Faculty Members' Perception of Factors on Academic Bullying: A Qualitative Study

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Introduction: Academic bullying is a global phenomenon in academic settings. Yet, it is complex and frequently overlooked, with insufficient action to address it. Consequently, the existing comprehension of this issue is inadequate for recognizing and preventing bullying behaviors. However, investigations into the determinants of bullying within academia are scarce, demanding further exploration. Thus, this study seeks to investigate the factors contributing to the academic bullying phenomenon among university faculty members.

Methods: This qualitative study employed a grounded theory approach. The sample consisted of 20 faculty members affiliated with Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. Purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Data were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin.

Results: From the grounded theory approach, conditional consequential matrix included a core variable (Academy scientific stagnation), two categories (Job burnout and Erosion of competitive edge), and four subcategories (Personality traits, Discrimination, Autocratic leadership, and unhealthy organizational climate).

Conclusions: This study highlights "Academy scientific stagnation" due to academic bullying among faculty members. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive strategies targeting both personal behaviors and systemic structures. Interventions should focus on fostering a supportive and inclusive organizational culture, promoting fair leadership practices, and mitigating discriminatory behaviors to break the cycle of academic bullying and scientific stagnation.

Keywords: Academic; Bullying; Faculty; Perception; Qualitative research

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Introduction

Universities are considered scientific and intellectual institutions, fostering a democratic and interactive atmosphere where relationships are built on dialogue and persuasion. By examining university life, faculty members are considered the core and backbone of these institutions (1). Global developments in academic environments have caused some changes like educational groups, consequently influencing the roles and engagements of faculty members as the primary stakeholders (2). Academic staff members are the heart and soul of institutions of higher learning, entrusted with the esteemed duty of shaping the next generation of leaders, thinkers, and problem solvers through their teaching, inspiration, and exemplary conduct (3).

Faculty members may face scrutiny and become vulnerable targets when they deviate from the core expectations of the organization culture (4). Experienced instructors mentor new members to introduce them to the typical norms. However, some individuals may not conform to these norms and, as a result, may face conflict, criticism, and bullying (5). Higher education institutions, despite efforts, remain disproportionately white and struggle with recruiting and retaining faculty from underrepresented populations. Due to tenure protections, bullying is especially problematic in these settings (6). Colleges and universities are the main stakeholders in addressing academic bullying (7).

Victims of academic bullying are typically in dependent positions relative to their perpetrators. They often hold lower hierarchical positions, face precarious employment conditions, have caregiving responsibilities, and/or possess work visas tied to their current job (8). Academic bullying can directly affect the target's ability to work effectively and harm their self-esteem, promotion, recognition, and/or professional credentials (9). In universities, we are often dealing with 'sophisticated, psychologically emphasized, inappropriate behavior that is difficult to label as bullying in a traditional way (10). Academic bullying violates human rights within an academic setting (8).

It has been observed that in certain universities some faculty members exhibit behaviors inconsistent with proper teaching etiquette. They may engage in bullying tactics and intentionally leverage their authority to promote their personal beliefs (1). Academic bullying is a serious issue that affects all disciplines and people of all levels of experience (11). Academic bullying involves senior scientists exhibiting abusive behaviors—like verbal insults, public shaming, isolation, and threats—toward vulnerable junior colleagues, including postdocs, graduate students, and lab members (12). Diminishing academic bullying in science requires attention and collaborative action by all scientific community members (13).

To reduce its effect, it is vital to clarify the factors that cause academic bullying from the viewpoint of faculty members and those who experience it. As mentioned in the literature review, bullying is a global phenomenon. Yet, it is complex and frequently overlooked, with insufficient action to address it. Consequently, the existing comprehension of this issue is inadequate for recognizing and preventing bullying behaviors. Nevertheless, investigations into the determinants of bullying within academia are scarce, demanding further exploration. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the factors contributing to the academic bullying phenomenon among university faculty members.

Methods
Study Design and Setting
This qualitative study was conducted in 2024 at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. Qualitative research was used to understand the participants' inner experiences and the meanings developed within a cultural context (14). This type of research explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems (15). The present study was part of a grounded theory study that focused solely on causal factors.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
For all participants, the inclusion criteria included being willing to participate in the study, having responsibility as a faculty member, identifying oneself as a target of bullying, and being able to communicate and share their experiences. The researchers in this study were themselves victims of bullying at university and had some experience with the phenomenon. They chose other people who had similar experiences to interview. The exclusion criterion was the participant's unwillingness to continue the interview.

Participants and Sampling Technique
The study population included faculty members affiliated with Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran, and those who experienced academic bullying. Participants were selected through a purposeful sampling technique where individuals who met the inclusion criteria were selected as participants. We used purposive sampling followed by snowball sampling to identify study participants. The sampling was continued until data saturation. Based on four saturation models, the data saturation model relates to the degree to which new data repeat what was expressed in the former data (16). To protect the privacy and prevent breaches of participant confidentiality, a protocol was implemented by the research team during the interview.

To increase the diversity of participants, we selected them from both female and male genders. Finally, 20 people participated in the interviews. Because it is difficult to identify these individuals at the university, a snowball method was combined with purposive sampling. First, the researcher approached the participants with similar experiences and then asked them to introduce people with similar experiences. To prevent bias, we asked the participants to

introduce 2 to 3 people. After being investigated by the research team, they were selected for interviews. The question of how many interviews are enough for one qualitative research is persistently controversial among qualitative researchers in social science. However, 20-60 is the most frequently observed sample size range in qualitative research (17). With the concurrent data collection and analysis approach, data saturation was checked and achieved.

Data Collection

Participants signed the informed consent form after receiving information about the study purpose and assurance of anonymity and confidentiality for the recorded interviews. Data collection instrument was the in-depth and semi-structured interview conducted individually and face-to-face for each participant. The interview guide was designed based on the research objectives. The interviews were conducted using general questions followed by more probing questions (e.g., "Did you face academic bullying in university? What is your experience of academic bullying?" and "Which factors cause academic bullying?") based on the conceptual categories and study objectives. Then, exploratory and follow-up questions (for example "Could you please tell me more?", "Could you explain more?", "What do you mean?", and "Can you give us an example?") were asked during the interviews when appropriate. All interviews started with background characteristics (age, gender, department, year of experience, academic ranking, and field of study). All interviews were conducted by the first author (RS), a medical education PhD candidate, who had been trained and lasted about 30-60 minutes. After obtaining their written consent, they were interviewed at a time and location convenient to them. Interviews were conducted under the supervision of the research team who were experts in qualitative research. All the interviews were audio-taped with the faculty members' permission and transcribed immediately. Data collection and its simultaneous analysis were continued to 20 interviews when data saturation (i.e., no new code was extracted following the interviews) was obtained. Yet, three more interviews were conducted to ensure saturation, which produced no new data. The first, third, and fifth participants were interviewed twice. Finally, data collection was finished with 23 interviews with 20 participants. The researchers repeatedly listened to the interviews and reviewed the typed text to immerse them in the data. Moreover, the face validity of the interview guide was determined by conducting three initial interviews with the participants, and some minor changes were made to make the questions more comprehensible. The content of these three interviews was excluded from the final analysis.

Data analysis

In the present study, the grounded theory approach by Corbin and Strauss (2015) was used for analysis (18). Therefore, we use three key analyses: simultaneous analysis, constant comparative analysis, and iterative (back and forth) analysis. Initially, the interviews were read line by line, and analysis was done simultaneously. After extracting the initial codes and by continuously comparing the codes, the categories were extracted, and by performing iterative analysis, connections between the codes, categories, subcategories, and themes were extracted. Conditional consequential matrix was extracted by performing iterative analysis in all stages of the analysis. The first author listened to the recorded interviews 2–3 times before transcribing the entire conversation word-for-word into a Microsoft Word document, which served as the unit of analysis. For better understanding, every finalized document was read by one of the research team members, and the meaning units were extracted. The meaning units were categorized and summarized based on similarities and differences, and the meaning codes were extracted. According to the degree of relatedness among meaning codes, they were classified into subcategories that represented the same subject. The interrelations among subcategories were assessed, and the main concepts were extracted from them.

Rigors

To ensure rigorous findings, this study employed Corbin and Strauss's (2008) criteria— fitness, applicability, usefulness, concepts, contextualization, logic, depth, variation, creativity, and sensitivity. To establish fitness, the researcher revisited and shared interviews and data analyses with participants for approval, incorporating their insights for validation. Applicability and usefulness were ensured by extracting the participants' operational strategies and interviewing key individuals to create a relevant model. Findings were categorized into concepts with varying abstraction levels to clarify their relationship with the central variable, ensuring concepts. Contextualization involved presenting findings within their formation context, identifying internal and external conditions, a conditions/consequences matrix, and facilitating/

inhibiting factors. Logic was maintained by detailing research stages—sample selection, coding, memos, methodological notes, and derived concepts—, allowing for easy research process assessment. Findings were discussed as abstract concepts within their contexts to ensure depth, fostering expert discussions that could influence policy and practice. Variation was achieved by interviewing with the faculty across diverse departments, capturing various perspectives. The research maintained creativity by applying flexible analytical strategies to understand academic bullying in Iran, while sensitivity was prioritized by avoiding bias in analyzing participant statements and aligning questions with their experiences, ensuring that the analysis evolved from their shared insights (18).

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study is derived from a PhD dissertation in Medical Education. It was carried out by the Helsinki Declaration. Prior to the interviews, we explained the study objectives to all participants, ensuring their voluntary involvement. We outlined the data collection methods, the purpose of recording the interviews, the roles of both the interviewer and participants, and the confidentiality and anonymity of the information. Participants then signed an informed consent form if they chose to participate, and we assured them they could withdraw from the study at any time. Moreover, Ethical considerations including the approval of the project by the Research Council affiliated to Shiraz University of Medical Sciences with the code of 29530, as well as the

Research Ethics Committee with the code of IR.SUMS.MED.REC.1403.115 was taken into account. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants.

Results

20 people (of whom 11 were male and 9 were female) participated in the interviews. The demographic characteristics of the participants are given in Table 1.

Data analysis led to extracting the core variable "academy scientific stagnation ", the two categories, and four subcategories after coding and comparing the codes based on similarities and differences according to Table 2.

Core Variable: Academy Scientific Stagnation

Scientific stagnation refers to the condition that a scientific institution suffers slow progress due to destructive organizational and individual factors. Drawing from participants' experiences, perceptions, and inferences, this research highlights scientific stagnation as its central theme. It denotes the persistent job burnout and diminishing competitive edge of scientific groups over time, stemming from personality traits, discrimination, autocratic and sedimentary leadership, and an unhealthy organizational climate. This theme includes two categories: "faculty members' job burnout" and "erosion of competitive edge of faculty members".

Category 1: Faculty Members' Job Burnout

Job burnout is severe mental and physical fatigue caused by chronic stress in the workplace.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees

Participants	Field of Study	Academic Ranking	Gender
P1	Neurology	Assit. Professor	Female
P2	Midwifery	Instructor	Female
P3	Gastroenterology	Full Professor	Male
P4	Medical Education	Assit. Professor	Male
P5	Pharmaceutical Biotechnology	Assoc. Professor	Male
P6	Surgical Nursing	Instructor	Male
P7	Biochemistry	Assit. Professor	Male
P8	Medical Education	Assoc. Professor	Male
P9	Community Medicine	Full Professor	Female
P10	TEFL	Assit. Professor	Female
P11	Operating Room	Instructor	Male
P12	Clinical Psychology	Assoc. Professor	Female
P13	Cardiology	Full Professor	Male
P14	Nursing Education	Assoc. Professor	Female
P15	Medical Education	Assit. Professor	Female
P16	Surgery	Assit. Professor	Female
P17	Medical Parasitology	Assit. Professor	Male
P18	TEFL	Full Professor	Female
P19	Pharmaceutical Biotechnology	Assoc. Professor	Male
P20	Physiotherapy	Assit. Professor	Male

Table 2: The core variable, categories, and sub-categories, and the codes

Code	Subcategory	Category	Core Variable
1. Jealousy 2. Narcissism 3. Paternalistic view 4. Omniscient personality	Personality Traits	Faculty Members' Job Burnout	Academy Scientific Stagnation
1. Gender discrimination 2. Ethnic discrimination 3. Racial discrimination 4. Forming a Team of "Yes Men" 5. Favoritism towards certain individuals 6. Nepotism	Discrimination		
1. Maintaining power and authority 2. Dominance 3. Unaccountability	Autocratic Leadership	Erosion of Competitive edge of faculty members	
1. Unhealthy relationships 2. Cutthroat Competition 3. Arbitrary enforcement of regulations 4. Lobbying 5. Injustice Growth	Unhealthy Organizational Climate		

One of the main categories that led to scientific stagnation, according to the participants, was the "job burnout of the faculty members" over time, which consists of two subcategories: "personality traits" and "discrimination".

Subcategory 1: Personality Traits.

Personality traits reflect the characteristic patterns of people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Based on the experimenters' perceptions, job burnout over time was related to personality traits such as jealousy, narcissism, paternalistic mindset, and omniscient personality. A participant shared his experience on the matter:

"When I joined the faculty, a colleague, a full professor, was recognized as a leading researcher for 5 years. As a newcomer, I sought his guidance, but he began to feel threatened by my presence. This caused him to try to assert his superiority by belittling me, driven by his jealousy and ego. It's clear that this behavior stems from academic bullying." (p12)

Another participant said:

"As a person enters the recruitment process and the discussion of articles and the number of articles is raised, a competition forms among faculty members. The quantity and index of published articles raise awareness of their importance and the research project. Consequently, other abilities are disregarded when a person's merit is solely based on the number of articles. This leads the individual to feel superior, and the system gives them more importance, ultimately fostering academic bullying." (p17)

Below is a comment stated by another participant:

"One of my colleagues, who graduated from the University of Medical Sciences located in the capital of Iran, Tehran, excelled academically. He exuded unwarranted superiority and false pride, often asserting his illogical views onto others through bullying behavior, despite his inferiority in science and research. Remarkably, his communication skills were at a very low level." (p13)

A participant stated:

"During a group meeting, we reviewed a particular clinical case. I referenced a case that was approved by my colleagues. However, a full professor with over a decade of experience as head of department displayed a somewhat patriarchal attitude towards the system. He seemed to believe he was more knowledgeable than others, and considered himself omniscient. Disagreement arose when I challenged his viewpoint; he rudely dismissed me as a novice, implying my diagnosis held little significance. Interestingly, while his diagnosis didn't win consensus from the group, no one dared to challenge it openly." (p9)

Subcategory 2: Discrimination

Discrimination refers to treating people differently based on gender, ethnicity, culture, and language. Insights from participants' experiences and perspectives, it involves gender, ethnic, and racial discrimination, nepotism, forming a team of "yes men", and favoritism towards certain individuals. In this regard, one of the participants had stated that:

"For instance, when the university's financial vice-president extends a loan to one individual but not another, it can create conflicts among professors. As a professor, I may feel unsettled, wondering why I am treated differently from my colleagues. This perceived discrimination can contribute to a culture of bullying within a scholarly setting like a university. In essence,

discrimination breeds neglect and indifference within the university system, ultimately fostering a climate of bullying." (p16)

According to one of the participants:

"Another issue I have encountered is creating a team of "yes men". That is the person who has won a position chooses a series of people as supporters to confirm him and destroy the others. This group, known as a team, initiates destructive actions aiming at individuals or systems." (p11)

And, elsewhere, one of the interviewees said:

"In the faculty group, where I am one of the few women among mostly men, I have observed frequent instances of bullying. Being in the minority as a female professor, I understand the dynamics that lead to this behavior. When trying to assert oneself in such an environment, male colleagues often resort to bullying tactics, hindering one's ability to shine. These experiences have eroded my trust in them. Additionally, as a non-native resident of this city, I have faced discrimination based on ethnicity and language. During meetings, there is a deliberate effort to converse in their native language, excluding me from understanding the discussions. Furthermore, there is a prioritization of native status over professional merit, which I have found to be a significant challenge." (P19)

Category 2: Erosion of competitive edge of faculty members

Another main category was the "erosion of competitive edge" between academic groups. It describes a situation where an individual's or an organization's capacity for fair competition diminishes, leading to irrational competition. This main category consists of "sedimentary and autocratic leadership" and "unhealthy organizational climate". According to the participants' perceptions, the erosion of the competitive edge between scientific groups was due to sedimentary and autocratic leadership and an unhealthy organizational climate.

Subcategory 1: Autocratic Leadership.

Autocratic leadership is when leaders see decision-making as their exclusive right and disregard others' opinions. Based on the participants' perceptions, factors such as maintaining power and position, exercising dominance, and not having accountability lead to sedimentary and autocratic authoritarian leadership. One of the participants stated her experience in this regard as follows:

"You see, the presence of a rigid hierarchy and unchecked centralized power can fuel the rise of bullying. If university leadership follows an

autocratic approach, takes the wrong procedure to maintain his power and position, and does not use the opinions of the faculty members in the management of affairs, this will lead to academic bullying. Therefore, dictatorial behavior shows that he forces others to obey him and he likes a place where he always wins in the competition and is always superior to everyone; this makes him unable to tolerate someone else coming into the department and group to compete with him." (p10)

One of the other participants said:

"I offered to take on the role of department head. However, the former head leveraged this connection with greater experience and familial ties to the faculty head. Regrettably, management favored him, and he coerced the colleagues against supporting me. He viewed the position as his birthright, seeking continual dominance over others." (p1)

A participant shared his experience on the matter:

"In my view, academic bullying represents an unacknowledged power struggle. This battle for power can manifest in various forms. When framed within a competitive environment, it spawns additional narratives. This implies that individuals may resort to any means to uphold their authority, leading to self-deterioration, humiliation, insults, and exclusion from the community. Such conduct is entirely two-faced. Academic bullying camouflages itself in jest while harboring a wrathful countenance underneath." (p14)

Other participants said:

"Power often leads to corruption. It often accompanies power. In universities, a major issue contributing to bullying is the lack of accountability among those in power. This absence of oversight and responsibility within leadership positions fosters a culture of bullying in academic settings. This can result from appointments made without consideration of scientific competence and meritocracy rather than relying on unhealthy relationships." (p6)

Subcategory 2: Unhealthy Organizational Climate

An unhealthy organizational climate occurs when communication among individuals strays from the logical standards of the organization, becoming more focused on self-interest. Based on the participants' experiences, factors like unhealthy relationships, cutthroat competition, arbitrary enforcement of regulations, lobbying, and rising injustice contribute to an unfavorable organizational climate. Below is a comment stated by a participant in this regard:

"In my first year as a faculty member, my colleagues lacked empathy and displayed unhealthy competition. They viewed me as a rival and hindered my participation in group meetings, disregarding my comments and treating the group as their exclusive territory." (p20)

One of the participants stated:

"We decided to recruit two people as academic members. I told the head of the department to introduce both of them to the recruitment board. However, he refused, stating that Dr. X, the head of the board, had already contacted him and recommended Dr. Y for recruitment. So, see here, bullying means oppressing another person, taking the right of another person, and giving the right to a person who does not have the necessary abilities for a position. It means confirming injustice. Bullying entails confirming injustice and engaging in an unequal and predetermined fight." (p11)

One interviewee described her experience as follows:

"I recall when one of our colleagues was designated as head of the department. We questioned why he was chosen despite holding a lower scientific rank and research standing than us. The dean justified it by pointing out his one-year advantage in work experience. Such unwritten, flawed, and fabricated rules and regulations are inherently faulty and contribute to a crisis in the education sector. When rules fail to ensure fairness or are crafted to hinder certain individuals' progress, they inadvertently foster a culture of oppression. This not only hampers the role of educators but sometimes serves as a barrier to their development." (P18)
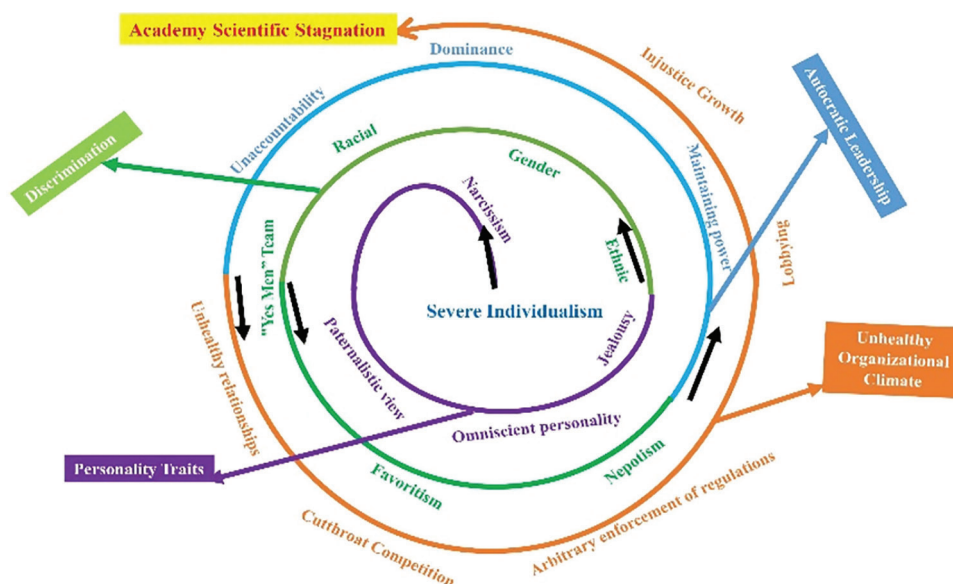
Conditional Consequential Matrix

As shown in Figure 1, by further analyzing the categories, severe individualism characterized by traits like narcissism, jealousy, a patriarchal view, and an omniscient personality can lead to gender, ethnic, and racial discrimination. This can result in the formation of a team of "yes men" and favoritism towards specific individuals, enabling bullies and dominating individuals to uphold their power and position through tactics of dominance, lobbying, lack of accountability, and fostering unhealthy relationships. Such behaviors can foster cutthroat competition, arbitrary enforcement of the rules and regulations, injustice, a decline in competitive edge, faculty job burnout, and ultimately academic stagnation.

Discussion

As it was mentioned before, the present study was part of a grounded theory study that focused solely on causal factors. The findings of this qualitative study offer a nuanced understanding of factors contributing to academic bullying among faculty members in a medical setting, which led to the emergence of the core variable as "Academy scientific stagnation" and the two main categories of "Faculty members' job burnout" and "Erosion of competitive edge of faculty members".

Faculty Members' Job Burnout

One of the critical factors identified is faculty members' job burnout, which is both a symptom and a cause of scientific stagnation. The subcategories of personality traits and discrimination provide deeper insight into the roots of job burnout. Burnout is a serious issue that

Figure 1: Conditional Consequential Matrix of Academic Bullying among Faculty Members

can lead to negative behaviors, such as bullying in academic and workplace settings. When individuals feel overwhelmed and exhausted, they may become less tolerant, irritable, and less empathetic, which can contribute to or worsen bullying. From a psychological perspective, burnout causes cognitive, emotional, and attitudinal damage. This results in negative behavior towards work, colleagues, users, and the professional role (19). An individual experiencing burnout feels drained and suffers from chronic fatigue. These people may develop aggressive behavior and become more suspicious and pessimistic in their interpersonal relationships (20). It is considered a predictor of aggressive behavior among nurses (21).

Personality traits

Traits such as jealousy, narcissism, a paternalistic mindset, and an omniscient attitude contribute to a toxic work environment. These traits foster interpersonal conflicts and reduce collaboration, essential for scientific advancement. Personality plays a significant role in workplace bullying and discrimination. Studies have shown that certain personality traits are associated with both perpetrating and being a victim of workplace bullying (22, 23). Researchers have found that personality traits significantly influence the incidence of workplace bullying. Their study provides new insights into the relationship between personality traits and workplace bullying, addressing the gaps left by previous studies (24). Additionally, personality factors such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism have been found to influence the incidence of bullying, with conscientiousness and agreeableness negatively related to bullying, while neuroticism shows a positive relationship (23). Personality traits influence the relationship between work demand constraints, workplace bullying, and psychological distress. Specifically, openness to experience moderates how work demand constraints relate to workplace bullying (25). Understanding these personality dynamics is crucial for organizations to address and prevent workplace bullying and discrimination effectively.

Discrimination

Discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and other factors exacerbates job burnout by creating an unfair and hostile work environment. Practices such as nepotism and favoritism further alienate faculty members, leading to decreased motivation and increased stress. Bullying and discrimination in the workplace depend heavily on contextual and individual psychological factors, influencing conflict dynamics and health consequences for those involved (26). Generally, sex, gender, and nationality are proxy variables from which concrete implications for bullying in the workplace can only be derived indirectly, depending on further contextual factors (27).

Gender differences play a role in self-reporting experiences of bullying and sexual discrimination, with women more likely to label themselves as victims, leading to psychological health impairments like burnout symptoms and reduced quality of life (28). Additionally, the perception of powerlessness and the impact of institutional bullying on individuals further emphasize the detrimental effects of workplace bullying on employees and organizations (29).

Erosion of Competitive Edge among Faculty Members

The second major category is the erosion of the competitive edge of faculty members and academic groups. This erosion is driven by autocratic leadership and an unhealthy organizational climate. Research indicates that workplace bullying leads to decreased job performance, affecting the overall effectiveness of teachers (30). The negative consequences of bullying include damage to psychological health, lower self-esteem, depression, and even thoughts of quitting the job. Moreover, the prevalence of workplace bullying is higher among female teachers and those with less experience, further hindering their competitive edge in the academic environment (31).

Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leadership, characterized by centralized decision-making and disregard for others' opinions, was a major factor eroding competitive edge. Leaders who centralize decision-making and disregard others' opinions create a stifling innovation environment. Autocratic leadership has been linked to workplace bullying, where despotic leaders trigger bullying behavior that diminishes employee well-being (32). Additionally, an organizational climate characterized by competition and envy can increase workplace bullying, especially when supervisors exhibit passive-avoidant leadership styles (33). Research suggests that competition is a risk factor for workplace bullying, particularly when combined with a passive-avoidant leadership style, which can reinforce the negative association with competition and exacerbate bullying behaviors (34). The lack of accountability and dominance associated with

autocratic leaders stifles creativity and fair competition, as observed in this study. Workplace bullying often thrives in environments lacking accountability, where employees feel powerless and exposed to mistreatment (35).

Unhealthy Organizational Climate

An unhealthy organizational climate, marked by unhealthy relationships, cutthroat competition, lobbying, rising injustice, and arbitrary enforcement of regulations, further diminishes the competitive edge. Unhealthy organizational climates, characterized by distrust, aggression, and antagonism, are closely linked to workplace bullying, where individuals are treated unfairly and aggressively (36). Research indicates that toxic work climates can lead to the emergence of bullying behaviors such as verbal violence, humiliation, and social isolation, perpetuated by abusive bosses or aggressive employees (37). The reciprocal relationship between a hostile work climate and workplace bullying creates a vicious circle, with each reinforcing the other, potentially exacerbating the negative impact on employees and the organization (36). Furthermore, the effects of workplace bullying extend beyond individual targets, impacting the mental health and job satisfaction of bystanders within the organization, especially in high-bullying climates (38). Academic workplace bullying, particularly targeting junior colleagues by senior scientists, is a prevalent issue influenced by the pressure to compete for scientific rankings like the h-index, leading to abusive behaviors such as verbal insults and isolation (12).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Since this qualitative study was conducted at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, the results cannot be generalized to other universities. It is recommended that this phenomenon should be studied from the viewpoint of other faculty members with more diverse samples regarding social and cultural backgrounds in other settings and contexts.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the intricate dynamics underlying academic bullying among university faculty members, highlighting "Academy scientific stagnation" as a core variable. Through qualitative analysis, we identified two primary categories—faculty members' job burnout and the erosion of competitive edge among academic groups—that underpin this central theme. The interplay of these factors creates a vicious cycle where individual and organizational dysfunctions

perpetuate academic stagnation. Since faculty members play a key role in educating and developing the next generation and academia, academic bullying should not be a model for them. It can adversely affect both faculty members' professional growth and the progress of academia, leading to scientific stagnation for both groups. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies targeting both personal behaviors and systemic structures. Interventions should focus on fostering a supportive and inclusive organizational culture, promoting fair leadership practices, and mitigating discriminatory behaviors to break the cycle of bullying and stagnation. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, providing a deeper understanding to inform effective policies and interventions to prevent academic bullying and promote a healthier, more productive academic environment. Academic bullying can manifest differently across various cultural and institutional contexts due to differences in social norms, power dynamics, and institutional policies. Considering that the participants were only selected from one university, it is recommended that this phenomenon be studied from the perspective of other faculty members in other medical universities with more diverse samples in terms of social and cultural backgrounds in different environments and contexts. Additionally, it should be examined which other factors, besides the findings obtained, play a role in the formation of academic bullying in universities.

Strength

Few studies have qualitatively investigated the major factors that cause academic bullying among faculty members; this study is one of them.

Authors' Contribution

RS, MHK, AAH, SAF and SZ participated in the planning and designing the study. RS collected data. MHK and SAF analyzed data. RS, AAH and SZ were responsible for writing

the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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