



*Original Research Article*

# Workplace bullying as ‘anti-positive psychology’ in institutions of higher learning

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**This study explores the correlations between workplace bullying and key elements of positive psychology among academic staff in the National University of Lesotho. The methodology for this study is the qualitative research approach, with an overarching intention of making meaning out of respondents' experiences of the phenomenon of workplace bullying. The sampling method is purposive, in respect of the qualitative principle of appropriateness, and to facilitate the choosing of participants who represent information-rich cases from whom the researcher could learn much in relation to the issues under study. Data for this study is collected through a semi-structured interview on twenty academic staff members of the aforementioned institution. Data analysis is done through the iterative and inductive methods of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results of the study highlight the fact that impacts of workplace bullying on staff psychological wellness are at the negative end of the spectrum of the key elements, precepts, principles, and values of positive psychology. The researcher concludes that workplace bullying is ‘anti-positive psychology’ considering key elements of positive psychology such as the negative brain, the role of positive emotion, the psychological paradox, and flow.**

**Key words:** positive psychology, negative brain, positive emotion, psychological paradox, flow

## INTRODUCTION

Positive psychology basically emphasizes on strategies for maximizing psychological wellness competencies among individuals (Taylor and Kielhofner, 2007). Positive psychology entails a fundamental philosophical orientation which is diametrically opposed to a pathology based psychology, because it strongly emphasizes the realization, development and reinforcement of positive areas of thinking, experience, and behavior (Taylor and Kielhofner, 2007). Baumgardner and Crothers (2009) stipulate that the concept of happiness is central in the assumptions of positive psychology as highlighted in the following triple domains:

The pleasant life pertains to the existential determinants, i.e. circumstances and subjective qualities which lead to a desired state of happiness.

The engaged life considers the extent to which there is active involvement of self-realized individuals with others,

work and leisure, in order to arrive at a sense of purpose.

The meaningful life entails the transcending of a ‘self-centered comfort zone’ in order to become an active, creative participant in activities geared towards the empowerment of others.

### Positive psychology and psychological wellness

Positive psychology plays a significant role in the enhancement of psychological wellness through Virtues in Action, character strengths, and situational themes (Snyder and Lopez, 2007).

### Virtues in action

Virtues in Action are fundamental characteristics which are time honored and valued by moral, religious and folk

wisdom over the ages. Virtues in Action are grouped under six virtues, including: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Seligman et al., 2005).

### **Wisdom and Knowledge**

Wisdom is the application of knowledge and discernment to life's situations as a result of prior interactions, mishaps and experience gleaned over time, space, and circumstances. Wisdom entails transcending self-centeredness, appraising things in perspective, and proffering judicious advice to others (Baumgardner and Crothers, 2009).

### **Courage**

Courage is described as the ability to be assertive, positive, realistic, and optimistic in spite of, and despite overwhelming internal and or external odds (Baumgardner and Crothers, 2009); Seligman et al., 2005).

### **Humanity**

Humanity is a person's capability of being selfless in thought, feeling, word, and action, at times even to one's detriment. It entails going beyond the 'me' and 'you' to attain the sense of 'us' (Baumgardner and Crothers, 2009; Seligman et al., 2005).

### **Justice**

Justice is considered a civic strength which permits objective appraisal of persons and situations, creative engagement in developmental issues for the achievement of worthy objectives (Locke, 2005; Baumgardner and Crothers, 2009; Seligman et al., 2005).

### **Temperance**

The virtue of temperance is the moral, mental, and volitional strength which enables man to transcend negative instinctive impulses and to manifest transpersonal behavior (Baumgardner and Crothers, 2009; Seligman et al., 2005).

### **Transcendence**

Transcendence implies having a holistic, timeless and limitless vision as a prerequisite for creative and meaning thought and action (Seligman et al., 2005; Baumgardner and Crothers, 2009).

### **Positive psychological character strengths**

Character strengths are the psychological processes and mechanisms that define virtues. A positive psychological strength is a unique and effective way of behaving which

accomplishes goals (Linley et al., 2006). Optimism, hardiness, locus of control, self-reliance, sense of coherence, hope, meaningfulness, manageability, positive affect are character strengths which effectively manage stress according to Nelson and Simmons (2005). Seligman (2002), and Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) outline the following character strengths of positive psychology which promote psychological wellness: resilience, positive affectivity, flow, positive emotions, emotional intelligence, courage, future mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, and perseverance. For Coetzee and Cilliers (2001), sense of coherence, locus of control, self-efficacy, hardiness, potency, and learned resourcefulness are effective in positivising coping behavior and enhancing psychological wellness in work organizations.

### **Situational themes in positive psychology: Well-being, health and wellness**

Situational themes are the specific habits that lead people to manifest strengths in particular circumstances. The following are situational themes which impact on psychological wellness: meaning making, intentional goal setting, self-efficacy, commitment to self-defining goals, goal achievement, optimism, and positive emotion (DelleFave, 2006):

Meaning-making is an aspect of the sense of coherence whereby individuals voluntarily and consciously re-create their experiences in line with the self-serving bias of positive illusion (DelleFave, 2006; Strumpher, 2006).

Intentional goal-setting implies a realistic appraisal of one's situation prior to setting and managing goals and incidental hurdles (DelleFave, 2006).

Self-efficacy is the basis of an internal locus of control in the face of trying circumstances and conditions, with a view to making operative all positive subjective resources and skills (DelleFave, 2006).

Commitment to self-defining goals is a sense of dedication for the accomplishment of self-fulfilling and self-realizing objectives, in order to reinforce the sense of coherence, meaning and happiness (DelleFave, 2006).

Goal achievement entails both threat appraisal and goal attainment processes, which are respectively an objective assessment of goals and limitations, and the improvement of strategies for goal achievement (DelleFave, 2006).

Optimism in an individual is characterized by better moods, greater perseverance and high rates of success, which enhance goal attainment and achievement. Optimism can be defensive or functional, with the former involving unrealistic overvaluation of individual control of situations, while the latter involves self-efficacy and the positive belief (DelleFave, 2006).

Positive emotion is a vital aspect of psychological growth and improved wellness, because it broadens mindset and sustains personal resources (Fredrickson, 2001, p.220; Lopez, 2008).

## Research objectives

The primary aim of this study was to describe, explain, and determine the influence of workplace bullying as psychological violence on the psychological wellness of educators in the National University of Lesotho (NUL). Furthermore, this study sets out to evaluate the prevalence, sources, and forms of workplace bullying in NUL, analyse how staff cope with workplace bullying, and develop a workplace bullying and psychological wellness model for effective management of the phenomena under study.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was chosen to guide the research design and methodology of this research because it facilitated the description of workplace bullying as psychological violence experienced by academic staff of the National University of Lesotho. Secondly, qualitative research described the world of workplace bullying and staff psychological wellness as personal experiences through 'natural language'. Thirdly, qualitative research increased the probability that the individual provides his or her own version, view, account, and expression of their own 'world' of workplace bullying. Lastly, qualitative research provided a framework for an in-depth understanding of the meaning that individuals made of their original and authentic experiences related to workplace bullying as psychological violence. The purposive sample for this study comprised twenty members of the academic staff in the National University of Lesotho. There are two reasons why purposive sampling was chosen for this study. Firstly, the choice of purposive sampling was in respect of the qualitative principle of appropriateness, i.e. having participants who are articulate, reflective, and willing to share their experiences with the researcher (Morse, 1991). Secondly, purposive sampling was based on choosing participants who represent information-rich cases from whom the researcher could learn much in relation to the issues under study (Patton, 1990). Twenty academic staff members of the National University of Lesotho constituted the purposive sample on which the semi-structured interview was administered. Among the respondents were two females, eighteen males, in the categories of three associate professors, nine senior lecturers, and eight lecturers. The ages of the respondents ranged from thirty three (33) to fifty five (55) years.

## Ethical considerations

1. Respondents agreed to participate at all levels of the interview process on the basis of informed consent, implying their awareness and acquiescence to the exigencies of their specific role in the research.

2. Participation in the research was purely voluntary and consensual.

3. Data obtained from the anonymous and consenting participants was treated as highly confidential and used solely for the purpose of the study.

4. Permission to carry out the study was obtained from the ethical committees of the University of the Free State and the research supervisor.

Data was collected through a semi-structured interview and data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which seeks to enable the researcher to understand how individuals make sense out of their major life experiences using a double hermeneutic. IPA was chosen because it elicits from respondents' accounts, a detailed and "substantially rich" depiction of the phenomena under study, from phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic perspectives (Eatough and Smith, 2008). Secondly, IPA favors the use of semi-structured phenomenological interviews for data collection and highlighting of potentially grey areas which structured and rigid formats will not adequately uncover (Eatough and Smith, 2008). Thirdly, data analysis using IPA focuses on making in-depth appraisal of the phenomena of workplace bullying and psychological wellness through its triple pronged methods of analysis, that is, phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic perspectives (Smith et al., 2009).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Workplace bullying as anti-positive psychology

#### Relating consequences of workplace bullying on staff psychological wellness to positive psychology

While considering the consequences of workplace bullying on the psychological wellness of interviewed staff of the National University of Lesotho, it dawned on the researcher that the consequences of workplace bullying are in total contradistinction to the proposed elements, precepts, principles, and values of positive psychology. This salient fact makes the researcher to attempt to say that workplace bullying is the epitome of "anti-positive psychology" as will be seen below, through the following rubrics: key elements of positive psychology, the negative brain, the role of positive emotion, the psychological paradox, and flow.

From Table 1, it can be seen that workplace bullying contrary to positive psychology which studies principles of optimal human functioning, success and happiness through maximization of strengths and virtues, only helps in exacerbating negative experiences and characteristics like fear, anxiety, and uncertainty among participants. In the case of the participants of this study, workplace bullying negatively impacts on their psychological wellness by inducing negative emotions which de-motivate them from using their strengths, since they are drained of positive energy. The combination of negative emotions and low energy level can be seen in two interviewees of the present study. Nero says:

**Table 1.** Key elements in positive psychology and workplace bullying

No	Key elements in positive psychology	Key elements in workplace bullying
1	The science of 'optimal human functioning'	The principle of minimal human functioning
2	Studies human success	Highlights human weaknesses and limitations
3	Focuses on positive subjective experiences like happiness and well-being as well as positive human characteristics such as strengths and virtues	Concentrates on negative subjective experiences like fear and despair, and on negative human characteristics like insensitivity and vices
4	It is not just interested in individuals but in how group structures such as organizations, families or cultures can induce positive emotion and encourage the use of strengths	It portrays how organizations can induce negative emotion and minimize the use of strengths

*'I am filled with permanent anxiety, fear, and despair by the rumors that flood the campus on a daily basis. I get the feeling that I am not really valued. My self-confidence is at an all-time low...my family is stressed and this in turn stresses me.'*

Hans feel low on energy as follows:

*'I have little enthusiasm, motivation, or energy.'*

### The negative brain

Contrary to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) who argue that the brain generally tends to be negative from a survival and evolutionary perspective, workplace bullying for the researcher seems to reinforce the prioritization of negative information. In other words, the persistent negative acts of workplace bullying experienced by participants intensify their sense of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty concerning the future, which effectively "fixates" their brains at the default position of worrying. In other words participants concentrate on gloomy thoughts arising from the negative acts of workplace bullying thereby maximizing the role of the 'negative brain.' The experience of Opondi exemplifies fixation on negative emotions as a result of workplace bullying. He expresses his experience as follows:

*'I have recently become impatient and nervous with students when they make normal mistakes. I even bark at them. I also get impatient with my daughter and wife at home. I am constantly ruminating about the future of my family: "Am I going to be amongst those who will be retrenched?" "What will be the future of my family, particularly my daughter?" "If I get retrenched now, how will I raise this child, especially to provide for her education?" The anxiety is killing me.'*

Participants' fixation on the 'negative brain' leads to 'psychic entropy' (Frederickson and Losada, 2005), i.e. the paralyzing of attention by the negative consequences of workplace bullying. As seen in Table 1, contrary to the prescriptions of positive psychology workplace bullying instead minimizes human functioning, highlights weaknesses, concentrates on negative subjective experiences, and reveals how organizations can induce

negative emotions through workplace bullying.

### The role of positive emotion

Frederickson and Losada (2005) argue that negative emotions narrow people's perspective and keep them focused on the specific problems at hand. Positive emotions on the contrary build personal resources which enhance effective coping and relationships with others. For Frederickson and Losada (2005), positive emotions broaden attentional focus and promote resilience for better stress management. Furthermore, participants who experience negative emotions as a result of workplace bullying, confirm Frederickson et al., 2005 thesis that negative emotions narrow people's perspective. This can be seen in the experiences of two interviewees of the present study, i.e. Camara and Jacqueline. Camara says:

*'No one is stable, there is emotional suffering, mental anxiety...I am permanently stressed up with accompanying headaches, stomach problems, inexplicable pains and insomnia.'*

Jacqueline's experience is as follows:

*'I experience negative interactions with colleagues. My stress levels are high. My family harmony is affected. I have a heightened sense of insecurity and uncertainty.'*

Negative emotions of participants can be categorized as follows:

Overriding negative emotions (fear, free-floating anxiety, frustration, despair, latent animosity), negative moods (uncertainty, de-motivation, dampened zeal, paranoia, suspicion), negative attitudes (sense of alienation, helplessness, worthlessness, lack of confidence, feeling belittled).

Frederickson's argument that negative emotions narrow people's perspective and keep them focused on the specific problem in hand (e.g. retrenchment scare of participants) is confirmed by this study in which participants are constantly obsessed and permanently stressed by the negative consequences of workplace bullying.

Participants experience negative emotions and have less 'behavioral flexibility' (Frederickson and Losada, 2005) which leads them to experience the 'depletion' of

**Table 2:** Comparing ‘flow’ and workplace bullying

No	The 8 ingredients of ‘flow’ in positive psychology	The 8 ingredients of ‘being stuck’ in workplace bullying in NUL
1	Involved in tasks that we have a good chance of completing.	Disengagement from our routine tasks
2	We are able to concentrate fully on activities	Permanent distraction by intrusion of dark thoughts of foreboding in relation to an uncertain future
3	Tasks have clear goals	The goals of restructuring are not unclear
4	There is immediate feedback on how well we are doing in our tasks	There is information blackout
5	Involvement is ‘deep but effortless’ and this ‘removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life’	There is disengagement and permanent worrying, which ‘obsesses awareness with the worries and frustrations of everyday life’
6	There is a sense of exercising control over our actions	There is a sense of helplessness
7	Concern for the self ‘disappears’ but paradoxically our ‘sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over’	Concern for self is ‘paramount’ but paradoxically the ‘sense of self weakens with permanent stress and ceaseless worrying’
8	We lose our normal sense of time – we can feel either that it has speeded up (and passed quickly) or slowed down	Sense of time is predominant in mind, becoming harassing, inelastic, and invasive

their ‘intellectual and psychological resources’.

Through experiencing negative emotions occasioned by workplace bullying, participants become less creative, experience negative workplace relationships, use negative coping strategies of avoidance and withdrawal, develop ‘narrowed attentional focus’ (Frederickson) which heightens bias (names calling), reinforces stress and diminishes resilience.

**The positive psychology paradox**

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), there is a core paradox in Positive Psychology, which emphasizes that though humans easily become fixated in negative brain mode, it is only through positive emotions that they can thrive physically, emotionally, mentally, socially and professionally. Workplace bullying on the contrary as experienced by the participants of this study ‘fixates’ them to negativity, develops negative emotions, compromises psychological wellness, relationships, intellectual and psychological resources. Luther and Raul depict the aforementioned relationship between workplace bullying and psychological illness.

Luther says:

*‘I am literally obsessed by the fact that I could be among those to be retrenched. I have the sense of being “stifled and restrained from total positive self-expression.”*

Raul says:

*‘I am frustrated but remain tied down by heavy workload and pressurizing deadlines, thereby increasing my stress levels.’*

The end result of this negative impact of workplace bullying on participants is to maximize negativity and ‘freeze existence’ into an unfulfilling ‘vicious circle’ of

frustration, stress, de-motivation and helplessness. The contradiction between ‘flow’ in positive psychology and the consequences of workplace bullying is shown in Table 2.

An important concept in Positive Psychology is ‘flow’. For Csikszentmihalyi (2000), flow is important because it enables control over consciousness, leads to holistic development of people, reinforces psychological ethos, and enables people to have optimal experience. Workplace bullying on the other hand as seen in Table 2, impacts on the psychological wellness of participants in the following ways which are contrary to the eight (8) principles of ‘flow’:

**Disengagement from our routine tasks**

Paul is disengaged from his professional activities:

*‘I lack energy to perform well in class. I mark one script for a very long time. I just feel dry. I have no stamina to plan for the future. I just feel stuck. Low energy levels make me uncertain as to whether to search for opportunities out of campus.’*

**Permanent distraction by intrusion of dark thoughts of foreboding in relation to an uncertain future**

Raul is obsessed with dark thoughts about the future:

*‘I am just totally frustrated. I am constantly worried about the fate of our only national university, whether I am there tomorrow or not; I am like dying inside, seeing our national university reduced to rubble.’*

**The goals of restructuring are not unclear**

Jacqueline says restructuring has unclear goals:

*‘Restructuring is taking place in an atmosphere of non-*

*transparency and poor communication of its agenda. People are in the dark about the whole process.'*

Ivo reinforces the preceding by saying:

*'No one can really put a finger on what is really going on. It seems restructuring is being dictated by someone, somewhere, and more tragic, those implementing the hidden agenda are not taking anyone's opinions into consideration. The views of members of staff are ignored, whereas what matters is "what is said in town", i.e. government. It seems that management wants someone, or "people in town" to be happy at the expense of all NUL staff.'*

### **There is information blackout**

In relation to information blackout, Hans has this to say:

*'Restructuring is a process in and through which vital information concerning staff future and destiny is unrevealed. So far no one has a clear idea of what the future holds. No one knows where they will be in the short, mid and long terms. Staff have just been told that there is going to be retrenchment based restructuring, with insinuations that the from day to day. I feel I just "drift along." latter might be avoided if other things are done, but what things these other options are, no one knows. An apt analogy of the current restructuring exercise would be like that of having a man point a gun at you and ordering you to do this or that without you daring to find out what this or that is, or what your orders are going to lead you to. The feeling I have is of a man who could be digging his own grave.'*

### **There is disengagement and permanent worrying, which 'obsesses awareness with the worries and frustrations of everyday life'**

Hans is also disengaged:

*'I am de-motivated through an uncertain personal and family future. My research productivity has dropped drastically because of no funds for conferences and research. I have little enthusiasm, motivation, energy, or even interest in teaching students.'*

### **There is a sense of helplessness**

Ivo adopts the 'ostrich stance':

*'I am scared so I do not want to express my opinions on the bullying restructuring process. I prefer to remain silent, lethargic, passive and adopt the "let's wait and see how things turn out." I prefer remaining a spectator.'*

### **Concern for self is 'paramount' but paradoxically the 'sense of self weakens with permanent stress and ceaseless worrying'**

Paul just 'drifts along'

*'I feel threatened and like hypnotized by the situation. My energy level is low so that my quest to leave is halfhearted and full of procrastination. I really don't know how I make it*

### **Sense of time is predominant in mind, becoming harassing, inelastic, and invasive**

Opondi is 'time crazed':

*"I have recently become impatient and nervous with students when they make normal mistakes. I even bark at them. I also get impatient with my daughter and wife at home. I am constantly ruminating about the future of my family: 'Am I going to be amongst those who will be retrenched?' 'What will be the future of my family, particularly my daughter?' 'If I get retrenched now, how will I raise this child, especially to provide for her education?' The anxiety is killing me."*

### **Implications of the research for social policy and planning**

There is urgent need for research which emphasizes the relationship between psychological capital and bullying, with psychological capital acting as a mediator of the impact of job stress on incivility. Higher education institutions should also conceive and implement positive psychology mechanisms for neutralizing, if not minimizing the impacts of workplace bullying on employee wellness and job performance. The principles of positive psychology to be emphasized for positive organizational relationships and staff development can include: self-efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience (Luthans et al., 2007; Avey et al., 2011). Positive psychological principles are important for organizational efficiency and effectiveness, and individual wellbeing because it is presumed that there are positive relationships between psychological capital and desirable employee attitudes, behaviors, and multiple measures of performance (Avey et al., 2011).

### **Conclusion**

Workplace bullying as experienced by participants of this study can be circumscribed as the epitome of 'man's inhumanity to man'. It exhibits the traits of 'violation of human rights', and acts as a veritable scourge on the psychological wellness of staff. The characteristics of workplace bullying as experienced by the participants of this study make the researcher to describe the former as 'anti-positive psychology' because it leads to the manifestation in victims of symptoms which represent the opposite of the avowed key elements of positive psychology. The 'anti-positive psychology' traits revealed by this study include; disengagement from routine tasks, permanent distraction by intrusion of dark thoughts in relation to an uncertain future, unclear restructuring goals, information blackout, disengagement and permanent worrying, a sense of helplessness, 'self-deflation', and 'obsession with time'.

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