

BULLIES BESIDE EMPLOYERS: EXPLORATORY ANALYSES OF THE WORST BULLIES IN SOUTH KOREAN WORKPLACES

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Abstract

This study examines the characteristics of the worst bullies in South Korean workplaces to understand the nature and dynamic of workplace bullying. Analyzing the qualitative data collected from 377 participants between 2007 and 2023, the study found that, regardless of the time periods, "worst bullies" were typically senior management (60–70%) and male (60–80%), and aged 50 or older (over 60%). 70-80% had strong ties to business owners and were usually protected by the employers even when reported. Due to the employers' attitudes, only 7% of victims reported the bullying, with no cases resulting in appropriate resolution. Findings underscore power dynamics that protect worst bullies, perpetuating workplace bullying. Effective intervention requires employers' heightened awareness and active engagement in prevention.

Keywords: *Workplace bullying, worst bully, strategic bully, emotional bully, bully-employer relations.*

1. Introduction

Eliminating bullying requires understanding its root causes. Research has examined individual traits (e.g., Coyne et al., 2003), organizational culture (e.g., Benard et al., 2017; Rayner et al., 2002), and social factors (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 2011). While recent studies focus on organizational and societal influences, Zapf and Einarsen (2011) caution against neglecting individual factors. In South Korea, studies on workplace predators are limited and focus on their ranks and gender only (e.g., Seo & Kim, 2023). Outside Korea, related studies often fail to differentiate severity levels (e.g., Seigne et al., 2007), leading to minimal distinctions between bullies and non-involved individuals (e.g., Glaso et al., 2009). Workplace bullying exists on a spectrum. Distinguishing extreme bullies should provide deeper insights into its mechanisms.

The term "worst bullies" has been mentioned in school bullying context (e.g., Williams & Winslade, 2008) without an established definition. Extreme bullying is associated with high frequency, severe victim harm (e.g., psychological trauma, suicidal ideation), and sustained aggression (e.g., Graham, 2020; Thomas, 2019). In this paper, worst bullies are provisionally defined as "perpetrators who engage in the highest frequency of bullying or inflict the most severe harm within an organization". In South Korea, research highlights prevailing bullying by senior members (e.g., Seo & Kim, 2023). Since frequent bullying requires access to multiple opportunities, high-ranking executives and those in authority are likely to fit this profile. Blackwood and Jenkins (2021) refined perpetrator classifications through a comprehensive review, categorizing bullies into six types: *the bad egg*, *the mob*, *the good colleague turned bad*, *the abrasive performance manager*, *the depersonalized bully*, and *the cyberbully*. Some findings challenge traditional views of bullies as impulsive and uncontrolled. Salin (2003) proposed that some perpetrators act strategically rather than emotionally. This perspective classifies perpetrators into two types: *emotional bullies*, who are unstable and lack self-control, and *strategic bullies*, who are rational and calculated. Prior research supports this classification (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of Perpetrators.

Emotional	Perpetrator Characteristics		References
	Strategic	Common Traits	
Low/unstable self-esteem, Lack of social competence, Unstable self-control, psychosis	High self-esteem Strategic social competence, office politics Rational and calculated tendencies Bullying as means of control Controlling tendency	Strong desire for power High Aggression Jealousy, selfishness, dogmatism, egocentrism, strong competitiveness, goal-oriented behavior, lack of ethical awareness, strong narcissism	Baumeister et al. (1996), Coyne et al. (2003), Fernandez-del-Rio et al. (2021), Glaso et al. (2009), Hidzir et al. (2017), Kemp (2014), Kernis et al. (1993), Lamia (2017), Linton & Power (2013), Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott (2011), Matthiesen & Einarsen (2007), Pilch & Turska (2015), Rutter & Hine (2005), Seigne (1998), Seigne et al. (2007), Sutton et al. (1999), Zapf & Einarsen (2011).

1.1. Hypotheses

While previous research has categorized general perpetrators, empirical evidence distinguishing them from worst bullies remains limited. However, given the higher frequency of bullying behaviors among worst bullies, their characteristics may be more pronounced. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed: H1) The proportion of senior management and individuals with significant power would be higher among the worst bullies; H2) Worst bullies, due to their power-seeking tendency, would have close ties with the employers or someone with power.

2. Methods

One-on-one interviews were conducted with Korean victims and witnesses between July 2007~July 2023 using convenience sampling. Witnesses were included to address concerns that victim-only accounts might overemphasize negative traits. Semi-structured interviews combined structured questions on perpetrators’ characteristics with follow-ups for additional insights. A total of 377 individuals participated (227 victims, 150 witnesses). Since data collection extended to four years beyond Korea’s Workplace Bullying Prevention Act (2019), the dataset was divided into four-year intervals to account for possible shifts in perpetrator characteristics pre- and post-law. Respondent details for each period are summarized in Table 2, with Period A (2019–2023) representing the latest data and Period D (2007–2011) the earliest. Although this study is based on qualitative data, the large dataset allowed for a structured analytical approach. Thematic analysis was first applied to the qualitative data, followed by coding and quantification.

Table 2. Characteristics of Respondents included in the Analysis (Unit: Persons/%).

Data Collection Period	Total	Gender		Age Group			Relationship to the worst bullies		
		F	M	20s	30s	40s	50s	Victims	Witnesses
A '19.7~'23.6	82	49	33	16	46	17	3	53	29
	(100.0)	(59.8)	(40.2)	(19.5)	(56.1)	(12.9)	(2.3)	(64.6)	(35.4)
B '15.7~'19.6	78	50	28	24	38	13	3	52	26
	(100.0)	(64.1)	(35.9)	(30.8)	(48.7)	(11.0)	(2.5)	(66.7)	(33.3)
C '11.7~'15.6	91	61	30	21	68	2	-	47	44
	(100.0)	(67.0)	(33.0)	(23.1)	(74.7)	(2.2)	-	(51.6)	(48.4)
D '07.7~'11.6	126	78	48	43	69	11	3	75	51
	(100.0)	(61.9)	(38.1)	(34.1)	(54.8)	(5.9)	(1.6)	(59.5)	(40.5)
Total	377	238	139	104	221	43	9	227	150
	(100.0)	(63.1)	(36.9)	(27.6)	(58.6)	(11.4)	(2.4)	(60.2)	(39.8)

3. Results

3.1. Factors and definition of worst bullies from the perspective of workers

Based on a literature review, this study defines a worst bully as a perpetrator who engages in the highest frequency of bullying or inflicts the most severe harm. However, due to the lack of formal definitions, this study reassessed the concept from workers’ perspectives. Respondents were first presented with the study’s initial criteria and then asked what factors they considered in identifying a worst bully. While minor differences emerged between victims and witnesses, their responses shared fundamental

similarities (see Table 3). Key factors for classifying a worst bully included: 1) Consensus among colleagues that the individual was the worst bully; 2) A friendly public image but selective targeting of weaker individuals; 3) Bullying of most vulnerable employees or the largest number of people; 4) Methods that caused severe distress and 5) Justification of bullying as necessary for the organization.

Table 3. Respondents' reasons to identify someone as 'worst bully' (Unit: Persons/%).

Reasons	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Victims	157	145	128	184	111	99	58	49	5	23
	(69.2)	(63.9)	(56.4)	(81.1)	(48.9)	(43.6)	(25.6)	(21.6)	(2.2)	(10.1)
Witnesses	133	59	56	50	36	34	23	9	3	9
	(88.7)	(39.3)	(37.3)	(33.3)	(24.0)	(22.7)	(15.3)	(6.0)	(2.0)	(6.0)

1. Majority of colleagues agreed this was the worst bully, 2. The perpetrator pretended to be kind in front of others while bullying weaker individuals, 3. The perpetrator bullied the most people (those in vulnerable position, in particular), 4. The perpetrator caused severe suffering to the victim(s), 5. The perpetrator Justified bullying as means to satisfy the employer, 6. The perpetrator Skillfully hid bullying behavior, 7. The perpetrator Acted like a victim while making others suffer, 8. The perpetrator Continued bullying even after victim left, 9. The perpetrator Habitually threatened multiple people with reports of bullying, 10. Others

Beyond the high frequency of bullying and victim distress—initial criteria in this study—additional factors emerged: agreement among multiple colleagues, concealment or justification of bullying. The latter aligns with rational and calculated traits identified in prior research (Kemp, 2014; Sutton et al., 1999). This suggests that many worst bullies may exhibit characteristics of strategic perpetrators. Based on these results, a worst bully is defined as ‘a perpetrator who inflicts severe harm on multiple victims, leading to widespread agreement among colleagues that they are malicious’. This definition incorporates three key elements: multiple victims, severe harm, and collective agreement. While the ability to conceal or justify bullying aligns with strategic tendencies, elements specific to strategic perpetrators were excluded to maintain a broader definition.

3.2. Power dynamics of worst bullies

To test the first hypothesis, an analysis examined the gender, age group, and hierarchical position of worst bullies. Since these factors are objective, responses from victims and witnesses were combined. A consistent pattern emerged: over 60–70% of worst bullies held senior managerial positions or higher (see Table 4). To compare with general perpetrators, these findings were contrasted with workplace survey data from the same periods. The difference was stark: while only 20–30% of general perpetrators were in senior management, this figure more than doubled (60–70%) for worst bullies. Even accounting for differences in data collection, the disparity remains significant, supporting the hypothesis that worst bullies are disproportionately concentrated in higher-ranking positions.

Table 4. Comparison of Job Positions Between Worst Bullies and General Bullies by Time Period (Unit: %).

Data Collection Period	Insider			Outsider (e.g., Customers, etc.)
	Entry-Level Employee	Middle Manager	Senior Manager+	
A	98	14.6	75.6	-
Seo-Kim(2023)	28.2	23.7	38.2	99
B	13	35.9	62.8	-
Seo-Lee(2016)	20.1	26.1	27.4	26.4

*For periods C and D, no survey data available for comparison.

Another notable characteristic of worst bullies is that men and individuals aged 50 and above accounted for 60–80% of cases. Given that older age groups typically occupy higher organizational positions and that workplace power dynamics in South Korea are often influenced by age hierarchy, this finding further reinforces the correlation between power and the prevalence of worst bullies.

Table 5. Gender and Age-group of worst bullies (Unit: %).

Data Collection Period	Gender		Age Group			
	F	M	20s	30s	40s	50s
A	34.1	65.9	24	6.1	28.0	63.4
B	20.5	79.5	0.0	2.6	30.8	66.7
C	15.4	84.6	0.0	1.1	29.7	69.2
D	19.0	81.0	0.0	0.0	36.5	62.5

Another significant finding regarding the power dynamics of worst bullies is their close ties to employers. Specifically, 70–80% of worst bullies maintained a strong relationship with the employer, highlighting their substantial influence within the workplace. These results reinforce the likelihood that worst bullies wield considerable organizational power, further supporting this study's hypothesis. Moreover, the consistency between victim and witness data suggests that this connection is not merely a subjective victim perception but an observable reality within workplace dynamics.

Table 6. Worst bullies' relation to their employers (Unit: Persons/%).

Data Collection Period	Employer or the Family		Employer's Regional or Academic Ties		Employer's Associate Without Blood, Regional, or Academic Ties		Relative of an External Power Figure or Wealthy Individual		No Relation	
	Victims	Witnesses	Victims	Witnesses	Victims	Witnesses	Victims	Witnesses	Victims	Witnesses
Total	20	14	37	28	118	75	11	2	41	31
(A~D)	(8.8)	(9.3)	(16.3)	(18.7)	(52.0)	(50.0)	(4.8)	(1.3)	(18.1)	(20.7)

A notable finding is that the largest proportion of worst bullies comprised close associates of the employer who lacked direct blood, regional, or academic ties, as well as associates of these close associates. While objectively assessing the closeness of their relationship with the employer is challenging, respondents identified these individuals as part of the employer's inner circle based on several key observations.

- 79.3%: Took care of the Employer's Personal Matters
- 76.7%: Often Dined with the Employer
- 76.2%: Earned the Employer's Complete Trust
- 75.6%: Frequently Accompanied the Employer to Golf Gatherings
- 61.7%: Exerted Significant Influence Over Company Operations
- 34.7%: Other

The majority of victims were unable to report their experiences, and even when they did, companies rarely took appropriate action, further underscoring the power held by worst bullies. Overall, only 7% of victims voiced their complaints and none of the reported bullies were disciplined. The employer either did not acknowledge the complaint or protected the bullies. The primary reasons victims refrained from reporting their experiences included:

- 90.1%: Fear of retaliation from the perpetrator.
- 87.7%: Concern that the employer would side with the perpetrator.
- 85.8%: Fear of being blamed for reporting.
- 83.9%: Belief that reporting would not improve the situation.
- 57.8%: Fear of secondary victimization by third parties
- 15.2%: Worst bully was the employer or their family
- 2.4%: The perpetrator claimed themselves to be the victims
- 10.4%: Other

4. Discussion

This study examined the characteristics of worst bullies by testing two hypotheses: H1) Compared to general perpetrators, the proportion of senior management and individuals with significant power would be higher among the worst bullies; H2) Worst bullies, due to their power-seeking tendency, would maintain close ties with the employers or someone with power.

An analysis of qualitative data from 2007 to 2023 supported both hypotheses. Worst bullies were overwhelmingly male, aged 50 and above, and held senior managerial positions in 60–80% of cases—compared to just 20–30% among general bullies (Seo & Kim, 2023). H2 was also confirmed, as 70–80% of worst bullies had direct ties to employers, either as associates or members of their inner circle. These individuals actively sought power, reinforcing research on dominance-seeking behaviors (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). Additionally, 93% of victims did not report their experiences. Even among those who did, most complaints were ignored or dismissed by employers. The strong link between worst bullies' high-ranking positions and their close ties to employers explains their ability to act with impunity. Only 7% of victims formally reported their experiences, highlighting the limitations of workplace policies that rely on victim reporting. Although legal provisions require employers to address workplace bullying, fear of retaliation (90.1%) was the primary reason victims refrained from reporting. Given worst bullies' power and repeated offenses, victims distrusted their organizations, fearing that reporting would worsen their situation.

This study quantified qualitative data collected over years. While the sample size (377 cases) is relatively small, the consistent patterns across different periods reinforce the conclusion that worst bullies occupy powerful positions and frequently engage in severe bullying. Their immunity from consequences perpetuates workplace bullying, as victims sometimes retaliate against weaker individuals, continuing the cycle (Benard et al., 2017). Employers play a critical role in shaping workplace culture (Rayner et al., 2002). While South Korea's workplace harassment law requires employers to manage bullying, enforcement remains weak. Despite mandatory workplace harassment training, employer awareness and accountability have not significantly improved. To address this, training programs should focus on impartiality in handling cases, particularly those involving high-ranking perpetrators. Strengthening employer accountability is essential, as organizational culture is most effectively reformed from the top down. Leadership commitment is crucial for driving meaningful change in workplace bullying prevention.

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