

WORKPLACE BULLYING IN SOUTHERN EUROPE: PREVALENCE, FORMS AND RISK GROUPS IN A SPANISH SAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

Although workplace bullying is receiving increasing attention and has been widely studied, to date there has been little academic research on workplace bullying in southern Europe. The purpose of the present study was to explore the prevalence and forms of bullying in a sample of Spanish employees. In addition, several socio-demographic and work situation factors were examined in order to identify risk groups. The sample consisted of 103 employees from the Madrid Autonomous Region (Spain), and data were collected using the “Bullying at Work Questionnaire”, developed for this purpose. The employees in this study showed considerable experience of having been bullied. Furthermore, the present findings emphasise the importance of gender, work experience, type of contract and educational level in the bullying process.

Keywords: Workplace bullying; prevalence; socio-demographic variables; risk groups; Spain.

INTRODUCTION

Since the pioneering studies of workplace “mobbing” by Leymann (1986; 1987; 1988), workplace bullying has begun to receive more and more attention, and is increasingly recognized as an important social and organisational problem. As Vartia (1996) points out, bullying has become a topic of widespread interest in several European countries; even so, to date there has been little academic study on bullying at work in southern Europe. This study thus aims to address this gap by studying workplace bullying among Spanish employees.

The term workplace bullying has typically been used to refer to repeated, negative acts that discredit, humiliate, isolate or even bring about an employee’s expulsion from the workplace” (cf. Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper 2003; Leymann 1996). In the past few decades, there has been growing evidence of the deleterious outcomes of bullying. Bullying has been shown to be associated with low productivity, multiple stress and psychosomatic symptoms (Brodsky 1976; Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen 1994; Mikkelsen & Einarsen 2002), as well as psychobiological consequences. For example, a recent study found that victims of bullying presented altered circadian cortisol cycles (Hansen et al. 2006). It is thus clear that bullying affects the physical and mental health of the victim, but it may also imply costs for the organisation, as a result of factors such as absenteeism, staff conflict, rapid turnover of personnel and staff losses in general (Leymann 1996; Rayner 1997, Sheehan, McCarthy, Barker & Henderson 2001).

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Several factors have been identified as correlates of bullying. These factors can be divided into two broad sources: factors related to the work environment and individual characteristics of victims and perpetrators. Researchers have documented a number of organisational stressors typically associated with the occurrence of bullying. For example, Einarsen et al. (1994) reported work characteristics such as “weak” leadership, role conflict and lack of work control as the most important variables for predicting bullying. Zapf, Knorz and Kulla (1996) also found job content and the social environment to be significant determinants of harassment at work. Furthermore, some authors argue that certain changes in the organisation or in the economy, such as a downsizing, a recession or an economic crisis, may increase the risk of bullying (Baron & Neuman 1998; McCarthy, Sheehan & Wilkie 1995; Salin 2003a).

But while many researchers have argued that work conditions and organisational variables play a salient role in the bullying process (e.g., Einarsen 2000), as Niedl (1995) and Zapf (1999) emphasise, harassment is a multi-causal phenomenon, and not an automatic consequence of work stressors. Exposed to the same conditions, some individuals are “bullied” while others are not. The response to job stressors is thus also affected by individual differences between employees, such as demographic factors, personality or work experience. In this regard, several personality characteristics have been shown to affect the bullying process and the likelihood of becoming a victim. These include self-esteem (Einarsen 1996), negative affectivity (Aquino, Grover, Bradfield & Allen 1999), emotional stability (O’Moore, Seigne, McGuire & Smith 1998) and anxiety (Zapf 1999). Socio-demographic factors, such as gender, age, marital status and level of education, and professional background and work situation, such as work experience and type of contract, may also have an effect, though research to date has yielded inconsistent results for the socio-demographic factors studied. This study aims to broaden our understanding of workplace bullying by examining bullying in the southern European context, which so far has been highly neglected in bullying research. More precisely, the study aims to explore the prevalence and forms of bullying in a Spanish sample and to identify particular risk groups, with respect to socio-demographic characteristics and work situation, in the Spanish context. Studying risk groups also more generally furthers our understanding of bullying by examining the role of socio-demographic factors and work situation factors.

WORKPLACE BULLYING, RISK GROUPS AND NATIONAL DIFFERENCES

A number of studies on workplace bullying have aimed at identifying risk groups. The factors that have been studied include gender, age and type of work contract. However, the results of these studies have been highly inconsistent and inconclusive.

Among socio-demographic variables, gender appears to be the most widely studied variable. However, results from empirical studies on gender and bullying are inconsistent. For instance, some authors have reported a higher frequency of bullying for women (Björkqvist, Österman & Lagerspetz 1994; Niedl 1995; Salin 2003b; Zapf et al. 1996), while many large-scale studies report no significant gender differences (Einarsen & Skogstad 1996; Hoel & Cooper 2000; Vartia 1996).

Hoel and Cooper (2000) found that younger people experienced more bullying than older employees, and other studies in the UK have revealed a similar pattern. Rayner (1997), for example, reported that victims of bullying were usually less than 25 years of age. In contrast, in Einarsen and Skogstad’s (1996) sample, older employees reported the highest incidence of

bullying. Likewise, other studies from Scandinavia have indicated that older employees are more often subjected to hostile acts (Einarsen et al. 1994; Piirainen et al. 2000; Vartia 2003). As regards bullying and the victim's work situation, Baron and Neumann (1996) reported a positive relationship between bullying and the use of part-time workers, while Hoel and Cooper (2000) found that those with full-time contracts were more at risk than those with part-time contracts. However, Kivimäki, Elovainio and Vahtera (2000) found no differences in the frequency of bullying between employees with temporary contracts and those with permanent contracts, or between full-time workers and those on part-time contracts.

As far as victims' organisational status is concerned, some studies have reported similar proportions of bullying victims for employees, supervisors and managers (Einarsen & Raknes 1997; Hoel, Cooper & Faragher 2001). For example, Einarsen and Raknes (1997) reported equal proportions in the experience of negative behaviours for workers and supervisors or managers. In contrast, other authors have reported that bullying is associated with hierarchical status, with employees on lower hierarchical levels reporting more bullying than higher-level employees. For example, in a study among business professionals, Salin (2001) obtained significant differences: only 2% of the managers reported experiences of bullying, whereas 17.5% of clerks and junior officers had experienced bullying over the previous 12 months.

But the contradictory results in relation to socio-demographic factors and work situation do not necessarily mean that these variables are not important when identifying particular risk groups: rather, it may indicate that different characteristics are associated with bullying in different organisational or national contexts. For example, belonging to a minority in terms of gender or age may be more strongly correlated with bullying than belonging to a certain gender or age group per se. This is supported by the finding that women report higher bullying rates in male-dominated fields, such as the business world or universities (Björkqvist et al. 1994; Salin 2001), whereas men report more bullying in the female-dominated child care sector (Lindroth & Leymann 1992).

Up to now, national differences in bullying have received scant attention, though some researchers have stressed the problems of using bullying questionnaires developed in other national contexts (Knorz & Zapf 1996), or stressed the effects of national differences in power distance and femininity on bullying behaviour (Einarsen 2000). While workplace bullying has received a great deal of attention in northern Europe, the United Kingdom and Australia, it has scarcely been studied at all in southern Europe. Even so, a small-scale comparative study of employees in the UK and Portugal reported several significant differences (Cowie, Dawn, Neto, Angulo, Pereira, del Barrio & Ananiadou 2000), such as a considerably higher prevalence of bullying in Portugal than in the UK and differences in risk groups of bullying and perpetrator profiles.

In Spain, the topic of workplace bullying has received increased attention in the past few years. Recently, this interest resulted in a special issue on workplace bullying in a Spanish journal (Moreno-Jimenez & Rodriguez-Muñoz 2006). In the studies reported in this special issue the prevalence of bullying ranged from 9.2% to 18.9%. Furthermore, the results reported in the special issue showed that bullying was related to workplace climate and organizational change (Muñoz, Guerra, Baron & Munduate 2006) and that job resources mediated the relationship between job demands and bullying (Rodríguez-Muñoz, Martínez, Moreno-Jimenez & Galvez 2006). However, although some empirical studies on workplace bullying

have been conducted, this research area still seems to be in its infancy in Spain and results have typically been reported only in national journals.

Thus, the present work contributes to our understanding of bullying in a new national context. It has two objectives, the first of which is to explore the prevalence and forms of bullying in a Spanish sample. The second aim is to identify particular risk groups, with respect to socio-demographic characteristics and work situation, in the Spanish context.

METHOD

Sample

This study was conducted among employees from the city of Madrid working in the transport and communication sector. A questionnaire was sent out to 330 employees and 103 were returned, giving a response rate of 31.21%. This response rate can be seen as normal in research on bullying (Björkqvist et al. 1994). Men made up 49.5% of the sample and women 50.5%. Mean age was 34 years ($SD=8.00$) and mean number of years of work experience was 11.1 (range 1-42 years). Concerning marital status, 58.3% indicated that they were single, divorced or widowed. Most of the participants (97.1%) worked for a private company and 87.3% worked full-time. 36.6% had a university degree, 49.5% had completed secondary education and 13.9% had elementary education. The majority of the respondents (85.3%) held subordinate positions, whereas only 13.7% had supervisory responsibilities. 72 per cent of the participants had permanent contracts (permanent work contract or civil servant) and 28 per cent had temporary contracts (temporary or project-based). Participation was voluntary and all information received was kept confidential.

Procedure

The study was carried out in cooperation with the Regional Institute of Health and Safety at Work and the General Trade Union of Workers. An Occupational Risk Prevention Plan had been developed for the Madrid Autonomous Region (*Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid*, made up of the city of Madrid and its surroundings, Spain), and assessing the occurrence of bullying was seen as a logical measure within this plan. We decided to carry out an exploratory study on the extent of bullying among employees from the transport and communications sector, since this sector had shown an interest in the topic.

In order to study the prevalence of bullying within this sample we decided to develop a questionnaire, adapted to the relevant national and occupational context. This involved reviewing relevant bullying literature, examining existing instruments and carrying out 10 structured interviews with employees from the sector to detect particular bullying features in this group. Before sending out the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted on 30 subjects with the aim of identifying possible difficulties in answering the questions, and some items were modified to make them easier to understand. The result was the "Bullying at Work Questionnaire" (BWQ, Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Garrosa & Morante 2005). The delivery and the collection of the final questionnaire were carried out by employees directly responsible for aspects related to occupational risk prevention. It was stressed that the questionnaires were to be answered individually and that information would be treated with respect to anonymity and confidentiality.

Instruments

The questionnaire had three sections: one on background information about the respondent, one on the respondent's experience of bullying and one on organisational factors. Data from the first two sections are used in this article.

In the first part of the questionnaire, socio-demographic and professional information was collected. Participants were asked to provide information on their gender, age, marital status and level of education. In addition, they were asked to report number of years of work experience, type of contract, work schedule (part-time vs. full-time) and hierarchical status. The categorization of the answers varied depending on the variable. For example, in the case of type of contract the respondent was given the following options: 1 ("Temporary"), 2 ("Project-based"), 3 ("Permanent") and 4 ("Civil servant"). The two first ones were coded as "permanent", and the two latter ones as "temporary". Regarding level of education, the options were: 1 ("Elementary"), 2 ("Secondary") and 3 ("Higher education").

The second part of the questionnaire was designed to measure perceived exposure to bullying and victimisation at work. At the beginning of this section, a definition of workplace bullying was introduced and respondents were asked whether they had been subjected to this kind of bullying during the past 12 months. They were also required to report the duration and frequency of bullying and the formal position of the perpetrator(s). As regards frequency, the respondent was to choose between the alternatives: less than once per week, once per week and several times per week; in the case of perpetrator, the options were (both categories could be ticked if applicable): supervisor/manager and colleagues. Based on previous research (Einarsen & Raknes 1997; Leymann 1996), in this questionnaire bullying was defined as "A situation in which one or several individuals persistently over a period of time perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative acts from one or several persons, in order to discredit, to humiliate, to isolate and, finally, to bring about his/her expulsion from the workplace".

After this, the respondent was asked to indicate how often he or she had been subjected to 13 listed, counter-productive acts (see Table 1). The list of acts was drawn up on the basis of previous literature and interviews with employees in the sector, who described different kinds of behaviours that can be perceived as bullying if they occur systematically. For each act, respondents were asked to indicate how often they had experienced it, on a scale of 0 (=never) to 4 (=always). Those who had experienced at least one of the acts on at least a weekly basis were classified as bullied (Leymann, 1992).

The 13 acts in question fell into three different categories, or dimensions, of bullying behaviour: Social Isolation, Discredit and Extreme Demands. These dimensions were identified on the basis of previous work in the field. The Social Isolation dimension was measured with items such as: "I have been ignored or excluded at work" and "My opinions and questions have been ignored". Items in the Discredit dimension included "I have been the subject of insulting or offensive remarks about my person, my attitudes or my private life" and "I have received continual and unjustified criticism of my work". Extreme Demands included items such "Being ordered to do work below one's level of competence" and "Being given absurd or useless tasks". A principal components factor analysis resulted in a three-factor solution. A confirmatory factor analysis for the proposed scale yielded a good fit to the data: χ^2/df ratio = 1.20, comparative-fit-index (CFI) = .99, goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .97,

root-mean-square-error-of-approximation (RMSEA) = .03. The internal consistencies of the dimensions, reported as Cronbach's alpha coefficients, were .94 for Social Isolation, .90 for Discredit and .90 for Extreme Demands. The scales thus showed high reliability, clearly above the .70 minimum established by Nunnally and Berstein (1994).

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS version 12.5. Frequency analyses were carried out for the prevalence of counter-productive behaviours. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was carried out to examine the association between bullying behaviours and the socio-demographic/work situation variables. A level of .05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Prevalence and forms of bullying

Based on the definition provided, approximately 26% reported that they had been bullied. Of these victims, 52.5% were bullied exclusively by superiors, 18.4% were bullied exclusively by colleagues, and 7.1% reported being bullied by both superiors and colleagues (these data does not result in 100% because of deletion of missing cases).

Frequency analyses were carried out to explore the forms of workplace bullying. The results showed that when analysing which acts respondents had been subjected to "occasionally", behaviours that discredited them were the type reported by the highest number of respondents. By "occasionally" we here refer to acts reported as occurring either "sometimes" or "often", in contrast to acts taking place "very often" or "always", which we have labelled as "systematically". Specifically, the respondents reported that their colleagues or superiors had occasionally spread gossip and rumours about them (71.5%), that they had occasionally been subjected to insulting or offensive remarks about their person, attitudes or private life (71.4%), and that they had occasionally been victims of jokes about their physical appearance and character/lifestyle (78.2 %).

When analysing the behaviours to which respondents were subjected "systematically" (i.e., "very often" or "always"), the behaviours related to Social Isolation were those most frequently reported. Several respondents complained about excessive control and/or monitoring of their work (34.3%), that their opinions and questions had been systematically ignored (27.2%), and that they received hostile answers to their comments and questions (27.8%). As for the subdimension Extreme Demands, the most frequently reported item was being ordered to do work below their level of competence (29.4%). Reported frequencies of all items are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Prevalence of counter-productive behaviours

Counter-productive behaviours	Never (%)	Occasionally (%)	Systematically (%)
Social Isolation			
I have been ignored or excluded at work	7.0	73.0	20.0
I have received hostile answers to my comments and questions	10.8	61.4	27.8
My opinions and questions have been ignored	4.8	68.0	27.2
Excessive control and/or monitoring of my work	11.8	53.9	34.3
Do not pass calls to me or say that I am not at work	21.1	65.2	13.7
Extreme Demands			
Access to resources necessary for doing my work has been restricted	13.1	63.6	23.3
Being given absurd or useless tasks	11.7	63.8	24.5
Repeated reminders of my errors or mistakes	16.1	56.6	27.3
Being ordered to do work below my level of competence	10.8	59.8	29.4
Discredit			
I have received continual and unjustified criticism of my work	15.3	58.2	26.5
Your colleagues or superiors have spread gossip and rumours about you	10.2	71.5	18.3
I have been the subject of insulting or offensive remarks about my person, my attitudes or my private life	19.4	71.4	9.2
I have been victim of jokes about my physical appearance, character/lifestyle, etc.	20.8	78.2	1.0

Note. Response categories for all counter-productive behaviours were: “never”, “sometimes”, “often”, “very often” and “always”. For the analysis we combined “sometimes” and “often” into the category “occasionally”, and “very often” and “always” into “systematically”.

Bullying and socio-demographic variables

In order to study the association between bullying and the socio-demographic/work situation variables, a multivariate analysis of variance was performed. The global bullying score and its sub dimensions served as dependent variables. Furthermore, we calculated the effect size using the partial eta squared (η_p^2) statistics, which has been recommended for multivariate designs to examine the strength of the relation between two variables in multivariate designs (Pierce, Block & Aguinis 2004). A value of partial eta-squared of .01 is considered a small effect, .06 is considered a medium effect, and .14 is considered a large effect (Cohen 1977; Stevens 2002).

The results of the multivariate analysis revealed a significant effect for gender, level of education, work experience and type of contract (see Table 2 for means). As for gender, the Wilks' criterion indicated that women experienced significantly more bullying behaviours than men, $F(3,99) = 4.14$ $p = .014$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$, with statistically significant differences for Social Isolation ($p < 0.05$) and for Discredit ($p < 0.05$).

As far as educational level is concerned, the analyses showed significant results for bullying and all its subdimensions, $F(5,97) = 7.48$ $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$. The group with an elementary level of education reported significantly more bullying than either the group with a medium (secondary) level of education ($p < 0.05$) or the group with higher education ($p < 0.01$), and there were significant differences in Social Isolation, Extreme Demands and Discredit between the group with an elementary level of education and the other two groups ($p < 0.01$). In line with this, those with secondary education reported significantly higher Social Isolation

than the higher education group ($p < 0.05$). As for type of contract, we decided to classify the respondents as employees with temporary contracts and employees with permanent contracts. The difference between the two groups, 1.90 for “temporary contracts” versus 1.48 for “permanent contracts”, was statistically significant, $F(3,98) = 3.12$ $p = .040$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$. This pattern emerged for some of its subdimensions, where the temporary group showed higher reported means for all dimensions, with significant differences in Social Isolation ($p < 0.05$) and Extreme Demands ($p < 0.05$).

With regard to number of years of work experience, the employees were classified into four groups: 1-4 years of work experience, 5-7 years, 8-15 years and 16-42 years. We found clear differences between these groups, which were statistically significant, $F(3,99) = 2.78$ $p = .045$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. The results showed that the group with most experience reported significantly less bullying behaviours than the 5-7 years group ($p < 0.05$). In line with this, the 5-7 years group experienced more bullying behaviours than the 8-15 years group ($p < 0.05$). With respect to marital status, hierarchical status, work schedule and age the analyses did not show any significant differences.

TABLE 2: Means and standard deviations for workplace bullying and its dimensions as a function of socio-demographic variables

	Social Isolation	Extreme Demands	Discredit	Global bullying score
Gender				
Male	1.36 (0.89)	1.56 (0.88)	1.13 (0.72)	1.35 (0.80)
Female	1.98 (1.15)	1.77 (1.13)	1.59 (1.01)	1.79 (1.05)
Age (years)				
22-27	1.75 (1.08)	1.84 (1.04)	1.52 (0.97)	1.70 (0.98)
28-32	1.91 (1.06)	1.97 (0.94)	1.62 (0.83)	1.87 (0.86)
33-37	1.78 (1.02)	1.75 (0.98)	1.45 (0.88)	1.68 (1.00)
38-52	1.69 (0.86)	1.65 (0.98)	1.38 (0.95)	1.54 (0.89)
Educational level				
Elementary	3.04 (0.86)	2.69 (0.90)	2.14 (0.67)	2.62 (0.75)
Secondary	1.52 (1.02)	1.61 (0.95)	1.30 (0.92)	1.48 (0.93)
Higher education	1.35 (0.14)	1.40 (0.35)	1.20 (0.35)	1.33 (0.10)
Marital status				
With partner	1.62 (1.05)	1.62 (1.01)	1.43 (0.92)	1.57 (0.96)
Without partner	1.70 (1.06)	1.72 (1.01)	1.38 (0.84)	1.59 (0.93)
Type of contract				
Temporary	2.35 (1.06)	2.06 (0.86)	1.77 (0.63)	2.06 (0.81)
Permanent	1.48 (0.96)	1.58 (1.02)	1.27 (0.92)	1.45 (0.93)
Hierarchical status				
Supervisor	1.87 (1.05)	2.03 (1.10)	1.59 (1.07)	1.83 (1.04)
Subordinate	1.94 (1.06)	2.10 (0.99)	1.66 (0.86)	1.99 (0.93)
Work schedule				
Part-time	1.09 (0.81)	1.19 (0.74)	1.02 (0.87)	1.08 (0.75)
Full-time	1.45 (1.06)	1.52 (1.00)	1.40 (0.87)	1.52 (0.94)
Work experience (years)				
1-4	2.01 (1.18)	2.00 (0.96)	1.60 (0.82)	1.87 (0.95)
5-7	2.30 (1.14)	2.41 (0.77)	1.90 (0.75)	2.28 (0.82)
8-15	1.47 (0.91)	1.54 (0.87)	1.35 (0.81)	1.45 (0.80)
16-42	1.31 (0.73)	1.11 (0.74)	0.99 (0.85)	1.14 (0.74)

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to broaden our understanding of workplace bullying by examining bullying in the southern European context, which so far has been highly neglected in bullying research. More precisely, the study aimed to explore the prevalence and forms of bullying in a Spanish sample and to identify particular risk groups, with respect to socio-demographic characteristics and work situation.

The sample of Spanish employees in the current study reported considerable experiences of having been bullied, with 26% of respondents reporting that they had been bullied weekly during the previous year. Our prevalence rates differ significantly from the results found in several other European studies. Comparisons with the rates found in previous research showed that our respondents experienced higher rates of bullying than employees in Finland (Björkqvist et al. 1994; Vartia 1996; Vartia & Hyyti 2002), Holland (den Ouden 1999), Norway (Einarsen & Raknes 1997; Einarsen & Skogstad 1997), Sweden (Leymann 1992) and the UK (Hoel & Cooper 2000). However, there are previous studies that have shown victimisation rates of the same or even higher magnitude. For example, Niedl (1995) reported a prevalence rate of 26.6% in an Austrian hospital, and Rayner (1997) reported that 53% of the part-time students in her UK study had some experience of being bullied at work.

All in all, the findings of this Spanish sample still indicate a high prevalence rate in international comparisons, in line with the findings by Cowie et al. (2000) in a Portuguese sample. These findings may be regarded as supporting Einarsen's (2000) hypothesis that in some southern European countries the risk of being bullied at work is fairly high, due to characteristics of the national culture. When compared to northern Europe, the UK and Australia, where several bullying studies have previously been carried out, Spain is, according to Hofstede (1980), characterised by a somewhat higher power distance and a significantly higher degree of uncertainty avoidance, indicating a country where inequalities, for example between managers and their subordinates, are allowed to grow and where there is relatively low tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity and variety of opinions. In line with this, based on the work of Hofstede (1980), the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) program provides valuable information about cross-cultural differences in leadership practices (Javidan, Dorfman, de Luque & House 2006). In the data from southern European countries, Spain scored very high on assertiveness, understood as the degree to which individuals are confrontational and aggressive in their relationships with others, and power distance. Also, Spain had the lowest levels of egalitarian practices among the southern European countries. These findings have practical implications, since it has been shown that deficiencies in leadership behaviour and power inequalities are important antecedents of workplace bullying (Einarsen 2000).

However, the fact that media attention and public awareness in relation to the topic have increased in Spain in the past few years may further have influenced the prevalence rate reported in the present study. In addition, these findings based on a sample in the transport and communication sector cannot necessarily be generalized to other sectors in Spain. What is more, comparisons between different studies do not permit us to draw definitive conclusions regarding national differences in levels of bullying, given both conceptual and methodological differences. For example, there is no generally accepted definition of bullying, and no consensus on the most appropriate assessment instrument. Moreover, there appear to be differences in the way the term "bullying" has been used (and translated) in the different

countries where bullying studies have been carried out. All of this makes it difficult to compare different studies with regard to prevalence.

The second aim of the study was to identify risk groups. The results showed that both being female and having a low level of education were risk factors. These findings thus highlight the importance of socio-demographic factors.

As for the influence of gender on bullying, a common belief is that bullying is typically a problem among women. In accordance with this, the present findings indicate that in Spain female employees are more often subjected to hostile acts than male employees. These results thus contradict some large-scale surveys that have reported approximately equal victimization rates among men and women (Einarsen & Skogstad 1996; Hoel & Cooper 2000; Vartia 1996). What we have found here may be related to gender inequality in the Spanish occupational context. For example, it has been shown that there are considerable gender differences in promotion opportunities in the Spanish labour market (Garcia-Crespo 2001), and this segregation of the labour market could constitute an important factor contributing to the occurrence of bullying among women.

Regarding level of education, the finding that people with a low level of education are the most bullied provides support for the importance of socio-demographic factors in the bullying process. It is possible that education may provide some protection against bullying by providing people with good conflict management skills, thus decreasing the likelihood of conflict escalation. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that level of education correlates with hierarchical status, which may also partly explain this finding. In fact, several studies (Einarsen 2000; Leymann 1992) have pointed out the relevance of formal power differences in the incidence of bullying.

A comparable pattern emerged for work experience. The greater the work experience, the less the workplace bullying suffered. Considering the above, it is thus reasonable to hypothesize that there may be individual differences in the abilities to manage conflict situations at work, allowing some to deal more effectively with their conflicts during stressful situations. In a Norwegian study (Einarsen et al. 1994), many victims of bullying felt that their lack of coping resources was a relevant factor in the experience of harassment at work.

Furthermore, type of contract seems to be a variable related to bullying. Employees working on temporary contracts reported significantly higher bullying rates than those with permanent contracts. On the basis of this finding, we might hypothesize that employment flexibility can have an influence on workplace bullying. The importance of type of employment relationships was also highlighted in a study by Baron and Neumann (1996), who reported that the use of part-time workers was a significant predictor of aggression at work. These findings have important implications in the Spanish labour market, which in recent years has seen a rapid and intensive shift from a protective employment system to a highly flexible labour market with an extraordinarily high proportion of temporary employees (Golsch 2003). On considering our results, it is easy to conclude that individual variables, both socio-demographic factors and work situation factors, are relevant for understanding the bullying process. Nonetheless, bullying occurs in an interactive social system, not as an isolated phenomenon, and should therefore be considered from a psychosocial perspective: it cannot be understood unless it is related to the organisational structure from which it derives. Furthermore, the work environment, besides transmitting certain attitudes and implicit values

through the culture of the organisation, may sometimes provide favourable conditions for bullying. However, a recent meta-analysis concluded that a comprehensive understanding of bullying requires a simultaneous examination of both situational and individual factors (Bowling & Beehr 2006). In this sense, no single factor can be identified as the sole agent causing bullying (cf. Einarsen 2000). These findings also concur with the most recent research on bullying, which has begun to develop new theoretical approaches that more explicitly integrate individual and organisational factors, rather than considering them in separate, either-or terms (Zapf & Einarsen 2003).

However, the results of this study must be considered in the light of its limitations. The small sample size, as well as the moderate response rate, are the primary limitations, even though other studies have indicated that a low response rate is normal in research on bullying at work, given the sensitive questions asked (Björkqvist et al. 1994; Leymann 1986). Furthermore, as is the case for cross-sectional surveys and correlational designs in general, we could neither completely rule out recall bias nor demonstrate causal directions. And lastly, the fact that trades unions were involved in the collection of information is a potential biasing factor. It is thus necessary to exercise caution about the generalisability of the results obtained here. Further research is required, for example, to establish to what extent these findings can be generalised to other Spanish samples.

Overall, however, the current study indicated that workplace bullying is a widespread problem also in Spain and that socio-demographic factors and work situation influence employees' bullying experiences. The high prevalence rate found in this study highlights the need for both preventive measures and efficient interventions. Although little research has been conducted on the efficiency of preventive measures, some empirical studies have reported that the prevalence of bullying is lower in organisations which have introduced anti-bullying policies and which have provided information about bullying to employees (Moreno-Jiménez et al. 2005; Neyens, Baillien, Vanoirbeek & De Witte 2005). It is thus important to raise awareness of these measures among Spanish employers. What is more, closely monitoring the work environment has been emphasised as another important preventive measure (e.g. Mathieson, Hanson & Burns 2006). For instance, work climate surveys and development discussions held between supervisors and their subordinates may provide useful information and early warning signals, which may enable employers to detect problems before they have deteriorated into full-blown bullying (Salin, 2006). As female employees, employees on temporary work contracts, employees with a low level of education and employees with little work experience are particularly at risk for becoming targets of bullying, special attention should be paid to these groups when monitoring the work climate.

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