

Psychological Bullying in Environmental Agency of Central Bengkulu Regency: A Stress-Model Transactional and Coping

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ABSTRACT

Workplace psychological bullying remains a significant concern, as the phenomenon in the Environmental Agency of Central Bengkulu Regency. Despite Indonesia's low rates of daily workplace stress, 16% of workers report experiencing psychological bullying, negatively impacting mental health and job performance. The tragic case of Dr. Aulia Risma Lestari exemplifies the severe consequences of such bullying, including suicide. The study aims to identify the various forms of psychological bullying encountered by civil servants and the coping strategies they employ. Applying Lazarus and Folkman's *Transactional Model of Stress*, this research analyses how individuals perceive and respond to stressors associated with psychological bullying. A mixed-method approach was used, combining quantitative data from questionnaires completed by 28 civil servants with qualitative insights from comprehensive interviews. The findings reveal that verbal abuse, excessive workloads, neglect, and humiliating pranks are prevalent forms of bullying. The coping strategies employed include problem-focused approaches, such as planful problem-solving and seeking social support, alongside less effective emotion-focused strategies like avoidance. The study underscores the need for robust organizational policies to address psychological bullying and support affected public servants by promoting a more conducive work environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia exhibits a relatively low percentage of workers experiencing daily stress compared to global and Southeast Asian averages. Globally, Indonesia ranks 138th out of 141 countries and holds the lowest position among nine Southeast Asian nations, with only 16% of workers falling into this category [1]. While this might seem like positive news for the majority of Indonesians, attention must still be paid to the 16% who report stress, as workplace stress is closely linked to ongoing psychological bullying, which continues to have a detrimental impact on workers' mental health and performance across the country.

One of the most notable cases of workplace psychological bullying in Indonesia, particularly in the medical field, was the death of Dr. Aulia Risma Lestari. It was suspected that the young doctor took her own life due to the psychological bullying she endured while pursuing her anesthesiology specialisation at Diponegoro University and Karyadi Hospital. Preliminary investigations by the Indonesia Police Department revealed that Dr. Aulia faced severe mental pressure from senior doctors during her training, which ultimately led her to suicide.

The case underscores the severe consequences of psychological bullying, including the risk of death. Psychological bullying can result in severe mental health disorders. Victims often feel isolated and lack adequate social support, thus increasing their risk of suicide [2]. The case also illustrates that psychological bullying can affect everyone, regardless of their profession or the prestige associated with their job. Moreover, psychological bullying can occur in any work environment, including government institutions. For instance, psychological bullying may affect civil servants at the Environmental Agency of Central Bengkulu Regency. It can manifest in various harmful actions, such as verbal abuse, defamation, neglect, excessive workload, threats, and pranks.

Verbal abuse and other harmful behaviours can cause long-term damage, mainly to brain function and mental health [3]. Here, verbal abuse often takes the form of disrespectful language or scoffing directed at the victim. Neglect and pranks are additional forms of bullying in the workplace [4]. Neglect typically involves ignoring an individual's contributions, whether by head officers or colleagues, while pranks are designed to humiliate the employee in front of others. The pranks are often disguised as "humour" or "just a joke," but the bullies carry an underlying intent to demean. It causes the victim to experience discomfort or even psychological trauma [5]. Conway (2018) stated psychological bullying can also arise from defamation, in which bullies spread false information about the victims at work. It can lead to decreased productivity and worsen the mental health of the victims [6].

Psychological bullying can also take the form of excessive workloads and threats [7]. Assigning tasks that reach an individual's job description is considered a form of bullying. Threats are particularly harmful because they involve an imbalance of power between the bullies and victims. For example, a chief may intimidate staff with the threat of demotion when they fail to comply with unethical requests.

The forms of psychological bullying create significant stress for employees, which negatively impacts their job performance and mental well-being. Lazarus and Folkman explain that stress experienced by employees can have both physical and psychological consequences [8]. Stress arises when individuals perceive a situation, such as psychological bullying, as a threat. In response, victims use various strategies to deal with stress, a process known in psychology as coping [9].

According to the transactional model of stress, coping strategies can be divided into two categories: 1) problem-focused coping (direct action) and 2) emotion-focused coping

(palliative response). The two approaches differ in their primary focus and how individuals manage their stress. Coping-focused problems involve taking direct action to resolve the issue, while coping-focused-emotion emphasises managing the emotional stress response [8].

A detailed understanding of the main elements of the transactional stress model allows the researcher to take two critical steps in this study. First, the researcher identifies the forms of psychological bullying experienced by civil servants at the Environmental Agency of Central Bengkulu Regency. Second, the theory enables the investigation of government workers' coping strategies to mitigate bullying stress.

2. METHOD

This study applied a mixed-method approach by integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies to achieve a more comprehensive and enriched dataset [10]. The use of mixed methods, as recommended by Clark and Ivankova (2016), allows for a deeper understanding by combining the strengths of both approaches [11]. The quantitative data were collected through the distribution of questionnaires to 28 civil servants at the Environmental Agency of Central Bengkulu Regency across five different work divisions.

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring participants met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives [12]. As Brough (2018) emphasizes, this approach helps to enhance the representativeness and relevance of the dataset in applied psychology research [13]. The workers' responses were organized into two tables, following a model suggested by Sugiyono, which was adapted to suit the specific needs of this study [14]. Then, the data were analyzed using nominal scales. It enables the calculation of respondent percentages within various categories, as outlined by Stanley Smith Stevens [15]. Stevens also provided formulas for calculating the percentages within categories related to forms of psychological bullying and coping strategies employed by public servants.

The questionnaires were structured into two primary sections. The first section categorized six distinct forms of psychological bullying: verbal abuse, defamation, neglect, excessive workload, threats, and pranks [4] [16] [17] [18]. The second section classified two broad coping strategies civil servants employ to manage stress arising from workplace bullying. The strategies were divided into problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Here, problem-focused coping strategies included planful problem solving, confrontational coping, and seeking social support. Conversely, emotion-focused coping strategies comprised positive reappraisal, accepting responsibility, self-regulation, distancing, and avoidance [9] [19]. Categorizing coping strategies into problem-focused and emotion-focused types helps distinguish between direct responses to reduce stressors and psychological adjustments that manage emotional responses.

The two sections served as instruments to identify civil servants' coping mechanisms in response to psychological bullying. Additionally, qualitative data were collected by conducting comprehensive interviews guided by a set of structured questions designed by the framework provided by Miles and Huberman [10]. Flick (2018) points out that interviews in qualitative research offer a nuanced perspective and provide rich, context-specific insights that complement quantitative data [20]. The interviews were selectively conducted with individuals capable of giving detailed and representative accounts of their experiences.

This qualitative analysis enhanced the depth and context of the study's findings, offering insights that numerical data alone could not fully capture [14]. This aligns with Brough's (2018) argument that mixed-method designs provide a more holistic

understanding of complex issues, especially when integrating subjective experiences through qualitative data [13]. Thus, employing a well-rounded research design in data collection proves crucial [21]. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study offers a holistic understanding of the impacts of psychological bullying and the various coping strategies employed by civil servants to mitigate stress.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study elaborates on the outcomes of a questionnaire distributed to 28 employees across five distinct sectors. The findings indicate a variety of psychological bullying forms dealt with by the respondents. They are also assessed with a nominal scale. A detailed presentation of the results is provided in the table below.

Table 1. Results of the Questionnaire on Forms of Psychological Bullying

Form of Psychological Bullying	Responses (Yes)	Percentage (%)	Responses (No)	Percentage (%)
Verbal Abuse	12	42.86	16	57.14
Defamation	10	35.71	18	64.29
Neglect	8	28.57	20	71.43
Excessive Workload	15	53.57	13	46.43
Threats	9	32.14	19	67.86
Pranks	7	25.00	21	75.00

Table 1 presents data indicating that all six forms of psychological bullying were reported by a subset of respondents, albeit with varying frequencies. Notably, verbal abuse was identified as a prevalent form of bullying, with 12 out of 28 respondents (42.86%) acknowledging its occurrence. In contrast, 57.14% of respondents reported not experiencing such treatment. The act of defamation, defined as the dissemination of false information, was acknowledged by ten respondents (35.71%), while 64.29% (18 respondents) affirmed that they had not encountered this behavior. Furthermore, neglect was reported by eight respondents (28.57%), with the majority (71.43%, or 20 respondents) indicating they had not been affected by this form of bullying.

Interestingly, excessive workload emerged as the most frequently reported form of psychological bullying, with 15 respondents (53.57%) indicating that they had been subjected to unreasonable demands. Conversely, 13 respondents (46.43%) reported no such experience. Psychological threats were recognized by nine respondents (32.14%), while 67.86% (19 respondents) claimed they had not faced this issue. Lastly, seven respondents (25%) acknowledged pranks aimed at humiliation, with the majority (75% or 21 respondents) reporting no experience with such behavior.

A detailed breakdown of the responses is summarised in Table 1, which highlights the proportion of participants who experienced each form of psychological bullying, as well as those who did not. These results provide valuable insight into the prevalence of different bullying behaviors across various sectors, suggesting that while some forms of bullying, like excessive workload, are more common, others, such as pranks, are less frequently encountered.

Additionally, this study analyses the results of a questionnaire focusing on the coping strategies employed by 28 government officers across five different sectors in response to psychological bullying. The findings are illustrated in the subsequent table.

Table 2. Results of the Questionnaire on Civil Servant Coping Strategies

Coping strategy	Responses (Yes)	Percentage (%)	Responses (No)	Percentage (%)
Coping focused-problem Strategy				
Playful problem solving	18	64.29	10	35.71
Confrontative coping	14	50.00	14	50.00
Seeking social support	20	71.43	8	28.57
Coping focused-emotion strategy				
Positive reappraisal	17	60.71	11	39.29
Accepting responsibility	12	42.86	16	57.14
Self-control	15	53.57	13	46.43
Distancing	11	39.29	17	60.71
Escape-avoidance	9	32.14	19	67.86

Table 2 indicates that 18 respondents (64.29%) reported utilizing playful problem-solving strategies, characterized by organized planning and implementing actions to address challenges. The approach is efficient in situations involving excessive workload or verbal abuse, in which concrete solutions are sought. Furthermore, 14 respondents (50%) indicated using confrontative coping strategies, which involve confrontation of the bullying source. The individuals actively address the bullying behaviors exhibited by their bullies. Contrarily, seeking social support emerged as the predominant strategy. In this case, 20 respondents (71.43%) expressed a tendency to solicit assistance from coworkers, family, or friends as a means of coping with bullying, especially in emotionally charged circumstances.

The remaining data pertain to emotion-focused coping strategies. By Table 2, 17 respondents (60.71%) used positive reappraisal strategies to reinterpret negative experiences positively or strived to extract valuable lessons from adversities. Additionally, 12 respondents (42.86%) acknowledged employing accepting responsibility strategies, demonstrating accountability for actions taken against bullying. Subsequently, 15 respondents (53.57%) utilized self-control strategies to regulate impulsive emotional responses to bullying incidents, such as verbal abuse and threats. Furthermore, 11 respondents (39.29%) indicated practicing distancing strategies by taking emotional distance from the situation and attempting to detach psychologically from the source of stress. Lastly, escape-avoidance strategies were adopted by nine respondents (32.14%). They tended to avoid direct engagement with the problem, such as neglect or pranks.

The predominance of problem-focused strategies, particularly seeking social support and playful problem solving, suggests a proactive approach to managing workplace stressors. Additionally, using emotional coping strategies, such as positive reappraisal and self-control, indicates a robust capacity for resilience among the respondents.

The research also incorporated comprehensive interviews that aimed at exploring employees' experiences of psychological bullying and their coping strategies. The interviews focused on three primary dimensions: experiences of bullying, its impact on employees' performance and mental health, and the coping strategies employed. The responses highlighting bullying experiences are reflected in the following informants' statements:

"I often feel ignored by my manager, especially when I share my ideas or reports. It makes me feel like I don't matter, especially when they throw out snarky comments that make me feel unappreciated." – Informant 1.

"I often find myself the topic of gossip among some coworkers. It makes me uncomfortable and isolated, and many rumors aren't true." – Informant 2.

"My supervisors regularly threaten me about finishing tasks on time. It puts a lot of pressure on me and makes me anxious about my job security and whether I might get relocated." – Informant 3.

"I've been the victim of pranks from coworkers before. One time, I was tricked into thinking my boss wanted to see me, but it turned out to be a joke. It was humiliating and happened more than once." – Informant 4.

The interviews above reveal a detrimental workplace environment characterized by psychological bullying and a notable absence of support. Informant 1 feels ignored by his manager and underestimated by sarcastic remarks. Both adversely affect the staff's sense of self-worth and motivation. Informant 2 experiences discomfort and isolation due to workplace gossip, undermining team cohesion. The dynamics foster an overarching atmosphere of distrust and disengagement among employees. Moreover, Informant 3 reports heightened anxiety stemming from persistent threats regarding task completion. It negatively impacts her job security and overall morale. Informant 4 recounts being subjected to humiliating pranks that erode trust among colleagues.

The subsequent aspect discussed during the interviews pertains to the influence of bullying on employees' performance and mental health. Below are the informants' responses:

"Dealing with bullying has shaken my self-confidence. I've started doubting my skills because of how my bosses treat me." – Informant 1.

"Every time I walk into the office, I feel anxious because I'm worried about the latest gossip. I think it's affecting my work since I'm so focused on what others might think of me." – Informant 2.

"After work, I'm often physically and mentally drained. My ability to focus on important tasks has taken a hit because of it." – Informant 3.

"I'm always feeling rushed with tight deadlines, which makes it hard to do my best work." – Informant 4.

The interviews provide critical insights into the detrimental effects of workplace bullying on employee performance and mental health. Informant 1 expresses that the pervasive nature of bullying has severely undermined their self-confidence, leading to self-doubt regarding their professional abilities. This situation is stated by Informant 2, who experiences acute anxiety upon entering the workplace, primarily due to the pervasive gossip that distracts from his work and undermines his focus. Additionally, Informant 3 describes the exhausting impact of bullying, noting that her physical and mental fatigue severely limits her capacity to concentrate on critical tasks. Informant 4 adds that the pressure of rigid deadlines impedes her capacity to deliver high-quality work.

Lastly, the interviews addressed the coping strategies employed to alleviate stress stemming from psychological bullying. The informants summarised their approaches as follows:

"I usually talk about my worries with coworkers I trust. Getting support from them helps. I also try to keep busy at work to distract myself, but I don't share my problems on social media." – Informant 1.

"To deal with the stress from work, I often just pretend it doesn't bother me and focus on my tasks. I also look for entertainment on social media to forget about the office drama for a bit."
– Informant 2.

"I try to take my work one step at a time, and if I'm struggling, I'll ask my coworkers for help."
– Informant 3.

"I talk more about my work problems with my family now. I no longer trust many people at work or social media." – Informant 4.

Based on the results of the interviews above, Informant 1 highlights the importance of seeking support from trusted colleagues. It indicates that open discussions about concerns serve as a valuable source of relief. They also strive to remain engaged with their tasks as a distraction, consciously refraining from discussing their issues on social media. On the other hand, Informant 2 conducts a more passive approach by pretending that the bullying does not affect him while seeking temporary relief through entertainment on social platforms. Meanwhile, Informant 3 conducts a structured approach to managing her workload by accomplishing tasks step by step and seeking assistance from colleagues when necessary. Informant 4 feels more comfortable confiding in family members about her difficulties than with colleagues or online platforms.

The findings highlight the prevalence of various forms of workplace bullying, such as verbal abuse, defamation, neglect, excessive workload, threats, and humiliating pranks. They align with previous research, which has consistently shown that workplace bullying poses a severe threat to employee well-being and performance. For example, the significant frequency of excessive workload reported in this study (53.57%) mirrors the findings of [7], who identified high job demands as a critical factor in predicting mental health issues in workplace bullying situations. Their study emphasized how an imbalance in job control and demands can intensify the psychological strain experienced by employees, further validating the significance of excessive workload as a form of bullying.

In addition to workload issues, verbal abuse (42.86%) and defamation (35.71%) were among the most frequently reported forms of psychological bullying. The behaviors can have long-lasting psychological effects, as highlighted in [17], who conducted a systematic review on the longitudinal consequences of workplace bullying. Their work indicates that exposure to bullying not only affects employees' immediate mental health but can lead to chronic stress, depression, and anxiety over time, which is consistent with the adverse outcomes reported by respondents in this study. Furthermore, it supports the findings of [22], who argued that laissez-faire leadership styles often contribute to the development of job insecurity and further exacerbate the effects of bullying. The high prevalence of verbal abuse and defamation in this study may reflect organizational weaknesses, such as poor leadership or a lack of effective management structures, which enable bullying behaviors to persist.

The coping strategies employed by respondents demonstrate various approaches to managing bullying. Problem-focused strategies, such as planful problem-solving (64.29%) and confrontative coping (50%), indicate that many staff take a proactive approach by developing structured plans or directly confronting the bully. These findings are consistent with [23], who found that human resource professionals globally recognize the importance of direct interventions, such as improving workplace policies and supporting employees in addressing bullying incidents. Moreover, Neall & Tuckey (2021) emphasize organizational justice, which is crucial in how employees perceive and respond to bullying [24]. A sense of fairness and the availability of formal mechanisms to address complaints can empower government workers to take action, as seen in the use of confrontative coping in this study.

Emotion-focused strategies, including seeking social support (71.43%) and positive reappraisal (60.71%), were also prevalent among respondents. The two strategies emphasize the importance of interpersonal networks, aligning with [4], who highlighted that social support could mediate the impact of bullying on mental health. Additionally, inclusive leadership can foster psychological safety, enhance employees' self-esteem, mitigate the adverse effects of bullying, and encourage adaptive coping strategies [25]. Both studies showed that perceived social support can act as a protective factor, reducing the psychological damage caused by bullying, particularly in environments where victims may not feel safe confronting the issue directly.

However, some respondents in this study resorted to less effective coping mechanisms, such as escape avoidance (32.14%) and emotional distancing (39.29%). Both strategies provide temporary relief but are associated with poorer long-term outcomes, as they do not address the root causes of the problem. Employees who engage in avoidance behaviors tend to experience higher levels of stress and anxiety over time. The strategy can ultimately diminish their overall mental health [26]. Similarly, in her analysis of workplace power dynamics, she noted that avoidance strategies may perpetuate a cycle of control and coercion in environments where corporate psychopaths or abusive leaders are involved [27]. This finding highlights the need for organizations to implement more robust support systems to empower employees and reduce the prevalence of avoidance-based coping strategies.

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample of 28 respondents, which may not fully capture the diversity of workplace bullying experiences. This aligns with the research of [18], who emphasized the importance of understanding bullying from broader cultural and organizational contexts. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported questionnaires presents the risk of response bias, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research should aim to include more extensive and more diverse samples, as suggested by Borualogo (2024), who studied the impact of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying on subjective well-being in Indonesia. Their research highlights the need for longitudinal studies to explore how different forms of bullying evolve and their long-term effects on employees' well-being and organizational outcomes [18].

Furthermore, future research should focus on how organizational culture and leadership styles influence the prevalence of workplace bullying. Studies like Conway et al. (2018) have explored pathways of job-related negative behavior, which highlights the role of toxic leadership in perpetuating bullying dynamics. Exploring the factors in greater detail could provide deeper insights into how organizations can better address and prevent bullying [6]. Moreover, workplace bullying can have far-reaching consequences, extending beyond the workplace to affect family functioning and overall life satisfaction [28]. Therefore, investigating these broader implications could further strengthen the understanding of workplace bullying and its impact on employees' lives.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing knowledge of workplace bullying by identifying its prevalence, various forms, and the coping strategies employees employ. It provides a foundation for developing more effective organizational interventions and anti-bullying policies, as well as encouraging future research on the long-term effects of bullying across different sectors and cultural contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

The research successfully addressed the critical questions regarding the forms of psychological bullying experienced by government employees across five distinct sectors

and the coping strategies they used. Findings reveal that excessive workload and verbal abuse are the most prevalent forms of bullying, which is consistent with existing literature on workplace stress and mental health challenges. Additionally, the proactive coping strategies adopted by many respondents—such as planful problem-solving and seeking social support—indicate a concerted effort to manage the adverse effects of bullying. However, some individuals resort to less effective avoidance strategies.

The investigation contributes to the expanding body of knowledge on workplace bullying by underscoring the significant role of organizational factors such as workload management and leadership in perpetuating or alleviating bullying behaviors. The implications of the findings are particularly relevant for organization leaders and human resource professionals who can leverage the insights to formulate more effective anti-bullying policies and foster a supportive work environment.

However, certain limitations were identified, including the relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, which presumably constrain the generalizability of the results. Future research should aim to increase sample sizes and examine the long-term effects of psychological bullying across various organizational contexts. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into the evolution of coping strategies over time and their effectiveness in mitigating the adverse outcomes associated with workplace psychological bullying.

In summary, the insights gained from the research show the dynamics of psychological bullying within the workplace by enhancing theoretical understanding and practical interventions. Ongoing exploration of this topic will further advance efforts to cultivate a more convenient and inclusive work environment.

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