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Does External Work Locus of Control Enhance the Exposure to Workplace Bullying? Moderator Role of Social Support

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Abstract

Workplace bullying in higher education is under researched, although academics are increasingly reported as a suffering group. Based on the explanation power of the interaction between people and the environment in the psychological field, this paper analyzes the moderation effect of social support in the relationship between external work locus of control (E-WLOC) and workplace bullying in Turkey's higher education context. Data were collected through questionnaires. It is found that people with an E-WLOC are more exposed to bullying if they get less social support.

1. Introduction

Bullying at work consists of harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone's work tasks repeatedly and regularly over a long period (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 22). It is accepted as illegal in many countries, and numerous people have suffered from such hostile, aggressive acts in contemporary working life (Yamada, 2011). Academics are among the most

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sufferers of workplace bullying (Einarsen, 1999; Sliskovic *et al.*, 2011). As a UK-based study, workplace bullying is more common in higher education (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). Keashly and Neuman (2010) suggested that researchers pay more attention to aggressive behaviors and workplace bullying in higher education, while the higher education context has specific characteristics. Summarized findings of country-based research in higher education in the study of Rojas-Solis *et al.* (2019) show how severe workplace bullying in academia is global. In American universities, workplace bullying reaches 32% (Keashly & Neuman, 2008), while it is around 52% in Canada (McKay *et al.*, 2008), 65,3% in New Zealand (Raskauskas, 2006), 49,7% in Pakistan (Ahmad *et al.,* 2017).

In recent years, Turkey's academic environment has been experiencing a change in assessment, appointment, and promotion criteria. In highly competitive academia, quantitative output expectations rather than qualitative requirements have been scrutinized for a while. Such expectations put pressure on teaching and research and are implied as critical reasons behind increased bullying ratios in higher education (Erdemir *et al.*, 2020). Academic Staff Association's (2014) study shows that %65 of 1987 participants from all over Turkish universities have been (partially or entirely) a victim of bullying (Aktas-Salman, 28 November 2014). Minibas-Poussard *et al.* (2018) report that 26% of 481 academic staff were exposed to bullying in a recent study. Apaydin (2012) also reports that 27% of 320 faculty members from 28 universities have experienced bullying. Moreover, lower rates were observed in the studies of Yelgecen-Tigrel and Kokalan (2009) and Tanoglu *et al.* (2007) that are respectively: 11.6% and 15.8%, while much higher rates were observed in the study of Gul *et al.* (2011), which is 70%. Also, Cogenli and Asunakutlu (2016) report that 66.8% of 400 faculty members in 10 different universities were exposed to bullying.

Although there is evidence that significantly changed structure and working conditions of universities are fundamental reasons behind decreased psychological well-being of academics (Sliskovic *et al.*, 2011), personality disposition is another highly acknowledged factor determining workplace bullying. Besides, social support, which positively impacts employees' mental health, is assumed to be a buffering mechanism in bullying (Lenta, 2018, p. 18). Moreover, a body of research suggests that personality is hard to change (Duggan, 2004). However, following Costa and McCrea (1994), this study argues that possible mechanisms affect the association of personality disposition and workplace bullying.

In this frame, this study aims to elucidate the possible moderation effect of social support in the relationship between external work locus of control, which implies generalized beliefs about control over work-related issues, and workplace bullying in the faculty staff context in Turkey. In addition, the study contributes to the existing literature by understanding the mitigating role of social support on personality-related bullying incidents.

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2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Workplace bullying and external work locus of control (E-WLOC)

While there is no consensus on why workplace bullying occurs, several factors are proposed as causes of bullying in the literature. Personality disposition (Coyne *et al*., 2000; Steensna & Van Dijke, 2006; Glaso *et al*., 2007; Persson *et al*., 2009; Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Bowling *et al*., 2010; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007; Lind *et al.,* 2009), and organizational level determinants (Leymann, 1996; Khalib & Ngan, 2006; Salin, 2003) are the most mentioned factors. However, the dominance of organizational determinants in bullying research creates a lack of (i) the personality disposition side of the research and (ii) empirical findings on this relationship (Nielsen & Khnardal, 2015). The individual disposition hypothesis suggests that certain personality traits or combinations lead to or increase the risk of being a target/victim of bullying and determine how a victim individually copes with this unethical situation (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015). On the other hand, Steensma and Van Dijke (2006) point out that more research is needed on this relationship between personality and workplace bullying and whether there is a clear path between them.

Locus of control refers to beliefs that outcomes in people's lives are determined by one's own decisions and actions or external factors. People with an internal locus of control believe that their lives are in their control, whereas those who believe that their experiences depend on fate, luck, or other externally controlled forces (Rotter, 1966; Spector, 2008: 236). Spector (1988) applied the LOC to the workplace, referring to employees' belief in certain relationships and behaviors related to the job. People with an internal WLOC in the workplace believe they are responsible for their success (or failure) and can control the work environment. In contrast, people with an external WLOC believe in the power of external forces in their success (or failure). Besides, research findings link the positive aspects of the job to internally controlled people while linking negative aspects with those who are controlled externally.

For example, a study covering 24 countries reveals that job satisfaction and psychological well-being are associated with locus of control (Spector *et al*., 2002). Ng *et al.* (2006) indicate that internal locus of control is positively associated with job/workplace satisfaction, motivation, expectations, performance, and problem-oriented coping strategies and negatively associated with burnout, job stress, and emotion-oriented coping strategy. Furnham and Drakeley (1993) claim that people with an internal locus of control have a more positive attitude about the work environment/climate and are more loyal to the organization than those with an external locus of control. Mohan (2006) claims that people with an internal locus of control effectively deal with job satisfaction and stress. On the other hand, E-WLOC is associated with various unproductive work behaviors (Latkovikj *et al*., 2017). In this context, it is expected that individuals with E-WLOC who believe they have no control over their choices will encounter more bullying in the workplace. Therefore, we elucidate personality traits following the individual

disposition hypothesis and Reknes et al. (2019) study. As one of the solid potential primary causes of bullying, people with E-WLOC are expected to be more affected by workplace bullying. Hence, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 1: E-WLOC *is positively related to workplace bullying exposure.*

2.2 Social support

Personal differences differentiate experiences, interpretations, and reactions to specific similar/same events. Glenn (1980, p.602) argued that as people age, personal "attitudes, values , and beliefs tend to become less likely to stabilize and change." Several theorists agree that personal characteristics are more stable in adulthood. Individuals react to others depending on their unique personality characteristics (Caspi *et al*., 2001). On the other hand, contextualist perspectives argue that environmental factors influence personal characteristics even if they assume stable individual dispositions in adulthood (Srivastava et al., 2003).

Similarly, given people's different beliefs depending on other areas of their lives, the work locus of control is a context-specific sub-dimension (Sliskovic et al., 2011; Wilski et al.,2015). Also, the locus of control is considered a continuum because people lie somewhere within that continuum, depending on the context and environment (Hans, 2000; Triplett & Loh, 2017). Therefore, *while personal characteristics predict only some part of the variance of CWB* (Fox & Spector, 1999), the effect of environmental factors and personality traits is expected to affect the assumed outcome of the relationship.

In the context of coping strategies, social support is thought to have a protective role in workplace bullying (Laschinger & Nosko, 2015). LaRocco et al. (1980) and Hansen et al. (2006) highlight the mediator role of social support in the relationship between stress and health problems. The mediating role of social support is also tested in the relationship between leadership behavior and psychological capital (Marashdah & Albdareen, 2020). Rossiter and Sochos (2018) revealed the moderating role of social support in the relationship between bullying and burnout. The example of Australia points out that employees receiving more social support in the workplace are less exposed to bullying (Gardner *et al*., 2013). On the other hand, social support is associated with PTSD symptoms in the relationship between trauma exposure and mental health outcomes (Skeffington *et al.*, 2016).

Apart from the most emphasized personal level outcomes such as health problems, suicidal tendencies, and stress disorder (e.g., Leymann, 1996; Hoel *et al*., 2002), significant disadvantages arise from issues in social networks (Podsiadly *et al.*, 2017). They also emphasize that the ongoing unfair social exclusion weakens self-regulation while destroying the victim's hope of improving social networks (Podsiadly *et al.*, 2017). Unfortunately, such chronic social exclusions also trigger

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mental health problems as the harmful effects of being bullied. Supporting this idea, Lepore (2012: 493) suggests that people's morale can be improved, and stress levels can be reduced through social support, even if only perceived. Otherwise, victims are expected to suffer serious health problems without appropriate social support (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994).

In their study covering the school environment, Humphrey and Symes (2010) show that social support and bullying are negatively associated, while Davidson and Demaray (2007) show that the social support of close friends mitigates the negative consequences of bullying. Furthermore, other studies in New Zealand (Gardner *et al.*, 2013) and Poland (Warszewska-Makuch *et al.*, 2015) show that social support helps reduce the harmful effects of workplace bullying on mental health problems. Therefore, this study explores the possible moderator role of social support in the relationship between E-WLOC and workplace bullying. Hence, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 2: Social support moderates the relationship between E-WLOC *and bullying exposure.*

Despite the rise in recent years in research on workplace bullying in higher education institutions in Turkey, bullying in higher education is less frequently investigated than in general organizational settings (Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Erdemir, 2020). As discussed above, the proposed relationship needs in-depth and diverse analysis, especially in the context of Turkish higher education. In this regard, the study's conceptual model is also presented in Figure 1.
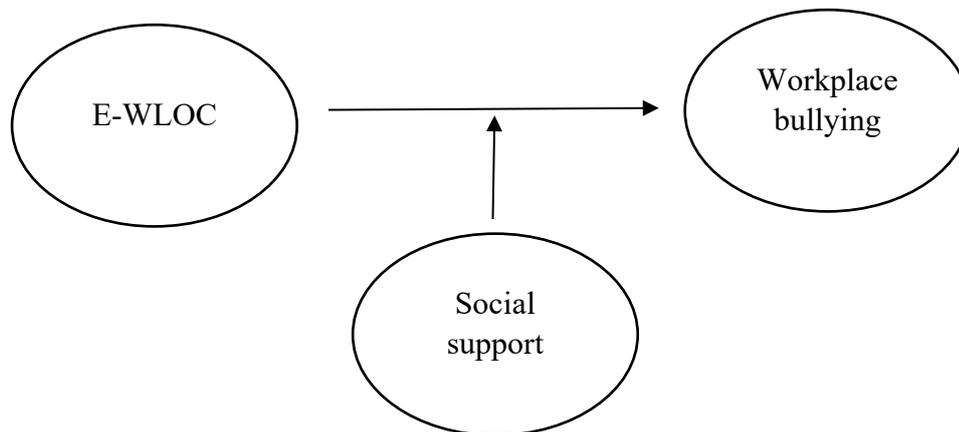
Figure 1. The Conceptual Model of the Study

3. Method

In this research, we executed a moderation analysis. We collected primary data from scholars via a survey method to test the hypotheses. Details about the sample, data collection procedure, measures, analysis, and results are as follows.

3.1 Sample and procedure

Extensive fieldwork was planned to collect data through questionnaires to test the hypothesis. Erdemir (2019) shows that bullying behavior in higher education institutions in Turkey is generally vertical. For this reason, this study covers faculty members with the titles of assistant professor and research assistant. The three largest cities of Turkey, Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir were selected for field study. The Higher Education Council of Turkey data shows that faculty members in these three provinces constitute 45% of all of Turkey. While convenience sampling was employed, academics with the academic title of "assistant professor" and "research assistant" from 51 universities were reached via email. In addition, they were invited to participate voluntarily in our research by sharing a link to our online survey via email sent to their corporate email address (approximately 10000 academics). We completed data collection on a total of 293 completed return surveys, with a 6% return rate, and eliminated some others due to missing data.

The final sample consists of research assistants (73%) and assistant professors (27%). 70% are in state universities, and the rest are from foundation universities. The female participation rate is 60%. According to age groups, the proportion of the participants is as follows: 16% between 20-25 years old, 38% between 26-30 years old, 36% between 31-40 years old, and 9% over 41. Also, 55% of the participants have 1 to 5 years of work experience, while 23% of them have 5 to 10 years, 12% of them have more than ten years of experience in their current organizations, and only 10% of them have less than one year and more than six months of experience.

3.2 Measures

Work locus of control: The WLOC scale was used to measure the workplace-specific locus of control. Spector's (1988) original 16-item Likert-type scale ranges from 1 to 6, where high scores indicate E-WLOC. The Turkish version of this scale has been adopted and used before (Minibas-Poussard *et al.*, 2017). We obtained a satisfactory psychometric property with a 0.82 Cronbach's α value.
Workplace bullying: A scale based on Neuman and Keashly's (2004) WAR-Q scale and Einarsen *et al.*'s (2009) NAQ-R scale was adopted to measure workplace bullying (2009). Due to the peculiarities of higher education institutions, questions in the general workplace context had to be adapted appropriately to the sample. The existing scale items were translated into Turkish by three independent experts and

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then back translated into English by two experts. During comparing these translations, some expressions were either eliminated or changed. Then, we ask for the opinions of 10 academics on whether the content is appropriate and understandable. Depending on their feedback, the wording of some items was rearranged, and some were deleted. The scale is then considered ready for further analysis. When asked how often they were exposed to bullying behaviors (never, occasionally, once a month, once a week, every day). A five-point Likert-type scale was preferred for the primary bully (superiors, peers, subordinates, administrative staff, etc.). As for the item-scale reliability statistics, considering the factor loadings and relevance, 31 items were listed in the last version of the scale instrument with a Cronbach α coefficient of 0.96.

Social support: A 5-item Likert-type scale with five items was used to evaluate how much the person was valued and supported during the bullying process. In this study, to measure social support, we used the scale of Minibas-Poussard and Idig-Çamuroğlu (2015), an adaptation of the scale developed initially by Schwarzer and Schulz (2000). Example items: "How much support did you get from people around you during your exposure to bullying?" and "When you were bullied, how much effective information and advice did you get from people around you?" The scale yielded a high internal consistency for our data (Cronbach α = 0,94).

4. Results

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables in this study. As indicated, the correlations between the variables are significant and in the proposed directions. Therefore, E-WLOC is positively related to workplace bullying. These results confirm Hypothesis 1 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Coefficients

	M	SE	1	2
1-E-WLOC	26.39	6.50		
2- Bullying exposure	44.52	15.59	.17**	
3-Social support	15.76	5.75	-.12*	-.25**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Hypothesis 2 aims to test the moderating effect of social support on the relationship between E-WLOC and bullying exposure. The moderation analysis is accomplished using process macro (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Social support moderated the relationship between E-WLOC and bullying ($R = .32$ $R^2 = .10$, $F=11.23, p \leq .001$), and the interaction was significant ($\Delta R^2 = .01$; F=6.30; df1= 1; df2= 288 $p \leq .01$). When social support was low (one SD above average), there was a positive and significant relationship between E-WLOC and bullying ($t=3.52, p \leq$

.001; LLCI=.33 and ULCI=1.19), but not when social support was high (one SD below average) this relationship was weakened. In other words, people with the E-WLOC have more bullying exposure when they get lower social support but less when they reach higher social support (see the slope analysis in Figure 2). These results confirmed Hypothesis 2.
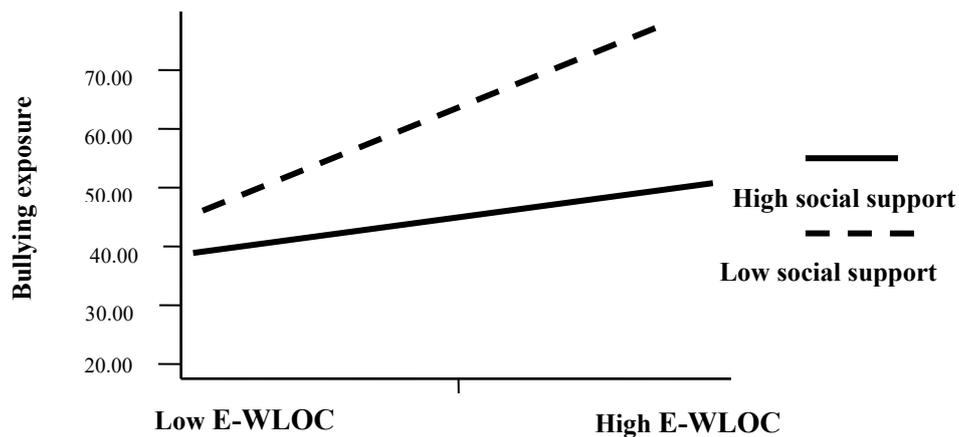
Figure 2. Moderating effect of social support on the relationship between E-WLOC and bullying exposure

5. Discussion

Lewin's field theory examines individual behavior as the interaction between the individual and the current environment (Lewin, 1939). With field theory, it is thought that it is possible to comprehend what behavior people show in a particular context (Burns & Cooke, 2012). Based on the explanatory power of the interaction between individual and environment in the psychological field, this paper tests the moderator effect of social support in the relationship between external work locus of control (E-WLOC) and workplace bullying in higher education in Turkey.

The study's findings confirm the buffering role of social support in the relationship between E-WLOC and workplace bullying. Results suggest that the positive relationship between E-WLOC and bullying is weakened when social support increases. This study addresses the gap in workplace bullying studies focusing on the higher education system. Although the variables used in the research have been discussed in bullying studies before, as we know, no study handles these three variables together. While the article provides a different perspective on the relationship between personality disposition and workplace bullying, it supports the importance of social support and its buffering effect in

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organizations from a different perspective. Social support is highlighted as a possible means of having the power to reverse stable personality traits, which can be a determinant of being bullied at work.

Many studies support the results of this study. For example, Reknes *et al.* (2019) state that workplace bullying affects people with high E-WLOCs more. The internal LOC is considered a personal coping resource related to problem-focused coping strategies and affects the relationship between stressors and bullying (Van den Brande *et al.*, 2016). Zapf (1999) states that the worse the social system consisting of organizational communication and social support is in a workplace, the higher the factors of bullying and high organizational stress. Minibas-Poussard *et al.* (2018) state that if a person receives lower levels of social support, they show more emotion-oriented reactions and feel more helpless than those who receive high social support. It is claimed that there is a negative relationship between social support and being exposed to bullying in the workplace (e.g., Gardner *et al.*, 2013; Hegney *et al.*, 2010; Topa & Mariano, 2013). While social support is considered a buffer in workplace bullying research, it was tested as a moderator in the relationship between bullying and mental disturbance (Nielsen *et al.*, 2019; Finchilescu *et al.*, 2018) and bullying and burnout (Rossiter & Sochos, 2018). The mediating role of social support in the relationship between bullying and psychological distress and bullying and work engagement is also emphasized (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, grounded on Social Identity Approach, Escartin *et al.* (2013) underline that social identities are effective in social interactions, and group identification is likely to reduce bullying.

As in all social science studies, this study has some limitations. This study covers academics working with the lowest academic titles (assistant professors and research assistants) in higher education institutions in three cities in Turkey. The survey method for data collection can be seen as another limitation because it needs to provide a deeper understanding of the findings. Leymann (1996) and Leymann and Gustaffson (1996) assert that bullying can change the victim's personality. Since the personality variables can be considered both antecedent and consequent variables, this study takes the locus of control as the antecedent. In addition, the data is cross-sectional. Since cross-sectional research cannot disclose the direction of cause and effect, generalizing the results is becoming hard. Even with the mentioned shortfalls, Mikkelsen *et al.* (2020) underline the importance of such studies in understanding causality as a first step. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by analyzing the relationship between locus of control and workplace bullying.

Dean and Rectorate level administrators in the academy, supervisory level practitioners, and HR professionals can benefit from the results of this study. Davidson and Demaray (2007) highlight the possible conflict between perceived and received social support. Rossiters and Sochos (2018) reported the potential impact of types of support on the types of bullying suffered. Therefore, awareness programs to better understand workplace bullying and its possible consequences can help prevent it. Also, basic training programs that improve organizational

communication, teamwork, and conflict management can increase the social support networks, support resources, and the effectiveness of these social supports needed in possible cases of bullying. Proctor and Tehrani (2001, p.166) list organizational support sources as a telephone helpline, information/advice, secret supporter, official process supporter, education and training, mediator/conciliator, and counselor. Considering all resources, managers, and practitioners can provide the best personalized supportive channel for bullied people. Besides, academics who have witnessed bullying in the workplace may provide a buffer mechanism for those exposed to bullying in higher education institutions and not leave them alone if their awareness is raised. In addition, since culture effectively perceives bullying (Seckin-Halac & Guloglu, 2019), such awareness programs would prevent bullying beyond helping the victims. Finally, it should not be forgotten that bullying in the workplace is not just an unethical behavior encountered in the workplace but a violation of human rights for victims (Carbo & Hughes, 2010; Einarsen *et al.*, 2017).

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