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Biomarkers of psychosocial trauma in organizations: The relationship between workplace bullying and pro-inflammatory cytokines

Statement of the Problem: Workplace bullying (WB) is a potential source of psychological trauma and is considered as a serious problem in the healthcare sector. Additionally, WB may have detrimental consequences for both the workers (e.g., clinical depression/anxiety, cardiovascular disease) and the organization (e.g., poor quality of care, sickness absences). Therefore, given the relevance of workplace bullying, the purpose of this study is to investigate the association between WB and serum levels of a possible biomarker of stress, namely interleukin 17 (IL-17), a pro-inflammatory cytokine that may contribute to chronic inflammation. Indeed, according to the allostatic load model, inflammation may play a role in the stress process, since the exposure to chronic or repeated stressful situations (such as WB) may lead to the sustained activation of primary mediators, including pro/anti-inflammatory cytokines. This, in turn, may lead to secondary mediators (e.g., C-reactive protein) and, in the long run, to physical (e.g., cardiovascular disease) or psychological (e.g., depression) diseases.

Methodology: The study was conducted in an Italian healthcare organization. Nurses and doctors (N=98) completed a self-report questionnaire (Cronbach's alpha=0.84) aimed at determining WB. Moreover, participants underwent a clinical interview, followed by a blood sample withdrawal.

Findings: Multiple regression analysis showed that WB was positively associated with IL-17 ($\beta=0.24$, $p<.05$), controlling for the effect of possible confounders, namely gender, age and BMI.

Conclusion & Significance: This study provides initial support for the hypothesis that WB is positively associated with IL-17, a possible biomarker of stress. Therefore, given its negative consequences, organizations and practitioners should implement interventions aimed at preventing WB, providing workers at risk with resources to cope with WB, and reducing the negative impact of WB on the health of the worker (i.e., primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention).

Biography

Alessandra Falco has completed her PhD in Social and Personality Psychology at Padua University. She is now Researcher and Adjunct Professor of Work and Organizational Psychology at Padua University. Her research areas are: Work-related stress risk assessment, with particular reference to the development of integrated tools, based on subjective, objective, and physiological indicators; the role of specific individual and behavioral dimensions (workaholism, negative affectivity, mindfulness, psychological capital (PsyCap) resources, perfectionism, presenteeism) in the etiology of organizational well-being/disease and; social marketing, communication and change with particular reference to traffic psychology.

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