

# 'Ambient' bullying gives employees urge to quit

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Merely showing up to work in an environment where bullying goes on is enough to make many of us think about quitting, a new study suggests. Canadian researchers writing in the journal *Human Relations* published by SAGE, have found that nurses not bullied directly, but who worked in an environment where workplace bullying occurred, felt a stronger urge to quit than those actually being bullied. These findings on 'ambient' bullying have significant implications for organizations, as well as contributing a new statistical approach to the field.

To understand whether bullying in the work unit environment can have a negative impact on a worker's desire to remain in their organization, independent of their personal or direct experiences of workplace bullying, [organizational behaviour](#) and human resources experts from the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, Canada surveyed 357 nurses in 41 hospital units.

Their analysis of the [survey results](#) showed that targets of bullying were more likely to be thinking of leaving. They also showed a statistically significant link between working somewhere where bullying was going on and a wish to leave. Next the researchers used [statistical analysis](#) to test the relationship between turnover intention and whether an individual was experiencing bullying directly. They found that the positive relationship between work unit-level bullying and turnover intentions is stronger for those who rarely experienced direct bullying compared with those who are bullied often.

A number of previous studies have shown a strong correlation between a high staff turnover and bullying within an organization, especially when there is other employment readily available. From an organization's perspective, staff turnover is costly, and when the word gets out about bullying this can also be damaging to reputation.

The study has wider implications in the field of human resources, the authors say, because they examined a broad, varied and generalized experience of bullying. Further, because they relied on hierarchical linear modeling techniques, the researchers could accurately examine the simultaneous impacts of direct bullying and ambient bullying, showing each unique effect above and beyond that accounted for by the other (something not possible with earlier statistical techniques).

"Of particular note is the fact that we could predict turnover intentions as effectively either by whether someone was the direct target of bullying, or by how much an environment was characterized by bullying," said corresponding author, Marjan Houshmand. "This is potentially interesting because we tend to assume that direct, personal experiences should be more influential upon employees than indirect experiences only witnessed or heard about in a second-hand fashion. Yet our study identifies a case where direct and indirect experiences have a similarly strong relationship to turnover intentions."

The authors theorize that although individuals may experience moral indignation at others being bullied, it is perceived as being even more unfair when others are bullied and they are not. The work contributes to a growing area of human relations study, which looks at how third party experiences affect individuals within organizations.

"This work provides insight into the bullying targets' understanding of their experiences and it challenges the 'passive' view of workplace bullying that characterizes the targets of bullying as hapless victims who

are too vulnerable and weak to fight their bullies," Houshmand suggests. "Instead, the targets of bullying see 'escaping' their own and other people's bullies as a means to create turmoil and disrupt the organization as an act of defiance."

**More information:** *Human Relations* June 29 2012

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