

Experiences of social workers who witness mistreatment as captured in drawing and narrative

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Abstract

● *Summary:* The current study attempted to find out how the Bystander's role and response are reflected in the drawings and narratives of social workers. The sample consisted of 32 social workers aged 25 to 55 who were asked to draw two drawings: "draw a work mistreatment you witnessed at work" and "draw your reaction to that event" narrative to each drawing was given following the drawing activity. In addition, a self-report questionnaire that included demographics was administered. The drawings and the narratives were analyzed according to a phenomenological method.

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- *Findings:* Two main themes emerged from the drawings and narratives: Loneliness and aloneness and the bystander role. Whereas most drawings were figurative, the bystander response and role were already exhibited within the first drawing.
- *Applications:* Most participants emotionally responded to the situation passively and in private. This study seems to raise awareness of this issue within social workers' services.

Keywords

Social work, work, best practice, ethical decision making, ethics and values

Introduction

Workplace mistreatment, particularly bullying and incivility, has been identified in an expert forecast of emergent psychosocial risks in the workplace (Milczarek et al., 2009). As a direct experience, greater exposure to bullying was associated with a more deficient work environment and lower individual well-being and work attitudes (Abas & Otto, 2016). Whereas most of the literature concentrated on the bully/victim dyad (Coyne et al., 2019), Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik (2010) provided evidence that many workers beyond the bully and the victim, called "Bystanders" that are involved, experience equivalent outcomes to those targeted (Hodgins et al., 2014). Whereas some researchers view bystanders as passive 'victims by proxy,' others suggest that their active or passive behaviors play a critical role (Coyne et al., 2019) in all elements of the bullying process. These include the bullying behavior's longevity and the victim's well-being (Li et al., 2019; Madden & Loh, 2020).

While bullying impacts workplaces and employees, bystanders' behavioral responses in bullying cases have rarely been explored (Desrumaux et al., 2018). The current study sought to understand how social workers whose professional values (helping the helpless, bullied victims) shape the nature of their work (Horton, 2016) respond to bullying in the workplace.

Previous studies show that drawing is a useful nonverbal tool for expressing hidden conflicts and feelings, yet it enriches narratives and encourages verbalization (Lev-Wiesel & Liraz, 2007). Based on that evidence, this current study examined how working mistreatment is reflected in drawings and narratives of social workers who were bystanders. Additionally, we questioned to what extent the bystander role (active vs. passive) would be exhibited in the drawing and narrative.

Background

Workplace mistreatment, definitions, and consequences

Workplace mistreatment includes threatening behaviors that may vary in content and severity, such as bullying and incivility. It often adversely affects workers (Follmer &

Follmer, 2021), such as anxiety, depression, fatigue, posttraumatic stress disorder, and its related results (Horton, 2016). Raja et al. (2018) found, for example, that workplace bullying can drain individuals' energy resources and enhance work-family conflict. Incivility has been identified as a growing form of workplace harassment that has equally negative consequences for victims as bullying (Balducci et al., 2011).

The bystander's role

Workplace mistreatment occurs in a social context. The bystander is the person who is a party to some of the acts that constitute bullying in the workplace, whether witnessing them directly in person, observing them through technology, or being told about them (Niven et al., 2020). It was found that witnessing bullying affects bystanders' well-being, psychological health, and organizational functioning (Niven et al., 2020). As such, bystanders are experiencing equivalent outcomes to those targeted (Hodgins et al., 2014). This approach treats bystanders somewhat as 'victims by proxy,' assuming that bystanders are passive and can only be affected by bullying.

This notion was challenged by researchers suggesting that bystanders play a critical role in highlighting bullying in organizations (Coyne et al., 2019) and are integral to workplace bullying (Paull et al., 2012). Their behaviors and actions, either active or passive, can have a pronounced effect on all elements of the bullying process, including the longevity of the bullying behavior and the victim's well-being (Li et al., 2019; Madden & Loh, 2020). Furthermore, there is an understanding of the bystander approach's potential to shape more total work units' social norms.

Bystanders' responses

The literature presented a mixed picture regarding bystander responses (Niven et al., 2020). While the deontic justice theory assumes that people are motivated to restore justice (Niven et al., 2020), alternative perspectives, such as Li et al. (2019), argue that bystanders are not always morally motivated and react against the victim due to incompatible goals for example. Given that, the question of what determines the bystanders' behavioral reactions in workplace mistreatment cases, although rarely explored, seems central and needs more investigation (Desrumaux et al., 2018).

Paull et al. (2012) suggested a typology regarding types of responses by bystanders that describe the multiple roles a bystander can take. It ranges from active to passive involvement, whether the behavior is proactive or avoidant, and constructive/destructive, whether the behavior has a positive or negative outcome. Combining these components has created four possible bystander response types: active constructive, passive constructive, active destructive, and passive destructive. Active behaviors address bullying, whether constructively, through searching to improve the situation for the target. Destructively addresses bullying by searching to worsen the case for the target. While those on the side of passive-constructive bystanders recognize that bullying is harmful and may feel sympathetic, they end up doing nothing; In contrast, passive-destructive bystanders wholly ignore bullying (Ng et al., 2022).

Workplace mistreatment and social workers

The effects of workplace bullying are unique to each work setting. Social workers are of particular interest as they are helping professionals who rely heavily on values such as equality, solidarity, respect, and dignity that serve as a resource for helping their clients (Horton, 2016). The idea that toxic environments occur in social work agencies presents intellectual, ethical, and emotional incongruities (Webster, 2016). Social workers are expected to follow high standards of conduct and lead a code of ethics in their work. Their working values include service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, the importance of human relationships, treating each person in a caring, respectful manner, integrity, being mindful of individual differences, and competence (Nandan et al., 2015; Horton, 2016). They are also expected to pursue social change that can positively impact people and communities, including social problems triggered by work and employment that nourish each other (Nandan et al., 2015), as mistreatment at work.

Use of drawings as an encouraging tool for disclosure

Drawing is a nonverbal tool that helps people obtain information from their unconscious minds, express their chaotic emotions, and reveal complex problems (Lee et al., 2017). According to the expression theories of art, all forms include “bringing emotions to the surface, bringing them outward to a place where they can be perceived by the audience” (Carroll & Schwartz, 2002). Through externalizing the inner emotional state, the arts discover emotions and help convey feelings or messages to others (Ho et al., 2020).

The use of drawings sought to explore how social workers perceive events of work mistreatment and their roles as reflected in drawings and narratives. Specifically, do their experience as bystanders to workplace mistreatment consistent with their reports of their reactions to incidents of mistreatment at work (perceptions, feelings, and behaviors)?

Method

Procedure and participants

Thirty-two social workers aged 26 to 55 (mean = 38, SD = 8.7) volunteered to participate in the study; 34% were service managers or supervisors of social work teams. Years of seniority ranged from 1 to 31 years; 56% had 8 and above years of experience. Nine males and 23 females. Twenty-one were married, ten singles, and one was a divorcee; 59% had an MA degree, while 38% had a BA degree; 49% worked for governmental services, 52% for associations and other services; 91% were Jewish, 69% of the participants were secular, and 28% were traditional religious.

Participants were recruited through social media platforms (Facebook & What is up groups of social workers). Following ethical approval from the Ethical Committee at Tel-Hai College (February 2022). The participant was asked to draw two drawings (on an A4 sheet of paper with a pencil) after completing a self-report online anonymous

questionnaire. The first was “Draw a work mistreatment that you witnessed at work,” and the second was “Draw your reaction during that event.” Narratives for each drawing were given following the completion of the drawings. The drawings and narratives were conducted in a private place, face-to-face with the social worker researcher.

Measures

The drawing task. Participants were given a blank sheet of paper and a box of 12 colored crayons. They were requested to make two drawings according to the instructions: “draw a work mistreatment you witnessed at work” and “draw your reaction to that event.” Next, the participants were asked to provide a narrative for the drawings. Drawings are considered a valuable tool by both scholars and clinicians in that they allow for the expression of content in a relatively rapid way by overcoming the defensive mechanism of self-censorship, especially since traumatic events are often recalled in a fragmented, dissociated, and nonverbal manner (Goldner & Scharf, 2012; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010; Lev-Wiesel & Liraz, 2007).

The drawings were given to five social workers (two of them were also licensed art therapists) for an independent assessment. Following a short training in the analysis of drawings, the evaluators were asked to indicate the main themes within the drawings and specify common characteristics (similar to the method used in Lev-Wiesel & Liraz, 2007). Characteristics such as the number of figures drawn, the identity of the figures, the use of colors, placement of figures, additional objects or words such as tears, threatening objects, or stances that might indicate emotions and intentions were selected. Characteristics that the evaluators agreed upon were then rated on a four-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not apparent at all*) to 4 (*very obvious*). The final score was determined by averaging the five assessments.

The narratives were given to five social workers for independent assessment. The researchers focused on the implicit content based on Josselson and Lieblich’s (2003) suggestion for a framework for narrative analysis, stating that meanings must be inductively created through the calibrated movement between concept and voice. They were asked to count the number of words expressing the meaning of the following categories: Negative emotions (e.g., sadness, anger, hatred, revenge), life appreciation (e.g., life is good, life stinks), optimism (e.g., things will improve), splitting (e.g., I love him/I hate him), and resistance (e.g., there is nothing to say, that is it).

Data analysis

In this study, we incorporate drawings into interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) that provides a vehicle through which participants can better explore and communicate their experiences. A correlational test was conducted between the narratives, drawing themes, and Bystander demographics.

The drawings were coded with indicators of content and style. Content included indicators of mistreatment in the workplace, such as the type of abuse, the connection

between perpetrator(s) and victim, physical touching, and the drawer's presence in the drawing. Style indicators included distance and boundaries between characters.

The narratives were coded using the following indicators: (1) correspondence between the Narrative and the drawing (yes/no), (2) organization of the Narrative (constrained, flooded, organized), (3) whether the Narrative is dissociative, (4) central theme in the Narrative: the Bystander's anxiety/terror/helplessness/lack of control and power: Bystander's humiliation/ sadness/ insult/ loneliness, guilt and shame: Bystander's anger/ disgust and identification, (5) resolution/solution of the Narrative (active-constructive; passive-constructive; active-destructive; passive-destructive) and (6) retrospective resolution/resolution.

Findings and discussion

Witnessing work mistreatment is a painful, disturbing, and often paralyzing event

Participants were asked to draw two sets of drawings: work mistreatment they witnessed and their reaction to it, and then to provide a narrative for each drawing. A phenomenological analysis was conducted to learn about the internal experience of the participants' drawings and verbal narratives. Similarities and dissimilarities between the two sets of drawings and between the drawings and narratives enabled us to capture the inner experience of the participants. The analysis yielded two main themes: loneliness and aloneness and the role of the Bystander; between active to passive behavior.

Theme 1: loneliness and aloneness. The drawing of the Bystander's response to the event revealed a sense of loneliness and aloneness. Drawing a work mistreatment event in which a boss humiliates workers publicly, then draw one self's response (in the second drawing) crying alone, encapsulating oneself figure, or vanishing into a void, accompanied by a narrative that expresses pain, disturbance, indicates not just the loneliness but also the feeling of aloneness within the group that is expected to be a professional, collegial support group (see Figure 1a and b).

As social worker who usually works in a team with whom they share the emotional burden of their clients' hardships, attending as a bystander to conflictual working maltreatment seems to lay an additional emotional difficulty that may, to some extent, "rob" them from continuing sharing the daily professional hardships.

Participants attempted to deliver their experience in a blunt, transparent mode, using, for example, tears, and X signs, covering the whole space around their figure, and adding words.

The first Narrative to Figure 1a drawing:

"An angry manager invades the privacy of his subordinate and threatens her with an upraised finger to make her carry out an instruction to which she has reservations. The manager,

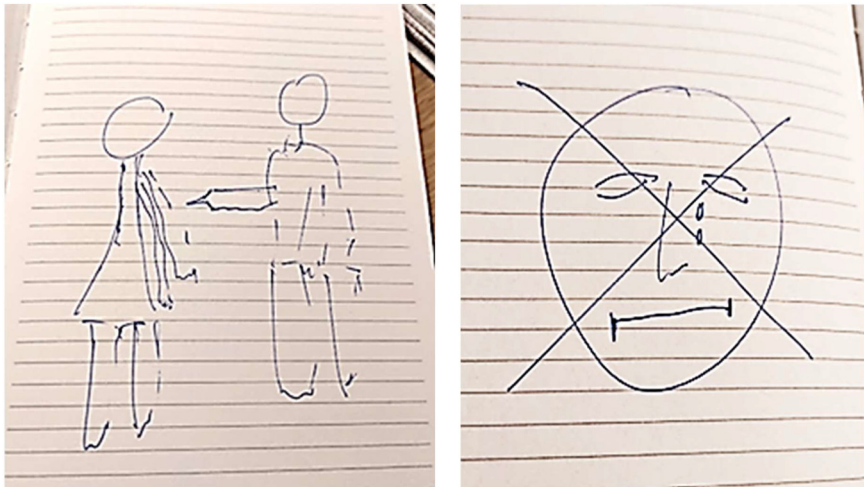


Figure 1. (a) The work mistreatment event drawing and (b) the reaction drawing.

subordinate, and office staff are present in the situation. The Bystander is present in the case; he is in a role parallel to the threatened employee.”

The second Narrative to Figure 1b drawing:

“I thought the manager had misbehaved, thoughtlessly, and abusively and had lost control and respect. I felt humiliated and threatened and identified with the victim. I watched from the sidelines and did not intervene. In hindsight, I would have considered victim assistance because I thought the victim acted out of legitimate considerations.”

The first and second drawings did not significantly differ in color, size of drawn objects, number of objects, use of space, and placement of objects. Most drawings were restricted to a limited scale of colors; black was the dominant color used. The lines were sharp, with almost no background. The overall impression was holding back rage, limited strength, and deep sorrow (see, e.g., Figure 2a and b). An innocent observer could understand from the first drawing the mistreatment conducted even without the narratives; this might reflect the participants’ overwhelming difficulty in witnessing such an event. The helplessness and suffering experienced during the traumatic event were apparent yet passively exhibited in the second drawing.

The Narrative for figure 2a:

“A manager who reacted very sharply and uncontrollably to her employees. She made harsh, insulting, and personally criticized some employees in public and front of others. The form was offensive, and the content was personal and unprofessional. This was not constructive criticism, but bullying and insulting”.

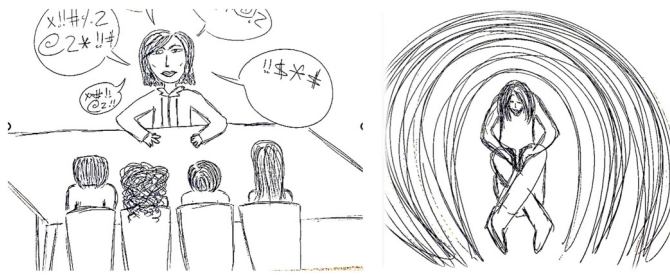


Figure 2. (a) The work mistreatment event drawing and (b) the reaction drawing.

The Narrative for figure 2b:

“I felt very uncomfortable; I wanted “the earth to swallow me up.” I wanted to hide, not be part of the situation ... I thought the manager’s reaction was unfair. I felt helpless... I could not intervene ...I was ashamed - I was silent ... there were many things I would do or say in retrospect, but at that moment, I fell silent...I want to think that I would have turned to the manager in a similar situation and reflected on her, her behavior, and its consequences.”

Using a few colors may also symbolize participants’ life perception under the shadow of work maltreatment events—as a “colorless” professional life. The tendency to use mainly black was also found in the literature to represent depression and anxiety (Buck, 1948; Buck & Hammer, 1969).

The fact that both sets of drawings lacked vitality represented by movement seems to cast a shadow on a bystander’s professional life. It raises the question of whether these social workers would benefit from an open discussion on this issue of work maltreatment. Recent evidence indicated that vitality and primary effects could shed light on an individual’s inner change through art therapy (Holmqvist et al., 2017).

Theme 2: role of the bystander, from active to passive. In most of the second set of drawings, bystanders drew themselves aching alone. They did not take an active role in changing, intervening, or taking a stand for or against either

The Narrative for Figure 3a:

“A manager yielded over one of the employees who did not meet the company’s goals. The manager was furious at his employee”.

The Narrative for figure 3b:

“I was shocked that the manager behaved this way and yielded at the employee; I was scared, did not respond, and kept my distance.”

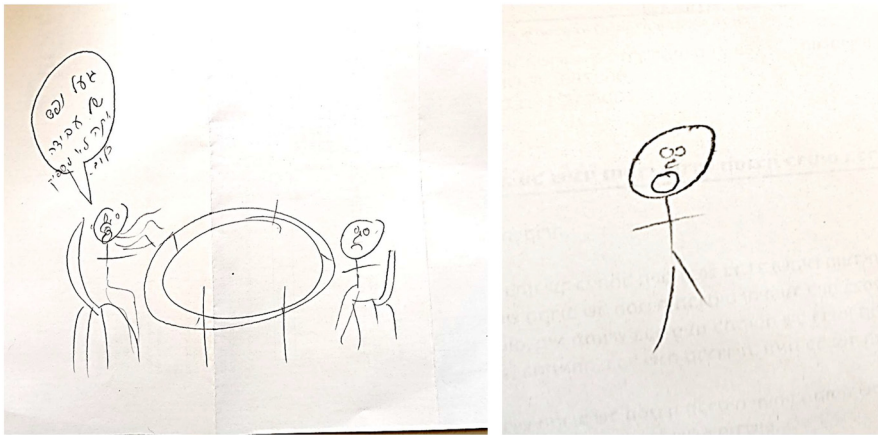


Figure 3. (a) The work mistreatment event drawing and (b) the reaction drawing.

The avoidance role of the Bystander may express the fear of the drawer entering the conflict with an authoritarian figure at work and perhaps becoming a target himself or herself. It aligns with previous evidence that enumerates a common fear of persecution when coinciding with a less-powered party. This fear is based on the universal norm of relationship reciprocity, an “eye for an eye” (Ho et al., 2020; McCullough et al., 2001), and awareness of power hierarchy. Only one drawer took a fierce stance and dared factio face the boss (see Figure 4a and b).

The first Narrative, Figure 4a

“Two directors of a project manager in an association decided to change the project she leads without consulting her. They sat her down and informed her of their decision; when the project manager objected to the change, they shouted at her, belittled her, and hinted that she would be fired if she did not cooperate. I was present when it happened.”

The second Narrative was given to the second drawing, Figure 4b:

“I thought they were belittling the employee, taking her responsibility and role, and threatening her. I felt terrible! I was angry at the principals and how they acted and I felt empathy for the injured principal. I stopped the call and told them they had crossed the border. In a similar situation in the future, I would do the same thing.”

The fact that in most of the drawings, the respondent’s figure was not explicitly drawn in the first drawing might represent the split and the internal conflict between the perpetrator, the colleague victim, and the team of colleagues who, in most social services, are the significant belonging group. It seems to be in line with Taylor’s (2002) conceptualization that professional dissonance is “an experience of discomfort arising from the



Figure 4. (a) The work mistreatment event drawing and (b) the reaction drawing.

conflict between professional values and job tasks” (p. 36), qualitatively characterized by anxiety, conflict, ambivalence, frustration, and a feeling of being torn between different courses of action.

Regarding the Bystander’s role theme within the narratives, participants described it with controlled emotion while refraining from using the perpetrator’s real name or title. As one narrated, “We tried to show how uncomfortable the whole situation was and continue as if regular at work.” Emotions required energy that participants seemed to fear or be drained off. It could also be that the mere explanation of the situation or the narration of the drawing itself demanded additional energy not at their disposal. Again, comparing the narratives and the drawings revealed a gap between the (respective) explicit and implicit experiences. It also represents a splitting between the willingness to act and change and the reluctance to cope with the mistreater. A similar splitting experience was found in the Palestinians’ drawings and narratives in Ho et al. (2020) study.

Limitations of the study

The study’s main limitation is its small, convenient sample size. This prevents the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation is that the prevalence or occurrence of work maltreatment in social work services is unknown and, to the best of our knowledge, has never been studied. From the latter aspect, this issue is hidden and unacknowledged.

Concluding comments and future directions

The phenomenological analysis of the drawings and narratives revealed that witnessing work maltreatment is a painful experience for social workers. It leaves the Bystander in a state of aloneness and loneliness (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999). *Loneliness* is defined as a subjective feeling of lack of social connection, whereas social isolation is an objective measure of ties to other people (Poscia et al., 2018). The social work professional

team serves as a support social resource group for its team, which is needed for its members to cope with their clients. The lack of the team as a resource when facing work mistreatment could explain the feelings of desperation, depression, and loneliness (Pittenger et al., 2019) that emerged in the second set of drawings and are expressed in the narratives.

Despite the participants' attempts to control the situation, the experience controls their lives; it sets the terms and conditions in which they can operate and limits their trust in social support. The struggle ends up in emotional and physical emptiness and depression (Pittenger et al., 2019). Kraus et al. (2019), when discussing resilience, claimed that hope and optimism are related to self-regulatory processes of emotions and motivations that enable individuals to adjust to achieve their goals (Lee et al., 2019). Lemieux et al. (2010) indicated that coping means learning to face a frightening situation and implementing different strategies to deal with it. The question arises whether better coping will be achieved if the issue of work mistreatment within social work is acknowledged and openly discussed. Perhaps, encouraging social workers to express their personal experiences, feelings of anger and fear (Gollwitzer & Denzler 2009), and helplessness (Berger, 2014; Newell et al., 2020) might contribute to better coping with the experience itself, the dissonance between the sets of values, and its unwanted outcomes.

The findings broaden our understanding of the psychological meaning of witnessing work mistreatment. Additionally, the findings shed light on how a somewhat unspoken phenomenon can become via drawings and narratives to express complicated feelings and situations (Lev-Wiesel & Liraz, 2007). From a psychoanalytical perspective, allowing a person to express hidden, unspoken conflictual issues might calm feelings of insult, fear, and humiliation (Berger, 2014). In addition, it directs professionals' possible destructive anger outwardly instead of inwards, thus preventing burnout (Diaconescu, 2015) acceptably and suitably to solve the dissonance (Haen & Weber, 2009). In the latter sense, opening such an issue within the team is self-protective, stabilizing the psyche, and transforming the Bystander's behavior from passive to active, thus, regaining a sense of control and self-esteem (Newell et al., 2020). Creative tools like drawings to help professionals express their fears may promote recovery.

Ethics

The Ethical Committee approved this project at Tel-Hai College, Kiryat Shmona, Israel [Feb1/2/8/2022].

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Authors' contribution

RLW was responsible for the theoretical background, methodology, analysis, and writing. EB was responsible for the theoretical background and data collection and analysis. YI was responsible for

the theoretical background and writing. CE, DS, HG, NDE, TO, and BB, were responsible for data collection.

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