

Getting Bullied in the Nonprofit Sector: The Dark Side of Public Service Motivation and Political Behavior

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Abstract

Bullying is harmful and prominent in nonprofit organizations (NPOs), yet it remains understudied. This article investigates how public service motivation (PSM), which is trait-like, prosocial and vital to NPOs, may counterintuitively expose NPO workers to being bullied. Notwithstanding PSM's many benefits, recent studies have identified a dark side of PSM that potentially may attract bullying from coworkers. This survey-based study in the New Zealand nonprofit sector ($N=880$) draws on social exchange theory and conservation of resources theory to examine the relationship between PSM and being bullied, the role of political behavior as a mediator, and constructive leadership as a moderator. Findings support all hypothesized relationships, except one. The article concludes with theoretical implications and practical recommendations to address challenges stemming from the dark side of PSM as well as to curb bullying in NPOs.

Keywords

public service motivation, bullying, nonprofit organizations, political behavior, constructive leadership

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Introduction

Workplace bullying harms individuals, teams, and organizations (Einarsen et al., 2020). Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) carry distinct risks of bullying, as they commonly lack sophisticated human resource management practices, have loosely defined jobs that create scope for conflict, and are often poorly equipped to prevent or address bullying (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002; Philip & Arrowsmith, 2021). In addition, employees in NPOs are often economically vulnerable, having sacrificed higher salaries, job security, and career advancement in favor of serving the public (Slatten et al., 2021), which limits their career choices and countervailing power (Venter et al., 2019). Despite a combination of both employer and employee risk factors, there is limited research on bullying in the NPO sector (Hodgins et al., 2025), including factors that cause and mitigate it. The present study examines public service motivation (PSM) as a focal antecedent of being bullied. PSM plays a central role in guiding the behavior of NPO workers (Ritz et al., 2016), alongside other distinct NPO-specific characteristics that workers may have a strong sense of personal mission and a sometimes oppositional identity (Lapworth et al., 2018). Understanding how PSM, a typically positive feature of NPO workers, may inadvertently contribute to such workers being bullied is crucial for developing effective management strategies to protect employee well-being and organizational performance. This research considers bullying from the target's perspective, as in "being bullied" is consistent with much contemporary research (Einarsen et al., 2020).

Experiencing bullying can be devastating for individuals. It precedes post-traumatic stress symptoms, higher rates of depression and anxiety, intent to leave the organization, absenteeism, erosion of trust, and impaired workgroup effectiveness (Einarsen et al., 2020). Bullying is "a psychosocial hazard involving repeated and frequent exposure, over time, to negative workplace behaviours such as unfair workload, insults, spreading gossip, and even violence or threats of abuse" (Plimmer et al., 2022, p. 202). It concerns "the persistent exposure to interpersonal aggression and mistreatment from colleagues, superiors or subordinates" (Einarsen et al., 2009, p. 24). While persistent and repeated acts are important features of much bullying research, studies also find that single acts of bullying (or incivility or harassment) can also be harmful (Estes & Wang, 2008; Zhou, 2024), making precise definitions difficult and controversial (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009). NPOs are fundamentally prosocial, but their structures, cultures, and commitment to higher-order causes, specifically through PSM, can foster bullying (Avula et al., 2019; Burton, 2021). While NPOs often carry "the myth of pure virtue" (Salamon, 1994, p. 118), they are in fact vulnerable to poor behavior. Their members' motivation to serve the public—or PSM—may be a surprising driver of this.

PSM is characterized by a commitment to serving others, to "unselfishly defend the public interest" and to contribute to the greater good (Perry, 1997; Vandenabeele, 2008 p. 144). It refers to an "individual's orientation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society" (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008, p. vii). It drives positive outcomes for both employees and organizations, including job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and performance (Ritz et al., 2016). It is evident across sectors, including NPOs.

In NPOs, specifically, PSM generates certain risks. Strong commitment to a cause may foster oppositional identities and moral stances that bring workers into conflict with coworkers and competing ideas (Bassous, 2015; Lapworth et al., 2018). Moreover, the prosocial behaviors underlying PSM are conditional: they depend on who is perceived as belonging to the group and whether others are seen as equally prosocial (Esteve et al., 2016; S. H. Kim & Kim, 2022). Loosely defined organizational structures deepen such risks (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002).

A growing stream of research suggests that PSM has a dark side that precipitates harm to both individuals and organizations (Rayner et al., 2018; Schott & Ritz, 2018; Zhang & Liu, 2024). PSM comprises rational, normative, and affective motives (Perry, 1997; Steen, 2008). Resource shortages and loosely defined roles may drive power struggles relating to influence, authority, and progression, thus prompting rationally motivated competition and conflict for resources as motivated workers often hold strongly differing views about the best approach to serve the public (Schott & Ritz, 2018). It can also frustrate and deplete resources for those who want to serve but encounter obstacles in doing so (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Ripoll & Schott, 2023). PSM inspires prosocial behavior but may also legitimize ethical or social violations committed in the name of serving the cause, which can provoke retaliation from coworkers (De Bruin Cardoso et al., 2024; Sandberg & Robichau, 2022). Although typically associated with positive actions and outcomes, we argue that PSM can also drive harmful behavior that invites revenge and bullying from others.

The puzzle of the present research is whether having high PSM is a risk factor for being bullied in NPOs. We propose and test a model exploring the association of PSM with the experience of being bullied, the mediating role of political behavior, and the moderating role of constructive leadership in attenuating the association between PSM and being bullied. We draw on social exchange theory (SET) to explain *relational* mechanisms and on conservation of resources (COR) theory to explain *resource* mechanisms underlying bullying in NPOs (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Our study makes several contributions. First, it addresses a research gap in the NPO literature by examining the preceding dynamics bullying. Second, it extends understanding of the dark side of PSM and establishes novel linkages to political behavior and being bullied. Third, it introduces the concept of constructive leadership to the NPO literature. Our study concludes with recommendations for NPO practices.

Literature Review

Bullying reflects a power imbalance. It most often occurs downward from supervisors to subordinates, but it can also occur laterally among peers and even upward when a subordinate has some form of leverage. Bullying spans work-related, personal, and physical forms of intimidation (Einarsen et al., 2009). Bullying can include a range of behaviors from explicit or overt aggression, such as insults or the allocation of unfair workloads, to more subtle but frequent behaviors, such as withholding information, gossip or rumor, and the use of silence or aggressive humor. Work environments characterized by poor psychosocial safety climate, laissez-faire leadership, dissatisfaction, and frustration are

prone to bullying (Plimmer et al., 2022; Salin, 2003a). Health, education, and social service sectors are prone to bullying, possibly because they are marked by unclear goals and high stress (Zapf et al., 2020). NPOs experience bullying at the same or higher levels as other sectors, possibly due to “complex and unique power relations, the exploitation of virtuosity, the exercise of hegemonic power, and asymmetrical power and extreme dependency, which together act to stabilize the presence of bullying in nonprofit and voluntary organizations” (Hodgins et al., 2025, p. 813).

The paradox of the NPO work environment is that it creates conditions for both prosocial behaviors and bullying. NPOs’ operations are characterized by complex workloads, limited support, and persistent stressors (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002). Constraints, such as limited capacity and bureaucratic red tape, increase workers’ susceptibility to stress (Davis & Pandey, 2024; Feeney & Rainey, 2009; Sandberg & Robichau, 2022). The pressure to meet high personal expectations in resource-constrained environments can cause workers to act irrationally or defensively toward coworkers (Balducci et al., 2011). In turn, coworkers may respond with retaliatory bullying.

Bullying, thus, arises from a combination of both contextual and individual factors. Contextually, it stems from low job control, ineffective leadership, and role ambiguity—conditions that lead to conflict over what should be achieved and how (Salin et al., 2011). Individually, it stems from low relational power, job insecurity, fewer job alternatives, and psychological vulnerability. Bullying risk is best understood as an interaction between contextual and individual factors (Plimmer et al., 2017). Workers’ traits and behaviors intertwine with organizational conditions through everyday interactions, where routine challenges and personal vulnerabilities together shape exposure to bullying (Balducci et al., 2011). Among individual drivers, PSM plays a salient role.

PSM is central to the NPO’s workforce, resonating strongly with workers’ values and mission-driven identities (Bright, 2016; Lapworth et al., 2018; Word & Carpenter, 2013). While NPO workers hold diverse motivations, PSM captures a core driver that encompasses humanitarian goals, nonmonetary rewards, and deeply held commitments to service (Bassous, 2015; Lapworth et al., 2018). They are more politically active and have less confidence in key institutions than their public and private sector counterparts (Taylor, 2010). They can have oppositional identities and strong moral stances that also differentiate them from others (Lapworth et al., 2018). When organizational constraints hinder workers’ aspirations, tensions may arise, leading to maladaptive expressions of PSM, particularly those driven by egoistic or rational motivations (Ng & McGinnis Johnson, 2020; Steen, 2008).

PSM’s recently identified dark side includes a higher incidence of stress, absenteeism, turnover intention, and burnout (Quratulain & Khan, 2015; Van Loon et al., 2015). The moralized reasoning common in NPOs can further evoke this dark side by providing moral justification for unethical behavior (Ripoll & Schott, 2023). A sense of moral justification or moral superiority provide mechanisms for seemingly virtuous actors to engage in questionable practices (De Bruin Cardoso et al., 2024) that reciprocally invite mistreatment from others. In addition, high PSM individuals often have

strong views about what constitutes the public interest, creating room for disagreement and conflict with coworkers (Ripoll & Schott, 2023; Schott & Ritz, 2018).

PSM comprises a blend of affective, normative, and rational motives geared toward benefiting the public interest and society at large (Perry, 2000; Schott & Ritz, 2018). Affective motives are grounded in emotion, including empathy and a desire to help others, but they can challenge self-regulation in the heat of the moment. Norm-based motives include duty and loyalty but raise dilemmas when there is a dispute regarding what that duty is. Rational motives in PSM are especially susceptible to triggering conflict, as individuals are driven to pursue their interests and their own version of the ideal (Schott & Ritz, 2018). In many cases, high-PSM workers may also seek the intrinsic rewards of “warm glow” altruism, which is “egoistic” and not entirely selfless (O’Leary, 2019, p. 83). Competition for recognition, resources, and career advancement may further prompt workers to undermine others (Salin, 2003b).

Such competition may rationally prompt high-PSM workers to engage in political behavior to acquire influence and resources. Defined as “the management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organization or to obtain sanctioned ends through non-sanctioned means,” political behavior requires both political motivation and skill (Mayes & Allen, 1977, p. 675; Treadway et al., 2005). Examples include impression management, ingratiation, and voice (Buchanan, 2008). Although political behavior can be prosocial and benign, it more commonly concerns contentious actions enacted at the expense of coworkers to amass valued resources and advance careers (Buchanan, 2008). Political strategies that are used to “get things done” may threaten coworkers’ goals or self-esteem, violate interpersonal trust, and elicit negative reciprocity and bullying (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2022).

Leadership plays a critical role in managing dysfunctional dynamics. Constructive leadership combines relational and task-oriented behaviors that support well-being, healthy workplaces, and organizational goals (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991; J. Lee & Jensen, 2014). Constructive leaders clarify goals and expectations, reduce ambiguity, and provide resources to manage challenges and stress (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2013; Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991; J. Lee & Jensen, 2014) and may lower the risk of bullying.

Theoretical Framework

We draw on SET and COR theory to develop the hypotheses and explicate the links between PSM and being bullied. Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized model in which SET explains relational mechanisms, such as the rationale for retaliation, whereas COR theory explains attempts to acquire or protect resources, for instance, through playing organizational politics.

SET posits that exchanges between individuals occurs with an implicit expectation of reciprocity of outcomes, benefits, and behaviors (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Implicit norms of trust and reciprocity may be upheld or violated by individuals in social exchanges, and, accordingly, recipients adjust their responses. When workers perceive their contributions to be recognized, they are more inclined to maintain positive exchanges. Conversely, perceived imbalances can deteriorate relationships and lead to

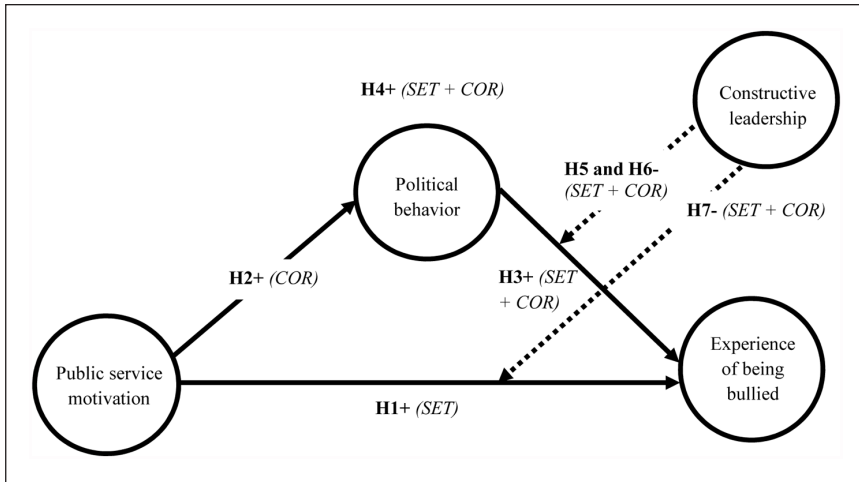


Figure 1. Proposed theoretical model.

Note. COR = conservation of resources; SET = social exchange theory.

negative exchanges (Gerlach, 2019), including revenge behaviors that escalate and spiral (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). When views differ on how best to serve the public, negative social exchanges marked by poor behavior, low interpersonal trust, and conflict may ensue (Ripoll & Schott, 2023).

COR theory suggests that individuals seek to build and protect resources such as skills, influence, self-esteem, and rewards. Gaining resources creates upward spirals, whereas losing them creates downward spirals, with losses typically felt more strongly (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In resource-poor contexts, protecting and gaining resources becomes critical for satisfying rational interests (Halbesleben et al., 2014), which can prompt political, exploitative, and deceptive strategies (Reynolds & McCrea, 2015). High PSM could trigger resource-acquisition strategies to optimize outcomes. Because NPO work environments present risks of resource loss, high-PSM workers may engage in resource conservation and acquisition strategies that are defensive, aggressive, or irrational and that may also elicit retaliation from coworkers (De Clercq & Belausteguioitia, 2022).

PSM and Being Bullied

High-PSM workers often contribute beyond formal role requirements. Under NPO-specific pressures, such as unclear roles and insufficient funding, service-oriented intent can give rise to rationalizations of harmful conduct framed as “ends justifying the means” (J. Kim et al., 2023). High-PSM workers may be forceful or manipulative to pursue their goals, thereby creating perceptions of interactional injustice (Bies, 2015). This rationally motivated PSM may drive socially dysfunctional behaviors that coworkers penalize, which, from a SET lens, could initiate negative social exchanges.

In group decision-making contexts, high-PSM workers may railroad deliberative processes and exert disproportionate influence to steer outcomes toward their preferred positions (Salin et al., 2011; Schott & Ritz, 2018). This dynamic may be accompanied by rationalizations of unethical behavior, including strategic manipulation or misrepresentation of information (De Bruin Cardoso et al., 2024; Ripoll & Schott, 2023), or other covert tactics that erode coworkers' trust. High-PSM workers may also overstep formal or informal role boundaries, engaging in role-encroaching behaviors that privilege their own perceptions and interests at the expense of collegiality and group harmony (Campbell & Im, 2016). In addition, highly motivated workers may set demanding performance standards that overshadow coworkers' efforts, thereby fueling envy and competition (Ritz et al., 2016). Taken together, coworkers may experience these behaviors as disrespectful, unfair, or dominance-oriented, even when the high-PSM worker rationalizes them with public service aims. Bullying may become a vehicle for sanctioning high-PSM workers and rebalancing power after perceived violations of social exchange (Parzefall & Salin, 2010).

Hypothesis 1 (H1): PSM is positively associated with experiencing bullying.

PSM and Political Behavior

Political behavior may become a tool for high-PSM workers to access resources for goal advancement. COR theory explains that individuals are motivated to acquire and protect valued resources, particularly in scarce contexts (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In NPOs, political actions may be prevalent because resources, including opportunities, are scarce. Both PSM and political behavior share motivational roots, including a need for achievement and intrinsic motivation (Treadway et al., 2005). Political behavior requires political will (motivation) and political skill (competence). Will is arguably more predictive of actual behavior than skill because individuals lacking will are unlikely to act politically regardless of their skill level (Kapoutsis et al., 2017). Political will is conceptually proximate to PSM insofar as both reflect underlying drives combining self-serving and prosocial elements (Kapoutsis et al., 2017). The prosocial drive may be more manifested in external environments, such as lobbying externally for the community. Within NPOs, however, PSM and political behavior may be self-serving.

Consistent with the COR theory, political behavior may be understood as a resource-acquisition strategy to gain influence and control over workplace resources (Mayes & Allen, 1977). These resources may be both material and functional (e.g., infrastructure or equipment), as well as social and political (e.g., influence or recognition). Regardless of the form, political behavior is a resource acquisition strategy to satisfy rational goals in the workplace. Accordingly, higher PSM should be associated with greater political behavior.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): PSM is positively associated with political behavior.

The Mediating Role of Political Behavior

Organizational politics has long been associated with adverse outcomes (Silvester, 2008). Political behavior is conflict-laden because it creates a competitive and hostile environment where workers jockey for limited resources (Treadway et al., 2005). When threatened by political behavior, coworkers may respond defensively in ways that are destructive and aggressive. For example, coworkers may deliberately withhold necessary information, thereby complicating the target's work (Kaur & Kang, 2023; Notelaers et al., 2019). They may also undermine political actors' social advantages by spreading gossip or rumors, excluding or marginalizing them from social or work activities, displaying hostile attitudes, ignoring them, making offensive remarks or insults, sabotaging their work by repeatedly drawing attention to past mistakes, and belittling their contributions (Sun, 2022; Yu et al., 2024). These responses constitute bullying behaviors, which may be covertly enacted without necessarily being socially visible.

OR theory can explain such retaliatory action. When high-PSM workers use political behavior to acquire resources, they reduce the balance of resources available for others in an already scarce environment. As resource losses are psychologically more salient than resource gains (Hobfoll et al., 2018), coworkers may experience an urgency to respond in self-defense, such as through knowledge-hiding or work sabotage (Kaur & Kang, 2023; Sun, 2022; Yu et al., 2024). Bullying of high-PSM workers can thus emerge as a self-protective strategy by coworkers (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). SET offers additional explanatory value by underscoring how coworkers perceive political acts as violations of relational norms. This motivates others to equalize the dynamic through retaliation (Parzefall & Salin, 2010), particularly where governance and oversight are weak. Bullying of high-PSM workers, therefore, also emerges as a response to negative social exchange.

We contend that PSM leads to being bullied via the mediating effects of political behavior. Through both social exchange (relational mechanism) and resource conservation, high PSM increases the likelihood of political behavior, an acquisition strategy by the high-PSM instigator, but an exchange violation by others, which in turn invites retaliatory bullying from others (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016; Sandberg & Robichau, 2022).

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Political behavior is positively associated with experiencing bullying.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Political behavior positively mediates the association between PSM and experiencing bullying.

The Moderating Role of Constructive Leadership

Constructive leaders reduce the risk and impact of resource loss and exchange violations. They proactively allocate resources, define role boundaries, and promote positive exchange norms (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991; J. Lee & Jensen, 2014; Mo et al., 2023). Constructive leaders attenuate the harm of rationally motivated political actions

by containing the threat of social and material loss for coworkers, whose motivation for retaliation then decreases. The buffering effect of constructive leadership is explained by both the SET and COR theory.

Relationally, constructive leaders offset perceived negative reciprocity arising from political behavior by providing stewardship in mediating conflicts, modeling ethical conduct, and highlighting goodwill and positive intent behind coworkers' actions (Mo et al., 2023). Viewed through a SET lens, constructive leaders act as stabilizing agents of relational security within teams. They foster interactional justice and consequently reduce the need for coworkers to equalize negative interactions through retaliatory measures.

Drawing on the COR theory, constructive leaders curb the risk of loss spirals by facilitating an equitable distribution of resources and defining goals and expectations clearly (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991; J. Lee & Jensen, 2014). Although political behavior is a resource-acquisition strategy, constructive leaders help ensure that distribution remains fair and adequate, thereby reducing the likelihood of actual losses, self-defense, and retaliation through bullying.

Constructive leadership may not eliminate political behavior entirely; however, it can modify coworkers' perceptions of threat such that they no longer feel compelled to retaliate. Constructively framing threatening actions, distributing responsibilities and resources fairly, and signaling the ability to intervene when required are ways in which (perceptions of) political behavior can be neutralized. Taken together, the SET and COR theories frame constructive leaders as anchoring agents who create relational and resource stability within teams, leaving coworkers less threatened by political behavior and thus less likely to enact bullying against high-PSM workers (Hobfoll et al., 2018; J. Lee & Jensen, 2014).

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Constructive leadership negatively moderates the association between political behavior and experiencing bullying.

Constructive leadership can also dampen the indirect association between PSM and being bullied via political behavior. High-PSM workers may be drawn to organizational politics to navigate resource-constrained environments (Schott & Ritz, 2018), and their actions may be motivated by stress and an inability to meet their goals (Hamann & Foster, 2014; Quratulain & Khan, 2015; Van Loon et al., 2015). Constructive leaders can enable goal achievement for high-PSM workers by offering adequate support and lowering their need to amass resources through political means. In addition, constructive leaders may direct political actions into more constructive outlets, such as voice behaviors (Buchanan, 2008). High-PSM workers may thus be motivated to temper their political actions and be more inclined to respect collegial norms.

The COR theory again frames constructive leadership as a stabilizing force that not only promotes security for coworkers but also supports high-PSM workers themselves in securely meeting objectives. Adequate resources provided by constructive leaders can help them fulfill public service aspirations without resorting to destructive forms of political behavior (Hogg, 2015). Through resource support, constructive leaders

may reduce stress, thereby facilitating positive expressions of PSM and political behavior, which in turn reduces the likelihood of revenge and bullying (J. Lee & Jensen, 2014; Woodrow & Guest, 2017). Therefore, the indirect relationship between PSM and bullying, mediated by political behavior, is likely to be weaker in NPOs with high levels of constructive leadership.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Constructive leadership moderates the indirect association between PSM and being bullied through political behavior, such that the positive indirect association is weaker at high levels of constructive leadership.

Constructive leadership may also buffer the direct link between PSM and being bullied. Applying SET, maladaptive expressions of PSM, associated with rationalizations of unethical behavior, conflict over values and priorities, role encroachment, competition, envy, and covert influence tactics may lead to social exchange violations (Ripoll & Schott, 2023; Ritz et al., 2016; Salin et al., 2011; Schott & Ritz, 2018). But constructive leaders' emphasis on positive exchanges could both inhibit and counter the effects of negative social exchanges involving envy, competition, and covert tactics. Applying the COR theory, proactive allocation of resources and the clear setting of role boundaries by constructive leaders could limit role encroachment and conflict, thus reducing the likelihood of retaliation (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991; J. Lee & Jensen, 2014; Mo et al., 2023). Thus, constructive leaders may prevent high PSM from generating negative dynamics. High-PSM workers may still create social risks for others, who may retaliate through bullying, but constructive leadership could potentially neutralize this risk.

Hypothesis 7 (H7): Constructive leadership negatively moderates the direct association between PSM and experiencing bullying.

Method

Sample and Procedures

Data were collected in New Zealand, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country with a strong history of public sector reform, where NPOs also deliver important social services. An anonymous survey was distributed by email among all members of New Zealand's main public sector union, the Public Service Association. Appropriate institutional human subjects review procedures were followed. A total of 14,125 usable responses were received, representing a 25% response rate. For this study, only community and voluntary sector participants were included ($N=880$). Table 1 shows that the majority of participants were women (82.8%) and of European origin (62.4%). The mean age of participants was 51.7 years ($SD=11.5$), 34.0% had a university degree or post-graduate qualification, and 17.7% had supervisor or management responsibilities. These distributions are broadly comparable to the New Zealand NPO workforce, where women comprise 71%, 33% have

Table 1. Sample Demographic and Employment Characteristics (N=880).

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender (valid <i>n</i> = 864)				
Women	729	82.8	0.84	0.36
Men	131	14.9	0.15	0.36
Other	4	0.5	0.01	0.07
Age (years; valid <i>n</i> = 783)				
Age	783	—	51.69	11.47
Highest qualification (valid <i>n</i> = 870)				
University degree or postgraduate qualification	299	34.0	0.34	0.47
Post-secondary certificate/trade certificate/diploma	284	32.3	0.33	0.47
Secondary/high-school qualification	129	14.7	0.15	0.36
Other/no qualifications	158	18.0	0.18	0.39
Supervisory/managerial responsibility (valid <i>n</i> = 815)				
Yes (manager/supervisor)	156	17.7	0.19	0.39
No (non-manager)	659	74.9	0.81	0.39
Ethnicity (total response, <i>N</i> = 880)				
NZ European	549	62.4	0.62	0.49
Other European	62	7.0	0.07	0.26
Māori	153	17.4	0.17	0.38
Pacific peoples	64	7.3	0.07	0.26
Asian	49	5.6	0.06	0.23
African/Latin American/Middle Eastern	13	1.5	0.02	0.12

Note. *N* = 880. For each categorical characteristic, the category was dummy-coded (1 = category present, 0 = absent) over its valid base; the mean of a dummy-coded category therefore equals its proportion (e.g., *M* = 0.84 corresponds to 84% of valid cases), and the *SD* is that of the 0/1 indicator. The % column reports the percentage of the full sample and may differ slightly from *M* × 100 because of item non-response; valid *n* for each block is shown in parentheses. Age is a continuous variable reported in years (*M* and *SD* on the year scale; no % applies). Ethnicity was measured as a multiple-response item, so respondents could report more than one group and percentages sum to more than 100. *SD* is the sample standard deviation.

a university degree, 57% are of European origin, and 47% are aged 45 and above (Statistics New Zealand, 2026). Participants worked in a range of jobs, including community support worker, administrator, care manager, and dietitian.

Measures

We used published and pre-validated measures in the questionnaire. Items for PSM and political behavior were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. See the appendix for full wording or measures used.

Public Service Motivation. PSM was measured using the same five items as Wright and Pandey (2008), based on Perry’s (1997) research. An example of item was: “Meaningful public service is very important to me.”

Political Behavior. Political behavior was measured using the six-item scale developed by Treadway et al. (2005). A sample of item was: "I play office politics at work as a way to ensure that things get done."

Constructive Leadership. Constructive leadership was measured using a six-item scale adapted from Ekvall and Arvonen (1991). A prompt stated, "Please indicate how often your immediate manager does each of the following:" followed by the scale items. A sample item read, "Encourages thinking along new lines.. Seven possible scale responses ranged from "Almost never" to "Almost always."

Bullying. Bullying was measured using Notelaers et al.'s (2019) short scale that measures targets' experiences of being bullied in either work-oriented or person-directed ways. The scale represents a variety of work-oriented and personally directed behaviors that could be enacted for retribution. Respondents were asked the question, "During the past year, how often have you been subjected to the following negative acts in the workplace?" followed by nine items covering topics, such as social exclusion and gossip. Sample items were "Someone withholding necessary information so that your work gets complicated," and "Insults." Participants responded on a 5-point scale: "Never," "Now and then," "Monthly," "Weekly," and "Daily."

Control Variables. Controls were respondents' age, gender, ethnicity, and workplace size.

Analytical Strategy

We conducted (a) confirmatory composite analysis (CCA) in SmartPLS to assess the factor structure, convergent validity, and distinctiveness of the measured constructs and (b) hypothesis testing using PROCESS Macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2017). According to Hair et al. (2020), CCA is an alternative approach to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for validating measurement models and offers several benefits. First, CCA in SmartPLS handles non-normality effectively through bootstrapping techniques, making it well-suited for skewed data. Bullying data often exhibit non-normal distributions due to low frequency and skewed incidence across organizations (Einarsen et al., 2020), as was the case in our data set (Hair et al., 2020). Second, CCA typically retains more items per construct compared with CFA, thereby preserving construct coverage. Third, CCA can be applied to both reflective and formative measurement models, making it more versatile than CFA. Unlike CFA, which is limited to reflective models, CCA additionally accommodates formative models, which are specified as composite constructs formed by their indicators. Given that hypotheses testing through PROCESS Macro requires observed composite scores, validating our constructs using CCA was methodologically aligned. Finally, a growing body of research conceptualizes and operationalizes reflective measures using CCA (e.g., Marques et al., 2023).

For hypothesis testing, we used PROCESS Macro in SPSS because it simultaneously examines moderated mediation pathways and addresses non-normality in data

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations.

Study constructs	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
Public service motivation	5.56	0.88	—		
Political behavior	3.53	1.06	0.049**	—	
Constructive leadership	4.07	1.61	0.126**	−0.040**	—
Bullying	1.56	0.71	0.102**	0.157**	−0.237**

Note. *N*=880. *SD* = standard deviation. Numbers 1 to 3 correspond to the variables listed in the rows.
***p* < .01.

by bootstrapping with 95% confidence intervals (CIs, Hayes, 2017). Researchers investigating moderated mediation models regularly rely on this approach (e.g., Badar et al., 2023). To test the indirect effects, we estimated the indirect relationship between PSM and being bullied through political behavior and the corresponding CI. We then analyzed the moderating effect of constructive leadership along the direct and indirect pathways to being bullied.

Analysis and Results

Table 2 reports the results of the descriptive analyses, including means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among focal constructs. All correlations are significant at the .01 level of significance.

Confirmatory Composite Analysis

To evaluate the model’s fit, we employed a set of Byrne’s (2016) recommended indices, including the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and the χ^2/df ratio. Following Hair et al.’s (2020) guidelines, a suitable model should demonstrate an RMSEA value below 0.08, along with CFI and TLI scores that surpass 0.90. Our hypothesized four-factor model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data with the following fit indices, χ^2/df =1.74, CFI=0.913, TLI=0.903, RMSEA=0.068. These results support the validity of our constructs.

We also checked the factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), Cronbach’s alpha (α), and heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratios to assess the convergent validity, reliability, and discriminant validity of our study’s constructs (see Appendix). All factor loadings exceeded 0.50, with the exception of one item that was deleted from the political behavior scale. The AVE values for all constructs were above 0.50, and CR values were greater than 0.80, thus further establishing convergent validity. The study’s measures were deemed reliable, as Cronbach’s alpha values for all variables were greater than .70. Individual scale items, along with the convergent validity and reliability results, are shown in the appendix. Discriminant validity was assessed by calculating HTMT ratios between measures. As shown in

Table 3. Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio.

Study constructs	Public service motivation	Political behavior	Constructive leadership	Bullying
Public service motivation	—			
Political behavior	0.071			
Constructive leadership	0.069	0.069		
Bullying	0.116	0.192	0.259	—

Table 3, all ratios were below 0.85, the maximum cutoff recommended by Sarstedt et al. (2021).

Common method bias (CMB) was tested with Harman’s (1976) single-factor test. The single factor accounted for only 22.42% of the overall variance, and all factor-level/inner variance inflation factors (VIFs) resulting from a full collinearity test were lower than 3.3. CMB was not a concern in the present study (Kock, 2015).

Prior to hypothesis testing, we constructed an indicative structural model in SmartPLS to assess the explanatory and predictive potential of the specified model. We assessed the coefficient of determination (R^2) and predictive relevance of the model (Q^2) against recommended values. According to Falk and Miller (1992), R^2 values should be .10 or greater in social science research. Similarly, according to Hair et al. (2011), Q^2 values should be larger than zero. In our indicative model, R^2 and Q^2 values were .170 and 0.076 for political behavior and .140 and 0.030 for being bullied, respectively, thus exceeding the minimum thresholds.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 4 shows the direct, mediation, and moderated mediation results. We found that PSM was positively associated with being bullied ($\beta=0.082$, $p<.01$) and political behavior ($\beta=0.148$, $p<.01$). Hence, we found support for H1 and H2. Moreover, political behavior was positively related to being bullied ($\beta=0.116$, $p<.01$), supporting H3. The results for the indirect effect of PSM on being bullied through political behavior were significant (indirect effect=0.017; CI [0.010, 0.025]), supporting H4.

Furthermore, we found a negative and significant interaction of political behavior and constructive leadership on being bullied ($\beta=-0.026$, $p<.01$), indicating that the relationship between political behavior and being bullied was weaker at higher levels of constructive leadership. Thus, we found support for H5 (see Table 4). Furthermore, as shown in Table 4, the conditional indirect relationship between PSM and being bullied through political behavior was weaker at higher levels of constructive leadership (0.023 at -1 SD, 0.017 at the mean, and 0.011 at $+1$ SD). The index of moderated mediation was also negative and significant (Index= -0.025 , $SE=0.003$, CI [-0.008 , -0.001]). These findings suggest that constructive leadership weakens the positive indirect relationship between PSM and being bullied, supporting H6. Simple slope plots shown in Figures 2 and 3 further support H5 and H6. Finally, the interaction

Table 4. Direct, Mediation, and Moderated Mediation Results.

Direct relationships	Coefficient	T values		
Public service motivation → Bullying	.082**		2.608	
Public service motivation → Political behavior	.148**		3.417	
Political behavior → Bullying	.116**		5.221	
Political behavior × Constructive leadership → Bullying	-.026**		2.392	
Public sector motivation × Constructive leadership → Bullying	-.014		0.665	
		Political behavior	Bullying	
Public service motivation	.148**		0.082**	
Political behavior	—		0.116**	
Constructive leadership	.191**		-0.123**	
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
Indirect effect of public service motivation on bullying via political behavior	0.017	0.006	0.010	0.025
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
Conditional indirect effect of constructive leadership on bullying				
-1 SD	0.023	0.009	0.012	0.019
M	0.017	0.006	0.010	0.025
+1 SD	0.011	0.006	0.004	0.019
Index of moderated mediation	-0.025	0.003	-0.008	-0.001

Note. $N=880$. LLCI = lower-level confidence interval; SD = standard deviation; SE = standard error; ULCI = upper-level confidence interval.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

effect between PSM and constructive leadership was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.014$, $t = 0.665$, $p = .253$), indicating that constructive leadership does not moderate the direct association between PSM and being bullied. Therefore, we found no support for H7.

The findings related to control variables showed small or non-significant effects, indicating that the core relationships in our model were not driven by demographic differences. Specifically, ethnicity and workplace size were not significantly associated with being bullied, but ethnicity showed a small positive association with political behavior ($\beta = 0.054$, $p = .025$). Gender was not associated with political behavior, although women reported slightly higher experiences of being bullied ($\beta = 0.117$, $p = .028$), similar to other studies (D. Lee, 2002). Age demonstrated the most consistent pattern: older workers reported lower political behavior ($\beta = -0.007$, $p = .015$) and lower exposure to bullying ($\beta = -0.005$, $p = .006$).

Discussion

This study examined whether PSM is an antecedent to experiencing bullying. We proposed and tested two pathways from PSM: a direct pathway, on the grounds that PSM precipitates violations of social exchange norms, and an indirect pathway via political behavior used as a resource-acquisition strategy by high-PSM workers. The indirect

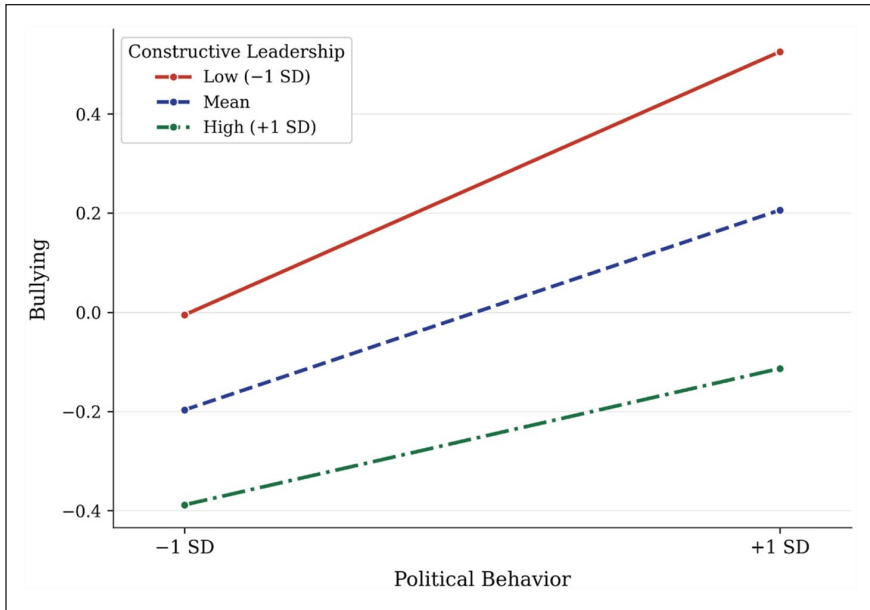


Figure 2. Moderating effect of constructive leadership on the relationship between political behavior and bullying.

Note. $N = 880$. SD = standard deviation. Low constructive leadership = Mean - 1 SD; High constructive leadership = Mean + 1 SD.

pathway also violated social exchange norms and depleted resources for others. High PSM thus attracted bullying as a revenge from coworkers. We examined whether constructive leadership moderated the relationship between political behavior and bullying, the mediated pathway between PSM and bullying, and the direct link between PSM and bullying. All the above relationships and hypotheses were supported, except one: constructive leadership did not moderate the direct link between PSM and bullying.

The absence of buffering against PSM's direct effect on bullying may be attributed to attitudinal factors. While constructive leadership significantly buffered behavioral issues involving politics—a more observable and addressable subject—imperceptible social exchange threats, such as envy, competition, and extra-role behavior benefiting the organization, are difficult to pinpoint and practically eliminate. Constructive leaders may not successfully temper the attitudinal problems emanating from high PSM, but those attitudinal problems may still be troublesome to others. Constructive leaders offer tangible support and set intangible norms through role modeling, but preventing less visible psychosocial conflict may not be within leaders' capacity. This implies that alternative mechanisms may connect PSM to experienced bullying. Other possible mediators may include identity-based, emotion-based, or contribution-based threats.

This study makes several contributions. First, it examines the dynamics surrounding bullying in the nonprofit sector and the antecedents that are characteristic of NPOs.

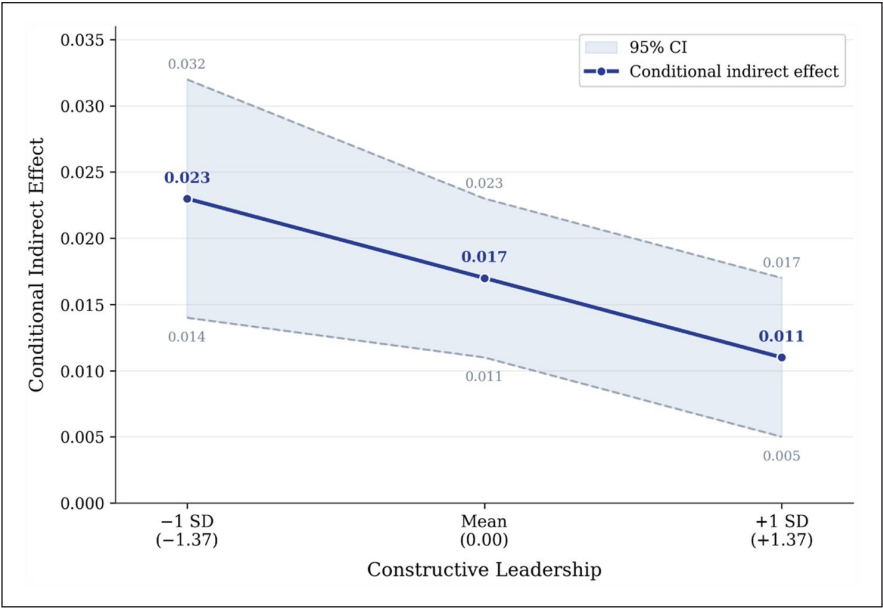


Figure 3. Moderating effect of constructive leadership on the relationship between PSM and bullying.
Note. $N=880$. PSM = public service motivation; SD = standard deviation. Low constructive leadership = Mean-1 SD; High constructive leadership = Mean+1 SD.

NPOs have unique structural and cultural features that influence interpersonal relationships and workplace behavior, making them potentially vulnerable to bullying (De Bruin Cardoso et al., 2024; Philip & Arrowsmith, 2021). Despite this, bullying remains surprisingly understudied in the NPO sector, possibly due to the assumption that the prosocial motivation of workers and the virtuous missions of NPOs act as natural bulwarks against mistreatment. This study adds to the literature, however, that prosocial occupational groups are not immune to harmful behavior, especially when high-PSM workers operate in stressful environments. For instance, the education and health sectors, also strong in prosocial and communal values, report elevated levels of bullying (Einarsen et al., 2010). Maintaining a workforce with high PSM may inadvertently heighten the risk of being bullied, thus warranting well-configured mitigation strategies in NPOs (Breauth et al., 2022).

Second, we contribute to the emerging literature on the dark side of PSM, as well as to the NPO-specific literature on PSM. In the NPO workforce, PSM exists alongside other closely related factors, such as belief in a cause or mission, personal values, and an oppositional identity, whereby workers describe themselves as “black sheep” (Lapworth et al., 2018, p. 1675). These factors can make it easier to violate behavioral norms, leading to conflict and bullying. In contrast, public servants, where much of the PSM literature originated, are more strongly driven by bureaucratic accountability,

norm-following, and risk aversion, which may be mildly protective against the risk of being bullied (Tu, 2024). The contingency of high-PSM workers' prosocial nature—whereby it depends on group membership and others' prosocial conduct—suggests scope for exchange violations that result in such workers being bullied by those outside the perceived group (Esteve et al., 2016).

While workers high in PSM carry altruistic motivations, they also simultaneously pursue goals with rational motives (Schott & Ritz, 2018) that may drive political maneuvers. In addition, high-PSM workers may challenge the status quo or resist unethical practices, which can disrupt established power dynamics. Such actions may be perceived as threatening by others and provoke mistreatment and bullying from coworkers. In resource-constrained NPOs, high-PSM workers are at heightened risk of experiencing role stressors, losing valued resources and adopting defensive strategies that conserve resources but are socially harmful, thus increasing their risk of being bullied (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007).

Our study highlights political behavior as a resource acquisition strategy despite its many pitfalls. Prior studies commonly focus on the harm political behavior causes others (Bedi & Schat, 2013; Buchanan, 2008). Our study, in contrast, highlights the self-inflicted harm it causes to perpetrators and highlights its role in the dynamics of resource-loss spiral (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The results suggest that “when people’s resources are outstretched or exhausted, they enter a defensive mode to preserve the self which is often defensive, aggressive, and may become irrational” (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 105).

Finally, we build on prior studies to articulate the role of constructive leadership in preventing bullying (Plimmer et al., 2022). The finding that constructive leadership lessens the harm of political behavior indicates that even in the presence of negative social exchange between coworkers, constructive leaders smooth over and reduce the impact of negative actions on others. Constructive leadership may alter the style of politics. Political behaviors, such as impression management, voice, and informal influence, can serve both prosocial and self-serving goals (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991; J. Lee & Jensen, 2014). Constructive leaders’ reliance on consideration, organization, and direction may enable productive expression of political behavior. Constructive leaderships’ role in moderating the mediated, but not the direct, relationship between PSM and bullying suggests that it is more successful in managing negative behaviors than in addressing more subtle negative attitudes that implicitly shape social exchanges between team members.

Practical Implications

Our study has significant practical implications for NPOs and other organizations with high-PSM workforces. First, the dark side of PSM warrants recognition and management, especially in NPOs. Its risks can be mitigated by clarifying and communicating shared values and behavioral expectations and through job designs that include clear roles and processes to minimize ambiguity, conflict, and bullying. Second, because political behavior may be covert, transparent and fair systems may

reduce both the incentive and the opportunity to engage in harmful political actions. Third, prioritizing the development and recognition of constructive leaders is essential, as they can address many challenges associated with political behavior and potentially other negative workplace actions. Finally, human resources (HR) practices, particularly recruitment, selection, reward, and training, should explicitly highlight both the benefits and potential risks of high PSM. This taps into collective insights about competence-related behavior and can inform selection, development, and performance management.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study has several limitations. First, our sample may not be generalizable in a broad sense, particularly beyond the NPO sector. Second, the unidimensional measure of PSM may not have fully captured the specific dimensions likely to elicit bullying (rational dimensions may be especially relevant in NPO workplace environments). Third, the cross-sectional survey design limits causal inferences. Further research on PSM and its dark side in the nonprofit sector is warranted (Costello et al., 2020; Ng & McGinnis Johnson, 2020; Ward & Miller-Stevens, 2021). Future studies could examine more granular aspects of both NPOs and PSM that may contribute to bullying. Uncovering other specific mediators may be a fruitful avenue. In addition, a longitudinal study design would allow closer examination of bullying dynamics over time. We also call for research into the motivational underpinnings of PSM, such as the role of rational motives, and how these interact with public service orientation. Finally, future studies could investigate the boundary conditions under which political behavior becomes prosocial versus destructive.

Conclusion

This study reveals a striking paradox: the very motivation that draws people to serve the public good—PSM—can also pave the way to be harmed. PSM is an antecedent of workplace bullying, with political behavior partially mediating this relationship. Findings suggest that constructive leadership can buffer against bullying by weakening the link between political behavior and bullying, and also by reducing the scope and likelihood of harmful political behavior more broadly. There are theoretical implications for research on the dark side of PSM, political behavior, and bullying. There are also practical insights into managing bullying risks. Because employees high in PSM may be more exposed to bullying, nonprofit managers should avoid over-relying on mission-driven motivation as a substitute for structural safeguards and instead strengthen reporting channels, monitor and address political behavior in teams, and select and develop constructive leadership, which our findings suggest buffers bullying. While findings are particularly applicable to nonprofits, they may also extend to other high-PSM public service settings, such as health care, education, and emergency services, where mission-driven employees face similar bullying risks and would benefit from the same protective leadership practices.

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Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study were collected from a third party and are not publicly available.

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Appendix. Factor Loadings, Cronbach's Alpha (α), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Constructs	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Public service motivation		.767		
Meaningful public service is very important to me	0.868		0.869	0.576
I am often reminded by daily events about how dependent we are on one another	0.518			
Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements	0.775			
I am prepared to make enormous sacrifices for the good of society	0.754			
I am not afraid to stand up for the rights of others, even if it means that I will be ridiculed	0.830			
Political behavior		.822		
I spend time at work playing office politics	0.896		0.898	0.644
I use my interpersonal skills to influence people at work	0.721			
I let others at work know of my accomplishments	0.588			
I work behind the scenes to see that my work group is taken care of (deleted)	0.478			
Actively playing office politics is an important part of my job	0.845			
I play office politics at work as a way to ensure that things get done	0.916			
Constructive leadership (My leader):		.939		
Encourages thinking along new lines	0.870		0.940	0.721
Gives recognition for good work	0.887			
Pushes for growth and improvement	0.852			
Sets clear goals for work	0.830			
Defines and explains work requirements clearly to subordinates	0.827			
Is flexible and ready to rethink his/her point of view	0.827			
Bullying		.911		
Someone withholding necessary information so that your work gets complicated	0.570		0.914	0.545
Gossip or rumors about you	0.790			
Social exclusion from coworkers or work group activities	0.691			
Repeated offensive remarks about you or your private life	0.811			
Insults	0.777			
Repeated reminders about your blunders or mistakes	0.767			
Silence or hostility as a response to your questions or attempts at conversations	0.817			

Note. $N = 880$.