TITLE: Neutralizing workplace bullying: The buffering effects of contextual factors

Cooper-Thomas, H., Gardner, D., O'Driscoll, M.P., Catley, B., Bentley, T. and Trenberth, L.

ABSTRACT

Purpose. This paper examines 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 investigates the effectiveness of organizational initiatives against bullying as perceived by targets and non-targets.

Method. 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 6 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.

Implications. These results show that contextual factors are important in workplace bullying. They were directly associated with lower levels of bullying and buffered the negative impacts of workplace bullying both through anti-bullying initiatives and perceived organizational support. Further research is needed into effective ways for organizations to counter bullying.

Originality. There is scant research on workplace factors that may reduce bullying and buffer its negative effects. Our 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.

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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% across Western countries (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). Workplace bullying results in anxiety, depression, absenteeism, and turnover (Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 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 & Hoel, 2011). From a prevention perspective, then, contextual factors may take on primary and secondary prevention roles in reducing bullying and its impacts (Bentley, Catley, Cooper-Thomas, Gardner, O'Driscoll, Dale, et al., 2012; Law, Dollard, Tuckey, & Dormann, 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 organizational support, and

organizational initiatives against bullying. These three factors are proposed to directly reduce

bullying and also reduce the negative ramifications of bullying on relevant individual and

organizational criteria. In the sections that follow we define bullying, outline our rationale for

choosing these criterion variables, and provide arguments for our hypotheses.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Defining Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is the persistent exposure to negative and aggressive behaviors,

which may be psychological, verbal, or physical, and may be perpetrated by an individual or

group (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire, & Smith, 1998). Such

negative behaviors are labeled 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 (Rayner & Cooper, 2006; Zapf,

Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 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 behaviors (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen,

2010).

Individual and Organizational Consequences of Workplace Bullying

Bullying can have severe effects on individual targets and on the organization. At the individual level, the results of bullying include lower self-esteem, more negative emotion, anxiety, stress, fatigue, burnout and depression (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Cassitto, Fattorini, Gilloli, Rengo, & Gonik, 2004; Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2006; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010; Hoel, Faragher, & Cooper, 2004; Lovell & 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 organizations: Targets take more days off, report unclear expectations of task performance, have reduced job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, and work motivation, and are more likely to leave the organization than non-targets (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2008; Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter & Kacmar, 2007; Keashly & Neuman, 2004). Based on these findings, our remaining two criterion variables were performance and organizational commitment. Performance represents a key outcome for the organization, while organizational commitment is an important attitude in itself and also has implications for task performance, contextual performance, and turnover (Sinclair,

Tucker, Cullen, & Wright, 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 organizations (Bond, Tuckey, &

Dollard, 2010; Giorgi, 2010; Salin & 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, Dollard,

Hosking, and Winefield (2009) observed that perceived cognitive, emotional and behavioral

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 organizational 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 organization level. Further, PSC at the organizational 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 organizational anti-bullying initiatives.

Constructive leadership. Hauge and colleagues (2007) note the paradox that although

supervisors are the most frequent perpetrators of bullying, relatively few studies have

investigated the relationship of leadership behavior and bullying. Those studies that have been

conducted tend to examine the negative consequences of destructive forms of leadership

behavior (see, for instance, Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Neilsen, & Einarsen, 2010; Kelloway

& Barling, 2010). Less attention has been focused on how constructive leadership behavior may

reduce the likelihood of bullying occurring and attenuate the negative outcomes of bullying.

Constructive leadership is defined as behaviors which encourage and recognize individuals for

their contributions, support their needs, foster growth and development within the organization

and illustrate a leader's flexibility to innovate and adapt to environmental contingencies (Ekvall

& Arvonen, 1991). Poor leadership can lead to or exacerbate bullying in workplaces in various

ways. Leaders may behave in bullying ways themselves, model bullying behaviors which others

copy, fail to intervene in bullying behavior or even reward it (Mathisen, Einarsen, & Mykletun,

2011). In contrast, constructive leadership may directly reduce the likelihood of bullying by modeling constructive behaviors, 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 & Lee, 2006; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Skogstad et al., 2011). Thus we predict a direct negative relationship of constructive leadership with bullying.

Hypothesis 1: 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 & Johnson, 2001; Hoel & Giga, 2006; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007). Previous research has found that negative leadership behaviors 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 behaviors 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:

Hypothesis 2: 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 organization will help employees to carry out their work and support their socioemotional wellbeing (Rhoades & 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 behaviors that benefit the organization (Eisenberger, et al., 1990; Rhoades & 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 recognized as potential antecedents of lower levels of bullying (Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Tucket et al., 2009). Hence we propose:

Hypothesis 3: 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 behaviors. 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 & Kelloway, 2003), and that it buffers the effects of psychological contract breach on negative affective reactions (Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson, & Wayne, 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 & 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:

Hypothesis 4: 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 behavior, blaming targets, and failing to deal with bullies

(Duffy, 2009; Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011). More effective actions are likely to be

system-wide approaches which make clear those behaviors 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 modeling of appropriate behavior by management and senior

staff (Namie, 2007; Rayner & Cooper, 2006; Rayner & Lewis, 2011). A few studies have

investigated the direct effects of organizational actions on bullying, with mixed results (Hoel &

Giga, 2006; Mikkelsen, Hogh, & Puggaard, 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, Leighton, Xu, & Knight-Turvey, 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 & Neuman, 2004; Saam, 2010). While the evidence is sparse, we consider that organizational initiatives are more likely to predict lower levels of bullying, and identified a broad range of initiatives from previous research (see Method).

Hypothesis 5: 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 & 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:

Hypothesis 6: 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 organizations could put in place to reduce bullying, but evidence of

their effectiveness is sparse (Hoel & Giga, 2006; Keashly & Neumann, 2004; Mikkelsen et al.,

2011). Given that organizational responses to bullying are often copied from one workplace to

another (Salin, 2008), it is important to identify which organizational 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, Ryan, Thomas, Greenberg, & Rolniak,

2007; Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2006; Eriksen & Einarsen, 2004; Hutchinson,

Vickers, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2005). For this research we chose the healthcare industry because

bullying has been identified as a major problem in this sector both internationally (DiMartino,

Hoel, & Cooper, 2003; Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2008; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007;

Yildirim & Yildirim, 2007), and in New Zealand (Bentley, Catley, Gardner, O'Driscoll,

Trenberth, & Cooper-Thomas, 2009; Foster et al., 2004; Scott, Blanshard, & Child, 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 organizational support, and organizational anti-bullying initiatives would

(a) directly negatively predict bullying and (b) through a moderating effect, reduce the

relationships of bullying with individual and organizational-level criteria of strain, wellbeing,

performance, and organizational commitment.

Method

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of 727 employees from nine healthcare

organizations in New Zealand, comprising different organizations and sites from within two

district health boards and two residential care organizations. Eighty-four percent (612) of

participants indicated their gender as female and the mean age was 46 years. Respondents had an

average of 7 years in their current job and nearly 8 years in the organization. Participants were

primarily New Zealand European (503; 69%), with Maori (64; 9%) and Cook Island Maori (6;

1%) also represented, as well as European (i.e., either not holding New Zealand citizenship or a

first generation immigrant: 72; 10%), Asian (42; 6%), Pacific Island (33; 5%) and South African

(9; 1%; all percentages have been rounded). Of those who indicated their role, 16 (2.2%) were

senior managers, 81 (11.3%) were middle-level managers, 73 (10.2%) were first-line

supervisors, and 445 (62.0%) 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

organization, 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, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007), which lists 22

negative workplace behaviors. 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 behaviors over the previous 6 months. Responses ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (daily)

($\alpha = .87$). 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 categorize 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 behaviors 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)

($\alpha = .93$).

Perceptions of organizational support. Seven items were used from Eisenberger,

Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa's (1986) measure of perceived organizational 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, McCormack, & Casimir,

2008). Sample items are "Help is available from my organization when I have a problem" and

"my organization cares about my opinions". Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1

(strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree) (α = .93).

Effectiveness of organizational initiatives against bullying. Thirteen 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 organizational stress management interventions

which organizations might engage in to address bullying. The item stem was "we now wish you

to think about what, if anything, your organization has done to address bullying. How effective

do you think your organization has been in each of the following areas?" All items are provided

in Table 3. Responses were on a 6 point scale ranging from 1 (very ineffective) to 6 (very

effective), with a "don't know" option offered (α = .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 (α = .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 (α =

.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 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 (α = .73).

Affective organizational commitment. Respondents' affective organizational commitment

was measured with six items from Meyer and Allen (1997). Example items are "I really feel as if

this organization's problems are my own", and "This organization has a great deal of personal

meaning for me". Responses were on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7

(strongly agree) ($\alpha = .83$).

Data analyses

Factor analyses supported the structure of established scales. For the new measure of

percieved effectiveness of organizational anti-bullying initiatives, principal axis factoring

indicated a single factor accounting for 70.39% of the variance. Next, data were pooled across

organizations 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, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003). For this, we identified those

who had experienced at least 2 negative acts per week over the last 6 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 & Judd, 1993; Siemsen, Roth, &

Oliviera, 2010), we conducted each moderator analysis separately.

<div align="center">

Results

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The means, standard deviations, and zero order correlations of all variables are shown in

Table 1. 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 organizational initiatives (r

= -.30), organizational support (r = -.35), and constructive leadership (r = -.35). For these

employees also, NAQ-R bullying is strongly positively correlated with strain (r = .39), strongly

negatively correlated with wellbeing (r = -.45), and weakly negatively correlated with self-

reported performance (r = -.23), and organizational commitment (r = -.26).

Insert Table 1 about here

The results are similar for the bullied employees, although the relationships appear

slightly weaker between NAQ-R bullying and perceived effectiveness of organizational

initiatives (r = -.32), organizational support (r = -.20), and constructive leadership (r = -.22). The

relationships appear weaker also for NAQ-R bullying with strain (r = .21) and wellbeing (r = -

.22), with no significant relationship of bullying with self-reported performance (r = .03) or

organizational commitment (r = -.05).

In Hypotheses 1, 3, and 5, we predicted that constructive leadership, POS, and anti-

bullying initiatives would negatively predict bullying. The correlations on the upper right

diagonal are negative and significant for these relationships (r's of -.22 with constructive

leadership, -.20 with POS, and -.32 with anti-bullying initiatives). These results support

Hypotheses 1, 3, and 5. It is also notable that these relationships are significant also for the non-

bullied sample (r's of -.30, -.35, -.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 & Hoel, 2011), and showed that when these three predictors are entered

concurrently, only anti-bullying initiatives is significant (F (3, 118) = 5.00, $p < .01$, R^2 =.11; anti-

bullying initiatives β = -.27, $p < .01$, constructive leadership β = -.07, ns, POS β = -.06, ns).

Insert Table 2 about here

In Hypotheses 2, 4, and 6, 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 organizational commitment, such that the impact of

bullying would be lessened when these organizational initiatives were present

Three of the predicted 12 interactions were significant. The interaction of bullying with

organizational support predicted performance (ΔR^2 = .03, $p < .05$), while the interaction of

bullying and organizational initiatives was significant in predicting wellbeing (ΔR^2 = .05, $p <$

.01) and organizational commitment (ΔR^2 = .05, $p < .01$). 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 ($p < .05$) are displayed in Figures 2a to 2c.

Insert Figure 2a, 2b, 2c about here

Figure 2a 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 = .61, $t = 1.65$, $p >$

.05; low POS: Simple slope = -.46, $t = -1.51$, $p > .05$), but the significant interaction showed that

the simple slopes were significantly different from each other. In support of Hypothesis 4c, our

results show that POS buffered the effects of bullying.

Figure 2b shows that bullied respondents who rated organizational anti-bullying

initiatives as more effective showed no interaction between bullying and wellbeing (simple slope

= -.21, $t = -1.26$, $p > .05$), whereas those rating organizational anti-bullying actions as less

effective showed an interaction (simple slope = -.72, $t = -5.25$, $p < .001$). Thus, for participants

who reported organizational initiatives against bullying as more effective, the level of bullying

experienced had no impact on wellbeing. In contrast, participants who reported lower

effectiveness for organizational initiatives against bullying experienced lower wellbeing in

tandem with greater bullying. This supports Hypothesis 6b.

Figure 2c shows that participants rating organizational anti-bullying initiatives as more

effective showed no interaction between bullying and organizational commitment (simple slope

= .31, t = 0.98, p > .05). However, for participants rating organizational anti-bullying initiatives

as less effective, when bullying was high, they had lower organizational commitment (simple

slope = -.68, t = -3.02, p < .01). Thus, more effective organizational anti-bullying actions

buffered against bullying however mild or severe it was, in terms of its effects on organizational

commitment. When such initiatives were less effective, participants were at risk and at high

levels of bullying they showed lower organizational commitment. This supports Hypothesis 6d.

The direct and moderator relationships are summarized in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Insert Table 3 about here

Finally, we explored which organizational actions healthcare employees rated as the most

and least effective in countering bullying. The initiatives are shown in rank order in Table 3, 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 organizational 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 organizational support (POS), and the perceived effectiveness of organizational anti-bullying initiatives would both directly predict lower bullying and buffer the negative relationship of bullying with strain, wellbeing, performance, and organizational commitment. The results provided some support for these propositions. Direct negative relationships were found for these contextual factors with bullying. Further, effective organizational anti-bullying actions buffered the relationship of bullying with wellbeing and organizational commitment, and POS buffered the relationship of bullying with performance. Thus, actions by the organization – 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 organizational initiatives against bullying. At high levels of bullying, participants who rated organizational initiatives as less effective also experienced lower wellbeing and lower performance while those reporting more effective organizational initiatives had similar levels of wellbeing and performance regardless of level of bullying. To date, much of the evidence on organizational initiatives to counter bullying has arisen from practitioner anecdotes (Duffy, 2009; Namie, 2007) or has been primarily descriptive (Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011; Rayner & Cooper, 2006; Resch & Schubinski,

1996). The current study provides empirical data to substantiate the importance of organizational

initiatives, which is important in persuading organizations to invest in anti-bullying activities.

Perceived organizational support (POS) is a less formal way in which organizations 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 behaviors.

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,

Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Hauge et al., 2007; Resch & 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 organizational 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 organizations 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 behaviors. 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). Organizational initiatives reduce the

negative relationships of bullying with wellbeing and organizational 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 organizations appear to be

taking minimal action to address bullying (Bentley et al., 2009; Heames & Harvey, 2006; Salin,

2008). We suggest that organizations 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 3) 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 & 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 1) suggesting that common method variance is not consistently inflating relationships

(Lindell & Whitney, 2001; see also Lance, Dawson, Birkelbach, & Hoffman, 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 & Stone-

Romero, 1997; McClelland & 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

$p < .10$, 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 organizational commitment at mostly higher levels for

non-targets than targets (see Table 1). This suggests a negative influence of witnessing bullying

(Cooper-Thomas, Catley, Bentley, Gardner, O'Driscoll, & Trenberth, 2011; Hoel, Sheehan,

Cooper, & Einarsen, 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 organizations 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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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients of study variables with non-bullied data set on lower diagonal and bullied only on upper diagonal.

	Non-Bullied										Bullied	
Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	M	SD
1 Anti-bullying actions	4.07	1.39	.98	.40‡	.43‡	-.32‡	-.27‡	-.25‡	.35‡	.11	.16	2.72	1.21
2 POS	4.58	1.63	.49‡	.95	.52‡	-.20*	.01	-.33‡	.47‡	.10	.51‡	3.02	1.68
3 Constructive Leadership	2.95	1.37	.41‡	.51‡	.93	-.22*	-.14	-.24‡	.39‡	.18*	.18*	1.87	1.23
4 NAQ-R Bullying	1.28	.27	-.30‡	-.35‡	-.35‡	.87	.55‡	.50‡	-.45‡	-.05	-.17*	2.29	.66
5 Self-Report Bullying	.02	.14	-.19‡	-.14‡	-.15‡	.19‡	-	.21*	-.22*	.03	-.05	.18	.38
6 Strain	1.23	.48	-.20‡	-.40‡	-.35‡	.39‡	.05	.85	-.69‡	-.18*	-.18*	1.73	.53
7 Wellbeing	4.11	.83	.29‡	.50‡	.44‡	-.45‡	-.15‡	-.70‡	.94	.10	.29‡	3.14	.87
8 Performance	7.86	1.19	.12‡	.13‡	.16‡	-.23‡	.02	-.27‡	.30‡	.73	-.06	7.39	1.40
9 Organizational Commitment	4.44	1.42	.34‡	.60‡	.34‡	-.26‡	-.15‡	-.33‡	.44‡	.12‡	.83	3.53	1.40

Note. $N = 467$-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. ‡ $p < .001$, ‡$p < .01$, * $p < .05$, L = Levene's test showed unequal variances hence equal variances not assumed. POS = perceived organizational support; NAQ = negative acts questionnaire; t = t-value; R = effect size.

Table 2. Regression analysis results showing direct and moderating relationships in predicting strain, wellbeing, performance, and organizational commitment among bullied employees.

Variables	Strain			Wellbeing			Performance			Organizational Commitment		
	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β
NAQ-R	.48‡	.46‡	.45‡	-.39‡	-.37‡	-.32‡	.03	.05	-.01	-.14	-.05	.09
Constructive Leadership	-.13			.31‡			.19*			.15		
POS		-.24♭			.40‡			.10			.49‡	
Anti-bullying actions			-.10			.23♭			.10			.10
NAQ-R by Constructive Leadership	.02			.01			.10			.04		
NAQ-R by POS		-.00			.00			.20*			.09	
NAQ-R by Anti-bullying actions			-.03			.22♭			.05			.24♭
Step 1 R^2	.27‡	.31‡	.25‡	.30‡	.35‡	.26‡	.03	.01	.01	.05*	.26‡	.05*
Step 2 R^2	.27‡	.31‡	.25‡	.30‡	.35‡	.30‡	.04	.04	.01	.05	.27‡	.10♭
ΔR^2	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.05♭	.01	.03*	.00	.01	.01	.05♭
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♭

Note. * $p =< .05$, ♭ $p < .01$, ‡ $p =< .001$.

Table 3. Ratings of the effectiveness of organization strategies to address bullying.

Strategy	Bullied		Not bullied		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Developing a workplace bullying policy	3.09	1.77	4.31	1.58	-6.40 [≠ L]
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 [≠ L]
Monitoring and reviewing staff relationships, especially fair treatment of people	2.16	1.38	3.70	1.70	-9.70 [≠ L]

Note. [≠] $p =< .001$; [L] = Levene'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 6 months. n bullied = 96-118; n not-bullied = 377-496. Scale is 1 (very ineffective) to 6 (very effective).

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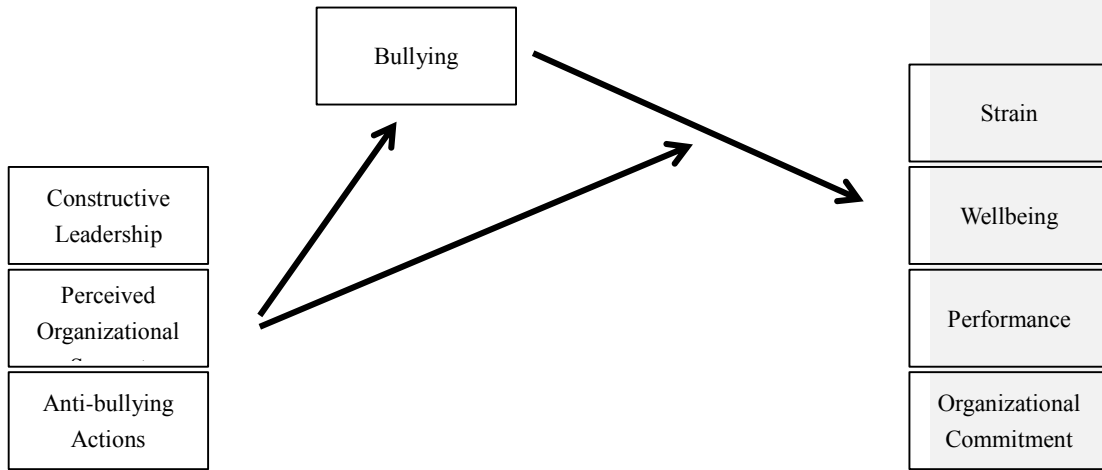with predictors and criteria

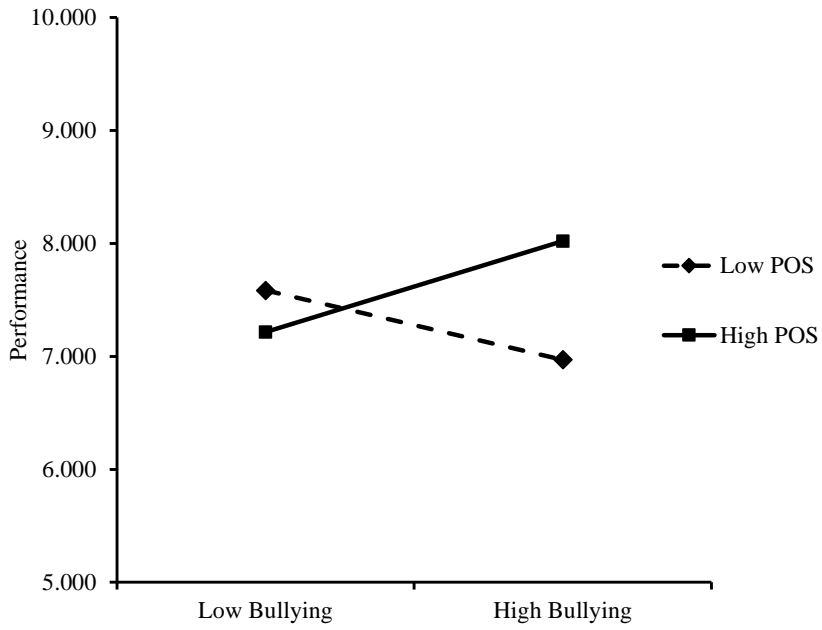Figure 2a. Interaction between POS and bullying on performance.

Figure 2b. Interaction between organizational anti-bullying activities and
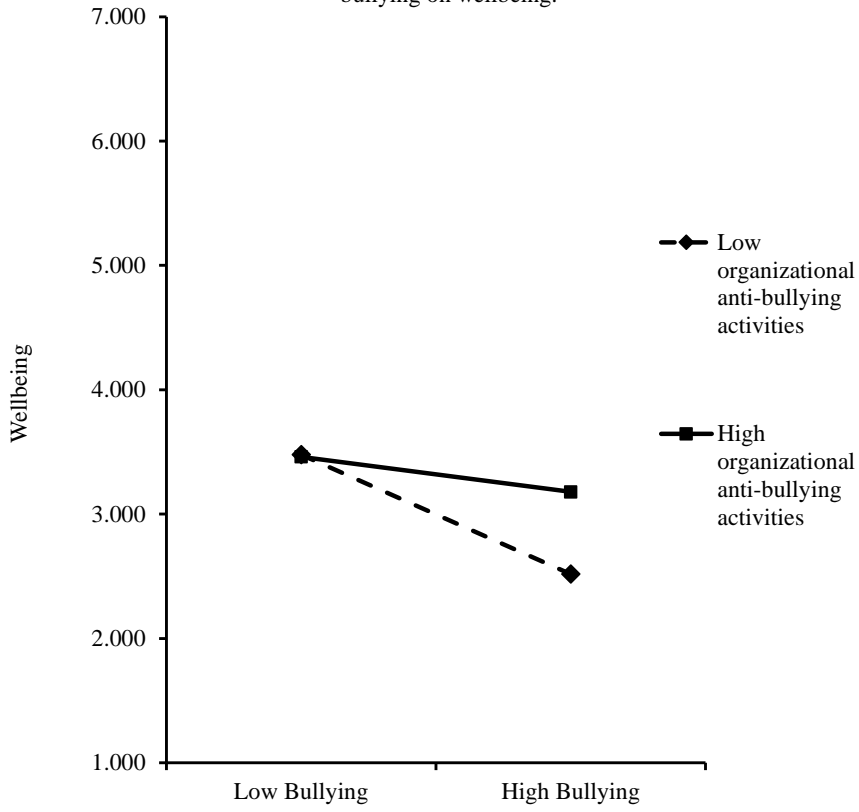bullying on wellbeing.

Figure 2c. Interaction between organizational anti-bullying activities and bullying on organizational commitment
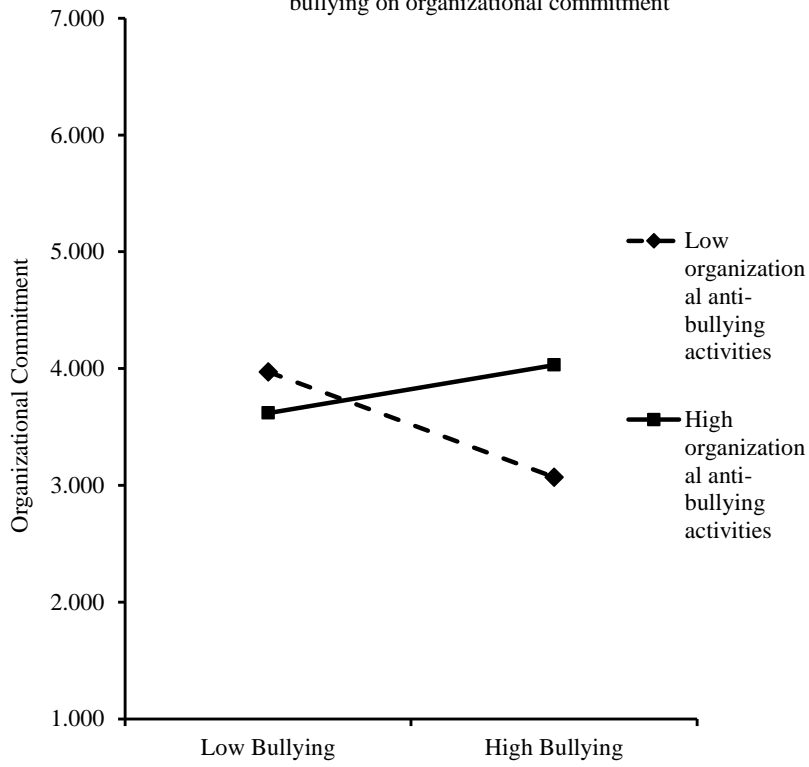
Figure 3. Actual direct and moderating relationships for the relationship of bullying with predictors and criteria.