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***Workplace Bullying II:  
A Civilizational Shortcoming Examined in a Comparative Content Analysis***

Leah P. Hollis

**Abstract**

According to Freud, civilization is meant to protect humans from the forces of nature, to protect human frailty; but then, paradoxically, it falls short of such protection by its lack of concomitant regulation (1991). In fact, civilized service to society, delivered via organizations, creates strife and anxiety. While civilization is a structure created to protect people from nature and to support a frail humanity, its rules and power structures yield aggression, spawning the need for people to control each other (Freud & Strachey, 1991).

Such control and the power structures that arise within organizations can be considered the root of workplace bullying, aggression, and incivility in our putatively civilized structures of work. Consequently, global researchers strive to make sense of incivility within civilization, a structure that generates aggravation although it was originally developed to provide protection.

Northern Europeans have led research efforts to analyze the psychological impact of workplace bullying for employees, observing the protection of human frailty as described by Freud. While researchers in the United States over the last twenty years have also paid considerable attention to workplace bullying, within the legal lexicon of the United States many consider workplace bullying as a status-free harassment, and other researchers consider bullying as but another form of harassment. The American approach aligns with Freud's assertion that civilization – with its “sum of achievement and regulations” – still yields unhappiness among mankind.

Thus, there are different approaches to considering workplace bullying. Methodologically, this article utilizes a content analysis of sixty articles to present some differences in how two civilizations analyze workplace bullying. The content analysis reveals that European researchers are more likely to discuss workplace bullying as a health and wellness issue, while United States researchers tend to focus on organizational policies and legal issues.

While this content analysis presents a difference in approaches, it is not intended to establish that a mutually exclusive approach to workplace bullying exists between these two cultures.

**Keywords:** *Workplace bullying, chronic health issues, legal issues, civilization*

## **Introduction**

In June of 2014, I presented a lecture during the “9<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Workplace Bullying and Harassment” at the University of Milan. With the theme “promoting dignity and justice at work,” the International Association on Workplace Bullying and Harassment hosted scholars from over twenty countries. The conference offered different perspectives related to workplace bullying, such as legislative considerations, cyber-bullying, and prevention.

The health results and psychological effects of workplace bullying were typically presented by European scholars. These European papers offered research beyond the litigious consternation that has an impact on organizational cost and productivity. Examples of such papers are as follows: “Sleep problems and workplace bullying: Is leisure-time physical activity a mediator or moderator?” authored by Asa Marie Hansen from Denmark; “Daily interpersonal conflicts and positive and negative effects among naval cadets: the moderating role of neuroticism,” authored by Jorn Hetland of Norway; and “Psychological distress is associated with reduced cognitive performance victims of workplace bullying,” authored by Luca Neri, from Italy. Such perspectives from the Europeans considered how the target’s health and wellbeing are eroded through workplace bullying.

Since this conference, I have had the opportunity to present at various colleges and universities across the United States. Participants in the United States typically ask about legal action to deter a bully, or whether workplace bullying is actionable in court. Those suffering targets seek ways to bring justice to the bully, yet they seem startled when we discuss the impact of such abuse on the target’s health and well-being.

For Americans, the discussion of health issues pales in comparison to the desire to exact damages from the organization that allows for bullying. During such campus visits, targets complain, nevertheless, of the escalating health costs that result from workplace bullying: inflamed nerves, sleep problems, and migraine headaches. However, while targets of workplace bullying in the United States ask about referrals to lawyers they typically do not ask about doctors or psychologists to mitigate the stress-induced health problems. The American culture focuses on steps to resolve workplace bullying issues in court; often the health-related issues are viewed as a happenstance or by-product, instead of a compelling consequence of working in an aggressive environment.

Referring to Freud, we may reflect on how the focus in the United States is on the lack of regulation, instead of a primary focus falling on compromised human frailty in the face of workplace bullying.

## Literature Review

Global scholars consider workplace bullying using disparate terms. In Europe, scholars have used a “negative acts” questionnaire to capture data about workplace aggression. Researchers have used terms such as “incivility” and “aggression” (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001); yet American scholars use “status-free harassment” (Yamada, 1999) to describe workplace bullying. Other terms such as “psychological harassment,” “harassment moral,” or “mobbing” are also used to discuss workplace bullying (Crawshaw, 2009).

As workplace bullying remains a global problem, researchers have examined the effects of incivility and workplace bullying (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994; Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; 2012; Einarsen, Hotel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Hollis, 2016b; Namie & Namie, 2009; Zabrodska & Kveton, 2013). More specifically, some European scholars have considered the effect on the targets’ health and wellness (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2008; Hallberg, & Strandmark, 2006; Rayner, 1997).

Workplace bullying creates a psychological stress within those targeted by such aggression. Stressful experiences can lead to depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders. Psychological stress and poor health were found in Vartia’s (2001) study of 949 Norwegian employees who dealt with bullying. In turn, these employees were more likely to use medication to sleep or rely on sedatives. In a study of 1100 British National Health Service employees, Quine (1999) confirmed that 42% of workers experienced workplace bullying that led to clinical depression. Other European researchers, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Notelaers and Moreno-Jiménez (2011) and Vartia (2001), also reported a relationship between workplace bullying and the targets’ subsequent depression and sleep issues.

These European examples align with Freud’s notion that a “person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of cultural ideas” (Freud & Strachey, 1991, p. 16). In short, the European focus seems to lean toward examining how the presence of bullying within civilization is part of civilization’s failure to protect human frailty.

Despite the attention that Europeans give to workplace bullying and its association with health issues, United States scholars seem to have a stronger focus on bullying and its impact on the organization. The groundbreaking Namie and Namie study (2009), reflecting on the general population, stated that 37% of workers face workplace bullying in their careers, costing organizations over \$54 billion.

In a study of 359 United States workers, Valentine, Fleischman, and Godkin (2015) called for clearer communication of organizational ethics to minimize the negative relationship between workplace bullying and employee job satisfaction. Goodboy, Martin, Knight, and Long (2017) considered 314 United States workers to analyze job demands and high stress environments. In their study, workplace bullying was related to job dissatisfaction and job stress.

United States studies on higher education confirm that approximately two-thirds of employees face workplace bullying, and relate such behavior to the costs from the activity to the organization (Hollis, 2016). Within the legal and economic focus of the American studies is a nod to Freud's assertion that civilization has an "inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships [in] society" (Freud & Strachey, 1991, p. 15). In other words, though such structures are civilized, the laws of the land developed in this civilization fail to truly protect the population. Hence, the proliferation of workplace bullying continues to bring unhappiness without effective regulations to mitigate the problem.

Though the studies undertaken in the United States lean toward analyzing relationships between workplace bullying and organizational factors, American health organizations do note the levels of stress-related ailments in the United States population. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA, 2016), 18% of the United States population, or 40 million Americans, struggle with anxiety and depression. Consequently, those affected seek medical attention at a rate three to five times more than the general population. Further, they were subject to more sleep issues, more substance abuse and higher rates of post-traumatic stress. As confirmed by Volkow's study (2009), substance abuse was one of the leading health care issues in the United States, affecting one tenth of the 307.8 million United States citizens, close to 31 million people. Within this statistic, alcohol abuse specifically is the third leading cause of American death (American Center for Disease Control (CDC), 2013). Such health issues are associated with stress and anxiety, with substance abuse as an escapist coping mechanism.

Given the extensive number of people in the United States who face workplace bullying and the association between workplace bullying and subsequent health issues as established by various European researchers, reasonably, Americans are also facing health issues because of workplace bullying. In turn, while United States government agencies have documented the stress related to the United States workplace, and United States researchers have considered the extent of workplace bullying in the country, United States researchers could expand their scope to consider the human frailties advanced by Freud, relating stress to civilizational conditions. A consideration of regulations and protecting health would be a more holistic approach to creating a civilized solution to workplace bullying for United States workers.

## **Purpose Statement**

Based on an initial reflection of the different approaches scholars take in researching workplace bullying – the European approach which leans toward protecting human frailty, and the United States approach which leans to strengthening regulation – this content analysis considered the abstracts of 60 articles on workplace bullying. Thirty articles were from United States scholars and thirty articles were from European scholars. This comparative analysis considered European and United States perspectives in studying workplace bullying. Just as the United States has a set of 50 states, with different populations and legislative functions; Europe has 50 countries with different populations and legislative functions. In turn, this comparison might inspire an expanded scope in United States research regarding workplace bullying.

## **Significance**

As a United States researcher studying workplace bullying, I recognize previous work has focused on the cost to organizations, and the impact on different populations and potential solutions (Baillien & De Witte, 2009; Hollis, 2016; Hollis, 2016a; Tehrani, 2013). Other American scholars have called for stronger regulations such as status-free legal protection from workplace harassment and aggression (Yamada, 1999), or studied the cost to organizations (McTernan, Dollard & LaMontagne, 2013; Murray, 2009). American scholarship that further incorporates the health and wellness detriments of workplace bullying could influence policy to protect workers in the United States by considering human frailty, health, and wellness. Such a focus on workplace bullying research could advance the need to protect American workers' human frailty just as European researchers have influenced policy to protect European workers' human frailty.

## **Data Collection**

The 60 articles were collected from EBSCO Host, ProQuest, Researchgate, and academia.edu using “workplace bullying” as the keyword in the query. The articles in the analysis were published between 2000- 2017. United States researchers and European researchers wrote the articles that were the subject of this content analysis. The abstracts from these articles, thirty from European researchers and thirty from United States researchers, were used to support the content analysis. The analysis included coding keywords from the problem statement, purpose statement, or findings discussed in the abstracts. The key phrases were highlighted and then coded for themes to determine if there was in fact a different focus or scope in studying workplace bullying between European researchers and United States researchers.

## Research method

This study utilized data sampling, data reduction, and data analysis as part of Krippendorff's (1980) content analysis procedures. First, I used a purposed collection of data, the articles focusing on workplace bullying from United States and European authors. The data reduction phase involved excluding articles outside the stated scope. As the scope of this analysis was to compare European and United States research, studies from Japan, Canada, Australia, and Nigeria were excluded. The data analysis phases included highlighting common phrases in the abstracts of each article that lead to an open coding process that yielded the emergent themes (Creswell, 2014).

## Research question

European and United States scholars potentially have different approaches in studying workplace bullying. To address this potential difference, the following research question was developed for this content analysis. How does European and United States research on workplace bullying potentially differ in the consideration of human frailty and regulation in the scope of the respective studies?

## Findings

The review of keywords in abstracts of sixty articles showed a difference in the approach taken by United States researchers and European researchers who focused on workplace bullying. As the topic involved the workplace, the keyword "organization" was a primary theme. However, based on this content analysis, United States researchers focused on the "organization" three times more often than did European researchers. See Table 1.

*Table 1: Comparative analysis of keywords between United States and European studies on workplace bullying*

<b>United States: n=141 keywords</b>	<b>Europe: n=130 keywords</b>
76 – Organizational	23 – Organizational
25 – Harassment	1 – Harassment
21 – Protected Class (demographics)	3 – Demographics
9 – Psychological/Emotional	45 – Psychological
10 – Health/Stress	37 – Health/Sleep
	21 – Suicide Ideation/Depression

United States and European research on workplace bullying shared a common theme of the organization being a salient focus of the research. The power dynamics and policies within organizations can support or deter aggressive workplace behaviors. In other words, the very organizational structures for work which emerge from creation of a

civilization are at the root of the workplace bullying problem. The social structure of an organization would presumably protect humans from nature, from poverty, from illness; yet, as Freud comments, such civilized structures control people's self-determination, and they result in the power struggle which gives rise to anxiety and aggression between workers.

Conversely, those who are self-employed, entrepreneurs, are striving to escape such contentious and presumably civilized work structures to instead forge a path guided by their own vision. See Table 2 for a sample of phrases from United States and European research focusing on the organization.

Table 2: *Theme #1: Organization (United States and European)*

US: "organizational culture can be both indirectly and directly related to workplace bullying" (Pheko, Monteiro, & Segopolo, 2017, p. 1).

US: "working in various organizations completed a questionnaire about their bullying experiences, working environments, and occupational outcomes. (Goodboy, Martin, Knight, & Long, 2017, p. 24).

EU: "yielding severe consequences for both the individual and the organisation" (Broeck, Baillien, & Witte, 2011. p. 40).

EU: "The article concludes by mentioning the likely legal and economic implications for Organisations and society" (Sullivan, 2010, p. 1).

As observed in Table 1, United States researchers assign more attention to the lack of legislation to protect employees from workplace bullying. In contrast, some European countries have already prohibited "harassment morale" (EU-OSHA 2009). Consequently, the existence of European legislation may have influenced how Europeans focus on workplace bullying. As the Europeans may have resolved a lack of regulation within their civilization, perhaps the focus then turned to the human frailty that is left unprotected at work through bullying.

Two other themes emerged from the United States content analysis. Theme #2 was "legal issues." Theme #3 was "protected class," referring to the protected classes found in Title VII Civil Rights legislation. This focus can be the attempt to address the "inadequacy of the regulations" (Freud & Strachey, 1991, p. 15).



Table 3: *United States: Theme #2- Legal Issues*

“There is a business case for workplace bullying legislation” (Yamada, 2009, p. 1).

“Striking finding was that 73.3% of the cases were found in favor of the employer as the defendant” (Martin & LaVan, 2010, p. 175).

“Bullying is not illegal in the United States, whereas it is illegal in many other countries” (Vega & Comer, 2004, p. 183).

American researchers also focused on how some people who have historically been disenfranchised and disempowered were more likely to face workplace bullying. Aligning with the litigious focus in some United States research, if a savvy target can tie workplace bullying to national Civil Rights legislation, that target might be able to seek relief through legal action. The theme of protected class (race, gender, disability) was essentially a subset of the legal arguments made by United States researchers to develop legislative protections against workplace bullying. See Table 4.

Table 4 *United States: Theme #3 - Protected Class*

“While a general form of bullying has been focused on by contemporary scholars, specific types of bullying (racist bullying and homophobic bullying) have not well been studied” (Misawa, 2010, p 7).

“Demographic minority groups are more likely to be victims of workplace injustice” (Okechukwu, Souza, Davis & de Castro, 2014, p. 573).

“Approximately 41% of those with disabilities face workplace bullying despite United States protections for those with disabilities” (Bernard, 2017, p. 41).

The European researchers, while embracing the organizational dynamics that yield workplace bullying, are more likely than United States researchers to associate workplace bullying with health issues such as psychological distress, depression, suicide, and general health issues. Table 5, Table 6, and Table 7 are the European themes that relate workplace bullying to health problems.

Table 5: *Europe: Theme #2 Psychological*

“Relationship between workplace bullying and physical and mental strain” (Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2015, p 147).

“Psychological symptoms are also associated with subsequent exposure to teasing” (Nielsen, Magarey, Gjerstad, & Einarsen, 2014, p. 2).

“The findings show that exposure to bullying is associated with both job-related and health- and well-being-related outcomes, such as mental and physical health problems, symptoms of post-traumatic stress” (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012, p. 309).

In addition to considering general psychological damage, European researchers specifically considered suicidal ideation and depression in relationship to workplace bullying. Table 6 offers a sample of statements that represent this emerging theme.

Table 6: *Europe: Theme #3 Suicide/ Depression*

“Nurse committed suicide over HSE probe” (Fallon, 2009, p. 4).

“Workplace bullying and subsequent mental health in the form of anxiety and depression with a time lag of five years “(Einarsen & Nielsen, 2015, p. 131).

“Workplace bullying may be a precursor to suicidal ideation, whereas suicidal ideation seems to have no impact on subsequent risk of being bullied “(Nielsen, Notelets, & Einarsen, 2015, p. 105).

Examining human frailty within these work structures, European researchers continued with a reflection on the health and wellness issues for targets facing workplace bullying. Sleep disorders were among the sickness leave and health issues addressed by researchers in this fourth European theme. See Table 7.

Table 7: *Europe: Theme #4 Health/Sleep*

“In this study, these consequences were examined prospectively by focusing on sickness absence in hospital staff “(Kaimuki, Elvina, & Vaster, 2000, p. 565).

“All but one study found that exposure to workplace bullying was associated with increased risk of sickness absence” (Nielsen, Indre Gard & Everland, 2016, p. 1).

“The associations between workplace bullying and subsequent sleep problems are poorly understood” (Lallukka, Rahkonen, & Lahelma, 2011, p. 204).

## Discussion

“The first requisite of civilization, therefore, is that of justice –that is, the assurance that a law once made will not be broken in favour of an individual” (Freud & Strachey, 1991, p. 21). However, the tension between such civilized justice and the protection of human frailty remains in conflict, as Freud commented that such laws, based on the majority “implies nothing as to the ethical value of such a law” (Freud & Strachey, 1991, p. 21). The structure of civilization can and has created entities that unjustly discount the human frailty of those outside the majority, those without the same power or resources as the majority.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) consider workplace bullying, violence, and aggression as a serious threat to employees’ health and wellness. Norway, France, Germany, Ireland, Belgium, and Poland are some of the countries that have codified the problem and declared workplace aggression to be an illegal threat that hurts workers (EU-OSHA, 2009). While many European countries have passed legislation, the emphasis through EU-OSHA (2009) is to protect the health and wellness of European employees. Such organizations can be viewed as part of a growing majority in Europe developing structures to protect human frailty, to redefine what is just within the civilized structures of work.

In comparison, by relying on the 1964 Civil Rights legislation and Title VII to protect United States workers from harassment, the United States may fall short in providing protection for anyone facing workplace aggression (Yamada, 1999). With advances in technology, such workplace aggression and cyberbullying have spread to the Internet and social media spaces, in turn bringing aggression into the target’s private space (Hollis, 2016c). Nonetheless, while such anti-discrimination protections are needed to provide equal access and opportunity (Hollis, 1998), United States researchers face a gap in the literature about how workplace bullying jeopardizes the health and wellness of United States workers. In other words, the American focus addresses the lacking regulations but would need to further consider how such lacking regulations in the American civilization further compromise American human frailty.

An American psychiatrist and anthropologist, Carroll Brodsky (1976), is often considered the first to have studied workplace bullying in his book, *The Harassed Worker*, a work that brought little attention at the time it was written. However, in the late 1980s, Northern Europeans advanced the field of workplace bullying and harassment with a series of studies that caught the attention of researchers in Britain, Germany, Australia, and Southern Europe. In later years, about the first decade of the 2000s, United States researchers started examining harassment and aggression which fell outside of federal regulations (Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010).

Within this timeline, European researchers have lead the field in addressing workplace bullying and aggression; hence, many European countries have developed regulations to forbid such workplace bullying and aggression. As a result, European researchers are advanced, within Freud's context; the Europeans are way ahead in tackling the "lacking regulations" and making major strides in addressing the human frailty that is subject to injury within civilized work structures. In comparison, since 2014, while the United States has some laws in Tennessee, Utah, Minnesota, and California that address workplace bullying, the United States is still grappling with the lacking regulations and is only now beginning a focus on how workplace bullying challenges human frailty.

This brief comparative content analysis of research studies on workplace bullying has highlighted a civilizational disparity: the European focus is on health and the United States focus is on litigious action. It is hoped that these findings will help push forward the conversation on workplace bullying. How should cultures further consider and address workplace bullying, from both a health perspective and a legal one, as it is seen to be an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of a civilized society?

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