

# Ethnicity, workplace bullying, social support and psychological strain in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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This research explored whether respondents who self-identified as New Zealand Europeans experienced less bullying and less severe outcomes than those who self-identified as Māori, Pacific Island or other ethnic groups. Social support was also examined as a potential buffer against the negative effects of bullying. One thousand, seven hundred and thirty-three respondents from four sectors (health, education, hospitality and travel) responded to a self-report questionnaire. Despite reporting higher levels of bullying than New Zealand Europeans, Pacific Island and Asian/Indian respondents reported lower levels of psychological strain. A possible explanation for this may lie in the somewhat higher levels of supervisor support reported by Pacific Island, Asian/Indian and Māori respondents, compared to those who self-identified as New Zealand European. Respondents with more supportive supervisors and colleagues reported experiencing less bullying and less strain. Bullying was related to negative outcomes for all groups. The implications of these findings for management of workplace bullying are discussed.

**Keywords:** Bullying, strain, social support, ethnicity

Workplace bullying is defined as a situation where a person feels they have repeatedly been on the receiving end of negative actions from one or more other people, in a situation where it is difficult to defend themselves against these actions (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994). While it can include overt threats or hostile acts, it can also comprise subtle behaviours such as altering a person's tasks, removing or withholding resources needed for work performance, criticising, social isolation, unwanted comments on a person's private life, verbal aggression and spreading rumours about the person (Rayner & Cooper, 2006).

Workplace bullying can adversely affect self-esteem, anxiety, stress, fatigue, burnout, depression, and post-traumatic stress, both while the bullying is occurring and for a considerable time afterwards (Hoel, Faragher, & Cooper, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen,

2002). Workplace bullying also affects organisational performance as a result of increased turnover and absenteeism along with reduced job satisfaction and work motivation (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). Recent New Zealand research found that workplace bullying in four sectors (health, education, hospitality and travel) was relatively high by international standards (Bentley, Catley, Cooper-Thomas, Gardner, O'Driscoll, & Trenberth, 2009; O'Driscoll, Cooper-Thomas, Bentley, Catley, Gardner, & Trenberth, 2011). Targets of bullying showed more psychological strain, absenteeism, intentions to quit and less wellbeing, job satisfaction and organisational commitment than those who had not been targeted (O'Driscoll et al., 2011).

Financial costs of workplace bullying are difficult to calculate but are likely to be high, given the direct and indirect costs associated

with absenteeism, turnover and poor individual and organisational performance. The negative impacts have led many organisations to implement policies against bullying, either directly or within their harassment policies. In addition, some overseas jurisdictions are introducing or amending legislation related to workplace bullying. In New Zealand there is no specific legislation regarding bullying at work but it is covered under health and safety legislation requiring that hazards, including factors which can give rise to stress, are identified, assessed and controlled (Scott-Howman & Walls, 2003). Therefore, there are legal as well as humane, commercial and professional obligations to manage bullying at work.

Measuring workplace bullying is problematic, with ongoing debate about the best approach. As bullying behaviours may be subtle and not readily observable, most attempts to measure bullying have relied on self-reports. One approach is to present participants with a definition of bullying and ask them whether or not they have experienced it. This incorporates people's own perception and evaluation of their experiences (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). The second approach is to present participants with a list of negative behaviours and ask them to indicate the frequency which they have experienced each behaviour (e.g. never, seldom, monthly, weekly, daily) over a given time period (usually either a year or six months). This approach can identify behaviours but not targets' perceptions of their effects (Einarsen & Hoel, 2001).

In general, rates of bullying tend to be lower when participants are asked to self-identify as targets than when they are asked to indicate whether they have experienced negative acts (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Nielsen, 2009; Rayner & Cooper, 2006). Some targets may be unwilling to identify themselves as such or may lack recognition that negative behaviours amount to bullying (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). While behavioural inventories tend to identify more people who have been bullied (Way, Jimmieson, Bordia, & Hepworth, 2013), rates vary depending on the criteria used to decide whether respondents have been bullied or not.

The relative frequency of bullying using each of these methods has seldom been explored in New Zealand. Each method tends to identify different rates of bullying, and different individuals may be classified as bullied/ not bullied by different methods. One aim of the present study was to examine the different rates and correlates of bullying when measured by general assessments of experiences compared to behavioural frequency measures. Clarification of this issue may help practitioners and researchers identify the best approaches to examine the prevalence and severity of bullying in workplaces. In view of research which has found that rates of bullying measured by behavioural inventories were higher than when measured by self-identification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Rates of bullying will be lower when measured by self-reports (of being bullied) than when measured by a behavioural inventory.

### **Multicultural New Zealand and bullying in the workplace**

Recent figures show that the New Zealand working population is increasingly diverse in terms of age, gender and ethnicity (Department of Labour, 2008), although Pakeha make up the majority of the working-age population (Dixon, 1996). Overt and covert discriminatory practices have been identified in New Zealand workplaces (Coates & Carr, 2005). While there may be elements of racism in the behaviour of bullies, bullying

and racism are distinct constructs. Definitions of bullying emphasise its persistent and sustained nature (Hershcovis, 2011), whereas one-off incidents can constitute racism, and bullying does not need to be based on racial, ethnic or other characteristics of the target. Rather than focusing on the extent to which members of different ethnic groups experience racist behaviour, this research focused on experiences of bullying. It is possible that those who find themselves in a minority at work, whether in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability or other characteristics, may be at greater risk of bullying (Lewis & Gunn, 2007). In international studies, targets have reported that they were bullied because they were 'different' and did not fit in with their work groups (Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007; Vartia, 1996). Although the present data did not allow identification of the extent to which participants belonged to workplace minority groups, the focus was on the implications of ethnic diversity at work for workplace bullying.

In addition to the multicultural nature of the workforce, Aotearoa New Zealand is recognised as a bicultural society. State sector organisations as well as many other organisations and professional bodies recognise the Treaty of Waitangi/ Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the founding document in New Zealand (Network Waitangi, 2008; New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2011). Signed between the Crown and Māori hapu in 1840, it exists in two versions, both acknowledged as binding. The requirements of both versions have, however, often been ignored resulting in a wide range of negative outcomes for the tangata whenua (Durie, 1998). On a community wide basis, Māori experience worse outcomes in terms of health, education and employment (Durie, 1998). In workplaces, possibly as a result of overt and covert discriminatory practices, Māori may be more likely to be employed in lower-level jobs with fewer promotional opportunities available to them. Many Māori report that they have faced discrimination in the workplace (Research New Zealand, 2007). Historically Māori people have tended to have lower job experience than the majority Pakeha/

European group, and barriers to work can include lack of English language, qualifications, and discrimination (New Zealand Government, 2001). The present research investigated whether, in addition to other known barriers to employment, there are differences between Māori, New Zealand European and other groups as regards experiences of workplace bullying, strain and perceptions of social support at work.

H2: Respondents who identify as New Zealand Europeans will experience (a) lower levels of bullying (self-reported and negative acts), (b) lower levels of psychological strain and (c) higher levels of support from peers and supervisors, than respondents in the other groups.

### **Psychosocial correlates of workplace bullying**

Workplace bullying is a known predictor of psychological strain, with targets experiencing increased levels of stress and anxiety compared to non-targets (Moayed, Daraiseh, Shell, & Salem, 2006).

H3: Bullying will be (a) positively related to psychological strain and (b) negatively related to support from peers and supervisors when controlling for ethnicity in the analysis.

Bullying affects the workplace social context: targets frequently find themselves isolated from sources of social support either because colleagues are turned against the target by the bully or because they are afraid of becoming targeted themselves. The consequences of bullying may also be worse for those who have relatively less support, as an imbalance of power between the target and the bully is often apparent (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). Supportive workplace climates are likely to be associated with lower levels of bullying, and if targets can engage and maintain their social networks to provide support, the effects of bullying are likely to be lessened (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). Social support from supervisors and colleagues was therefore explored as a possible buffer of the relationship between bullying and strain for all groups.

H4: The relationship between bullying and psychological strain will be moderated by social support, such that respondents who experience more social support from colleagues and supervisors will report less psychological strain related to workplace bullying than those who experience less support.

## Method

### Procedure

The present study extends the analysis of data collected by Bentley et al (2009) by examining relationships among stress, bullying and support for different ethnic groups within the New Zealand workforce. Data were collected by means of online surveys which respondents could complete in privacy at home or within their organisations. Permission was gained from the human resources or other senior manager within each organisation. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Northern).

### Participants

Participants were from a total of 36 organisations from the education, health, hospitality and travel sectors. Data were obtained from 1733 respondents. Of these, 727 (42%) worked in the health sector; 459 (27%) in education, 133 (8%) in hospitality and 332 (19%) in travel. Eighty-two (4%) did not specify their sector. Participants in hospitality and travel were significantly younger than those in health and education,  $F_{(3, 1628)} = 133.85, p < .001$ . The number of employees who received questionnaires in each workplace is unknown so response rates could not be calculated.

The large majority of respondents (70.7%) identified as New Zealand European, while 8.5% identified as Māori. Percentages were substantially lower for the other ethnicities (Table 1). In the 'other' category, 83 (4.8%) of participants self-identified as 'other European'; 11 (0.6%) as Filipino and 4 (0.2%) as Latin American. Proportionally more Māori, Pacific Island and Asian/Indian respondents were working in the health and hospitality sectors than New Zealand Europeans, and fewer were working in education and travel ( $\chi^2_{15} =$

Table 1: Demographics

	n (%)
NZ European/ Pakeha	1226 (70.7)
Māori/Cook Is Māori	147 (8.5)
Pacific Island	50 (2.9)
Asian/Indian	90 (5.2)
UK/Australia/South African	97 (5.6)
Other	98 (5.7)
Missing	25 (1.4)
Total	1733

169.06,  $p < .001$ ). No information was available on the ethnic composition of respondents' workgroups.

### Measures

*Workplace bullying* was assessed in two distinct ways. Firstly, participants were asked to respond to the 22-item Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised (NAQ-R) (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009). This measure lists 22 negative behaviours and respondents indicate whether they have experienced each behaviour over the previous 6 months, with responses from 0 (never) to 4 (daily). The mean score across negative acts was computed for each person ( $\alpha = .93$ ). In addition, respondents were classified as 'bullied' if they had experienced at least two of the negative behaviours weekly or more frequently over the past six months (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Respondents who did not meet this criterion were classified as non-bullied.

Secondly, self-identified bullying was assessed by providing respondents with a definition of bullying followed by a single item asking them whether, over the previous 6 months, they felt that they personally had experienced bullying in their workplace (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007). Responses were from 0 (no) to 4 (yes, almost daily). Responses were recoded to align with the negative acts measure, so that responses from 'never' to 'now and then' were coded 'No' and 'Several times a week' to 'Almost daily' were coded 'Yes' (Hauge et al., 2007). The self-identification measure was presented after the NAQ-R so that responses to the negative acts items would not be influenced by the item that explicitly asked about bullying.

*Psychological strain.* The 12-

item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Goldberg, Gater, Sartorius, Ustun, Piccinelli, Gureje, & Rutter, 1997) has been widely used to measure occupational strain. Respondents indicated how often, on a scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (much more than usual), they had experienced each of 12 psychosocial symptoms in the previous 6 months e.g. 'felt constantly under strain'. Positively worded items were recoded so that a higher score indicated more strain, calculated as the mean score across the 12 items ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

*Support from supervisor and support from colleagues.* Four items asked respondents how often they received helpful information or advice, sympathetic understanding and concern, clear and helpful feedback, and practical assistance, from a) their supervisor and b) their work colleagues (O'Driscoll, Brough, & Kalliath, 2004). Responses ranged from 0 (never) to 5 (all the time). Separate scores were computed for supervisor support and colleague support by computing mean scores across each set of four items (supervisor support  $\alpha = .95$  and colleague support  $\alpha = .94$ ).

### Data analysis

Group comparisons were conducted using chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), ANOVA and moderated regression. Moderator and predictor variables were standardised to address potential problems with collinearity (Aiken & West, 1991).

## Results

To investigate Hypothesis 1, the response rates and correlates of bullying measured in the two ways were explored. Based on the criterion of having experienced at least two

Table 2: Means (sd) for negative acts, support and psychological strain.

	NZ European	Māori	Pacific Island	Asian/Indian	UK/Australia/ South African	Other	F	$\eta^2$
Bullying (negative acts)	1.43 (0.52)	1.43 (0.52)	1.59 (0.67)	1.58 (0.81)	1.53 (0.72)	1.45 (0.51)	2.52*	.01
Supervisor support	3.79 (1.39)	4.10 (1.38)	4.15 (1.39)	4.00 (1.36)	3.60 (1.45)	3.81 (1.40)	2.70*	.01
Colleague support	4.29 (1.12)	4.28 (1.29)	4.21 (1.19)	4.03 (1.21)	4.08 (1.29)	4.15 (1.25)	1.41	.00
Strain	1.36 (0.54)	1.26 (0.60)	1.09 (0.62)	1.09 (0.62)	1.33 (0.54)	1.30 (0.60)	6.23**	.02

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

negative acts at least weekly during the last 6 months, 17.8% ( $n=308$ ) of respondents were classified as having been bullied. In comparison, when asked directly whether they had been bullied, sixty-seven respondents (3.9%) reported that they considered themselves to have been bullied “several times per week” or “almost daily”. Hypothesis 1 was supported. Proportionately more men than women had experienced at least two negative acts at least weekly during the last 6 months (21% vs. 17%,  $\chi^2_1 = 3.18, p < .05$ ), but fewer men than women reported that they had been bullied when asked directly (2% vs. 4%,  $\chi^2_1 = 3.63, p < .05$ ). This suggests that there may be gender differences in the willingness to report being targeted by bullies.

To further explore this issue, and to address Hypothesis 2a, bullying was explored for the groups shown in Table 1. When asked directly whether or not they had been bullied, there were no significant differences between the groups. Forty-one (3.4%) New Zealand European respondents reported that they had been bullied when asked directly, compared to 9 (6.2%) Māori, 1 (2.2%) Pacific Island, 3 (3.5%) Asian/Indian and 5 (5.3%) UK/Australian/South African respondents, ( $\chi^2_5 = 3.86, n.s.$ ). In contrast, rates of bullying measured by negative acts were significantly different between the groups,  $F_{5, 1596} = 2.52, p < .05$ . Although effect sizes were small, Hypothesis 2a was supported. Pacific Island and Asian/Indian respondents reported somewhat higher rates of negative acts than European and Māori respondents. The negative acts measure appeared to be more sensitive

to respondents’ experiences of bullying behaviours than direct self-identification as a target of bullying. The negative acts instrument was therefore used as the measure of bullying for the remainder of the analyses.

Hypothesis 2b and 2c explored group differences in psychological strain and in support from peers and supervisors (Table 2). Hypothesis 2b was not supported. Strain differed significantly between groups but Pacific Island and Asian/Indian respondents reported lower levels of strain than New Zealand European respondents, rather than the higher levels that were expected. Hypothesis 2c was not supported for supervisor support or colleague support. For colleague support there were no significant differences between groups. For supervisor support, New Zealand European and UK/Australian/South African participants did not differ significantly from each other but reported less supervisor support than Māori, Pacific Island and Asian/Indian participants. Implications will be presented in the Discussion.

The third hypothesis examined the relationship between bullying and psychological strain and between bullying and support. In the regression analyses, gender was dummy coded 0=female, 1=male. Five dummy codes were used to represent ethnicity, with New Zealand European as the reference category (coded 0). Table 3 presents the findings.

Hypothesis 3a was supported as negative acts were significantly related to psychological strain. There were also direct effects of ethnicity on strain, with

Māori, Pacific Island and Asian/Indian respondents reporting lower levels of strain than New Zealand Europeans. Hypothesis 3b was also supported, as negative acts were significantly related to lower levels of both supervisor and colleague support. Women reported lower levels of both forms of support than men, and Māori, Pacific Island and Asian/Indian respondents reported more supervisor support than New Zealand Europeans, but comparable levels of colleague support.

Hypothesis 4 examined whether colleague and supervisor support would moderate the relationship between bullying and psychological strain (Table 4). As in the previous analysis, dummy coded gender and ethnicity were entered as control variables. Ethnicity was related to strain, as Pacific Island and Asian/Indian respondents demonstrated less strain than New Zealand Europeans, while there was no effect for gender. Negative acts were related to increased strain, and both supervisor support and colleague social support were related to less strain. The interactions between supervisor support and negative acts and between colleague support and negative acts were small but statistically significant.

Figure 1a shows evidence for direct but not moderated effects. When supervisor support was low, levels of negative acts and psychological strain were higher than when supervisor support was high (Figure 1a) but there was no evidence of interaction. Similarly, the strong positive relationship between negative acts and strain was apparent at all levels of colleague support without

Table 3 Relationships of ethnicity and bullying with psychological strain, supervisor support and colleague support.

	DV: Strain			DV: Supervisor support			DV: Colleague support		
	B	SE B	Beta	B	SE B	Beta	B	SE B	Beta
Gender	-.02	.03	-.02	-.20	.08	-.06**	-.19	.07	-.06**
NZE- Māori	-.10	.04	-.05*	.33	.11	.07**	.01	.10	.00
NZE - Pacific Is.	-.36	.07	-.11***	.51	.18	.06**	-.01	.16	-.00
NZE - Asian/Indian	-.34	.05	-.13***	.43	.14	.07**	-.12	.13	-.02
NZE – UK/Aust/SA	-.08	.05	-.03	-.08	.14	-.01	-.15	.12	-.03
NZE - Other	-.08	.05	-.03	.05	.14	.01	-.09	.12	-.02
Negative acts	.31	.01	.55***	-.56	.03	-.40***	-.28	.03	-.24***
R	.57			.41			.25		
Adj R <sup>2</sup>	.32			.17			.06		
F	114.38***			49.78***			16.75***		

\* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001.

Note: Gender 0=Female, 1=Male. NZE = New Zealand European. UK/Aust/SA = United Kingdom, Australian and South African respondents.

Table 4: Interaction effects of support and bullying on psychological strain

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE B	Beta	B	SE B	Beta	B	SE B	Beta
Gender	-.01	.03	-.01	-.04	.03	-.03	-.04	.03	-.03
NZE - Māori	-.10	.05	-.05*	-.07	.04	-.03	-.07	.04	-.03
NZE - Pacific Is.	-.27	.08	-.08**	-.31	.06	-.09***	-.31	.06	-.09***
NZE - Asian/Indian	-.25	.06	-.10***	-.30	.05	-.12***	-.30	.05	-.12***
NZE – UK/Aust/SA	-.03	.06	-.01	-.09	.05	-.04*	-.09	.05	-.04
Negative acts				.24	.01	.44***	.26	.01	.46***
Colleague Support				-.04	.01	-.07***	-.03	.01	-.06**
Supervisor Support				-.14	.01	-.24***	-.14	.01	-.25***
Negative acts * Colleague support							-.02	.01	-.05*
Negative acts * Supervisor support							.03	.01	.06*
R		.13			.62			.62	
Adj R <sup>2</sup>		.01			.38			.38	
Δ R <sup>2</sup>		.01			.37			.00	
F		5.89***			131.94***			106.67***	

\* p<.05 \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001.

Note: Gender 0=Female, 1=Male. NZE = New Zealand European. UK/Aust/SA = United Kingdom, Australian and South African respondents.

Figure 1a: Supervisor support as a moderator of the relationship between negative acts and strain.

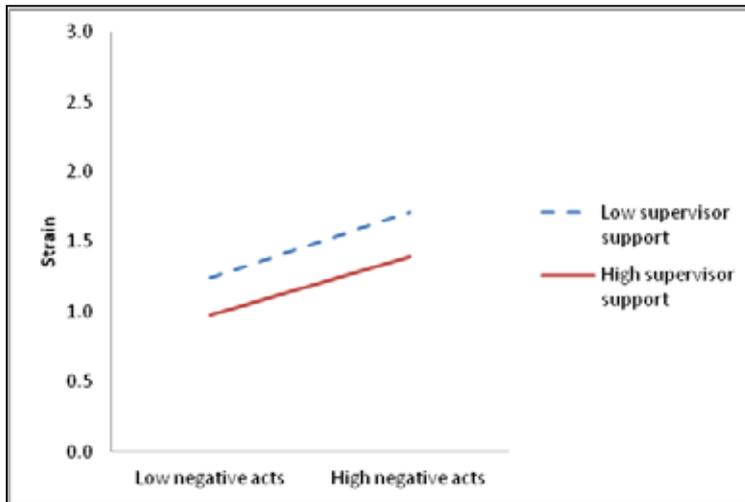
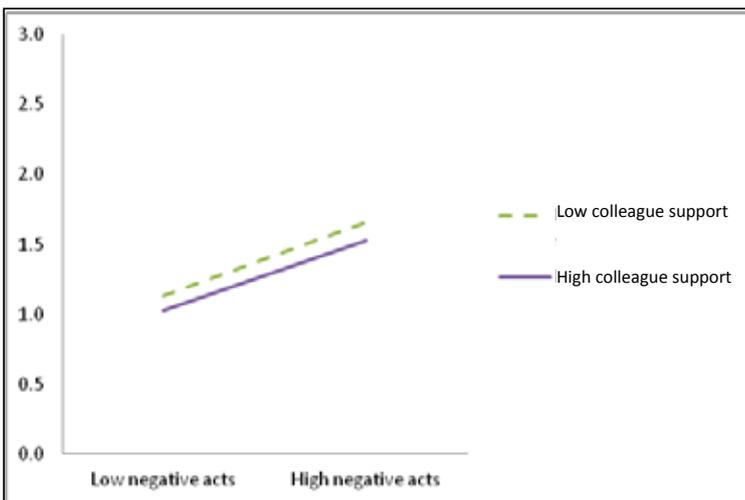


Figure 1b: Colleague support as a moderator of the relationship between negative acts and strain.



a significant interaction (Figure 1b). Overall, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

## Discussion

Despite reporting higher levels of negative acts than New Zealand Europeans, Pacific Island and Asian/Indian respondents reported lower levels of psychological strain. A possible explanation for this unexpected finding may lie in the somewhat higher levels of supervisor support reported by Pacific Island, Asian/Indian and Māori respondents, compared to those who identified as New Zealand European. Respondents with more supportive supervisors reported experiencing fewer negative acts and less strain, although

these effects were small.

It will be important for further research to identify why some groups report more supportive supervisors than others, and which aspects of supportive supervision help reduce the incidence of negative acts and minimise the harm that bullying can do. More important than ethnicity per se may be minority status within a workgroup or organisation. Those who find themselves in a minority group at work, whether due to ethnicity, gender minority status or other personal attributes, may be at increased risk of being targeted by others' anti-social behaviours during times of change, uncertainty and insecurity. Supportive supervision may enhance role clarity,

conflict management and constructive interpersonal interactions which limit the extent to which bullying can flourish. These are issues that require further examination.

For all groups, negative acts were related to increased psychological strain and reduced perceptions of support from colleagues and supervisors. Given the known harm that bullying does to individual health and morale and to organisational productivity, it is important that constructive policies be established, written, communicated and enforced. Bullying is multi-causal: organisational factors such as culture and climate, leadership, role models, norms, policies and procedures act together to establish expectations about behaviour that is acceptable or otherwise (Einarsen et al., 2003).

## Implications for research

Bullying in this study was measured in two ways: by the self-reported experience of persistent negative behaviour in the workplace and by self-identification as a target of bullying. The self-identification measure suggested very low rates of bullying and indicated that male respondents may be less willing to self-identify as a 'victim'. Future studies which ask respondents to self-identify as targets should include measures of under-reporting. In addition, it will be valuable to examine participants' perceptions, interpretations and impacts of their experiences.

This study was cross-sectional and cannot establish causality. As regards the relationship between ethnicity and bullying, there are no grounds to argue for reverse causation but other intervening variables cannot be ruled out. Further research is needed to establish whether those in ethnic minority groups in workplaces are indeed at greater risk; this assumption could not be explicitly tested in the present study as information on the ethnic composition of participating workplaces was not collected. As is often the case in organisational research, longitudinal studies are required to identify causal processes. The bullying field in particular is lacking research into successful interventions to reduce bullying risk and impacts; more work on 'best practice' in managing this issue

is required.

### Implications for practice.

Organisations which aim to deal with workplace bullying need to look closely at their internal processes and procedures. The important role of organisational leaders and supervisors is increasingly being recognised in establishing norms for appropriate behaviour at work. Evidence is building that it will be fruitful to examine and constructively manage leadership factors in organisations. A supportive organisational culture that genuinely values diversity and appreciates the strengths of the different perspectives and viewpoints it brings is one that is likely to foster the wellbeing of employees.

### Conclusion

Bullying directly affects psychological strain for those who experience it. Similarly, the effects of social support on strain were direct and positive, and supervisor support may reduce the prevalence of negative behaviours at work. Bullying needs to be effectively managed and should not be confused with 'tough management' or other task-focused approaches which overlook the serious impacts of negative behaviour at work. Bullying is multi-causal: organisational factors such as culture and climate, leadership, role models, norms, policies and procedures combine to establish expectations about behaviour that is acceptable or otherwise. Bullying is more prevalent in situations of role conflict and ambiguity, organisational change, uncertainty, and 'get it done' discourses in which negative interpersonal interactions may be overlooked, ignored or even subtly encouraged (Einarsen et al., 2003). Effective leadership and clear policies are required to focus on discouraging negative behaviour and supporting positive behaviour by aiming for 'cultures of respect' (Osatuke, 2009). Given the known harm that bullying does to individual health and morale and to organisational productivity, it is important that constructive approaches be identified, communicated and implemented in New Zealand organisations.

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