity at work. According to Emamzadeh (2021), workplace bullying happens when, an employee constantly receives mistreatment from other colleagues in a form

of imposing power through behaviour where the bully is either by a manager, supervisor, or any senior staff or subordinates. Tool (2021) reported about survey on mental health, which recorded that about 21% of construction employees have experienced bullying in 2020, that is, about 1 from every 10 workers in the construction sector is labelled bullied. Jalali, Hidzir, Jafaar and Dahalan (2019) state that bullying in the construction industry is a very serious matter and it can be expected to come from various project team members, and bullying is one of the biggest challenges in South Africa. Thus, the bullying of subcontractors mainly by the main contractors may be caused by three (3) different factors such as work organisation and job design, leadership and social climate, and culture orientation with negative inclination (Jalali et al., 2019:142). For instance, bad work organisation and job design, this could be caused by lack of clear organisational goals concerning the work and unorganised flow of information in the workplace. In addition, there are empirical evidence that some of the main contractor leadership have unjustly maltreated/ bullied the subcontractor's managers during project delivery (Jalali et al., 2019).

Accordingly, climate and culture refer that organizational culture as a beliefs or values that affect the attitude and behaviour of a worker (Jalali et al., 2019); and negative culture in workplace leads to workplace bullying ultimately (Jalali et al., 2019). According to Allason, Lester and Notar (2015:31), bullying is not a new problem but something that has been there since the recording of history, it has been existing from the time of the bible example the story of, Abel and Cain, Goliath and David and Joseph and his brothers. Thus, bullying at workplace is not only resulting from interpersonal conflict but can also originate from the organizational and work-related factors which can be work culture, and some organizational policies (Virza, et al., 2021). It has been observed that there are two forms of bullying, the first one is direct bullying where inappropriate words or actions are used to victimize construction workers and the second one is indirect bullying which results from work overload to construction workers or having no recognition to their performance by delaying promotion or similar actions (Chennel and Dunn, 2013). The effects of bullying may consist of issues such reputational damage, absences of employees from the workplace, reduced productivity, increased costs, stress, associated physical and/or mental ill health, poor morale and loss of respect for managers and supervisors (HSA, 2021).

### **Research Questions**

What is/are the most critical effects bullying incidents would have on construction workers wellbeing and performance?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 An Overview of Bullying in Workplace Environment**

Bullying is multidimensional problem in the South African workplaces, and it is one of the main causes of conflicts in the work environment (SABPP, 2018). Workplace bullying comes from bad behaviours such as aggression, hostility, intimidation and harm where their perpetrators are repeatedly doing those negative actions causing physical or physiological pain

to the victims (D’ruz, Noranha and Luttgen-Sadik, 2018). Therefore, it is a very important discourse that employers and policymaker should devices effective means to identify and potentially resolve or prevent bullying from occurring in the workplace especially in the construction industry (Smit, 2014). Bullying can also originate from the misuse of power and authority where normally supervisors and managers have power over their team members. This shows that having people with authority like managers and supervisors who cannot use their power effectively can deviate to bullying (SABPP, 2018). Thus, issues of bullying in the workplace can have a negative impact on individuals causing people to suffer from depression, low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts, which would potentially lead to poor performance (Smit, 2014). Workplace bullying is a negative action involving unwelcome behaviors such as aggressive, hostility, intimidation and harm to one or more individuals (D’ruz, Noranha and Luttgen-Sadik, 2018).

According to Chen, Tai and Chu (2021) bullying can be identified in two forms direct and indirect bullying. Direct bullying includes abuse, insults, spreading false information, behavior or language that frightens, humiliates, belittles, or degrades, inappropriate comments about a person’s appearance or lifestyle. Indirect bullying includes, overloading a person with unnecessary work or not providing enough work, setting timelines that are difficult to achieve or constantly changing deadlines, setting tasks that are below or beyond a person’s skills level, purposely excluding or isolating a person from normal work activities and withholding information that is vital for effective work performance (Dunn and Chennell, 2013). Doran, waters, Rebar and Meredith (2020) state that bullying in the construction workplace has a negative effect on both the employees and the company itself. There is empirical evidence that people who are exposed to bullying incidents and victimization from work suffer from low self-esteem and poorer physical, psychological and emotional health and wellbeing. Thus, this phenomenon would ultimately lead to increased anxiety, depression, psychosomatic symptoms, aggression, fear and mistrust, isolation, loneliness, chronic fatigue and sleep problems (Pate and Beaumont, 2009). Pate and Beaumont (2009) further state that the implications of bullying can affect the company’s finances negatively due to the absenteeism, sick leaves, reduced productivity and performance in work duties.

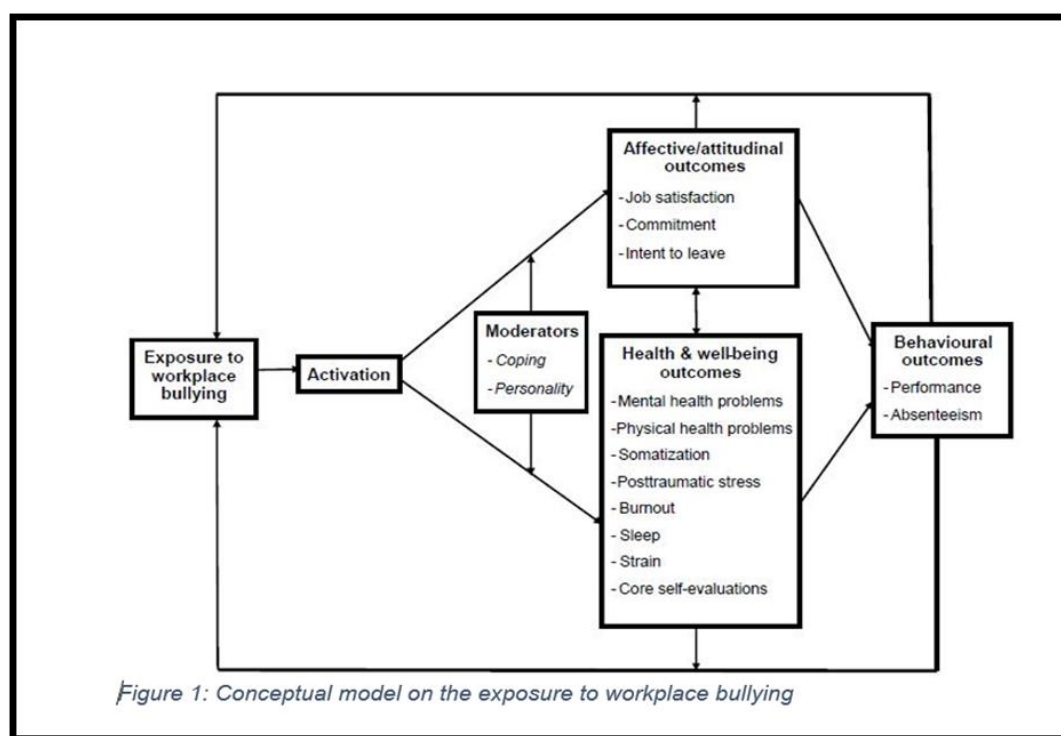
## **2.2 An overview on critical effects of bullying on the construction workers’ wellbeing and performance**

Bullying in the construction industry is a dangerous weapon that negatively impact construction workers well-being and discourages good performance from workers (Doran, Waters and Meredith, 2020). Construction workers who are bullied from their workplace experience negative personal and work-related consequences. The personal consequences or effects of been bullied are related to psychological wellbeing, where targets experience stress, anxiety and depression which can lead to suicidal thoughts or action (Jalali *et al.*, 2019). Whilst, work consequences or effect of been bullied may lead workers to experience reduced motivation and productivity at work, and this can result to absenteeism and intention to quit (Riggull, Skues and Wise, 2017). Other negative effects resulting from bullying is low self-efficacy and increased intentions to quit work; and in the building and construction industry

worker are reluctant to formally report bullying (McCormack, Djurkovic and Casimir, 2013). Ross *et al.* (2021) declared that it has been proven that construction workers constitute one of the highest occupational risk groups for suicide worldwide. Thus, these incidents of suicides elevate from male dominated industries and come from various issues such as drinking excessive alcohol, relationship problems, lack of job security and adverse psychosocial working conditions. However, the construction industry is dominated by men and it is known as “man don’t cry” and “the need to be strong” mentality and this occasionally makes it difficult for construction employees to seek help, and it has potentially increased the rate suicides in the industry (Ross, *et al.*, 2021). Bullying at workplace increases anxiety which leads to insomnia and neglect to the life satisfaction (Virza *et al.*, 2021).

### 2.3 Conceptual model on the exposure to workplace bullying and its impact on workers’ health and well-being in an organization

The conceptual model explains the individual effects of exposure to workplace bullying, which shows how workplace bullying is associated with individual outcomes. Thus, below figure shows the different outcomes of workplace bullying and the negative impact it has on the workers well-being, health and performance at work place.



**Figure 1: Conceptual model on the exposure to workplace bullying**

Source: Nielsen & Ståle Einarsen (2012)

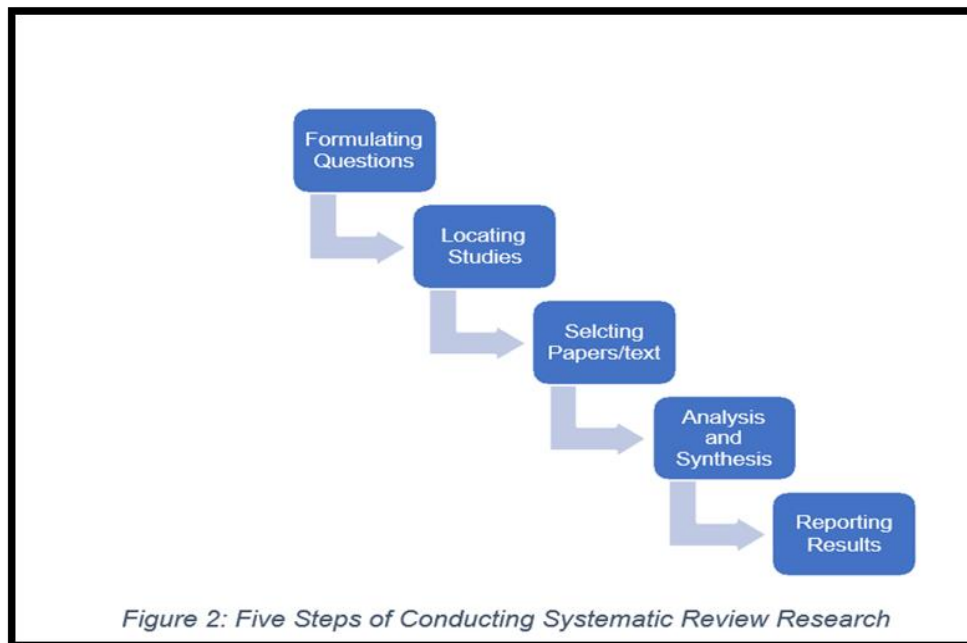
The conceptual model explains the individual effects of exposure to workplace bullying, which shows how workplace bullying is associated with individual outcomes.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD ADOPTED IN THIS STUDY

According to Daniels and Sam (2011), data can be collected in two methods, qualitative approach and quantitative approach where qualitative approach can use data techniques such as interviews, observations and documents reviews; and quantitative method uses survey techniques and questionnaires for the collection of data (Yusuf, 2017). Creswell (2012) states that a research methodology can be seen as systematic method that can be used to investigate issues to solve issues. Thus, this study will be using a qualitative research approach based on systematic research review. A qualitative search is based on the collection of qualitative data.

#### 3.1 Search strategy

According to Denyer and Tranfield (2009), there are five steps of conducting systematic review such as formulation questions or objectives, location of relevant studies, selection of paper/texts, analysis and synthesis, and reporting result of the collected data.



Sources: Denyer and Tranfield (2009)

#### 3.2 Research Data Collection Instruments

This study employed secondary data through scholarly journal databases and other related sources of the subject matter under investigation. Thus, data will elicit from academic publications, industry and government reports in a systematic approach (using Boolean operator concept) in search for keywords adding command such as “AND, OR, NOT or AND NOT”. The keywords to be used in this research are “bullying”, “Construction industry”, “strategies to prevent bullying”, “workers’ well-being and performance”. The study analysis will be framed within themes and critical variables emanated from elicited data accordingly.

The study seeks to uncover the underlying factors responsible for bullying in the workplace and impact thereof in the construction industry. Thus, 17 publications under the subject matter were systematically and critically reviewed and analysed accordingly.

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study is to determine the implication of bullying on construction workers well-being and performance. The table 1 below indicated some of the major effects that bullying incidents would have on construction workers' well-being and performance with regard to those who have experienced or witness bullying situation at place of work. Thus, the table 1 present the themes as findings emanated from systematic and critical analysis of 17 academic publications under the subject matter.

**Table 1: Effects and outcomes of bullying incidents on construction workers**

S/N	Effects and outcomes of bullying incidents on construction workers	Sources	Frequency	Ranking
1	<i>Affected by Anxiety</i>	Virza et al, (2021) Chen, Tai & Chu, (2021); Doran et al., (2020); Dunn & Chennel (2013); Bowen, Zhang & Edwards (2021); Smit (2014); SABPP (2023); Obrenovic et al.,(2020), Pate & Beaumont (2009); Nielse & Einarsen (2012); Tools, (2020) Ross et al. (2021)	12	1
2	<i>Affected by Depression</i>	Chen, Tai & Chu (2021); Doran et al., (2020), Dunn & Chennel (2013); Bowen, Zhang & Edwards (2021); Smit, (2014); SABPP (2023), Obrenovic et al., (2020); Pate & Beaumont (2009); Nielsen & Einarsen (2012); Emamzadeh (2021).	10	2
3	<i>Intent to leave/ quit job employment</i>	Virza et al., (2021); Chen, Tai & Chu (2021); Doran et al., (2021); Smit (2014); Jalali et al., (2019); Nielsen & Einarsen (2012)	6	3
4	<i>Absenteeism</i>	Pate & Beaumont (2009); Doran et al., (2021); Smit (2014); Jalali et al., (2019); Emamzedah, (2021); Nielsen & Einarsen (2012)	5	4
5	<i>Job dissatisfaction</i>	Chen, Tai & Chu (2021); Doran et al., (2021); Smit (2014); Jalali et al., (2019); Nielsen & Einarsen (2012)	5	4
6	<i>Experiences Physical health problems</i>	Chen, Tai & Chu (2021); Doran et al.,(2020); Dunn & Chennell (2013); Obrenovic et al.,(2020); Nielsen & Einarsen (2012).	5	4
7	<i>Experiences/ witness Stigmatization</i>	Chen, Tai & Chu (2021); Doran et al.,(2020); Dunn & Chennell (2013); Bowen, Zhang & Edwards (2021); SABPP ( 2023);	5	4
8	<i>Mental health Problems</i>	Doran et al., (2020); Einarsen, (2012); Patchin & Hinduja (2010); Tools (2021). D'ruz, Noranha & Luttgen-Sadik, 2018	5	5

9	<i>Experiences Burnout</i>	Bowen, Zhang & Edwards (2021); Obrenovic et al., (2020); Nielsen & Einarsen (2012); Emamzedah (2021)	4	5
10	<i>Experiences Suicidal Thought-forms</i>	Pacthin & Hinduja (2010); Dunn & Chennel (2013); Neilsen & Einarsen (2012); Emamazedah (2021)	4	5
11	<i>Poor work performance</i>	Obrevonic et al., (2020); Emamzedah (2021); Nielsen & Einarsen (2012); Pate & Beaumont, (2009)	4	5
12	<i>Experiences Sleeplessness</i>	Virza et al., (2021); Dunn & Chennel (2013); Nielsen & Einarsen (2012)	3	6
13	<i>High level of Strain</i>	Bowen, Zhang & Edwards, (2021); Obrenovic et al., (2020); Neilsen & Einarsen (2012).	3	6
14	<i>Post-traumatic stress</i>	Doran et al.,(2020) Nielsen & Einarsen (2012)	2	7
15	<i>Less work commitment</i>	Doran et al., (2021); Nielsen & Einarsen (2012)	2	7

Source: Researchers' construct (2024)

#### 4.1 Discussion

Table 1, shows some of the major negative effects bullying incidents would potentially have on construction workers' wellbeing and work performance. The study findings, indicated that construction workers' who experiences bullying incidents are mostly likely to experience and affected by anxiety and depression, intent to leave/ quit job employment, absenteeism, job dissatisfaction, physical health problems, witness stigmatization, and mental health problems. The study findings, further highlighted issues of burnout, experiences suicidal thought-forms, poor work performance, and experiences sleeplessness as some of the impacts of bullying incidents on construction workers' wellbeing and work performance. Lastly, the study findings indicated that construction workers who experiences bullying incidents are potentially expose to high level of strain, post-traumatic stress and less work commitment.

#### 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the study was to investigate and analyse the negative impact bullying has on construction workers' wellbeing and work performance. Based on the findings emanated from the critical and systematic review and analysis, the study concluded that the major negative effects and impact of bullying incidents on construction workers are anxiety and depression, intent to leave/ quit job employment, absenteeism, job dissatisfaction, physical health problems, witness stigmatization, and mental health problems. The study further concluded that other factors such as issues of burnout, experiences suicidal thought-forms, poor work performance, and experiences sleeplessness, high level of strain, post-traumatic stress and less work commitment as some potential negative outcomes that the construction workers might experience and these issues will increasingly impact on their wellbeing and work performance.

Thus, the study recommended that all construction companies and workplaces should have clear non-bullying codes of conduct and policies that will make workers aware that bullying is

an unacceptable behaviour and there is harsh punishment for the perpetrators like, suspension without payment, imprisonment, demotion, and possibility of them getting fired (Dunn, *et al.*, 2013). The company should also encourage employees to report bullying of any type and be taught procedures that should be followed when facing any case of bullying. The Company should spend money on making training programmes and campaigns that will teach their employees on how they can protect themselves against bullying and teach they employees clearly what is considered as bullying and what is not considered bullying.

### List of References

- 1) Allason, P.B., Lestor, R.W and Notar, C.E., (2015). A history of bullying International journal of education and social science.
- 2) Bowen, P., Zhang, R.T., and Edwards, P., (2021). An investigation of work-related strain effects and coping mechanisms among South Africa construction professionals. *Construction Management and Economics*. Vol 39.
- 3) Chen, Y., Tai, H., Chu H., (2021). Constructing Employees Assistance Program Measures Against Workplace Bullying.
- 4) Creswell, J. W., (2009). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. SAGE Publications, Incorporated.
- 5) Daniels, P.S., Sam, A.G., (2011). Research Methodology. Kalpaz publication.
- 6) D’Cruz, P., Noronha, E., Lugten-Sandvik, p., (2018). Power, Subjectivity and context in Workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment: Insights from Postpositivism.
- 7) Denyer, D and Transfield, D., (2009). “Producing systematic review”. The sage hand book of organizational research methods. Producing a systematic review.
- 8) Doran, C., Rebar A., Waters K and Meredith P., (2020). A review related to the impacts and interventions for workplace bullying in the construction industry. A report conducted for Mates in construction. Queensland
- 9) Dunn, C. and Chennell, S., (2013). Australian Master Work Health and Safety Guide. A Wolters Kluwer business. Australia, *CHH Australia Limited*. 21/30-80.
- 10) Emamzadeh, A., (2021). Workplace Bullying: on work, Health and family: The effect of workplace bullying is examined. Psychological health and physical health outcomes.
- 11) Health and Safety Authority (HSA). (2021). Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Prevention and Resolution of Bullying at Work. The Health and Safety Authority and Workplace Relations Commission.
- 12) International Labour Organisation (ILO). (2006). Documents of international labour conference. International labour conference.
- 13) Jalali, A., Hidzir, N., Jaffar M., Dahalan N, (2019). Factors that trigger bullying amongst subcontractors toward intention to quit in the construction Projects. Built environment project and asset management. Vol 10.
- 14) Nielsen, M.B., Einarsen, S.V., (2012). Outcome of exposure to workplace bullying: A meta-analytic review. Work and stress.
- 15) Obrenovic, B., Jianguo, D., Khuddaykulov, A and Khan, M.A.S., (2020). Work-family conflict impact on psychological safety and psychological well-being: A job performance model. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.0045>.



- 16) Pate, J and Beaumont, P., (2009). Bullying and harassment: A case of success. *Employee's relation*. Vol 32.
- 17) Ross, V., Mathieu S. L., Wardhani, R., Gullestrup, J and Kolves, K., (2021). Factors Associated with Workplace Bullying and the mental health of Construction Industry Apprentices: A Mixed Methods Study. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*.
- 18) Smit, D.M., (2014). Bullying in the workplace towards a uniform approach in South Africa Labour Law.
- 19) Tools, H., (2021). Nationwide survey. One in Five construction employees have suffered from bullying in the last year, impacting their mental health.
- 20) Virza, M.Y., Erwandi, D., Lestari, F and Kadir, A., (2021). Satisfaction with life, psychological distress, and workplace bullying among construction workers. *International Journal of Public Health Science*, Vol 10.
- 21) Yusuf, B., (2017). Qualitative Method versus Quantitative Method in marketing research: An Application Example at Oba Restaurant.