



Neutralizing workplace bullying: the buffering effects of contextual factors

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the direct and buffering effects of three workplace contextual factors – constructive leadership, perceived organizational support, and organizational anti-bullying initiatives – on bullying and its relationships with relevant criteria. Further, the paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of organizational initiatives against bullying as perceived by targets and non-targets.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from 727 employees in nine New Zealand healthcare organizations. Of these, 133 employees were classified as bullied, as they had experienced at least two negative acts per week over the last six months.

Findings – Correlations revealed negative relationships between the three contextual work factors and bullying. Moderated regression showed that perceived organizational support buffered the relationship of bullying with self-rated job performance, and that organizational initiatives against bullying buffered the relationship of bullying with both wellbeing and organizational commitment. Targets consistently gave lower ratings than non-targets of the effectiveness of organizational initiatives to address bullying.

Originality/value – There is scant research on workplace factors that may reduce bullying and buffer its negative effects. This paper makes an original contribution in providing evidence of the importance of three contextual factors, and of buffering effects for perceived organizational support and organizational initiatives against bullying.

Keywords Workplace bullying, Perceived organizational support, Leadership, Anti-bullying, New Zealand, Bullying, Workplace, Health services sector

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Workplace bullying is a concern for many employees in their everyday working lives. Research shows that it is a widespread phenomenon, with rates of 5-28 per cent across western countries (Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2007). Workplace bullying results in anxiety, depression, absenteeism, and turnover (Hogh *et al.*, 2011). Pioneering research by Leymann (1996) identified a poor work environment as the key antecedent of bullying. Indeed, work environment factors may influence both the likelihood that bullying occurs and affect how recipients of bullying respond (Salin and Hoel, 2011). From a prevention perspective, then, contextual factors may take on primary and secondary prevention roles in reducing bullying and its impacts (Bentley *et al.*, 2012; Law *et al.*, 2011).

While considerable progress has been made in understanding contextual factors as antecedents to bullying, Salin and Hoel (2011) highlight several limitations that future research should address. These include using multivariate analyses to simultaneously investigate the relative strengths of contextual factors, and interactive models that reflect the complexity of contextual factors that may have multiple and dynamic effects. We address these shortcomings in the present study investigating both the direct and buffering roles of three contextual workplace factors as depicted in Figure 1: Constructive leadership, perceived organisational support, and organisational initiatives against bullying. These three factors are proposed to directly reduce bullying and also reduce the negative ramifications of bullying on relevant individual and organisational criteria. In the sections that follow we define bullying, outline our rationale for choosing these criterion variables, and provide arguments for our hypotheses.

Defining workplace bullying

Workplace bullying is the persistent exposure to negative and aggressive behaviours, which may be psychological, verbal, or physical, and may be perpetrated by an individual or group (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011; O'Moore *et al.*, 1998). Such negative behaviours are labelled as bullying when they "occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months)" (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011, p. 22). Bullying is primarily psychological and persistent, and on this basis is distinguished from workplace violence, which is primarily physical and irregular

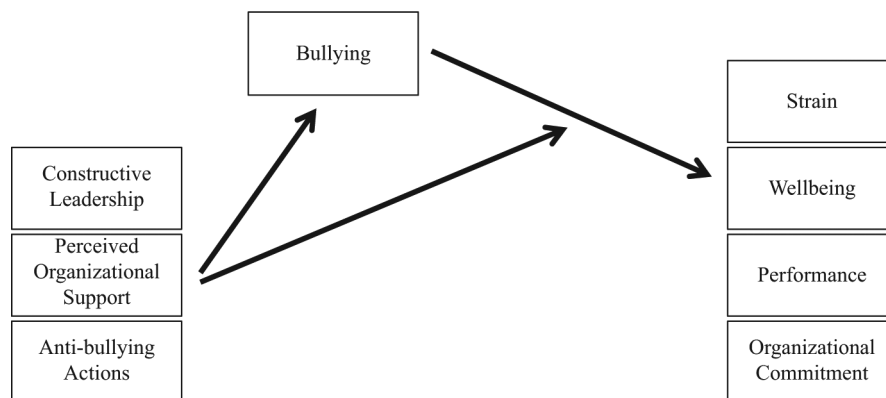


Figure 1. Anticipated direct and moderating relationships for the relationship of bullying with predictors and criteria

(Rayner and Cooper, 2006; Zapf *et al.*, 2003). Estimated rates of bullying vary across studies depending on the criterion and measure used, with the two most common measurements being self-identified bullying and inventory-based checklists of negative behaviours (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010).

Individual and organizational consequences of workplace bullying

Bullying can have severe effects on individual targets and on the organisation. At the individual level, the results of bullying include lower self-esteem, more negative emotion, anxiety, stress, fatigue, burnout and depression (Agervold and Mikkelsen, 2004; Cassitto *et al.*, 2004; Djurkovic *et al.*, 2006; Hauge *et al.*, 2010; Hoel *et al.*, 2004; Lovell and Lee, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). In the current study we examined strain and wellbeing to capture two opposing dimensions of individual health (see also Law *et al.*, 2011). Although strain and wellbeing are related, strain is the outcome of experiencing stressors and is focused on environmental factors whereas wellbeing captures individual traits, social cues, and cognitive processes (Warr, 2006).

Bullying also negatively affects organisations: Targets take more days off, report unclear expectations of task performance, have reduced job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation, and work motivation, and are more likely to leave the organisation than non-targets (Agervold and Mikkelsen, 2004; Djurkovic *et al.*, 2008; Harvey *et al.*, 2007; Keashly and Neuman, 2004). Based on these findings, our remaining two criterion variables were performance and organisational commitment. Performance represents a key outcome for the organisation, while organisational commitment is an important attitude in itself and also has implications for task performance, contextual performance, and turnover (Sinclair *et al.*, 2005). To date there has been little research investigating the relationship of bullying with these variables.

Contextual factors as antecedents of workplace bullying

Contextual factors have the most potential for broad impacts in reducing bullying and its effects since they can be implemented across work units and organisations (Bond *et al.*, 2010; Giorgi, 2010; Salin and Hoel, 2011). Three recent studies have considered broader factors and investigated both their direct and interactive effects, in line with Salin and Hoel's (2011) call for such research designs. In a survey of frontline police officers, Tuckey *et al.* (2009) observed that perceived cognitive, emotional and behavioural support from colleagues negatively predicted experiences of bullying and observed bullying toward others. Moreover, the positive relationship between observed bullying and work demands was reduced by a combination of support from colleagues and high work control. Investigating perceived organisational support (POS) among schoolteachers, Djurkovic *et al.* (2008) found that POS was both negatively related to bullying and moderated the relationship between workplace bullying and targets' intention to leave. More recently Law *et al.* (2011), using a random Australian working sample, found both a direct and moderating effect for psychological safety climate (PSC), which is the perception of management's commitment to protecting workers' psychological health and safety. PSC had direct negative relationships with bullying at the individual and organisation level. Further, PSC at the organisational level buffered the positive relationships of bullying with psychological distress and emotional exhaustion, and buffered the negative relationship of bullying with engagement. In the present study we investigated

three potential antecedents to ascertain direct and moderator relationships with bullying: Constructive leadership, POS, and organisational anti-bullying initiatives.

Constructive leadership

Hauge *et al.* (2007) note the paradox that although supervisors are the most frequent perpetrators of bullying, relatively few studies have investigated the relationship of leadership behaviour and bullying. Those studies that have been conducted tend to examine the negative consequences of destructive forms of leadership behaviour (see, for instance, Aasland *et al.*, 2010; Kelloway and Barling, 2010). Less attention has been focused on how constructive leadership behaviour may reduce the likelihood of bullying occurring and attenuate the negative outcomes of bullying. Constructive leadership is defined as behaviours which encourage and recognise individuals for their contributions, support their needs, foster growth and development within the organisation and illustrate a leader's flexibility to innovate and adapt to environmental contingencies (Ekvall and Arvonen, 1991). Poor leadership can lead to or exacerbate bullying in workplaces in various ways. Leaders may behave in bullying ways themselves, model bullying behaviours which others copy, fail to intervene in bullying behaviour or even reward it (Mathisen *et al.*, 2011). In contrast, constructive leadership may directly reduce the likelihood of bullying by modelling constructive behaviours, intervening when bullying occurs and ensuring consistent punishment for bullying. The few studies that investigated supportive or constructive leadership and bullying have found a negative relationship, showing that employees who experience such positive leadership experience less bullying (Brotheridge and Lee, 2006; Hauge *et al.*, 2007; Skogstad *et al.*, 2011). Thus we predict a direct negative relationship of constructive leadership with bullying:

H1. Constructive leadership negatively predicts bullying.

Constructive leadership may also reduce the negative effects of bullying by managing conflict, clarifying work roles and goals, acting as a role model for appropriate behavior, and reducing targets' perceptions of loss of control (Gardner and Johnson, 2001; Hoel and Giga, 2006; Strandmark and Hallberg, 2007). Previous research has found that negative leadership behaviours such as laissez-faire leadership facilitate negative work factors such as role conflict in predicting bullying (Hauge *et al.*, 2007). Here we focus on positive leadership behaviours to suggest positive buffering effects. Leaders who intervene in conflict, trust employees, and provide autonomy may reduce the degree to which targets of bullying experience strain and wellbeing. Clarifying work roles and goals may help to keep employees' work on track, reducing the negative effects of bullying on performance. Also through having clear goals, targets of bullying may be better able to integrate these with their own goals hence sustaining organizational commitment even in the face of bullying. We predict that:

H2. Constructive leadership will reduce the relationship of bullying with (a) strain, (b) wellbeing, (c) performance, and (d) organizational commitment.

Perceived organizational support (POS)

POS is defined as the employee's perception that the organisation will help employees to carry out their work and support their socioemotional wellbeing (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). A supportive workplace which acknowledges individuals' goals

and values, supports wellbeing as well as performance, and values employee ideas and contributions, may be an effective counter to bullying (Djurkovic *et al.*, 2008; Keashly, 2001). Based on the norm of reciprocity, in which good treatment from one person obliges the other to respond in kind (Gouldner, 1960), employees repay POS with attitudes and behaviours that benefit the organisation (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Higher levels of POS are therefore likely to be associated with lower levels of bullying. While there is evidence that a poor work environment is associated with higher levels of bullying (Skogstad *et al.*, 2011), only recently have supportive workplace climates been recognised as potential antecedents of lower levels of bullying (Parzefall and Salin, 2010; Tuckey *et al.*, 2009). Hence we propose:

H3. Perceived organizational support negatively predicts bullying.

There is emerging evidence that POS may act also as a buffer to reduce the impact of bullying by sustaining reciprocal positive attitudes and behaviours. Djurkovic *et al.* (2008) found that POS buffered the relationship of bullying with intentions to leave. More recently, Parzefall and Salin (2010) have suggested that POS may act as a buffer for victims of bullying, helping them to cope. In line with this evidence, we propose that POS may buffer the relationships of bullying on targets' strain and wellbeing. Past research has found that POS moderates the effects of psychological aggression on emotional well-being, somatic health, and job-related affect (Schat and Kelloway, 2003), and that it buffers the effects of psychological contract breach on negative affective reactions (Dulac *et al.*, 2008). Hence, when an employee feels supported they may be better able to see bullying as separate from their broader experiences of work, which reduces its prominence and impact (Parzefall and Salin, 2010). Past research has shown that POS positively predicts organizational commitment (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990, 2001) and both task and contextual performance (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986, 1990; Wayne *et al.*, 1997), so a buffering effect for the relationship of bullying with these criteria is plausible. We note a potential dark side to POS in the context of bullying, in that high levels of POS could lead a target to feel obligated to perform or feel committed in spite of experiencing bullying. However, if a lack of POS allows bullying to reduce a target's performance this may threaten the target's continued employment which is also a negative outcome. Overall, we predict that:

H4. Perceived organizational support will reduce the relationship of bullying on (a) strain, (b) wellbeing, (c) performance, and (d) organizational commitment.

Organizational anti-bullying initiatives

Targets often report that employers respond inadequately to bullying by, for example, failing to support targets, trivializing targets' concerns, accepting and normalizing bullying behaviour, blaming targets, and failing to deal with bullies (Duffy, 2009; Hogh *et al.*, 2011). More effective actions are likely to be system-wide approaches which make clear those behaviours that are and are not acceptable and which create good working relationships (Duffy, 2009; Hogh *et al.*, 2011). This may require policies and procedures with credible enforcement, support for targets and those accused of bullying, suitable training, and the modelling of appropriate behaviour by management and senior staff (Namie, 2007; Rayner and Cooper, 2006; Rayner and Lewis, 2011). A few studies have investigated the direct effects of organisational actions on bullying, with mixed results

(Hoel and Giga, 2006; Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2011). Hoel and Giga (2006) found little consistent evidence that organisational interventions reduced bullying. It is possible that the interventions raised awareness and increased reporting of bullying and that this did not accurately reflect actual changes in bullying (Cooper-Thomas *et al.*, 2010). Using a process evaluation approach, Mikkelsen *et al.* (2011) found evidence for the beneficial effects of a range of interventions to prevent workplace bullying. Several other authors argue that organisational initiatives should be multi-faceted for maximum effectiveness (Ferris, 2004; Keashly and Neuman, 2004; Saam, 2010). While the evidence is sparse, we consider that organisational initiatives are more likely to predict lower levels of bullying, and identified a broad range of initiatives from previous research (see method):

H5. Organizational initiatives against bullying negative predict bullying.

Additionally, we examined whether organizational initiatives against bullying can reduce the effects of bullying. Thus, when organizational initiatives are perceived by employees to be effective, we anticipate that even though bullying may still occur, its impact will be lessened – akin to secondary prevention (Bentley *et al.*, 2012). Specifically, when employees who experience bullying have recourse to organizational initiatives designed to prevent or reduce bullying, their psychological health may be less affected and they may experience less strain and better wellbeing. Further, organizational actions against bullying may act as a specific type of reciprocity within social exchange theory (Coyle-Shapiro and Conway, 2004) – if the organization is seen as taking action against bullying, then targets may work harder in turn to offset any negative impacts of bullying hence sustaining their performance and organizational commitment. We predict:

H6. Organizational initiatives against bullying will reduce the relationship of bullying on work-related experiences, attitudes, and behaviors of (a) strain, (b) wellbeing, (c) performance, and (d) organizational commitment.

Perceived effectiveness of organizational initiatives

Past research has identified a range of potential activities that organisations could put in place to reduce bullying, but evidence of their effectiveness is sparse (Hoel and Giga, 2006; Keashly and Neuman, 2004; Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2011). Given that organisational responses to bullying are often copied from one workplace to another (Salin, 2008), it is important to identify which organisational actions are seen as most effective in countering bullying (Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, we explored bullied and non-bullied employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of various anti-bullying initiatives to obtain a rank ordering and also investigate differences in perceived effectiveness.

Workplace bullying in the healthcare industry

Bullying is identified as more prevalent in certain industries, especially those involving service such as education and healthcare (Browning *et al.*, 2007; Djurkovic *et al.*, 2004; Hutchinson *et al.*, 2005). For this research we chose the healthcare industry because bullying has been identified as a major problem in this sector both internationally (Di Martino *et al.*, 2003; Nielsen *et al.*, 2008; Strandmark and Hallberg, 2007; Yildirim and Yildirim, 2007), and in New Zealand (Bentley *et al.*, 2009; Foster *et al.*, 2004; Scott *et al.*,

2008). Given the prevalence of bullying in healthcare it is likely that contextual factors promote bullying, including a sometimes harsh, high-pressure environment, as well as differences in knowledge that relate to work hierarchies and contribute to power imbalances (Foster *et al.*, 2004; Scott *et al.*, 2008).

Summary

The main goal of the present study was to investigate whether constructive leadership, perceived organisational support, and organisational anti-bullying initiatives would directly negatively predict bullying, and through a moderating effect, reduce the relationships of bullying with individual and organisational-level criteria of strain, wellbeing, performance, and organisational commitment.

Method

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of 727 employees from nine healthcare organisations in New Zealand, comprising different organisations and sites from within two district health boards and two residential care organisations. A total of 84 per cent (612) of participants indicated their gender as female and the mean age was 46 years. Respondents had an average of seven years in their current job and nearly eight years in the organisation. Participants were primarily New Zealand European (503; 69 per cent), with Maori (64; 9 per cent) and Cook Island Maori (6; 1 per cent) also represented, as well as European (i.e. either not holding New Zealand citizenship or a first generation immigrant: 72; 10 per cent), Asian (42; 6 per cent), Pacific Island (33; 5 per cent) and South African (9; 1 per cent; all percentages have been rounded). Of those who indicated their role, 16 (2.2 per cent) were senior managers, 81 (11.3 per cent) were middle-level managers, 73 (10.2 per cent) were first-line supervisors, and 445 (62.0 per cent) were non-managerial employees.

Procedure

Participants were informed about the research through a participant information sheet that was sent to them internally (either email or paper). Participants completed a computer-based survey, either online or on a laptop. Laptops were set up in a central location at each organisation, with each laptop screened to provide privacy. An online option was provided for participants who preferred to complete the survey at a time and location convenient to them.

Measures

Bullying. This was measured in two ways. One measure was the revised version of the negative acts questionnaire (NAQ-R) (Hauge *et al.*, 2007), which lists 22 negative workplace behaviours. Example items are “being ignored or excluded” and “excessive monitoring of your work”, with respondents asked to indicate how often they have experienced each of these behaviours over the previous 6 months. Responses ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (daily) ($\alpha = 0.87$). Two scores were computed for each respondent. First, the mean response across the 22 items was computed to yield an “average” score for each person. Second, we computed a binary bullying score (0, 1) to categorise participants as either bullied or not bullied. Following Hauge *et al.* (2007), the criterion was such that participants had to have experienced at least two of the negative

behaviours weekly or more frequently over the past six months. To achieve this, participants were assigned a score of 1 on any item to which they responded “weekly” or more, and participants who obtained a sum of 2 or greater across the 22 items were classified as having been bullied. Respondents who scored less than 2 were classified as non-bullied. In addition, a second measure of bullying was included for comparison purposes, which was self-reported bullying. Respondents were provided with a definition of bullying as repeated negative actions, taken from Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.* (2007, p. 847) and asked “Do you consider yourself to have been bullied at your workplace over the past 6 months?”, with response options ranging from “no” (0) to “yes, almost daily” (5).

Constructive leadership. Six items were used from Ekvall and Arvonen’s (1991) measure of change-oriented leadership (e.g. “defines and explains work requirements clearly to subordinates”, “sets clear goals for work”). Respondents were asked to rate their immediate manager. Responses to all items were on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (always) ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Perceptions of organizational support. Seven items were used from Eisenberger *et al.*’s (1986) measure of perceived organisational support (POS). Shorter versions of the full POS scale are common and non-contentious because the original scale is unidimensional and has high internal reliability (DJURKOVIC *ET AL.*, 2008). Sample items are “Help is available from my organisation when I have a problem” and “my organisation cares about my opinions”. Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree) ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Effectiveness of organizational initiatives against bullying. A total of 13 potential actions were identified from the literature on bullying and negative workplace climates (e.g. Ferris, 2004), as well as the more general literature on organisational stress management interventions which organisations might engage in to address bullying. The item stem was “we now wish you to think about what, if anything, your organisation has done to address bullying. How effective do you think your organisation has been in each of the following areas?” All items are provided in Table I. Responses were on a 6 point scale ranging from 1 (very ineffective) to 6 (very effective), with a “don’t know” option offered ($\alpha = 0.98$).

Wellbeing. Wellbeing was assessed using Warr’s (1990) list of 15 affective adjectives, such as “tense”, “calm”, “depressed”, “cheerful”, and “optimistic”. Participants were asked to indicate how often they had felt each of these affective experiences in their job over the previous 6 months, ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (all the time). Negatively-worded adjectives (such as tense” and “depressed”) were recoded so that a high score indicated greater well-being ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Psychological strain. The 12 item version of the general health questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Goldberg, 1972) was used to measure psychological strain. The items relate to psychosocial symptoms experienced over the past 6 months such as “felt constantly under strain” and “been able to face up to your problems”. Participants responded from 0 (not at all), 1 (no more than usual), 2 (rather more than usual), and 3 (much more than usual). The six positively worded items were reverse-scored so that a higher score on the instrument indicated greater strain ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Self-reported performance. Individuals’ perceptions of their job performance were measured with three items asking them to rate their overall job performance compared to others (Kessler *et al.*, 2003). An example item is “How would you rate your own usual

Strategy	Bullied		Not bullied		<i>t</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Developing a workplace bullying policy	3.09	1.77	4.31	1.58	-6.40 ^{*a}
Encouraging open and respectful communication between people	2.92	1.46	4.30	1.44	-9.31 [*]
Developing a clear procedure for handling complaints about bullying	2.90	1.73	4.27	1.63	-7.72 [*]
Its efforts to increase awareness among its employees about bullying	2.83	1.52	4.13	1.62	-7.56 [*]
Encouraging appropriate ways for people to interact with their work colleagues	2.70	1.37	4.14	1.49	-9.28 [*]
Reviewing its procedures for dealing with bullying	2.60	1.52	4.01	1.64	-7.58 [*]
Developing a system for reporting incidents of bullying	2.57	1.44	4.02	1.62	-8.35 [*]
Its efforts to identify and resolve conflict quickly and fairly	2.57	1.44	3.95	1.56	-8.63 [*]
Its efforts to identify the occurrence of bullying in this workplace	2.45	1.44	3.68	1.58	-7.36 [*]
Its efforts to identify factors which might encourage bullying to occur	2.44	1.33	3.62	1.57	-6.98 [*]
Providing training and support in the management of relationships	2.42	1.39	4.00	1.57	-9.66 [*]
Establishing clear consequences for those who engage in bullying other people	2.27	1.55	3.72	1.79	-8.20 ^{*a}
Monitoring and reviewing staff relationships, especially fair treatment of people	2.16	1.38	3.70	1.70	-9.70 ^{*a}

Table I. Ratings of the effectiveness of organization strategies to address bullying

Notes: ^{*}*p* = < 0.001; ^aLevene's test showed unequal variances hence *t*-test does not assume equal variances; Bullying groups split on NAQ score, bullied as those reporting at least two or more acts weekly in the last six months; *n* bullied = 96-118; *n* not-bullied = 377-496; Scale is 1 (very ineffective) to 6 (very effective)

job performance over the past 6 months?" Ratings were on a 1-10 scale, where 1 = the worst performance anyone could have at your job and 10 = the performance of a top worker ($\alpha = 0.73$).

Affective organizational commitment. Respondents' affective organisational commitment was measured with six items from Meyer and Allen (1997). Example items are "I really feel as if this organisation's problems are my own", and "This organisation has a great deal of personal meaning for me". Responses were on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Data analyses

Factor analyses supported the structure of established scales. For the new measure of perceived effectiveness of organisational anti-bullying initiatives, principal axis factoring indicated a single factor accounting for 70.39 per cent of the variance. Next, data were pooled across organisations and for men and women, given that there were no significant differences (results are available from the first author). Moderated multiple hierarchical linear regressions were undertaken on the responses of the subset

of respondents who experienced bullying following the procedure recommended by Cohen *et al.* (2003). For this, we identified those who had experienced at least two negative acts per week over the last six months, with 133 respondents meeting this criterion. Note that, to retain sufficient power and given the difficulty of finding moderator effects in field research (McClelland and Judd, 1993; Siemsen *et al.*, 2010), we conducted each moderator analysis separately.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and zero order correlations of all variables are shown in Table II. Given our focus on the potential buffering effects of moderator variables for those who experienced bullying, we provide this information separately for non-bullied participants (the lower left diagonal of the table), and bullied participants (the upper right diagonal of the table). For non-bullied employees, NAQ-R bullying (the frequency of negative acts experienced) is moderately negatively correlated with the perceived effectiveness of organisational initiatives ($r = -0.30$), organisational support ($r = -0.35$), and constructive leadership ($r = -0.35$). For these employees also, NAQ-R bullying is strongly positively correlated with strain ($r = 0.39$), strongly negatively correlated with wellbeing ($r = -0.45$), and weakly negatively correlated with self-reported performance ($r = -0.23$), and organisational commitment ($r = -0.26$).

The results are similar for the bullied employees, although the relationships appear slightly weaker between NAQ-R bullying and perceived effectiveness of organisational initiatives ($r = -0.32$), organisational support ($r = -0.20$), and constructive leadership ($r = -0.22$). The relationships appear weaker also for NAQ-R bullying with strain ($r = 0.21$) and wellbeing ($r = -0.22$), with no significant relationship of bullying with self-reported performance ($r = 0.03$) or organisational commitment ($r = -0.05$).

In *H1*, *H3*, and *H5*, we predicted that constructive leadership, POS, and anti-bullying initiatives would negatively predict bullying (Table III). The correlations on the upper right diagonal are negative and significant for these relationships (r 's of -0.22 with constructive leadership, -0.20 with POS, and -0.32 with anti-bullying initiatives). These results support *H1*, *H3*, and *H5*. It is also notable that these relationships are significant also for the non-bullied sample (r 's of -0.30 , -0.35 , -0.35). A multiple regression analysis was conducted with the data from bullied respondents to investigate relative prediction since these contextual factors are likely to overlap (Salin and Hoel, 2011), and showed that when these three predictors are entered concurrently, only anti-bullying initiatives is significant ($F(3, 118) = 5.00$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.11$; anti-bullying initiatives $\beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.01$, constructive leadership $\beta = -0.07$, ns, POS $\beta = -0.06$, ns).

In *H2*, *H4*, and *H6*, we predicted that constructive leadership, POS, and anti-bullying initiatives would moderate the relationships between bullying and the criterion variables of strain, wellbeing, performance, and organisational commitment, such that the impact of bullying would be lessened when these organisational initiatives were present

Three of the predicted 12 interactions were significant. The interaction of bullying with organisational support predicted performance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.03$, $p < 0.05$), while the interaction of bullying and organisational initiatives was significant in predicting

Table II.
Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients of study variables with non-bullied data set on lower diagonal and bullied only on upper diagonal

Variable	Non-bullied											Bullied	
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	M	SD
1. Anti-bullying actions	4.07	1.39	0.98	0.40*	0.43*	-0.32*	-0.27*	-0.25*	0.35*	0.11	0.16	2.72	1.21
2. POS	4.58	1.63	0.49*	0.95	0.52*	-0.20**	0.01	-0.33*	0.47*	0.10	0.51*	3.02	1.68
3. Constructive leadership	2.95	1.37	0.41*	0.51*	0.93	-0.22**	-0.14	-0.24*	0.39*	0.18**	0.18**	1.87	1.23
4. NAQR bullying	1.28	0.27	-0.30*	-0.35*	-0.35*	0.87	0.55*	0.50*	-0.45*	-0.05	-0.17**	2.29	0.66
5. Self-report bullying	0.02	0.14	-0.19*	-0.14*	-0.15*	0.19*	-	0.21**	-0.22**	0.03	-0.05	0.18	0.38
6. Strain	1.23	0.48	-0.20*	-0.40*	-0.35*	0.39*	0.05	0.85	-0.69*	-0.18**	-0.18**	1.73	0.53
7. Wellbeing	4.11	0.83	0.29*	0.50*	0.44*	-0.45*	-0.15*	-0.70*	0.94	0.10	0.29*	3.14	0.87
8. Performance	7.86	1.19	0.12*	0.13*	0.16*	-0.23*	0.02	-0.27*	0.30*	0.73	-0.06	7.39	1.40
9. Organizational commitment	4.44	1.42	0.34*	0.60*	0.34*	-0.26*	-0.15*	-0.33*	0.44*	0.12*	0.83	3.53	1.40

Notes: $n = 467$ -592 for the non-bullied sample and $n = 111$ -133 with pairwise deletion used; Reliabilities on the diagonal are based on the non-bullied sample; * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; POS = perceived organizational support; NAQR = negative acts questionnaire; $t = t$ -value; $R =$ effect size

Variables	β	Strain	β	β	Wellbeing	β	β	Performance	β	β	Organizational commitment	β
NAQ-R	0.48***	0.46***	0.45***	-0.39***	-0.37***	-0.32***	0.03	0.05	-0.01	-0.14	-0.05	0.09
Constructive leadership												
POS	-0.13	-0.24**		0.31***	0.40***		0.19*	0.10		0.15	0.49***	
Anti-bullying actions												
NAQ-R by constructive leadership				-0.10		0.23**			0.10			0.10
NAQ-R by POS	0.02	-0.00		0.01	0.00		0.10	0.20*		0.04	0.09	
NAQ-R by anti-bullying actions												
Step 1 R^2	0.27***	0.31***	-0.03	0.30***	0.35***	0.22**	0.03	0.01	0.05	0.05*	0.26***	0.24**
Step 2 R^2	0.27***	0.31***	0.25***	0.30***	0.35***	0.26***	0.04	0.04	0.01	0.05	0.27***	0.05*
ΔR^2	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.05**	0.01	0.03*	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.10**
F	49.42**	57.16**	34.93**	81.24**	99.57**	52.78**	11.66**	11.59**	9.53**	31.16**	110.77**	30.64**

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table III.
Regression analysis results showing direct and moderating relationships in predicting strain, wellbeing, performance, and organizational commitment among bullied employees

wellbeing ($\Delta R^2 = 0.05, p < 0.01$) and organisational commitment ($\Delta R^2 = 0.05, p < 0.01$). Following Cohen *et al.* (2003), to interpret the interactions we plotted their simple slopes at one standard deviation above the mean and one standard deviation below the mean of both the independent variable (NAQ bullying) and the moderator (Sibley, 2008). The significant results ($p < 0.05$) are displayed in Figures 2 to 4.

Figure 2 shows the interaction of POS and bullying with performance. At high levels of POS, respondents who experienced higher levels of bullying also reported higher performance. Conversely, at low levels of POS those who experienced high levels of bullying reported lower performance. Neither simple slope was significant (high POS: Simple slope = 0.61, $t = 1.65, p > 0.05$; low POS: Simple slope = $-0.46, t = -1.51, p > 0.05$), but the significant interaction showed that the simple slopes were significantly different from each other. In support of *H4c*, our results show that POS buffered the effects of bullying.

Figure 3 shows that bullied respondents who rated organisational anti-bullying initiatives as more effective showed no interaction between bullying and wellbeing (simple slope = $-0.21, t = -1.26, p > 0.05$), whereas those rating organisational anti-bullying actions as less effective showed an interaction (simple slope = $-0.72, t = -5.25, p < 0.001$). Thus, for participants who reported organisational initiatives against bullying as more effective, the level of bullying experienced had no impact on wellbeing. In contrast, participants who reported lower effectiveness for organisational initiatives against bullying experienced lower wellbeing in tandem with greater bullying. This supports *H6b*.

Figure 4 shows that participants rating organisational anti-bullying initiatives as more effective showed no interaction between bullying and organisational commitment (simple slope = 0.31, $t = 0.98, p > 0.05$). However, for participants rating organisational anti-bullying initiatives as less effective, when bullying was high, they had lower organisational commitment (simple slope = $-0.68, t = -3.02,$

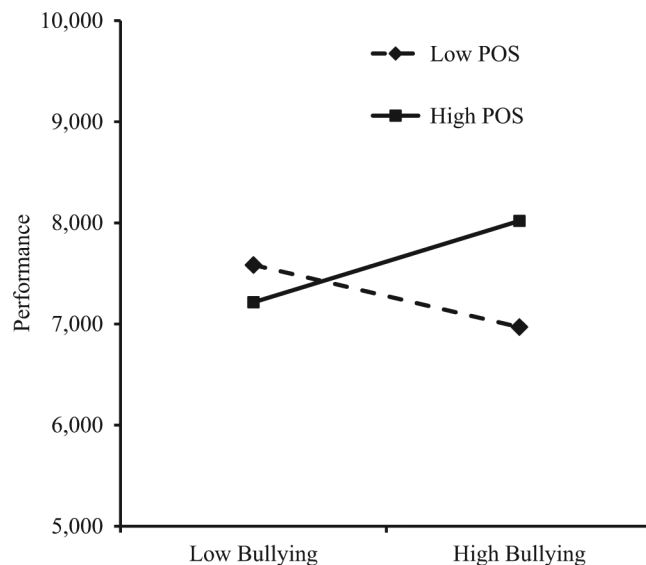


Figure 2.
Interaction between POS
and bullying on
performance

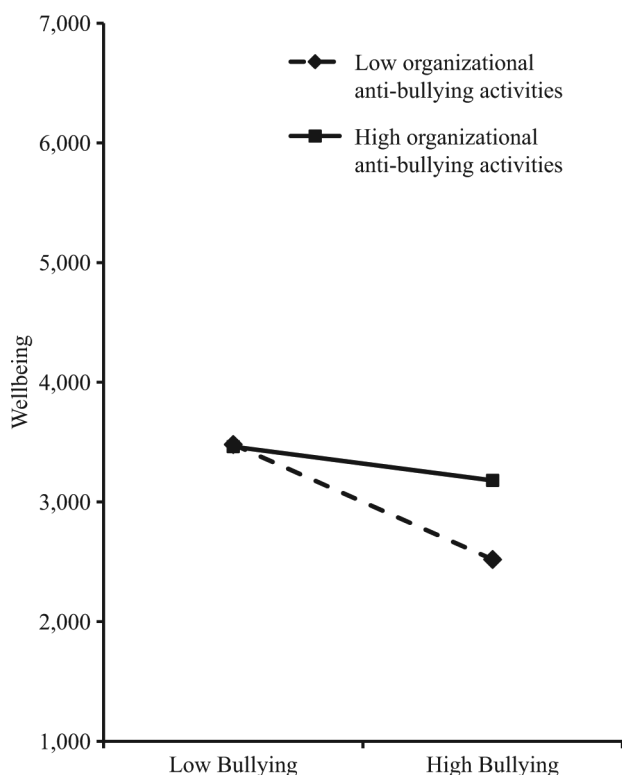


Figure 3.
Interaction between
organizational
anti-bullying activities
and bullying on wellbeing

$p < 0.01$). Thus, more effective organisational anti-bullying actions buffered against bullying however mild or severe it was, in terms of its effects on organisational commitment. When such initiatives were less effective, participants were at risk and at high levels of bullying they showed lower organisational commitment. This supports *H6d*. The direct and moderator relationships are summarised in Figure 5.

Finally, we explored which organisational actions healthcare employees rated as the most and least effective in countering bullying. The initiatives are shown in rank order in Table I, with separate columns for bullied and non-bullied respondents. The results show that respondents perceived the most effective strategy to be developing a workplace bullying policy, with other important initiatives including efforts to support and encourage a respectful work environment, and having clear procedures for dealing with bullying. The overall ranking of organisational anti-bullying activities was similar across bullied and non-bullied participants, although bullied participants consistently rated the initiatives as less effective, as shown by the significant *t*-tests. Further, even respondents who were not bullied on average rated only approximately half of the initiatives (7 of 13) as somewhat effective or higher.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether constructive leadership, perceived organisational support (POS), and the perceived effectiveness of

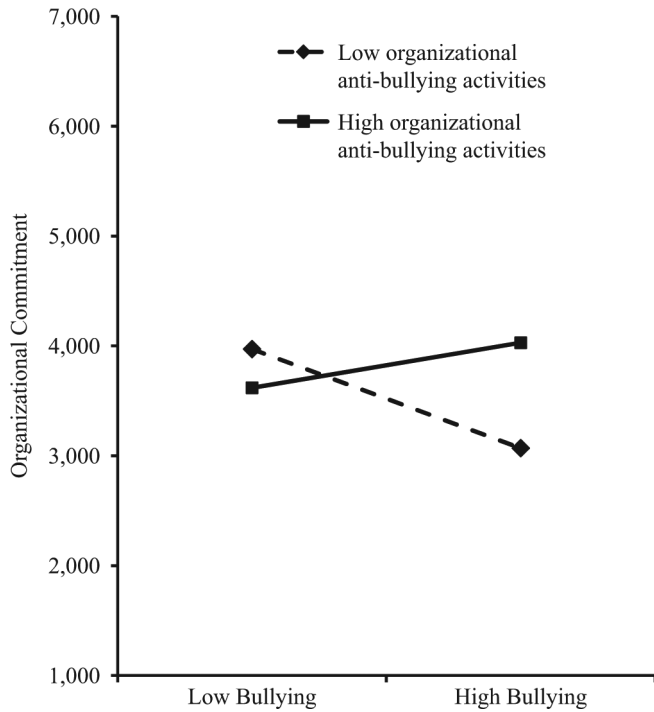


Figure 4. Interaction between organizational anti-bullying activities and bullying on organizational commitment

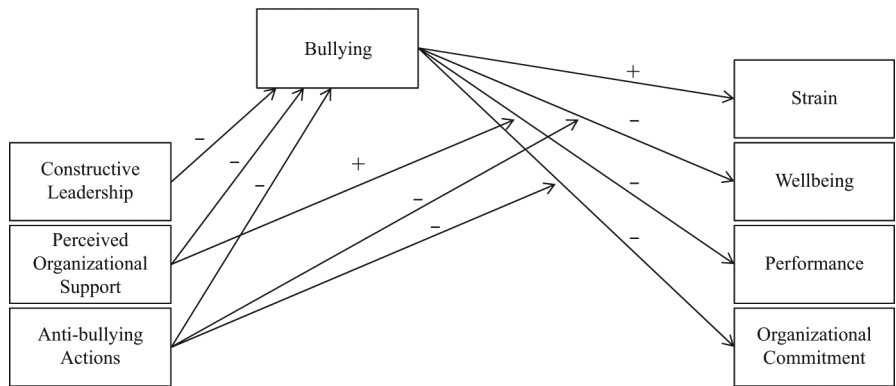


Figure 5. Actual direct and moderating relationships for the relationship of bullying with predictors and criteria

organisational anti-bullying initiatives would both directly predict lower bullying and buffer the negative relationship of bullying with strain, wellbeing, performance, and organisational commitment. The results provided some support for these propositions. Direct negative relationships were found for these contextual factors with bullying. Further, effective organisational anti-bullying actions buffered the relationship of bullying with wellbeing and organisational commitment, and POS buffered the relationship of bullying with performance. Thus, actions by the organisation – both

specific actions and less tangible perceptions of support – have a role in reducing the impact of bullying, and are associated with lower levels of bullying.

These results show the value of having effective organisational initiatives against bullying. At high levels of bullying, participants who rated organisational initiatives as less effective also experienced lower wellbeing and lower performance while those reporting more effective organisational initiatives had similar levels of wellbeing and performance regardless of level of bullying. To date, much of the evidence on organisational initiatives to counter bullying has arisen from practitioner anecdotes (Duffy, 2009; Namie, 2007) or has been primarily descriptive (Hogh *et al.*, 2011; Rayner and Cooper, 2006; Resch and Schubinski, 1996). The current study provides empirical data to substantiate the importance of organisational initiatives, which is important in persuading organisations to invest in anti-bullying activities.

Perceived organisational support (POS) is a less formal way in which organisations may be able to counter the impact of bullying at work (Djurkovic *et al.*, 2008). Where POS was lower, bullying appeared to be detrimental to performance but the reverse trend is also of concern, showing that employees experiencing high levels of bullying and high POS showed higher performance. The combination of bullying and POS may put additional pressure on targets to perform at a high level. This may have short-term productivity benefits but is likely to be detrimental to individual health and performance if it continues and may give rise to health-related absenteeism, employment disputes, and turnover. POS had a direct negative relationship with bullying also, showing that overall POS is associated with fewer negative behaviours.

We found direct but no buffering effects for constructive leadership. Previous research has suggested that consistent and strong leadership is important for reducing bullying (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994; Hauge *et al.*, 2007; Resch and Schubinski, 1996), and our research supports this. It is surprising that we found no buffering effects. It is possible that leadership has only direct relationships with the other variables we investigated, or that constructive leadership only has moderating effects at higher levels, with few respondents in this study rating their leaders as highly constructive. Finally, it may be that work context factors, for example shiftwork which is typical in healthcare, diluted the potential impact of leadership in buffering the effects of bullying. Specifically, employees may have had a range of people within a leadership team across shifts; we did not measure shiftwork and hence were unable to investigate its potential impact retrospectively.

The final aim of our inquiry was to identify which organisational initiatives against bullying were rated as most and least effective. Initiatives viewed as slightly more valuable included encouraging open and respectful communication and developing an anti-bullying policy. The rank ordering of initiatives in terms of their perceived effectiveness was similar for bullied and non-bullied respondents, although bullied respondents provided consistently lower ratings of the effectiveness of initiatives than non-bullied respondents. This suggests a relative consensus among employees as to the effectiveness of different actions that organisations can take to deal with bullying, yet implies that such initiatives would benefit from further work to improve their effectiveness when implemented.

Practical implications

The direct negative relationships of bullying with constructive leadership, POS, and anti-bullying initiatives support the notion that contextual factors are important in providing an environment that discourages negative behaviours. Turning to the interactions, high levels of POS and bullying provide a worrying combination that, while associated with high levels of performance which may be the desired outcome (Bentley *et al.*, 2009), in the long term could lead to severe negative health outcomes (Bond *et al.*, 2010). Organisational initiatives reduce the negative relationships of bullying with wellbeing and organisational commitment, supporting the benefits of such activities.

Overall, the evidence shows that contextual factors have an important role in reducing workplace bullying and its relationships with other variables, yet organisations appear to be taking minimal action to address bullying (Bentley *et al.*, 2009; Heames and Harvey, 2006; Salin, 2008). We suggest that organisations should try to better implement the anti-bullying initiatives they have to make them more effective, search for alternatives, and work toward improving the work environment through providing support and constructive leadership. For anti-bullying initiatives, the items assembled for this research (Table I) may be useful. In particular, having a policy to deal with bullying and developing a clear procedure on how to handle complaints about bullying rank high on this list, and would be relatively non-contentious starting points (see also Vartia and Leka, 2011).

Potential limitations

In keeping with most studies in workplace bullying (Nielsen *et al.*, 2008) our research is cross-sectional and therefore we cannot infer causality. Future longitudinal research would be useful in providing evidence on the relationships between variables over time. A second limitation is the use of self-report data that can lead to common method variance concerns. Offsetting this concern is the number of weak and non-significant correlations between variables (see Table II) suggesting that common method variance is not consistently inflating relationships (Lindell and Whitney, 2001; see also Lance *et al.*, 2010). Common method variance is more likely to deflate interaction terms (Siemsen *et al.*, 2010), and therefore we can place confidence in those interactions that are found. A final limitation is the lack of power to detect interaction effects, which occur particularly in field settings (Aguinis and Stone-Romero, 1997; McClelland and Judd, 1993). To check on this, we also looked at the coefficients for the interaction terms in the moderated multiple regression analyses to a significance level of $p < 0.10$, but no additional interaction effects were found. Finally, we note that different results might be found in industries other than healthcare.

Future research

Contextual workplace factors need further examination as antecedents to and moderators of bullying (Djurkovic *et al.*, 2008; Tuckey *et al.*, 2009), having the potential to improve the workplace for all employees. Indeed, our own research shows negative relationships of bullying with strain, wellbeing, performance, and organisational commitment at mostly higher levels for non-targets than targets (see Table II). This suggests a negative influence of witnessing bullying (Cooper-Thomas *et al.*, 2011; Hoel

et al., 2011), and further supports the importance of research investigating factors that reduce bullying and its impacts for the benefit of all employees.

Conclusion

Contextual workplace factors directly predict levels of bullying and, in some instances, buffer the negative effects of bullying. There is growing evidence that organisations should take an active rather than *laissez-faire* approach to the issue of bullying. These results contribute to the small corpus of research focusing on contextual factors that reduce the impact of bullying, and show that this is a fruitful avenue for further investigation.

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