A Lifestyle Perspective on Potential Victims of Workplace Harassment

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Abstract

Previous research findings on work harassment and personality do not answer the question of how the lifestyle construct (as conceptualized by Alfred Adler) is related to the individual's experience of workplace harassment. To assess the dynamics of workplace harassment and lifestyle, the BASIS-A Inventory (Wheeler, Kern, & Curlette, 1993), Work Harassment Scale (WHS; Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Back, 1992), and a demographic survey were administered to a sample of 320 employees from 3 organizations located in a metropolitan area of Lithuania. Logistic regression analysis was performed. Participants were assigned to one of two groups based on WHS scores: lower work harassment group (N = 195) and higher work harassment group (N = 109). Results of a logistic regression analysis of the data set indicated that 3 of the 5 major scales of the BASIS-A Inventory—Taking Charge, Wanting Recognition, and Being Cautious—were significantly related to work harassment as reported by employees on the WHS. Discussions and conclusions support some of the other research findings related to personality attributes of the potential victim but provide additional information indicating that positive lifestyle attributes may also become problematic when the individual is placed in a stressful work environment.

Keywords: lifestyle, personality, potential victim, work harassment, work task

Work (or one's occupation) was described by Adler (1927/1970) as one of the major life tasks. A successfully established work task usually refers to satisfaction with work and a good working atmosphere, which often interfere with relations with colleagues (Ferguson, 2003; Stone, 2007). Adler (1931/1958) indicated that the choice of an occupation by the individual was connected to one's lifestyle and that a child's choice of an occupation was a reflection of his or her whole style of life.

The term lifestyle may be viewed as similar to what other theorists would refer to as personality but with additional implications from an Adlerian perspective. Adler viewed the lifestyle as teleological and holistic. Though there are a number of more eloquently described definitions for lifestyle in the literature, the term lifestyle is conceptualized for this article as an organized set of beliefs and emotions that are purposeful in nature and which the individual employs to solve the three major tasks of life.

Though Adler considered the task of work as one of the three most important tasks of life and one's lifestyle as extremely important in understanding...
the approach to this life task, research studies based on the principles of Individual Psychology and organizational variables related to one's occupation are underrepresented in the literature. Despite several previous articles and empirical studies related to the aspects of work from an Individual Psychology perspective there have been no studies on work harassment as it relates to an Adlerian perspective of personality, or more specifically to the lifestyle of a person (Stone, 2007; Matheny, Gfroerer, & Harris, 2000; Morris-Conley & Kern, 2003). We believe that this study is significant in that the lifestyle of an individual is unique and explains the various ways the person relates in various social, intimate, and in this case, work settings. This study has value by specifically investigating the interplay of individual lifestyle dynamics related to a specific stressful dynamic of workplace harassment.

**Personality and Work Harassment**

The term *work harassment*, presented by the researcher Björkqvist, is defined as "repeated activities, with the aim of bringing mental (but sometimes also physical) pain, and directed toward one or more individuals who, for one reason or another, are not able to defend themselves" (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Back, 1994, p. 173). The phenomenon has been the focus of various studies since the 1980s when a Swedish scientist and therapist Heinz Leymann began his pioneering work (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). Work harassment usually leads to job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, sickness, or even suicide (Astrauskaite, 2009; Astrauskaite, Perminas, & Kern, 2010; Einarsen, 2003; Leymann, 1996). From the examples of the negative consequences related to workplace harassment, one could conclude that the phenomenon is a critical issue for organizations to address.

In the previous studies, researchers identified personality as a contributing variable related to harassment (Glasø, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2007; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). Although Leymann believed that a change in personality is a consequence of work harassment, other researchers claim that individuals with certain types of personality attributes are more likely to become victims of harassment (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Leymann, 1996). In fact it appears at times that some studies seem to put the blame on the potential victim versus the problematic work setting.

For example, some researchers state that some victims of work harassment are more neurotic, more sensitive, and express more suspicion and anger (Balducci, Alfano, & Fraccaroli, 2009; Gandolfo, 1995; Vartia, 1996). Einarsen claims that victims of harassment may lack self-confidence and are more anxious in social situations (Einarsen et al., 1994). Brodsky (1976)
believed that the victims are humorless and somewhat naïve. Despite these findings on harassment and personality, additional studies are warranted that would identify positive as well as negative personality attributes of the possible victim of workplace harassment from different theoretical perspectives.

The Present Study

The present study is a part of a broader research project financially supported by the Research Council of Lithuania. The main goal of the present study was to investigate the relationship of lifestyle attributes as measured by the Basic Adlerian Scales for Interpersonal Success–Adult form (BASIS-A Inventory; Wheeler, Kern, & Curlette, 1993) and work harassment as measured by the Work Harassment Scale (WHS; Björkqvist et al., 1992). Thus, the main aim of the present study is to explore the specific attributes of the lifestyle that are associated with potential victims of harassment in the workplace.

Participants and Procedures

Anonymous self-report questionnaires were completed by the employees from three organizations in Lithuania. Out of the 415 distributed questionnaires, 320 were returned (77.1% response rate). The sample included 200 men and 116 women (4 did not specify gender). The mean age of employees was 39 years ($SD = 11.7$); the mean length of number of years of work experience in a current position was 4.7 years ($SD = 5.7$ months); the workload varied from 8 to 65 hours per week, and the mean workload per week was 43.7 ($SD = 7.1$). Other demographic and work profile characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Instruments

The BASIS-A Inventory. For the assessment of the lifestyle of respondents, the BASIS-A Inventory was used (Curlette, Wheeler, & Kern, 1997; Wheeler et al., 1993). The Inventory measures one's lifestyle based on perceptions of early childhood experiences (Kern, Gormley, & Curlette, 2008). The Inventory is constructed of 65 items and includes five primary scales: Belonging/Social Interest (BSI), Going Along (GA), Taking Charge (TC), Wanting Recognition (WR), and Being Cautious (BC) and five supporting scales identified as: Harshness (H), Entitlement (E), Liked by All (L), Striving for Perfection (P), and Softness (S). The Belonging/Social Interest scale measures a person's sense of community feeling. The Going Along scale
Table 1
Participants’ Demographic and Work Profile Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a partner/married</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widower</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position within the organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinate</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>82.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 320.

measures the degree to which the individual prefers to follow rules. The Taking Charge scale measures the tendencies of an individual who prefers to tell others what to do. The Wanting Recognition scale measures the importance one places on being validated by others as well as the need to feel successful. The Being Cautious scale measures how trusting an individual is in interpersonal situations (Eckstein & Kern, 2009).

None of the supporting scales of the instrument were used in this study due to the lack of information on reliability and validity issues related to the Lithuanian translation of the instrument. The BASIS-A Inventory was translated into Lithuanian, using a back-forward translation procedure. The internal consistency reliabilities of the scales were relatively high, e.g.: .82 for the scale of BSI; .79 for the scale of GA; .82 for the scale of TC; .80 for the scale of WR; and .83 for the scale of BC. The original reliability indices as presented by the authors of the BASIS-A instrument were: .86 (for BSI); .83 (for GA); .85 (for TC); .82 (for WR); and .87 (for BC) (Curlette et al., 1997; Wheeler et al., 1993). Somewhat similar results were presented in
previous studies in the United States (Peluso, Peluso, Buckner, Curlette, & Kern, 2004; Peluso, Stoltz, Belangee, Frey, & Peluso, 2010).

The Work Harassment Scale. The Work Harassment Scale was used for the assessment of work harassment (WHS; Björkqvist et al., 1992). The scale consists of 24 items measuring how often employees have been exposed to negative forms of behavior during the last 6 months. The scale measures direct and indirect forms of aggression, e.g., shouting loudly, criticizing, belittling one's opinions, refusing to hear a person, accusing, spreading malicious rumors, etc. (Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1994). The instrument was translated into the Lithuanian language, using a back-forward translation procedure. The internal consistency reliability of the WHS scale was .94. The original Cronbach's \( \alpha \) presented by the instrument's authors was .95 (Björkqvist et al., 1992).

Results

The logistic regression analysis was conducted two times to isolate the interplay of lifestyle attributes, demographics, and workplace harassment. In the logistic regression analysis the variable of work harassment was included as a binary variable; it was divided into two groups based on the mean score of work harassment. In the present study the mean score of work harassment was 10.46 (\( SD = 11.44 \)). The minimum sum score of work harassment was 0, and the maximum score was 56. The two groups of work harassment were as follows: the group of lower work harassment \( < 11 \) (\( n = 195 \)); the group of higher work harassment \( > 11 \) (\( n = 109 \)).

The first analysis included the BASIS-A scales and demographic variables, such as age, gender, marital status, and number of years of work experience. The variables of age and number of years of work experience were included in the analysis as continuous variables. Gender and marital status were included as categorical variables. In the present study, logistic regression was used because it is less sensitive to non-normal distribution of the data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). In the first analysis, number of years of work experience was the only demographic variable that significantly contributed to the prediction of work harassment. Therefore, a second logistic regression analysis including the BASIS-A scales and the number of years of work experience was performed (see Table 2).

The results of the second logistic regression analysis indicated that three scales on the BASIS-A were important in explaining potential workplace harassment (work experience, in this case, had no significant meaning). The Taking Charge (negative relationship), Wanting Recognition, and Being Cautious scales were significantly related to the work harassment scores of the sample under investigation.
Table 2
Logistic Regression Analysis: Work Harassment and Lifestyle Attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>LL</th>
<th>UL</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging/Social Interest</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going Along</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Charge</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting Recognition</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Cautious</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Experience</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagerkelke $R^2$</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $B =$ unstandardized regression coefficient; OR = odds ratio; 95.0% C.I. for EXP($B$) = 95.0% confidence interval for exponential beta; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; Nagerkelke $R^2$ = general effect size.

Discussion

The results of the second logistic regression analysis indicated that the lifestyle attributes of Taking Charge, Wanting Recognition, and Being Cautious were associated with work harassment as perceived by employees on the WHS instrument. The scale of Taking Charge was negatively related to work harassment, which means that a higher level of perceived work harassment is related to lower scores on the TC scale. The low Taking Charge finding could be indicative of an employee who lacks skills to confront, approach conflict effectively, has difficulty being direct with others interpersonally, and may be viewed as an employee who is lacking assertiveness skills in the workplace. These employees may become the victims of what Einarsen referred to in the literature as a “predatory” behavior (Einarsen, 2005). In Individual Psychology terms, this type of aggression or predatory behavior of others could be explained as striving for personal superiority at the expense of the other. This superiority dynamic seems similar in nature to the ostracized person in groups as described in a recent article in the Journal of Individual Psychology on belonging (Carter-Sowell et al., 2010).

The second finding was a positive relationship between work harassment and the Wanting Recognition scale of the BASIS-A. The positive relation between work harassment and the scale of Wanting Recognition indicates that employees who experience a higher level of work harassment
may possess lifestyle attributes in which being liked or approved by others, receiving recognition, and needing a sense of accomplishment and success are critical for them to feel accepted and valued in the workplace. Such employees may be more sensitive to disapproval by others and thereby experience higher levels of discouragement when these particular aspects of their lifestyle dynamics are not fulfilled. Therefore, if they do not receive recognition from others in the organization, they may feel harassed. In this case, the leader’s role may be very important, because for individuals who score high on Wanting Recognition, support by superiors and acknowledgment is critical for them to feel a sense of belonging (Wheeler et al., 1993). These same attributes that may seem problematic in this study, however, can be viewed as extremely important in the workplace by organizational personnel. We propose that most organizational personnel would place a high value on high-achieving employees who are sensitive to the needs of others, and respond to validation by superiors. On the other hand, people who score high on Wanting Recognition may be very ambitious and because of their success orientation may be harassed by competitive and jealous colleagues (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010).

The positive relationship between potential workplace harassment and the Being Cautious scale, as reflected in the logistic regression analysis of Table 2, supports findings by other researchers and shows that the victims of harassment may be more neurotic, oversensitized, impulsive, and may participate in high-risk behavior (Balducci et al., 2009; Gandolfo, 1995; Einarsen et al., 1994; Vartia, 1996). These individuals may take things too personally and as a result overreact to others’ words or actions (Wheeler et al., 1993). In fact, the relationship between the score of BC and work harassment seems to be the strongest in comparison with two other scales of BASIS-A, suggesting that this variable may be very important in explanation of work harassment (see Table 2).

The findings presented above appear to create a picture of the potential victim of workplace harassment as more sensitive to positive as well as negative feedback by those he or she views as exhibiting harassing behaviors or comments. The potential victim may feel discouraged and less valued in the organizational setting. The inability of the victim to cope with more stressful situations may be explained by the lifestyle attributes of the elevated Wanting Recognition and Being Cautious scales, and lower Taking Charge scale. Some of these attributes in each of these scales related to the individual’s lifestyle may have inhibited the individual during his or her growing up experience in the family from perceiving the importance of being assertive and expressing one’s needs in stressful situations when being confronted or disrespected by peers or supervisors. However, based on the arguments of Leymann (1996), individuals who experience work harassment may become
more sensitive and lack coping strategies due to the negative acts they face at work, which has little relationship to personality dynamics.

The present study is additive in that the findings, from an Individual Psychology perspective, do not totally support the possible assumption put forth in some studies that infers that the victim is to blame for being harassed. Our findings seem to indicate that the individual may sometimes be more a victim of circumstances or of the organizational dynamics surrounding workplace harassment. There is little that is pathological about wanting to be validated, successful, and sensitive to others, as reflected in the Wanting Recognition scale of the BASIS-A. In fact the majority of studies on the Wanting Recognition scale are supportive in nature related to psychological well-being (Kern et al., 2008). In addition there is no research evidence on the BASIS-A to date that has been reported on the lower Taking Charge scale as a problem in the organizational setting or other task of life proposed by Adler. The Being Cautious scale appears to be the only scale that supports the finding of other researchers of the potential victim being more discouraged or neurotic than other employees. In other words, we propose, given a workplace that is void of harassment, the lifestyle dynamics identified in this study could well be functional and productive.

The present findings appear to be a major contribution, from a lifestyle dynamics perspective, of viewing the employee who is potentially harassed in the organizational setting not as a person who creates the problem but simply as a person who is thrown into a situation that may be reflective of an organizational culture. We concur with Sperry (2009) who states that the individual employee’s response to abusiveness in a workplace setting is influenced by individual dynamics, group dynamics, and organizational dynamics. These dynamics can either foster or reduce the likelihood of mobbing (harassment) and bullying in the workplace.

**Limitations**

Despite the findings of this study, the standard concern of many research studies is sample size. Possibly a larger sample or a more diverse sample would have yielded different results. A second limitation could be that the general effect size of Nagerkelke $R^2$ is rather small (e.g., .16), however it is quite common for psychological studies. The third limitation is that the Work Harassment scale used in the study had norms that were developed on an educational sample and not a sample of employees in the organizations used in our study. The fourth limitation is related to the two groups of work harassment included in the logistic regression analysis. Based on this limitation, we propose that further studies should include the higher cut of work harassment score, in that it could explain the personality dynamics of
the victim better. The final limitation is that the present study does not answer the question of causal inference related to personality and harassment. Additional studies need to be conducted to investigate if it is the personality dynamics of the individual that increases the probability of harassment or does harassment in the workplace alter in some ways the personality dynamics of the victim? As long as there are no longitudinal or additional empirical studies on the lifestyle instrument and efforts by organizational personnel to systematically track harassment in organizations, this question remains unanswered.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, we believe that the objective assessment of the lifestyle construct may well be a valuable tool in isolating important personality dynamics of potential victims of workplace harassment. The value of the lifestyle construct is that it is embedded in a sound and comprehensive theory. Understanding the lifestyle of the individual within the organizational setting, and in particular the victim of workplace harassment, could provide human resource personnel, managers, and leaders a theoretical and research-based model to design effective interventions related to workplace harassment that may lead to higher levels of productivity in the workplace.

Our findings highlight the interplay of individual lifestyle and harassment. We suggest that some individuals may possess lifestyle dynamics that interfere with coping strategies related to workplace harassment. Based on this assumption it is proposed that organization personnel should provide a climate whereby employees can be assertive toward others when they view situations as toxic. In addition, it is suggested that human resource personnel and managers attend training to become more familiar with the workplace harassment phenomena and its impact psychologically and physically on the employee. So often, in an organization, individuals are weary of voicing their opinions and believe that workplace harassment is just something one must tolerate in the job setting. Therefore, it is critical that organizations implement some systematic procedure to monitor these phenomena much like the procedures implemented in the United States related to sexual harassment and regulations related to discrimination in the workplace.

It is possible that "perpetrators" in the organizational setting may view their behavior toward employees as a motivational tool and fail to recognize that with certain employees they in reality are discouraging versus encouraging productivity. In the present competitive work environment, coupled with the high unemployment numbers nationally and internationally, we believe that employees have less power related to expressing their displeasure with peers and superiors for fear of job loss, promotion, or being labeled as
being too sensitive or a problem employee. Some employees may tolerate mistreatment by peers and superiors versus taking an active role in resolving the problem. Of course, this approach of confronting the potential problem could be exasperated by the lifestyle dynamics of a lack of assertiveness skills, the need to be validated, and conflict avoidance behaviors, reflected in the results of this study. But if interventions by the organization could be designed to identify if there is a problem related to workplace harassment and then focus activities on teaching employees ways of responding appropriately when harassment takes place in the workplace, possibly some of the lifestyle and personality dynamics that interfere with responding could be minimized.

We propose that the victim of workplace harassment not be viewed as the individual who nurtures or increases the harassment by others in the workplace. We propose to reframe the victim of harassment more in terms that the lifestyle dynamics that an individual brings to the workplace are of high value, but it is the harassing situation in the organization that needs to be addressed as well as providing the victim with more appropriate coping skills when confronted by the harasser. As Adler proposed years ago, all behavior must be viewed within the social contexts to provide a clearer understanding of the individual and his or her particular problem situation.

For future research possibilities, we propose that a longitudinal research project be undertaken to infer the cause-and-effect relationship between the two variables of workplace harassment and personality/lifestyle. In that this is the first study related to the topic of lifestyle and harassment, we suggest that additional studies be designed to replicate these findings on other samples and other ethnic groups. We also encourage other researchers to provide additional insights related to the interplay of lifestyle dynamics and the task of work.

Authors’ Note

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References


