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Qualitative Research into False/Exaggerated Claim Cases of Workplace Bullying in South Korea

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Abstract

False bullying claims are likely to coincide with the enactment of anti-workplace bullying legislation during unstable labor market. It is likely that false bullying cases are mishandled in South Korean workplace due to the management's tendency to shift responsibility and scapegoat an individual for the benefit of the organisation. This paper examines seven South Korean cases of false claims in terms of the reported behavior, characteristics of the claimant's actions, responses from management, impact on the reported individuals, and motives of the

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claimants. Consistent behavioral patterns of claimants included (1) exaggerating neutral behaviors as malicious ones or producing false details and (2) exposing (or threatening to expose) their case to pressure management. Management tended to avoid involvement and shift responsibility, even at the expenses of an innocent employee. The impact on the accused included damage to their reputation and career prospects, impaired physical and psychological health, financial loss, and loss of trust in management and colleagues. The claims were suspected or found to be motivated by claimant's self-interest, seeking tangible or intangible benefits. This study's findings have implications for handling false bullying claims in that the management's avoidance of responsibility and failure to maintain objectivity could lead to further suffering of true victims or the falsely accused. By mishandling workplace bullying cases, the management may become an accessory to an upward bullying or become a perpetrator themselves.

- Key Word: Workplace Bullying, False/Exaggerated Claims, Management's Conflict Avoidance, South Korea

I. Introduction

In the literature, bullying is often used as an umbrella term that includes sexual harassment, violence, verbal abuse, and all other forms of mistreatment (Hoel & Cooper, 2001). Harassment and Violence were typically the most overt form. Many countries already had anti-harassment and anti-violence legislation years before anti-bullying legislation came in.

Workplace was one of the main contexts in which anti-bullying legislation was introduced. The first anti-workplace bullying legislation came into act in Sweden and Netherland in 1994, followed by Belgium, France, Ireland and, many others with the state with the most recent relevant legislation being Bermuda (Seo, Kim, & Park, 2022). In 2018, South Korea also passed the anti-workplace bullying legislation bill that was enacted from July 2019.

Bullying/mobbing has a number of equivalent translations in Korean language (Seo, 2010). Since the anti-bullying bill, the preferred legal term has been Gwe-rop-him. It is also the oldest term found in Korean media and most widely accepted term in Korean academia. However, Koreans have commonly used other terms to refer to bullying. In 1990s, a Japanese term, Ijime was introduced with the influence of Japanese popular culture on young Korean people. Ijime has a group element embedded within its meaning. It was replaced by new Korean terms that also implies a group isolating the target, Tta-dol-im and Wang-tta. Wang-tta was an informal term derived from Tta-dol-lim. Wang means King in South Korea and was used to emphasize the meaning. Another colloquial term Tae-wum has also been used among medical professionals. (Seo, 2010) Tae-wum means to burn something and was used to describe the situation where the perpetrator bullied the target till their burnout or where the perpetrator gave an excruciating (burning) pain to the target. One of the most recent, colloquial term that began appearing in media was Gap-jil starting in the early 2000s: In Korea, Gap refers to someone in the highest, most powerful position in a contract. Eul is the one with the second most power, followed by Byung. The term Gap-jil originated from Gap's abuse of power imposed upon

Eul. Currently, Gap-jil is used to encompass all directly and indirectly aggressive behaviors that originate from someone with more power than the victim.

In relation to Gap-jil, the term Eul-jil began appearing in South Korean media in the early 2010s. At that time, it was used to refer to bullying inflicted on the weakest (Jeong) by someone in the middle (Eul) who was bullied by the strongest (Gap) (Seoul Shinmun, 2013). Currently, it refers to upward bullying by someone who is supposedly in a weaker position (Eul) toward their employer or someone with more power (Gap) (Aju Daily, 2021; Asian Economy, 2021; Ilyo Shinmun, 2020; Jeonnam Daily News, 2020).

The concept of Eul-jil in South Korea suggests that false bullying claims could become a form of upward bullying (Anonymous, 2019) and produce harmful consequences (Aju Daily, 2021; Fredericks, 2019; Ilyo Shinmun, 2020). One of the common types of Eul-jil is fabricating reports of bullying to employee support services under the Ministry of Employment and Labor (MoEL) or police (Aju Daily, 2021; Jeonnam Daily News, 2020). The claimants of the false claims would then approach the accused and demand monetary settlement or other benefits (Jeonnam Daily News, 2020).

As seen in previous academic literature and articles in the media (Aju Daily, 2021; Asian Economy, 2021; Klein & Martin, 2011; Martin & Klein, 2013), these false or exaggerated claims has been occurring worldwide. The appearance and increase in such claim has been suggested to coincide with the enactment of strong anti-workplace bullying legislation in unstable labour market (e.g., McGrath, 2021).

While there is no statistical data available to show whether the number of false/exaggerated claims is on the rise in South Korea, repeated media articles suggests, at least, repeated occurrences. Developing from the previous literature and media reports, this paper aimed at examining cases of false claims and their practical implications.

II. Literature Review

Adams (1994; in Rayner, 1997) has commented that the potential for false-positive (classifying someone as victimized when they are not) reports is minimal, whereas the potential for false-negative (classifying someone as not victimized when they are) reports is high. Statistics from South Korea also seem to support this assertion: Only 17.5% of workplace victims have made a bullying claim (or at least sought counseling for it through an internal or external body) (Seo & Lee, 2016). Since the figure includes those who had counseling only, the proportion of individuals who made claims would be even smaller. In other words, most true victims would hesitate to file a report despite their suffering at work, leaving many victims unidentified (false negatives).

Nevertheless, Hutchinson et al. (2017) have highlighted the importance of minimizing both false positives and false negatives in empirical research on bullying. Klein and Martin (2011) also warn of potential deceit by bullying claimants. They posit false-positive cases as representing one of two dilemmas in handling workplace bullying cases and emphasize the danger of accepting self-reports that could be false positives. Similarly, Martin and Klein (2013) caution against relying on the self-reports of bullying, referring to their research on bullies who portrayed themselves as victims.

Wrongful identification of victims and bullies is not simply a theoretical issue. It happens in real life. In some cases, the claimant is suspected or found to have acted deliberately for their own gain. False bullying claims had already become an issue in Australia over a decade ago (Caponecchia, 2011). In South Korea, the issue arose more recently. Featured in Jeonnam Daily News (2020), an employer was reported to the police for sexual molestation after tapping a temporary worker's shoulder to tell her to stop using her mobile phone for personal entertainment during work hours. CCTV footage proved that the only physical contact that occurred was this shoulder tap. However, the police informed the employer that the investigation would continue because physical contact did occur, and the claimant demanded monetary settlement to drop the case.

Another example of false or exaggerated workplace bullying claims (Asian Economy, 2021) involved employees (i.e. claimants) who consistently failed to abide by their contract and were issued a formal warning by management. The employees pressured management to withdraw the warning by filing bullying claims through the National Human Rights Commission. Even in Australia where there is strong legislation and national policy against workplace bullying, the law makes a clear distinction between legitimate performance management and bullying (Anonymous, n.d.-a). As a matter of common sense, being warned for repeated violation of one's contract can hardly be seen as a form of bullying. Some employees might consider false bullying claims as a bargaining strategy that could protect them against future repercussions in the unstable job market, which could explain the significant increase in false bullying claims (Anonymous, n.d.-a; McGrath, 2021).

Seeing the increase in the incidence of false bullying claims, scholars, legal experts, and public and private agencies have begun providing guidelines for how individuals should act when falsely accused of bullying at work (e.g., Anderson, 2021; Anonymous, n.d.-b; Fredericks, 2019; McGrath, 2021; Seo, 2022) and how management should handle these cases (e.g., Anonymous, 2021; Caponecchia, 2011; Henry, 2018).

These recommendations also caution against management's mishandling of false bullying claims (Patel, 2021). Until proven guilty, the accused should also be entitled to legal protection; however, in false bullying claims cases, management sometimes ends up violating the rights of the accused (Patel, 2021). Such behaviors could be explained by management's tendency to shift responsibility in bullying cases (Martin & Klein, 2013). In East Asian cultures, the tendency to avoid conflict (Leung, Koch & Lu, 2002; Peng & Tjosvold, 2011; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002) could exacerbate the problem. Similarly, in South Korea, the tendency of organizations to readily sacrifice an individual for the benefit of the organization (Im et al., 2012) could become the exacerbating factor.

Claimants could easily take advantage of the management's tendencies. Their typical behavioral reactions include exposing their case to outside parties or threatening to do so, reporting one or two minor or neutral incidents in more

severe terms, and filing multiple reports based on a single incident to exaggerate its severity (Seo, 2022). All these behaviors pressure management to minimize their involvement and conclude the case as quickly as possible, quite often forcing the accused to yield to the claimants' unwarranted demands. In doing so, the management could easily become the perpetrators. This also gives reason why false bullying claims should be investigated and measures to prevent such claims should be established in South Korea.

Academic research on false bullying claims is scarce. It is even more difficult to find studies that conducted personal interviews with the involved person. This study aimed to fill in the gap through in-depth interviews and explore the nature of false bullying claims.

III. Research Methods

We investigated seven cases of reported workplace bullying that were proven “false” and/or “exaggerated” (or insiders were at least aware that the reports were false). All cases occurred in South Korea. Case information was obtained through one-on-one interviews with participants from 2019-2021, after the anti-workplace bullying law took effect in South Korea. Participants—all of whom were women—were recruited through snowball sampling. We first approached people involved in bullying cases in general (claimants, the accused, witnesses, handlers and bullying committee members). Based on their interviews, we drew out cases that were suspected or proven to be false/exaggerated and obtained contact details of the involved people through the initial participants. In some cases, the contacted people were interviewed or they recommended others who were more directly involved or willing to participate.

Their ages and other background information remained confidential. We assessed the cases in terms of the reported behaviors, characteristics of the claimant's actions, responses from management, impact on the reported individuals, and the suspected motives behind the claims.

IV. Results

Per participants' request, we do not include direct quotations of their comments here. Participants requested this because many were still working in the same organization where the reports were filed, and they were concerned about their anonymity. Participants received an ID unrelated to their initials.

1. Case 1

A. Gender of the accused / claimant: Female / Female

B. Reported behavior: Slandering a supervising manager and forcing the claimant to do the same

Participant 1 (P1) was reported for the above behavior by a female junior worker. According to P1, the actual behavior that occurred differed from what was reported. Based on her memory, the case began when P1 attempted to console the claimant who was repeatedly teased and verbally abused by their manager. P1 did not have the courage to tell the manager to stop but felt sorry for the claimant. Meeting her in the restroom, P1 offered a few words of consolation that they all knew she was not really doing anything wrong, but the manager was unfairly targeting her. P1 told the claimant to cheer up and suggested a chat over a cup of coffee.

C. Characteristics of claimant's actions: Exaggerating P1's words

The claimant turned management against P1 by portraying P1 as someone who spoke ill of management. The claimant exaggerated P1's relatively neutral words as malicious.

D. Response from management: No investigation, manager's verbal abuse toward the reported individual

The claimant reported P1 to the manager for bullying her. She claimed that

P1 had slandered the manager in her presence and forced her to do the same. The manager called P1 to his desk and verbally abused her. From then on, his target became P1. The claimant resigned a few months later. While the manager himself was the bully, no investigation was conducted with respect to his actions. P1 felt that she could not report the case to upper management because they would inform her manager that P1 reported him, exacerbating the problem.

E. Impact on the reported individual: Losing standing at work, reduced career advancement prospects, and feeling distant from colleagues

The report resulted in the manager's enduring anger toward P1 and made P1 lose standing at work. The manager gave her a particularly low grade in her performance appraisal until he moved to another team. P1 also stated that she no longer felt close to her colleagues and would talk to them only about work. Even when she saw other junior colleagues being bullied, she would turn a blind eye and avoid involvement.

F. Suspected motive behind claim: Rechanneled anger and escaping from bullying

After the claimant quit her job, P1 met her outside work. The claimant greeted P1, and P1 asked why she made the claim. The claimant's response was that she had been angrier at P1 than at the manager. She thought P1 was acting hypocritically and that her words of consolation were insincere.

The claimant's aggressive reaction to P1's consolation was atypical. It is plausible that she made a false or exaggerated claim to channel her accumulating anger toward the manager to P1. To her, the manager was someone with too much power. It would pose serious risks to retaliate against the manager. In contrast, P1 was only slightly above her position, and targeting P1 would not pose much of a risk, especially because she reported P1 for slandering the manager to the manager himself. The manager was likely to become angry at P1, rendering P1 unable to retaliate.

Thus, exaggerating the report was in the junior worker's interest. Through the report, the junior worker could channel her anger at P1 and make the manager

change his bullying target from her to P1. Though intangible, the junior worker reaped benefits from the claim.

2. Case 2

A. Gender of the accused / claimant: Female / Female

B. Reported behavior: Showing the claimant's HR-related papers to previous colleagues

Participant 2 (P2) was reported for the above behavior. At the time of the interview, P2 was still confused about the claimant's actions. P2 received a call from the claimant who very briefly worked for her but left after the end of her contract. On the call, the claimant shouted at P2, claiming that P2 showed papers related to her HR affairs to the team members and slandered her. P2 asked the claimant exactly what papers she thought that P2 had shown to them, but she did not reply. She continued verbally abusing P2 and demanding an apology, which P2 refused. P2 was then reported for bullying through the employee support services under the MoEL.

C. Characteristics of the claimant's action: Reporting to an external body, producing false details, and threatening team members who provided contrary evidence

The claimant reported to the employee support service under MoEL to put pressure on management to yield to her demands. The claimant appeared to have produced false details as neither P2 nor the team members had any recollection of events happening. The claimant also failed to specify the exact nature of the documents that P2 had allegedly shown to others. When the team members' testimonies proved her claims to be false, the claimant began sending threatening messages to them.

D. Response from management: No investigation and demanding an apology to the claimant

Initially, neither management nor P2 took the claimant seriously. However, when the claimant filed a claim with the MoEL, management instructed P2 to apologize. After communicating with the claimant, management expressed that the claimant appeared to be psychologically unstable and that it would be easier to apologize and resolve the issue.

P2 conducted her own investigation and found that no one on the team were aware of the claimant's claim. None of them had seen any HR papers belonging to the claimant. P2 explained the results of her investigation to the claimant. The claimant began sending text messages to colleagues, demanding them to admit that they were being pressured by P2 to lie. P2 obtained the copies of the text messages and forwarded them to management.

Nevertheless, management instructed P2 to apologize to the claimant. Feeling weary of the situation and wanting to avoid involving her team further, P2 made a verbal apology, and the claimant demanded monetary reimbursement. P2 refused and reported this incident to management. Only then did management agree to stop the claimant from making unreasonable demands.

E. Impact on the reported individual: Loss of trust in management and feeling uneasy around temporary workers

P2 suffered no tangible damage due to the false report. However, she lost trust in management and began feeling uncomfortable around temporary workers. P2 stated that she would interact minimally with temporary workers because of her fear that any of them could cause her difficulties as the claimant did.

F. Suspected motive behind claim: Possibility of monetary gain

The motive underlying the claimant's false claim was monetary gain. Upon receiving a verbal apology, the claimant demanded monetary reimbursement from P2. Cases of temporary workers making false reports and demanding monetary reimbursement have been reported in Korean media (e.g., Jeonnam Daily News, 2020). Another possibility would be psychological instability (e.g., delusions of persecution). However, no direct evidence was available regarding the claimant's psychological state.

3. Case 3

A. Gender of the accused / claimant: Male / Female

B. Reported behavior: Repeated sexual molestation

Participant 3 (P3) was a bystander and the claimant's close colleague. According to P3, the claimant told her that someone in senior management was repeatedly molesting her. P3 told the claimant to file a claim against the perpetrator. She did not answer but continued to share her distressful experience.

P3 began noticing that the claimant was describing an additional person as a perpetrator. She even mentioned a moment when she was nearly raped. Thus, P3 believed that two perpetrators were harassing the claimant and strongly recommended her to report this to the police. The colleague did file a report—not with the police but instead with an external body that pressured the organization to investigate the case.

After the investigation began, P3 learned that the claimant only reported the second perpetrator, who was in a lower position than the initial perpetrator. The claimant provided very detailed descriptions in a diary, including the times and places of numerous incidents. P3 found it odd that, even for the earlier incidents, the second individual was described as the perpetrator. P3 remembered that, at that time, only the senior manager was mentioned as a perpetrator.

C. Characteristics of the claimant's action: Producing false details and publicizing the case

The claimant produced a very detailed, though false, report and publicized the case. Severity of the report and the increasing number of employees becoming aware pressured management to rush to close the case by making the reported individual yield to the claimant's demands.

D. Response from management: Pushing for case closure without proper investigation

Management rushed to close the case by putting pressure on the accused to settle with the claimant. The detailed records and testimony also seemed to support the accused's guilt.

However, the accused hired a legal expert who found some inconsistency in the recorded testimony. Some of the dates and times coincided with the accused's long-distance business trips. His colleagues' testimonies proved that it would have been impossible for him to return in time to commit the alleged behaviors.

The organization's internal investigation was hurried and not thorough. However, the legal expert identified false details. Ultimately, the expert found that the colleague had imagined much of the details that she had claimed.

E. Impact on the reported individual: Damaged reputation and financial loss

Although the reported individual was found to be innocent, women workers began avoiding him and talking about him with suspicion. He also was forced to pay the legal expenses out of pocket to prove his innocence due to management's irresponsible actions and improper investigation. He could have suffered additional negative consequences, but with the accounts originating from a bystander (P3), no further evidence was available.

F. Suspected motive behind claim: Rechanneled anger

According to P3, the claimant mentioned a perpetrator in senior management at the beginning of their communication. However, the claimant only reported another person in a lower position. The details of her claim were proven false through an expert's investigation. Thus, it is plausible that the claimant rechanneled her anger to the accused because the actual perpetrator was a senior manager with greater power. Rechanneling anger to someone with less power also occurred in Case 1. Similar anger displacement could be at play here.

The claimant's detailed descriptions of molestation are also intriguing. Through the investigation, the accused was found to be innocent. It was questionable whether the descriptions were of actual molestation by the senior

manager (the initial perpetrator) or a product of the claimant's imagination. If the latter, this could imply the claimant's psychological instability. However, no evidence regarding the claimant's psychological state was available.

4. Case 4

A. Gender of the accused / claimant: Female / Female

B. Reported behavior: Refusal to reimburse an unused leave

Some Korean organizations do not have a monetary reimbursement policy for unused leave. Instead, they encourage employees' full usage of leave. However, after an employee resigns, the relevant legislation entitles them to monetary reimbursement. The legislation is not known to many small business owners (and even some medium-sized business owners).

In Case 4, Participant 4 (P4) was a witness to a claimant who took advantage of the legislation and the organization's lax HR management. The claimant was contracted to work just over a month and had one day's leave. The organization did not have the aforementioned reimbursement policy in place, and the claimant was instructed to use the leave before her contract ended. The claimant had her supervisor sign the document requesting her leave and was absent from work for one day. However, she never submitted the document to HR. She also took a work-at-home day with no prior authorization (considered equivalent to absenteeism). Thus, there was cause for the claimant to forfeit the monetary reimbursement.

However, at the end of her contract, the claimant demanded monetary reimbursement for one day of unused leave. HR initially denied the demand for reimbursement and instructed the prior supervisor to reach out to the claimant. P4 was seated next to the claimant's prior supervisor during the meeting. P4 witnessed the claimant screaming at and insulting the supervisor.

The claimant then reported to the employee support service under MoEL, arguing that the organization was denying her rightful claim for reimbursement for unused leave by lying about her absenteeism. She also claimed that her prior

supervisor used strong language during the investigation process.

C. Characteristics of the claimant's action: Reporting to an external body and producing false details

Like the claimant in Case 2, the claimant also filed a claim with the employee support service under MoEL and pressured management to yield to her demands. To paint herself as a victim, the claimant falsely accused the supervisor of verbal abuse.

D. Response from management: Refusal to investigate, monetarily reimbursing the claimant, and demanding that the prior supervisor apologize to the claimant

According to P4, a brief investigation of emails, documents, and CCTV footage, as well as bystander's testimony, could have easily proved the claimant's claims to be false. Nevertheless, HR refused to continue the investigation in order to avoid exposing their CCTV footage to the MoEL. Because the claimant demanded only a small amount of monetary compensation, management complied to close the case. Additionally, HR pressured the claimant's prior supervisor to apologize.

E. Impact on the reported individual: Loss of trust in management and temporary staff

P4 noticed the prior supervisor's increasing distance from the temporary staff. The supervisor expressed tacit disappointment with management and distrusted temporary staff afterwards.

F. Suspected motive behind claim: Possibility of monetary gain

The motive underlying the claimant's claim was clear: monetary gain. It is becoming increasingly common for temporary workers in South Korea to fabricate reports of bullying or other wrongdoing after the end of their contract to gain monetary reimbursement (e.g., Aju Daily, 2021; Jeonnam Daily News, 2020). Deliberately not using annual leave (or not recording the use of annual leave) and claiming that the organization intentionally interfered with their right

to use leave is a common form of false report.

5. Case 5

A. Gender of the accused / claimant: Female / Female

B. Reported behavior: Not mentioning the claimant's name in the acknowledgements of a report

Case 5 involved a claimant who made her initial claim through an external body that audits the organization, and management overreacted. The claimant worked with Participant 5 (P5) for just over a month on a research project. The project lasted for eight months, and the claimant arrived at the end of the project to replace the predecessor who had found another job. During the short contract, the claimant was often unavailable without providing a reason and generated complaints from the collaborating organizations.

Eight months after the contract ended, the claimant reported P5 for bullying, claiming that P5 did not include her name in the acknowledgements of a report. The claimant used exaggerated expressions such as "malicious intention" and claimed that P5 acted to deny the claimant the proof of being involved in the project. The claim was false as the only recognized proof of involvement was the formal letter issued by the HR department. It was a common practice in the organization not to acknowledge a temporary worker in a report. There was also another complicated organizational issue prompting the absence of the claimant's name in the acknowledgements, which was beyond P5's control.

C. Characteristics of the claimant's action: Repeated reporting to external bodies, exaggerated and false details

The claimant filed a claim with one external body and, when her demands were not met, filed an additional claim with the employee support service under MoEL. Henry (2018) reported a similar behavioral pattern in which the claimant continued filing for new claims when her previous claims were found to be false.

In Case 5, two complaints through external bodies pressured management to

yield to the claimant's demands. Not recognizing a short-term temporary worker in reports' acknowledgements was a very common practice in the organization, but the claimant transformed this into an act of bullying by using strong, emotional words. Moreover, although recognition in the acknowledgements did not constitute proof of involvement, the claimant falsely claimed that it did.

D. Response from management: Improper investigation demanding that P5 take the blame, withholding information, evidence, and statements, and coercing P5 to yield to the claimant's demands

Management did not wish to expose that it was common practice not to include temporary staff's name in reports' acknowledgement. Management began pressuring P5 to take full personal responsibility for the claimant's claim. As P5 later learned, management withheld P5's testimony and evidence from the external investigatory bodies in order to place the blame on P5.

Management never clearly informed P5 of the details of the claimant's claim or how the case was progressing. The two designated investigators did not communicate amongst themselves, did not maintain a record of the investigation, and repeatedly asked the same questions and requested the same pieces of evidence. Being kept in the dark made P5 more anxious. P5 was forced to make sense of the situation herself. The investigators also exaggerated the seriousness of the situation to put pressure on P5 and coerced her to take full responsibility. P5 repeatedly experienced verbal abuse and coercion via phone and email. The investigators' coercion continued until P5 collapsed from the stress and was hospitalized.

P5 was unaware of what happened to the claimant's initial claim, as management did not inform her of the case's progress. The claimant made a second claim through an employee support service under the MoEL for the same issue. This time, the organization had the HR manager handle the case while not informing him of the first claim and P5's testimony. The manager simply passed the message to P5 to attend a hearing with the MoEL service. Due to her unstable condition, P5 could not attend. With only the claimant's testimony present at the hearing, the investigation reached the conclusion that "slight

bullying” had occurred.

P5 was instructed to include the claimant’s name in the acknowledgements and write an apology letter. Concurrently, management issued a formal letter that a formal bullying investigation would be conducted should P5 refuse to comply. P5 accepted the first condition but hesitated to write the apology letter. However, in her weakened psychological condition, P5 did not feel that she could cope with the bullying investigation, knowing that management would not be objective and honest during the process.

The HR manager promised that, should P5 write the letter, he would obtain written consent from the claimant that she would never report P5 for the issue again and agree to drop the case completely. However, once he obtained the letter from P5, the manager never again mentioned the written consent that he had promised to obtain from the claimant.

P5 was advised by a relevant expert to write the letter according to how she truly felt instead of accepting herself as a bully, as the claimant claimed her to be. The latter could potentially bring more legal responsibilities due to loopholes in the legislation. This was more agreeable to P5, so she wrote a letter that apologized for not understanding that being acknowledged in the report was important to the claimant, especially because it was not proof of her involvement with the project. She explained in the letter that the real proof was the formal letter issued by HR.

The HR manager did not keep P5 abreast of developments in the case. P5 could have filed an appeal within a few weeks, but management did not inform her of this either. P5 learned this herself by contacting the designated officer at the MoEL service. Through the officer, P5 found that management had withheld all her testimony and evidence. The officer was surprised to hear of this, but she could do nothing for P5 because the deadline for filing an appeal had already passed. This was a rare case, and had the officer been informed of P5’s evidence and statements, P5 could have easily been proven innocent. Even with the claimant’s testimony only, the officer believed that it made a very weak claim. Nevertheless, a conclusion had to be reached, and the officer had opted for “slight bullying.”

E. Impact on the reported individual: Loss of trust in management, psychological distress and physical health problems, financial loss, and family distress

Due to management's improper investigation and coercive handling of the case, P5 suffered psychological distress and developed a panic disorder with breathing difficulties, sleeplessness, and signs of serious psychological disturbance. P5 lost trust in management. She felt that she was treated as something expendable, not as a human being. She underwent psychiatric treatment for months and was hospitalized due to an eating disorder induced by the stress. She lost 20% of her body weight. P5 was still suffering from the symptoms at the time of the interview. P5 incurred expenses for the ER, inpatient, and psychiatric treatments. P5's family also showed signs of psychological distress (e.g., insomnia and extreme mood swings) and physical health problems (e.g., heartburn, other digestive problems, heightened blood sugar levels, and elevated blood pressure) during and following the case.

F. Suspected motive behind claim: Desire for recognition

As a temporary assistant who worked for just over a month and was frequently unavailable, the claimant's work made little contribution to the project. However, she showed a desire to be recognized for the project in her demand to have her name in the report's acknowledgements.

6. Case 6

A. Gender of the accused / claimant: Male / Female

B. Reported behavior: Sexual molestation

In Case 6, Participant 6 (P6) was a bystander. P6 and the accused had been involved with the local women's union in community work for years when the union reported the latter for sexual molestation. The claimant gave descriptions of multiple incidents, including that the accused coerced her into his car, drove her to (location), took her up to the attic, and touched her (parts of body). The

union publicly accused the suspect of the crime. However, the police investigation quickly proved the claim to be false. The accused had never driven in his life and possessed neither a car nor a driver's license. After the investigation concluded, the union offered no apology. Some union members continued to act and speak as though the police investigation was a sham.

C. Characteristics of the claimant's action: Producing false details, reporting incident to the police (an external body), involving the women's union, and publicizing the case online

The claimant made a false report to the police and involved the women's union in the case. This put strong pressure on management, leading them to discipline the accused who was later proven innocent. When the police investigation was closed, the claimant made the case public again by posting information online but omitting the police investigation's results.

D. Response from management: Disciplining P6 and discontinuing collaboration with the union

Management did not involve itself with the police investigation and made no attempts to protect the accused. Although proven innocent, the management still disciplined the accused on the grounds that giving the union cause to report him (even if falsely) was his fault. Management demoted and relocated him accordingly. Management also discontinued their collaboration with the women's union.

E. Impact on the reported individual: Damaged reputation, demotion, loss of trust in management, physical and psychological symptoms of stress and PTSD

Although proven innocent through the police investigation, the accused was demoted. Rumors circulated, with many assuming that the accused must have been disciplined for a reason. Additionally, the case was publicized in the online women's community with no mention that the accused was ultimately exonerated. P6 saw the online post and informed the accused. By the time the accused saw the post, numerous insulting remarks had been posted in the

comments section. Seeing the post and the comments shocked the accused. He began showing signs of anxiety when a woman was nearby. He was formerly close with P6, but he would appear wary even when around her. After he was relocated, P6 never heard from him again.

F. Suspected motive behind claim: Releasing gender-related hatred and satisfying need for attention

The claimant and possibly the union could have had self-serving motives for the false claim. However, as the union remained silent, it is impossible to understand their motives based on the case alone.

According to P6, the case could have been a manifestation of the claimant's gender-related hatred, as it had become somewhat fashionable in the aforementioned online community to post a case in which men were villains, and such posts would receive much attention and supportive comments. In line with P6's comments, another possible motive is a need for attention. The claimant received much attention and support from the women's union during the police investigation. Even after the police investigation had concluded, she published information about the case and received further attention.

7. Case 7

A. Gender of the accused / claimant: Male / Female

B. Reported behavior: Photographing the license plate of the taxi that the claimant was riding in after social gatherings at work

In Case 7, Participant 7 (P7) witnessed a situation in which the claimant threatened management with publicizing the case. P7 and colleagues were invited to a workplace social gathering (hwesik) in the neighboring department. The purpose was to welcome a new employee (the claimant). After the dinner, the manager called a taxi for the claimant, when the claimant entered the vehicle, took a photo of the license plate. This is a common measure in South Korea to prevent taxi crimes.

A few weeks later, the claimant filed a report claiming that the manager sexually harassed her. She stated that the manager's photographing the taxi's license plate made her feel uncomfortable. When filing the report, she and her father brought a journalist along.

C. Characteristics of the claimant's action: Exaggerating a neutral behavior and exhibiting readiness to publicize the case

It was difficult to consider the reported behavior as sexual harassment. Nevertheless, the claimant claimed it to be so by emphasizing her uneasy feelings while the action took place. That she and her father brought a journalist along showed that they were ready to publicize the case.

D. Response from management: Short investigation and disciplining the manager

Management quickly organized an investigation. They determined what actually transpired and that no other actions that could imply sexual harassment occurred. However, management still chose to discipline the reported manager and demoted him. The entire process lasted a few days. Upon being informed about the discipline, the father and the journalist demanded monetary settlement. P7 was unaware of the actions taken by management in response to the demand.

E. Impact on the reported individual: Demotion, damage to reputation, and avoidance of women

The manager's discipline generated rumors at work. P7 and his colleagues were present during and after the social gathering to observe what actually happened and knew that he was innocent. However, others who were not present assumed that something must have happened for the manager to deserve such discipline. P7 observed that the accused had become very wary of female colleagues approaching or passing by.

F. Suspected motive behind claim: Monetary gain

Upon hearing of the discipline, the claimant's father and the journalist demanded monetary settlement. This action implies the motive of monetary gain.

V. Discussion

This paper discussed seven cases of false or exaggerated bullying claims. Though not a large number, these cases highlight the existence and negative consequences of wrongful identification of victims and perpetrators.

While differing in the contents of the report, the cases showed some consistencies: claimant's self-interest (direct or indirect) and the management's willingness to scapegoat the accused without a proper investigation.

〈Table 1〉 The overview of the cases

no.	Gender of Accused/ Claimant	Contents of Report	Claimant's Actions	Managerial Responses	Suspected Motives	Impact upon the accused
1	Female/ Female	Slandering a supervisor and forcing the claimant to do the same	Turning words of consolidation into malicious slandering	No investigation, manager's verbal abuse towards the accused	Rechannelled anger, escaping from manager's bullying	Manager's retaliation, psychological distance towards colleagues
2	Female/ Female	Showing the claimant's HR-related papers to previous colleagues	Making up false details, Reporting to the MOEL Employee support service	No investigation, demanding the accused to apologize to claimant	Monetary gain	Loss of trust in management and colleagues, uneasiness around temporary workers
3	Male/ Female	Repeated sexual molestation	Blaming the molestation on an innocent person not the actual culprit Publicizing the case within the organisation	Pushing for quick case closure, Demanding the accused to settle the case with the claimant	Rechanneled anger	Damaged reputation, Financial loss

no.	Gender of Accused/ Claimant	Contents of Report	Claimant's Actions	Managerial Responses	Suspected Motives	Impact upon the accused
4	Female/ Female	Refusal to reimburse an unused annual leave	Pretending not to have used the annual leave by not turning in the paper to HR, Reporting to the MOEL's employee support service, Verbally abusing the colleagues who testified her use of the leaves	Refusal to investigate, demanding the accused to apologise to the claimant, monetarily reimbursing the claimant for the leaves	Monetary gain	Loss of trust in the maangement and temporary staff
5	Female/ Female	Not acknowledging a short term staff in a report	Repeated reporting to External bodies on the same action	Refusal to reveal that it was common not to include a short term staff in the acknowledgment in the organisation Designated investigators verbally abusing the accused while demanding to take the full blame Hiding the evidences and statements from the accuses from the MOEL services	Desire for recognition (without actual contribution)	Loss of trust in the management , psychological and physical health problems, financial loss, family distress

no.	Gender of Accused/ Claimant	Contents of Report	Claimant's Actions	Managerial Responses	Suspected Motives	Impact upon the accused
6	Male/ Female	Sexual molestation	Producing false details that did not occur Reporting to the police, Involving women's union Publicizing the case online after it was proven false	No involvement during investigation Unjustified discipline after police investigation revealed the case to be false, Discontinuing collaboration with the women's union	Releasing gender-related hatred Need for attention	Damaged reputation, demotion, loss of trust in management, signs of symptoms, PTSD
7	Male/ Female	Photographing the license plate of a tax the claimant was riding after work-related social gathering	Exaggerating a neutral behavior, Pressing the management by bringing a journalist	Short investigation, Disciplining the accused	Monetary gain	Demotion, damaged reputation, avoidance of women

That false reports were motivated by claimants' self-interest accords with previous literature (Anonymous, n.d.-a; McGrath, 2021). Whether tangibly or intangibly, the claimants benefited from the claims or at least attempted to obtain such benefits. They pressured management by making their initial claim through an external body or publicizing the case (or threatening to do so). This behavioral pattern differs from that of real victims. Real victims usually hesitate to file a report (Caponechia; 2011; Seo & Lee, 2016). Even when they choose to file a report, they usually make their initial claim through an internal channel of the organization (e.g., internal help center, ombudsman, workers' union, HR department, or trusted manager) (Seo, 2022). A small proportion might approach an external body (e.g., employee support services under MoEL, Human Rights Commissions, or women's unions) when the organization mishandles the case (Seo & Lee, 2016).

However, unlike true victims, false claimants were quick to approach external

bodies. Legislation and policies to protect employee rights and welfare have been strengthened over the years, perhaps giving false claimants a sense of power over their employers/managers. The targets of false reports in the case studies and in the media (e.g., Aju Daily, 2021; Jeonnam Daily News, 2020) were usually small business owners, someone in middle management, or someone in a slightly more powerful position than the false claimants. None of the claimants targeted someone with great power for their false or exaggerated claims. Moreover, in four of the seven presented here, the falsely accused individuals were women. This was counterintuitive considering that in statistics on workplace bullying, men are often overrepresented among perpetrators (e.g., Seo & Lee, 2016). With women's lower social status compared to that of men in Korean society, the perceived small power distance between the claimant and the falsely accused might have been easy to overcome with the assistance of employee protection legislation and policies.

With pressure from external bodies and possibility of exposure, management complied with claimants' demands. Some went as far as to wrongfully discipline or coerce the accused to place the blame on them. The Korean cultural tendency to avoid conflict is illustrated well by management's responses in Cases 2 through 7. When facing outside exposure of a bullying case or pressure from external bodies, management overreacted and disciplined the accused, even when they were aware that the claims were false. Management's different reactions to bullying claims depending on the possibility of outside exposure are relatively typical of Korean organizations (Seo & Park, 2021). While completely different in the nature of the actions taken, there was one common thread: Management attempted to avoid conflict and minimize its responsibility for the claims (Martin & Klein, 2013; Leung et al., 2002; Peng & Tjosvold, 2011; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). With such tendencies, management readily scapegoated the reported individuals.

Implications and Limitations

False or exaggerated claims and management's responsibility-shifting tendency could have ripple effects on real victims. Once an organization has experienced a case of false or exaggerated bullying claims, management is likely to be skeptical of future bullying claims. This bias would be in management's interest as they could minimize their responsibility and involvement by considering all bullying to be false or exaggerated and blame the victims for bringing up the issues. In this sense, false claimants could be harming true victims.

False claims' negative repercussions suggest that they should be recognized as a form of bullying. In the cases presented here, false claims harmed the reported individuals' reputations, psychological and/or physical health, position within the organization (e.g., demotion), and financial standing (e.g., legal fees, reduced income due to demotion, medical expenses, etc.). In that sense, false or exaggerated claims should be considered upward bullying (Anonymous, 2019), and action should be taken to prevent them along with other bullying behaviors. As implied by media articles and legal cases (Aju Daily, 2021; Anonymous, n.d.-a; McGrath, 2021), deliberately false reports filed against managers/employers could be on the rise. While the traditional understanding has been that workplace bullying is usually perpetrated by someone with more power within the organization, it would be wise to watch out for the reverse (Eul-jil), too.

This research makes a unique contribution in that it shows the harmful effects of erroneous identification of perpetrators due to claimants' deliberate deceit. These cases have a number of practical implications. For instance, the cases clearly show that false claimants can take advantage of conflict-avoidant, responsibility-shifting management. Management could victimize their own members by giving in to the false claims, in which case they would also become perpetrators of bullying.

The study also cautions the public that they too could become targets of false reports in the workplace. As shown in the cases, false claimants could frame neutral behaviors as malicious ones. For the wrongfully labeled perpetrators,

acting according to common sense was insufficient to avoid the false claims.

Management and external bodies that receive workplace bullying complaints should be able to distinguish true bullying from false alarms (e.g., Caponecchia, 2011) and follow appropriate investigatory procedures (Anonymous, 2021; Caponecchia, 2011, Henry, 2018). False accusation itself should be considered a form of bullying as it harms the falsely accused (Anderson, 2021; Frederick, 2019; Patel, 2021) and the management should handle the case accordingly.

Management should take responsibility in supporting the falsely accused (Anonymous, 2019; Frederick, 2019; Patel, 2021). If false reports themselves are bullying, then the falsely accused should be treated as victims and provided with the same support, such as counseling services, helplines, or employee assistance programs (Patel, 2021). For Koreans who are falsely accused, counseling services would be particularly important. Experts in Australia assumed in their advice that management would remain objective and neutral while handling false claims (e.g., Caponecchia, 2011; Frederick, 2019; Patel, 2021). However, the seven cases examined in this paper showed that Korean management was quick to scapegoat the falsely accused with their tendency to avoid conflict (Leung, Koch & Lu, 2002; Peng & Tjosvold, 2011; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002) and willingness to sacrifice individuals for the “good” of the organization (Im et al., 2012). Management’s actions would likely cause further shock and pain among the falsely accused who were already harmed by the false report. Counseling could play a pivotal role in helping them overcome trauma and return to their original state.

This study has two important limitations. First, there were only seven cases of false or exaggerated claims reported in this paper. This was because these were the only individuals who consented to having their cases published. The sample is too small to draw firm conclusions. There was not a large body of previous literature on similar cases, and the related statistical data were difficult to find. This suggests the need for further research on why individuals make false or exaggerated reports and how to recognize them (e.g., identifying the typical behavioral patterns of false claimants) as well as statistically surveying the possibility of false or exaggerated reports among the bullying claims.

Second, all claimants in these cases were women. Generally, women are

overrepresented among bullying victims (whether real or false) compared to men. Thus, it was also easier to find cases of female false claimants than those of male false claimants. However, the fact that all false claimants in this study were women does not imply that women are more likely than men to make false or exaggerated claims of bullying at work. Further investigation is needed to examine these gender differences.

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