



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation

ISSN: 2582-7138

Received: 02-02-2021; Accepted: 04-03-2021

www.allmultidisciplinaryjournal.com

Volume 2; Issue 2; March-April 2021; Page No. 64-69

Forced tolerance: Exploring reporting culture of inappropriate behaviour at work among Malaysians

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Abstract

This article using a phenomenological approach aims to investigate the reasons for low reporting of incidences of inappropriate behaviour such as harassment, bullying and mobbing. Interviews were conducted with 12 participants self-identified as victims. Themes identified in the study were: fear of reprisals, non-existing reporting system,

confidential issues, no action to perpetrators and one theme within the sub-themes appeared to be secondary victimisation. The study emphasised the importance of knowing the reason for the toleration of inappropriate behaviour by victims in Malaysia which might provide insightful information for researchers in non-western society.

Keywords: Accept, Culture, Inappropriate Behaviour, Reporting, Tolerate

Introduction

Under-reporting of inappropriate behaviour at work is usually extremely high (Fisher *et al.* 1996)^[7], which limits the action that organisations need to undertake to respond to the issue. In many studies of harassment, bullying and mobbing at work victims do not report or make formal complaints to the organisation. However, the incidence of reporting of such misbehaviour at work is higher particularly in Western-European society compared to Asia or any developing countries. Non-Westerners do not have the same level of motivation to report due to the consequences such as reprisals from perpetrators and embarrassment (Culbertson *et al.* 1992)^[3].

There is very little work being conducted into the phenomenon of inappropriate behaviour at work in Asia, including Malaysia. So, this research is important because it allows us to shed light on incidents of reporting and tolerating the situations that are in need of understanding and may offer important insights into inappropriate behaviour in unique populations such as that found in Malaysia's culturally diverse population. To date studies of populations from non-Western societies are underrepresented. Many values in Western societies prefer direct communication, openness, sharing, no ranking, objectivity, and fairness, are the opposite of those in Asian society. This cultural effect is further supported by Gelfand, Erez and Aycan (2007)^[8] when they mentioned that it is pertinent to understand the cultural context with the intention of enriching the understanding of inappropriate behaviour at work. The Secretary of the Malaysian Trade Union Congress, Andrew Low, mentioned his concerns about workplace bullying in Malaysia and the absence of policy or a support system, in conjunction with the Asian respect for work hierarchies, gives the impression that workplace bullying is acceptable (Apau, 2010). George Young (Employers' Federation Associate Consultant in Industrial Relations) also supported Low's statement by saying "*For us here, it's still a much-forbidden kind of topic and a human rights issue*" (Apau, 2010).

Sabitha Merican (2008)^[20] in her research in Malaysia highlighted a situation where women were not admitting any inappropriate behaviour (either bullying or harassment) but avoided reporting or confronting because they are intimidated and fear that the phenomenon will deteriorate (Macintosh *et al.*, 2010)^[14]. The resulting acceptance of the phenomenon and lack of reporting has become endemic around the world. The situation of 'not reporting' and 'tolerance' gives the idea that inappropriate behaviour at work does not exist, and therefore there is less concern about this issue in Malaysia. People seem to not understand the concept of why a person is not reporting harassment, bullying and mobbing when it occurs. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and explain the daily experiences of Malaysian health care employees and the reason they feel forced to tolerate the hostile environment of inappropriate behaviour.

Research Method

This present study used the methodological approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and so the researcher needed to have access to a pool of potential participants who have experienced the phenomenon in question. Twelve support employees from different types of professions and who work in the clinical and non-clinical departments were involved in this study. They were given a pseudonym to protect their identity. Purposive sampling was used, and they were recruited based on their Spector’s Job Satisfaction Scale (JSS) scores from a previous study. Participants who score between 36 and 144 were selected.

The data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews in a separate meeting place for each participant. Participants were provided with these settings in order facilitate a safe and supportive environment to talk in depth about this sensitive issue. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The analysis of the data adhered to the established procedure of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008) [24]. To begin with, the researcher viewed the 12 interview transcripts to identify items that pointed to the existence of potential themes. This involved a case-by-case analysis, followed by a cross-case analysis of shared themes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statements of each sub-themes illustrated by participants’ excerpts

Sub-themes	Transcriptions
Fear of reprisals	“...we don’t want our boss to hear. We would be afraid they would transfer us to the other department...” Dara
	“.....we were in the same work place and there will be a big problem soon when I come to work, especially work rotation at that respective department..... further conflict will begin.....” Adina
	“So we can’t report.....we would get payback.payback at us...so we are in trouble...” Keane
Non-existed system	“...Please look at my case as an example. I don’t know to whom I need to speak to, talk to my best friend and that would be the best.....” Adina
	“...I guess not.....in here....a support system if we have a problem at work...” Heidi
	“Actually, I don’t want to tell anyone about this because we work in the same department... I could not tolerate anymore and try to get help from my friend...” Fiona
Confidential issue	“When we report it...he will know about it later....” Liam
	“I felt afraid because I have told my supervisor....because my gut was saying that she will spread out the gossip...and it is true.....” Eliza
	“Everyone will knowwhen it comes to investigation matter that is the problem.....” Adina
No action	“.....But the problem is she tried to ignore the problem. Seems like she cannot control the problematic staff at all....” Heidi
	“Since that case....he never gets close to me.....and I’m not sure about any action taken to him....and he is still working in the department...” Eliza
	“Some problematic staff used to absent from work, but Boss seems not to take action. So we have to cover their work regularly.....it is unfair.....” Jasmine

Results

During the progress of the analysis, four sub-themes that fit into main focus for this article which is ‘forced tolerance’ situation emerged from the 12 participants’ accounts in each of the professional groupings. In this interview, the aim is to explore these issues in-depth through how victims could tolerate or accept the circumstances and the reason for not reporting the incidence. Four subthemes appeared to be fear of reprisals, non-existing reporting system, confidential issues and no action will be taken to perpetrators.

Sub-Theme 1: Fear of Reprisals

This sub-theme appears when most participants confessed that they lack enthusiasm to complain because of fear of reprisals from the perpetrator. Participants were unwilling to take formal action against perpetrators because they were concerned that the action might negatively contribute to their long-term career development. We can see that participants were very cautious with this issue. Most of the participants’ supervisors have a good rapport with the top-level management. If any of them complain to the management, they felt that the supervisors will find out about it later. Implicitly these employees have expectations of intimidation and threats. Raising any suggestion of being a victim of bullying or harassment may contribute to negative effects on their career development. More precisely, participants mentioned that the existence of a power imbalance, which they articulated according to their developmental level. Informing higher authority could harm participants’ relationship with their supervisors, seniors, and colleagues.

The participants highlighted types of reprisals such as poor appraisal report, unfair treatment and being recommended for transfers. For instance, Dara mentioned,

“Please keep it as a secret...” and “...we don’t want our boss to hear. We would be afraid they would transfer us to the other department...”

An anxiety of getting negative treatment and appraisal by supervisor cum perpetrator was also reflected by participants, who could not report misconduct that they come across in the department. They want to avoid the possibility of payback treatment, by taking an optimistic approach. For example, several participants decided to ignore the situation in the department in order to ensure their own future work security. This culture of fear to some extent is one of the reasons why employees do not speak out. Keeping it silent was the most common pattern of tolerating the phenomenon because the victims were afraid of reprisal from the powerful person in the department.

One of the participants mentioned that he was informed by a supervisor saying that his work performance was not good enough. Not only being appraised poorly, but Liam was also isolated by colleagues in the department. This situation left Liam with a mixture of emotions mostly feeling unhappy and angry and finally deciding to transfer due to the miserable experience. The easiest way to survive in the situation is to tolerate the fact that they must work within the situation.

Sub-Theme 2: Non-Existing Reporting System

In this theme participants indicated that they chose not to report the incidents because of the fact that there is no appropriate system to help them overcome the problem. The following quotes from Dara and Adina illustrate that participants agreed that others had also been through similar experiences. Feeling trapped because there was no appropriate system to help them, Dara stated,

"I don't think so...non-exists at all, if any of the staff complain, our Boss would never back-up and support us."

Another example given by Fiona when a supervisor gives her a heavy workload makes Fiona sad and it becomes inconvenient when she meets her supervisor in the office every day. The situation has been going on for almost two years. Fiona kept it to herself without telling anyone because she does not know where she should seek help for resolving the conflict.

Most of the colleagues in the department realise the reality of the situation Fiona had been through. She feels trapped with the situation but at the same time she does not want to ruin the relationship as a friend with her supervisor. We can see participants feel vulnerable and stuck with conflicts of friendship and task. They feel obliged to accept the situation. From the transcripts it appears that they felt downhearted, like there was nowhere to get help to listen to their problem. No resources, for example a unit to handle grievances, are available to help employees deal with issues. Geri perceives insolent treatment from her new colleagues and conflict with her front-line supervisor. She did not tell friends or family about the situation. Geri could barely tolerate the situation and could not handle the unhealthy daily environment. This feeling seemed to be overtaking the happiness she used to feel about the job. Without a support system one cannot only be a victim of the incident but also be victim of the situation.

This theme highlights how the participants, for certain reasons, felt that they had to tolerate the frustrations. Most of the participants' excerpts, suggests that they have no option but to learn to deal with the problem. What is more, it seems as though all of them prefer to discuss their problems with their trusted friends and family rather than take formal action. In addition to the non-existence of a support system there are no procedures to manage the situation.

Sub-Theme 3: Confidential Issue

A greater concern was the issue of confidentiality that inappropriate behaviour both harassment or bullying is a sensitive subject, and a victim may feel unable to lodge a formal grievance and prefer to turn to colleagues for support. Most of the participants mentioned that they were worried that those responsible for performing the investigation would never keep the issue classified. For example, Eliza informally reported her situation to the supervisor when she was being sexually harassed repeatedly for quite some time. She had no option and could not survive with the situation any longer. Eliza's instinct told her that something bad would occur after reporting when she said,

"I felt afraid because I have told my supervisor because my gut was saying that she will spread out the gossip...and it is true....."

When many of her colleagues knew about her experience. Adina used the same expression when describing one of her

episodes in the following excerpt,

"Everyone will knowwhen it comes to investigation matter...that is the problem further conflict will begin....."

Other participants stated that if any of them make a complaint to the authority, they felt that their perpetrators will find out about it later. The expressions they used in the interviews describe how they might get into trouble when the issue being investigated would not be treated as confidential. Keane mentioned,

"When we talk about it.....seems that he or she will know the gossip.....we will get a bad reputation...."

Participants assume the negative response because the person in charge would never keep the information confidential. That is one of the main reasons they feared to report the matter officially. Most of the above excerpts show that they realised what was going to happen. This perhaps indicated some insecurity over their position and the uncertainties refer to their career potential. Since the confidentiality issue bothers them and could not be assured, they prefer to share their problem informally with trusted friends and keep silent to what had happened.

Sub-Theme 3.1 Secondary Victimization

In this study most of the participants were identified to be a secondary victim. Secondary victimisation is the traumatization of the abuse or a relapse into a state of trauma, triggered by some following incident. In these circumstances secondary victimisation refers to behaviours and attitudes of office colleagues that are 'victim-blaming' and insensible which traumatize victims of inappropriate behaviour in the department. The unsympathetic colleagues' values in every participant's department have made the problem worse. What makes victims unhappy was the gossip cycle continued until everyone in the department had heard about some participants' experience. Consequently, they would have to live in fear of negative publicity for quite some time. Even though they were the victim, the negative attention is focused on them and not the perpetrators.

Sub-Theme 4: No Action

Finally, the reason victims do not want to report misconduct at work is because the victim has already assumed that no action would be taken against perpetrators. Specifically, action against perpetrators is still rare. Therefore, most of them tolerate the situation because they believe that there would be no difference whether the situation was reported or not. For example, in this study Heidi was disgruntled with her situation because the supervisor was aware of the problems but pretended 'nothing' was happening. She explained,

"She knew about the situation. But the problem is she tried to ignore the problem never take action to those troublemakers."

This theme highlights how the participants, felt that they had to tolerate the frustrations with the circumstances without action. In Eliza's case, management had confronted the perpetrator, but no action had been taken. And she explained,

“Since that case he never gets close to me.....and I’m not sure about any action taken to him....and he is still working in the department....”

Therefore, a strong reason the participants decided not to report and accept the situation is because some management refuse to take firm action against perpetrators.

Discussion

This study used phenomenology as the method for a comprehensive analysis of the inappropriate behaviour victims’ interpretations. In particular, our results confirm that Malaysians are more prone to tolerate and not report the instances of inappropriate behaviour because of fear of reprisals, the non-existence of an appropriate system and grievance procedure to manage these complaints, and issues of confidentiality; resulting in becoming a secondary victim, with no action towards perpetrators. The findings from this study add value to cross-cultural studies in the field of inappropriate behaviour at work in Malaysia. Participants reported disappointment, being confused and that people around them did not understand their situation. One clear message from the interviews is that victims of inappropriate behaviour are frustrated with the lack of help and support (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011) ^[17] they feel is available. It was indicated by participants that reporting the inappropriate behaviour to organisation management would be of no benefit to them in that it would not achieve the preferred outcome, their situation would not be acknowledged, and they could not rely on confidentiality.

In other words, it is evident that participants believe that reporting inappropriate behaviour may lead to social conditions that could create difficulties at work, especially in terms of their working relationships and career prospects. Several participants did report the incidences to the supervisors, but they claim that, as expected, no action was taken against the perpetrators. One of the most important issues that emerges from this study is that no formal support system exists. Therefore, perhaps the most valuable remedial action to be considered is arrangement for an efficient grievance procedure and the establishment of an independent unit to investigate the incident.

Victim Transformation

The majority of participants considered as primary victims in this situation transform to become secondary victims. This is because their perception is that their social environment will respond in a way that makes the stigma of being a victim more disabling than the primary situation itself. This was accompanied by a sense of lack of awareness and understanding from others. Most participants worry about what others think and they had the feeling that people were judging them because of their experience. This is critical in situations of gossip when the victim is in the working area and colleagues’ problem behaviour is directed toward the victim. For instance, continuous staring at the victim; confidentiality is not protected by investigators and spreading the rumours about victim. As we can see, this issue is serious, and these expected consequences are likely to pressurise victims not to report the incident. This identifies how cultural differences affect the relationship of the individual and his or her surroundings when he/she comes across misconduct at work. The situation is opposite to the finding recorded when they mention that gossip is relatively common between

employees and may not be perceived as a major problem (Notelaers *et al.*, 2011) ^[17].

Helplessness and Hopeless for the Situation

The emergent knowledge from the interviews has indicated that participants without support systems become easily distracted, for example losing concentration while working (McCann, 2005) ^[15] and tolerate the situation instead of finding a way out. Disappointments can lead to depression and the findings have also shown that participants report the key characteristics of depression, namely helplessness and hopelessness (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002) ^[16]. Learned helplessness theory (Seligman, 1975) ^[23] and the hopelessness theory of depression (Abramson *et al.*, 1989) ^[1] may be useful in explaining this situation. Numerous studies have used both theories to relate the situation of victim violence with feeling helplessness (Schafer *et al.*, 2005; Greif & Furlong, 2006; Peskin *et al.*, 2007) ^[21, 9, 18] and hopelessness (Scher & Resick, 2005; Henry, 2009; Rodriguez, 2006) ^[22, 11, 19].

Participants in this study experienced mostly feelings of anger, unhappiness, defeated and vengefulness. This is because they believe they have no power to change the situation. The more they keep thinking about the uncontrollable situation at work, the more stress and depression they felt about making changes in that environment. It appears that the participants in this study ‘learn helplessness’ when they are exposed to stressors at work that they cannot control. Most of them seem to accept their situation instead of fighting or taking any action against it, which is a manifestation of learned helplessness (Schafer *et al.*, 2005; Greif & Furlong, 2006; Peskin *et al.*, 2007) ^[21, 9, 18]. Seligman (1975) ^[23] suggested that disheartened people tended to use a more pessimistic explanatory style when thinking about stressful events than optimistic people, and this is similar to the participants’ responses in this study. The situation of feeling helpless and depressed makes them feel that whatever they do will be useless, and that they have no control over their environment especially reprisals from perpetrators, ruination of relationships with others and gossiping about them as victims. These perceived helpless experiences can explain their unresponsiveness in the situation and can ultimately threaten their mental well-being. Participants were also found to express despair because there appears to be no possibility of getting help; they feel trapped and feel that there is unlikely to be a change in the situation they experience, thereby making them feel ‘hopelessness’. Participants in this study believe that there is no advantage or use in trying to report their experience of inappropriate behaviour if they have already learned and predicted that the authority could not manage the phenomenon confidentially with any support system provided to help. Previous research has suggested that when a person experiences hopelessness then they will conclude that their situation cannot be changed (Abramson *et al.*, 1989) ^[1] and this again explains the unresponsiveness of participants in this study.

As we can see, the ‘work stressor’ in this setting has become a controllability factor that contributes to psychological health when it comes to learned helplessness and hopelessness in the study. The results suggest that helplessness and hopelessness has a shared relationship with self-reported depression symptoms (Rodriguez, 2006; Henry, 2009) ^[11, 19]. These findings have several potential

implications, both for a better understanding of the nature and development of the effect of inappropriate behaviour and for

early identification of individuals at risk. Thus, this highlights the benefits in providing a formal support system for promoting a healthy working environment.

Only one out of twelve participants lodged a verbal complaint to the supervisor. It has been suggested that few reports the incident of inappropriate behaviour at work because they reflect feelings of being a victim (Jensen & Gutek, 1982) ^[12]. As we can see, almost all the interviewees in this study did not report the phenomenon. So, it is important for management in this setting to promote and heighten awareness about this issue among employees. To some extent, this result replicates cultural patterns that are similar to other Asian countries. For instance, Young, Yun-Joo and Leventhal (2004) ^[25] stated that students in Korea are unwilling to report inappropriate behaviour because they feel embarrassed about being a victim. Research conducted in 2008 among school children in Hong Kong found that 67% of students choose not to report the incidents either to their teachers or parents (Wong *et al.*, 2008) ^[26]. Recently a survey based on data from random telephone interviews conducted in Hong Kong reported that 53% of employees are distressed in silence because of bullying at work (Chen, 2013) ^[2]. The cultural pattern of being '*unwilling to report*' seems to be broadly preferred in Asian values, contrasted with Western society.

Furthermore, most likely due to the difficulty in data collection among Malaysians about this sensitive issue that taps into psychological well-being, dignity, and respect, there is likely to be under-reporting of inappropriate behaviour. As Faberow (1963) ^[6] revealed, research on sensitive topics is taboo. And Lee (1993) ^[13] indicates that sensitive research is "research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it" (p. 4). This explanation suggests that sensitive research has the potential to impact on all the people who are involved and possibly to hurt the participants taking part in the study. So, Griemel and Kodama (2011) ^[10] discover only a small sample of reported incidents of bullying in Japan compared with Austria, which might tell us more about the difference in cultures than the level of actual bullying. Moreover, heightening awareness of inappropriate behaviour and why it is unacceptable will help to eliminate the embarrassment and adverse feelings experienced by employees at the thought of reporting the situation, enabling them to talk about the event and thus take a positive step towards eradicating the phenomenon. There is no doubt that cultural differences might influence the result of this research (Escartin *et al.*, 2011) ^[5]. Some results of this research provide important new insights on the cultural variability of inappropriate behaviour at work in Malaysian society, which is part of an examination of inappropriate behaviour in a non-Western society which is underrepresented in the psychological literature.

Conclusion

It is not claimed that these themes are generalizable, but it is expected the themes will provide some insight into the experience of misconduct and employees' reasons not to report the incidents. Making more information about this issue will not only assist the organisation to establish and manage employees' relationships effectively but also could reduce inequalities by advancing knowledge in an area where there has been minimal concern in research.

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