Difficulties in Identifying Workplace Bullying Prevalence and Implementing Prevention

I have been following workplace bullying trends for years because I teach Employment Law and Human Resources Law. Workplace bullying is difficult to quantify due to the definitions put forth (by various institutions) and the research methods utilized to measure workplace bullying prevalence. I am going to discuss each of these issues separately.

What is workplace bullying? The Workplace Bullying Institute (2014) provides the following definition:

"Workplace Bullying is repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators. It is abusive conduct that is:

* Threatening, humiliating, or intimidating, or

* Work interference — sabotage — which prevents work from getting done, or
Verbal abuse" (para. 1).

What precisely is 'threatening, humiliating, or intimidating'? Researchers often find it difficult to measure such definitions due to the various interpretations of the three terms- by those conducting the research and by research participants. We each have our own definitions for these terms that are shaped by our lived experiences. What one person may consider threatening may not be considered as such by another. For example: Does threatening entail physical or verbal threats- or both? Does the threat need to be direct (spoken) or passive (implied)?

What is the precise definition for 'work interference- sabotage- which prevents work from getting done, or verbal abuse'? To begin, 'verbal abuse' should be included in the first part of the definition as to then read 'Threatening, humiliating, intimidating, or verbal abuse' because it seems to fit there yet be outside the scope of the second part which requires that work is not completed *due to* the bullying encountered. Does work sabotage entail directly stopping or interfering, through bullying acts, the work of another employee…or does passive sabotage count as well? Passive sabotage calls for subjective interpretation because it is a passive-aggressive bullying act where the bully will deny the action (or inaction) and other (possible) reasons could be the reason why the work was not completed. Is it the perception of the employee that another is intentionally sabotaging his or her work completion or are there evidenced incidences? It is these terms in the research, and the interpretation of the terms by the research participant, that can skew the results of a study.

It is difficult to measure the prevalence of workplace bullying due to the research designs used in attempts to quantify the issue. There is little research available and what is available relies upon self-reported questionnaires, surveys, and online polling. These research methods- as those who conduct research know- are questionable and not fully reliable due to human emotion, perception, and how the terms are interpreted. The research that I have located has a sample size of no more than 1,300 replies (in any one study) to a questionnaire, survey, or poll; this low sample size can hardly be projected as representative of the 123 million people, according the

Bureau of Labor and Statistics, that were employed full-time in July of 2015 (para. 3). This results in a tremendous amount of conjecture in attempts to quantify a vaguely-defined issue projected upon a population where the sample size is not representative of the demographic it attempts to study.

There are federal laws in effect to protect particular classes of people in the workforce, such as laws against race and sex discrimination. Violations of such laws necessarily meet the definition of 'workplace bullying' above (notably the first part) because the actions of 'threatening, humiliating, or intimidating' are always present, as evidence put forth by the complainant, when allegations of such discrimination are asserted. This could result in a research participant reporting workplace bullying when sex (or race) discrimination is present as well…and two sets of statistics, addressing each of the issues separately, are put forth even though they could be part of each other.

I have no doubt that workplace bullying occurs that is within, or outside, the scope of federal laws. It is difficult to propose solutions to workplace bullying when the prevalence of it is truly unknown and the definitions used to define it are vague. The research currently available relies upon self-reported incidences of workplace bullying that render results that are flawed. I am of the opinion that work organizations should regularly conduct internal research, and have an anonymous complaint system, to police possible bullying issues endemic to the business. However, implementing pre-emptive workplace bullying seminars could take away training and awareness sessions on workplace discrimination issues that we know exist.

References:

The Bureau of Labor and Statistics. (2015, August 7). *The employment situation- July 2015*. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf

Workplace Bullying Institute. (2015). *The WBI definition of workplace bullying*. Retrieved from http://www.workplacebullying.org/individuals/problem/definition/