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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Preventing and Neutralizing the Escalation of Workplace Bullying: the Role of Conflict Management Climate

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is, by definition, a gradually escalating process, theorized to occur from psychosocial stressors when there is a lack of management intervention in escalating conflicts, and a lack of fair and robust conflict management procedures in the organization. Based on national probability survey data gathered in 2015–2016 from the official Norwegian employee-register, we investigated how a strong perceived climate for conflict management may buffer the escalation of workplace bullying over time. A total of 1197 respondents participated in the study at two measuring points. The average age at baseline was 45.20 years (SD = 9.98), and the sample consisted of 52.1% women and 47.9% men. Structural equation modelling in Mplus 7.4 was used to test the construct validity and the study's hypothesis. As expected, the analyses showed that a strong conflict management climate buffered the escalation of workplace bullying. Exposure to bullying behaviour at T1 largely explained (47%) new and increased instances of bullying behaviour at T2, but only for those employees working in what they perceived as a weak conflict management climate. We conclude that a strong conflict management climate neutralizes the escalation and development of workplace bullying.

Keywords Harassments · Workplace bullying · Conflict · Climate · Conflict management climate

Introduction

Searching for organizational factors that may prevent and defer destructive social relationships at work, the present study investigates the hypothesis that working in a perceived strong and constructive climate for conflict management will buffer further escalation of potential workplace bullying cases. Knowledge of preventive factors is important for both theoretical and applied reasons, as exposure to workplace bullying has been documented as a prevalent and detrimental stressor in contemporary working life, often taking the course of a gradually escalating process (Einarsen et al., 2020). Evidence then shows that exposure to bullying is highly related to escalating interpersonal conflicts (Ågotnes et al., 2018; Baillien et al., 2009; Hauge et al., 2007), usually in combination with a hostile social climate at work and the lack of proper leadership intervention in these conflicts (Leymann, 1996; Stouten et al., 2010). This indicates that the workplace itself should be the most suitable arena for preventions, and especially so in relation to how well interpersonal conflicts and bullying processes are handled and managed (Einarsen & Einarsen, 2021). Hence, proper conflict management in the early stages may prevent further escalation in bullying situations (Einarsen & Einarsen, 2021), and thereby also hampering and preventing the detrimental consequences documented to follow in the footsteps of bullying.

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Bullying behaviour consists of a variety of negative and aggressive acts, often including acts of social exclusion which may frighten, humiliate, or otherwise obstruct the target (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). While such negative acts can be detrimental by themselves, it is the patterned or systematic exposure over time which constitutes the real menace (Leymann, 1990; 1996). Workplace bullying is therefore often defined as a situation in which one or several persons persistently, and over a period of time, perceive themselves as being on the receiving end of negative actions from superiors or co-workers, and where the target finds it difficult to defend himself or herself against these actions (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Olweus, 1993). Yet, bullying is by nature an escalating process (Parzefall & Salin, 2010), where bullying gradually develops over time, often originating and escalating from a mere interpersonal conflict (Baillien et al., 2017; Notelaers et al., 2018). Hence, exposure to acts of workplace bullying may exist on a continuum from the occasional exposure to negative social acts, by some denoted as incivility, to severe exposure, and victimization characteristic of a full-blown bullying case in line with the above definition. In the quest for understanding why and how this detrimental process evolves, we should be searching for triggers of the process as well as for factors that may prevent the further development of bullying. In line with this, we will employ the term "exposure to bullying behaviours" to cover the full spectrum of bullying-related experiences investigated in the present study, as our overarching aim is to focus on preventive factors that may halt the bullying process, preferably at an early stage.

The Role of Conflict Management Climate in Bullying Escalation

In Heinz Leymann's (1996) pioneering work, he described bullying as a gradually developing process encompassing four stages. The first stage consists of a triggering critical event, which is often an interpersonal conflict. This stage can be short, and sometimes difficult to recognize and confront (Leymann, 1996), often resembling any other interpersonal conflict (see also Notelaers et al., 2018). In the second stage, the situation escalates, gradually evolving into a full-blown bullying case in line with the stricter definition of workplace bullying, involving exposure to continuous criticism, humiliation, defamation, social isolation, and in extreme cases threats of violence (Einarsen et al., 2020). The third stage is denoted "personnel-administrative measures," and it is at this stage that the bullying situation becomes an "official" case, which further should lead to proper management intervention. If the intervention fails, comes too late, or does not come at all, even more severe outcomes may be evident, entering the last stage of severe trauma and a risk of exclusion from the workplace, or even working life altogether for the one targeted (see also Berthelsen et al., 2011; Glambek et al., 2014).

If leaders avoid taking responsibility and intervening in this process, there is a high risk for further escalation and further detrimental outcomes (Ågotnes et al., 2018; Baillien et al., 2009; Leymann, 1996). From the theoretical description of the process by Leymann (1996), proper conflict management intervention by management in early stages either by personal initiative or by established procedures, should therefore stop, or at least halt, further escalation. In a prospective study with a representative sample of Norwegian employees, Ågotnes and colleagues (2018) showed that interpersonal conflicts at baseline was related to becoming a victim of bullying 2 years later, yet only among employees reporting to work for a laissez-faire leader. Törnroos and colleagues (2020) showed that how employees perceive conflicts are managed in ones working environment, moderate the prospective relationship between exposure to bullying, and subsequent development of depressive symptoms and sleep problems. In the present study, we theorize that a strong and sound climate for conflict management is an important characteristic of an organisation that may neutralize the further development of bullying. In such a climate, conflicting matters are perceived to be solved early on, which will defer and halt the further escalation of workplace bullying, and actual cases will be handled firmly and constructively in early phases (e.g., Keashly at al., 2020; Leymann, 1996). This theoretical notion is partly supported by a recent cross-sectional multilevel study which showed that a strong conflict management climate at team level buffered the relationship between having high job demands (e.g., role conflict) as risk factors, and the reporting of exposure to bullying behaviours associated with high job demands (Zahlquist et al., 2019), as well as being directly related to less individual reports of bullying itself. Such findings indicate that conflict management climate buffers the risk psychosocial stressors pose for the onset of a bullying process. In a cross-sectional study with a moderated-mediation design, Einarsen and colleagues (2018) showed that such a climate not only moderated the relationship between exposure to bullying and lowered job engagement, it was also related to less reports of exposure to bullying itself. Yet, only prospective studies may shed light on the possible role such a climate has when it comes to early intervention and prevention of a further escalating process.

Conflict management climate (CMC) can be understood as employees' perception of the extent to which interpersonal conflicts are handled well and fairly in the organisation (Rivlin, 2001). In a work environment with a strong CMC, employees experience that the organisation has proper and

effective conflict management procedures, fair methods of conflict management, efficient and fair leaders in this respect, and that employees and management work together to solve problems that may arise in the organisation (Rivlin, 2001). By having procedures and rules that are familiar to everyone in the organisation, the employee knows how conflicts will be dealt with, and are confident that they actually will be handled. Procedures are standardized and fair, as they are the same for everyone, which can provide predictability and perceived control (Rivlin, 2001). CMC can also make employees feel safe to voice any concern and to speak out early on when mistreatment and unfairness takes place, as there is an expectation that negative acts will be addressed, and thus prevented and stopped (Zahlquist et al., 2019). Hence, CMC is not about the individuals own conflict management style or one's own ability to handle and cope with interpersonal conflicts, but rather one's trust in the organisation and its managers will and ability to intervene in and manage these conflicts if necessary.

A study among HR managers and elected health and safety representatives of Norwegian employees showed that such a climate was strongly related how well bullying cases were seen to be handled in the organisation (Einarsen, et al., 2017). Hence, a strong CMC can probably prevent bullying from further developing in the first place, as firm conflict management will weaken the relationship between precursors in the work environment (such as high demands and interpersonal frustration) and bullying (Zahlquist et al., 2019). A weak CMC, on the other hand, can create insecurity in the relationships between the members of the organisation, which may further threaten the psychological safety in the group, prompting new cases of bullying. Organisations with a weak CMC may both implicitly allow negative acts to continue, as the organisation does not address the underlying conflict or stressors, nor the bullying itself. Hence, a weak CMC can foster an environment that allows negative acts to evolve, as interpersonal tension and problems are not addressed, as well as implicitly allowing the very bullying situation itself to exist and escalate.

In empirical terms, there is ample general evidence that a poor social climate and leadership is involved as antecedents of bullying, even when one looks at observed workplace bullying (Agervold, 2009; Skogstad et al., 2011). Furthermore, research on the related concept of psychosocial safety climate has shown that such a perceived climate predicts a reduced prevalence of workplace bullying 4 years later (Dollard et al., 2017). The concept of psychosocial safety climate (PSC) focuses on the importance of employees' perception and appraisal of the organisations practice and procedure protecting the psychological health and safety of its employees (Dollard & Bakker, 2010), where open communication and trust are seen as essential for maintaining a strong PSC (Bond et al., 2010). In an environment where the employees' health and safety are emphasized, it is natural to also prevent bullying early on. Even though a range of studies have documented the importance of such a climate in relation to workplace bullying (Dollard et al., 2017), it is still unknown exactly how such a climate works. CMC may be the actual ingredient and an important subfactor of PSC. Compared to PSC, CMC is a more specific factor related to conflict management, and especially pertinent to investigate in relation to bullying behaviour.

At present there is a lack of empirical evidence on how to prevent and manage workplace bullying (Einarsen & Einarsen, 2021). Hence, we need more knowledge of the mechanism involved in workplace bullying to inform further prevention strategies. Therefore, using questionnaire data collected with a time lag of 1 year, we investigated the possible moderating effect of CMC in the developmental process of bullying over time. We expected that CMC moderates the relationship between exposure to bullying behaviour at a given time and the degree of bullying behaviour reported 1 year later (see Fig. 1). The following hypothesis was tested:

> *H1: Conflict management climate moderates the relationship between exposure to bullying behaviour at base line and subsequent exposure 1 year later so that the association between exposure at the two time points is weaker for targets perceiving a strong climate for conflict management and stronger for participants reporting a poor climate for conflict management.*

Methods

Design and Procedure

The present prospective study was based on data from a representative and nationwide survey in the Norwegian workforce. Data was gathered by Statistics Norway (SSB), who drew a random sample of 3500 respondents from the official Norwegian employee-register. Respondents represent most kinds of organizations and industries throughout the country, like education, administration, managers, legal positions, research, health sector, architecture and geology, economics and banking, consultants, various professions such as electricians and carpenters, emergency services, shop and sales, transport, ICT, real estate, engineers, public sector employees including municipalities, and food and customer service. The survey was approved by the Regional Committee of Medical Research Ethics in the East of Norway (REK

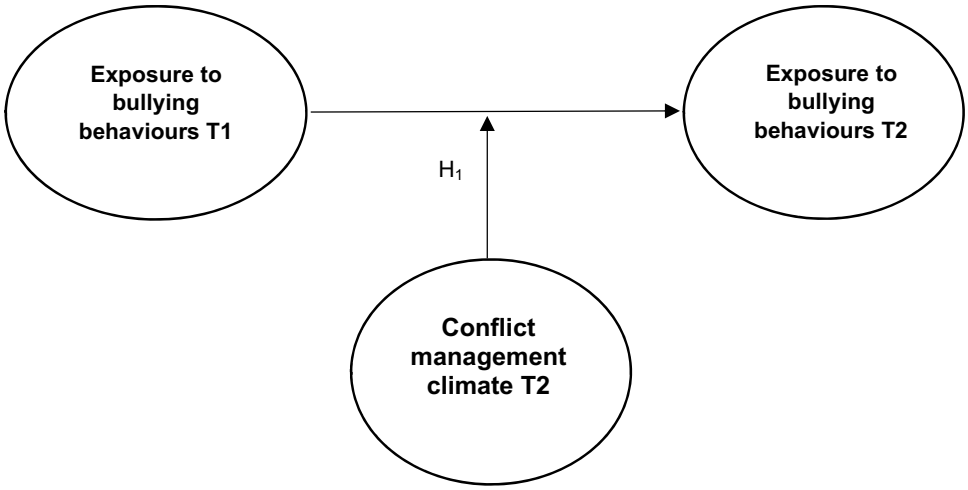

Fig. 1 Theoretical model of conflict management climate as a moderator in the process of bullying

2014/ 1725). Criteria for inclusion was being registered as an employee in a Norwegian company, aged 18–61 years.

Sample

The first round of questionnaires was sent out via e-mail in the spring of 2015, with a total of 1459 responses (response rate 32%) at baseline (T1). All who attended at baseline was invited to a follow up study (T2) in the spring of 2016. A total of 1197 participated at T2, providing a longitudinal sample with a response rate above 80%. At baseline, the average age was 45.20 years (SD = 9.98), and the sample consisted of 52.1% women and 47.9% men. Of all respondents, 90.1% were full-time employees, and 34.7% had a managerial or supervisor role. Hence, respondents with a manager and leadership role are over-represented in the sample. Cronbach's alpha values, means, standard deviations (SD), and correlations for study variables are presented in Table 1.

Instruments

The short version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-S; Notelaers et al., 2019) was used to measure exposure to workplace bullying behaviour. The inventory includes nine items describing different negative acts which can be perceived as bulling if happening regularly over some time, yet without labelling them as bullying per se. The questions distinguished between direct negative acts: have you experienced being shouted at or being a target of spontaneous outbursts of rage?, and indirect negative acts: have you experienced social exclusion at work?, as well as addressing acts of a work-related and a person-related nature. The responses were given on a 5-point scale from 1 to 5 (*never, occasionally, monthly, weekly, daily*). Internal consistency of the NAQ-S in the present study as measured with Cronbach´s alpha was 0.86 at T1 and 0.87 at T2, respectively, and well above the often set cut-off at 0.70 (DeVellis, 2012).

Conflict management climate (CMC) was measured with four items from the Conflict Management Climate Scale (Einarsen et al., 2018; Rivlin, 2001; Zahlquist et al., 2019): (1) If I have a serious disagreement with someone at work, I know who I should talk to about it. (2) The way we deal with disagreements between employees in my unit works well. (3) My superiors deal with conflicts in a good manner. (4) We have good procedures and methods for raising disagreements and conflicts in my workplace. Response options were given on a Likert scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Thus, a high score would be an indicator of a perceived strong conflict management climate. CMC was measured at T2. The internal consistency was 0.88 as estimated with Cronbach's alpha, far above acceptable limits.

Time is decisive in the bullying process, and we reasoned that a time lag of 1 year was necessary in order for a bullying case to evolve and escalate, and simultaneously long enough for employees to evaluate and assess the general perceived conflict management climate in the same period. In the present study, any changes of perceived CMC over time are not relevant, as we investigate how changes in exposure to bullying behaviours may depend on the perceived CMC. Hence, this is a study of a factor (CMC) that may halt and prevent the escalation process involved in bullying over time. As our measures have a retrospective focus, that is describing what has been, we included CMC at T2 as this would be a measure of how the perceived climate has actually been in the period we are looking at. Measuring CMC at T1 would have been a measure of the climate before the period we are studying. As age and gender is related to the experience of bullying behaviour (Rivers & Smith, 1994) with women being over-represented among victims (Zapf et al., 2020) and

Table 1 Cronbach's alpha values, means, standard deviations (SD), and correlations (Pearson's r) for the study's variables

Variables	α	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age		45.20	9.98	-				
2. Gender		1.52	0.50	− .09**	-			
3. Leadership status		1.65	0.48	− .07**	.19**	-		
4. Bullying behaviour T1	.86	1.19	0.34	− .03	− .00	− .03	-	
5. Conflict management climate T2	.88	3.70	1.00	.10**	− .01	− .10**	− .37**	-
6. Bullying behaviour T2	.87	1.18	0.33	− .03	− .02	− .02	.63**	− .43**

**Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

subordinates more at risk of being bullied than are leaders/managers (Rayner et al., 2002), both age, gender and leadership status were included as control variables.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics (version 25.0) was used to analyse scale reliability (α), demographics, and correlations between included variables. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and a structural equation modelling (SEM) in Mplus 7. 4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) were used to test the construct validity of the included scales, and to test the hypothesized moderated relationship between perceived climate for conflict management and bullying behaviour, respectively (see Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000; Muthen & Asparouhov, 2003). The independent variable (bullying behaviour at baseline), the moderator (perceived climate for conflict management), and the dependent variable (bullying behaviour one year later) were individual-level variables. Root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and comparative fit index (CFI) were used fit indices. Values close to 0.08 for RMSEA indicate a satisfactory fit between measurement model and observed data, while for TLI and CFI, values above 0.95 indicates good fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The significance level was set to $p < 0.05$.

Results

The results from the CFA in Mplus supported the constructed validity of a 3-factor model, including exposure to workplace bullying at T1, conflict management climate at T2, and exposure to workplace bullying at T2 (see Table 2). Three models were tested and compared (see Table 3). The inspection of the fit indices supported the 3-factor model (RMSEA = 0.03, TLI = 0.98, CFI = 0.98).

Cronbach's alpha values, means, standard deviations (SD), and correlations for study variables are presented in Table 1. Gender was not correlated to variables of interest and was therefore excluded from further analyses. SEM in Mplus was used to test the relationship between exposure to bullying behaviours and conflict management climate. Firstly, the direct effect model was tested with bullying behaviour at T1 ($\beta = 0.66$, $p = 0.000$) and conflict management climate at T2 ($\beta = -0.28$, $p = 0.000$) as predictors of bullying exposure at T2. The full model explained 67% of the variance in exposure to bullying behaviour at T2, and fit indices (Table 4) indicated that the model had satisfactory fit to the data [χ^2 (206, $N = 879$) = 510.11, $p = 0.000$, CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04]. Age and leadership status were included as control variables at first; however, as they did not have significant relationships to the outcome, and the other estimates did not change significantly, the control variables were excluded from the analysis (see Becker et al., 2016).

Then an interaction model was tested (see Figs. 2 and 3), where workplace bullying at T1 ($\beta = 0.41$, $p = 0.000$), conflict management climate T2 ($\beta = -0.31$, $p = 0.000$), and the product term (workplace bullying behaviour at T1* conflict management climate T2: $\beta = -0.33$, $p = 0.000$) were all related to workplace bullying behaviour at T2. The full model explained 47% of the variance in exposure to bullying behaviours at T2. The interaction was only significant under conditions of a weak conflict management climate ($b = 0.23$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that a strong conflict management climate at T2 entirely buffers the relationship between workplace bullying at T1 and T2 ($b = 0.02$, $p = 0.484$), supporting the study's hypothesis.

Discussion

The present study was designed to study the role of perceived climate for conflict management with regard to the potential escalation of workplace bullying over time. In line with our hypothesis, the results showed that the experience of a strong conflict management climate acted as a buffer in the relationship between the bullying behaviour at baseline and subsequent exposure to bullying behaviour one year later. Hence, reporting a strong conflict management climate reduces the risk of reporting increased exposure to bullying behaviour over time, in our case a year later. A basic tenet of early theorizing holds that bullying behaviour

Table 2 Items and standardized factor loadings for the included variables

Items	Factor loadings		
NAQ T1			
Someone withholding information which affects your performance	.69		
Spreading of gossip and rumours about you	.80		
Being ignored or excluded	.81		
Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person, attitudes or your private life	.80		
Being shouted at or being a target of spontaneous rage	.64		
Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes	.79		
Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach	.81		
Persistent criticism of your work and effort	.83		
Practical jokes carried out by people you do not get along with	.81		
NAQ T2			
Someone withholding information which affects your performance		.70	
Spreading of gossip and rumours about you		.87	
Being ignored or excluded		.84	
Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person, attitudes or your private life		.87	
Being shouted at or being a target of spontaneous rage		.65	
Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes		.78	
Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach		.84	
Persistent criticism of your work and effort		.87	
Practical jokes carried out by people you do not get along with		.76	
Conflict management climate T2			
If I have a serious disagreement with someone at work, I know who I should talk to about it			.67
The way we deal with disagreements between employees in my unit works well			.90
My superiors deal with conflicts in a good manner			.95
We have proper procedures and methods for raising disagreements and conflicts in my workplace			.90

will evolve out of interpersonal conflicts and become ever more aggressive and escalated if the situation is not intervened or otherwise stopped (Björkvist, 1992). Our findings showed that perceived strong climate for conflict management neutralized the escalation of workplace bullying over time.

Bullying often arises as an "end point" triggered by escalating interpersonal conflicts (Baillien et al., 2017; Leymann, 1992, 1996; Notelaers et al., 2018). Addressing conflicts and negative acts in early stages has been proposed to be of great importance in order to end the escalation of the bullying process (Leymann, 1992, 1996), in line with the present findings. Addressing task/related or person-related conflicts in the workplace inhibit the intention to leave, and more importantly, it seems to have a positive effect on resolving the conflict (Van Gramberg et al., 2019). To speak up about a conflict or bullying situation is probably easier in a context of a strong CMC, where the organisation has well known and fair procedures and a habit for dealing effectively with conflicts (Rivlin, 2001). When not knowing or trusting how interpersonal problems are handled, or even if problems will be handled at all, employees will be less likely to "talk out loud" about matters involving conflicts and bullying behaviour, hence facilitating further escalation of existing

Table 3 Fit statistics for confirmatory factor analyses

Model	Latent factors	χ^2	Df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
1 Factor model	WBT1, WBT2, CMCT2	2769.16*	209	.87	.85	.09
2 Factor model	WBT1 and T2 + CMCT2	779.51*	208	.97	.97	.04
3 Factor model	**WBT1 + WBT2 + CMCT2**	**539.82***	**206**	**.98**	**.98**	**.03**

Measurement model is presented in bold

WB workplace bullying, *CMC* conflict management climate, *T1* baseline, *T2* 1-year time lag

Table 4 Fit statistics for the hypothesised relationships

Model	Latent factors	χ^2	Df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	R^2
Main model	WBT1, CMCT2, WBT2	510.11*	206	.98	.98	.04	.67
Interaction model	WBT1, CMCT2, WBT1*CMCT2, WBT2						.47

Listwise deletion of missing data is applied in both models ($N = 879$)

WB workplace bullying, *CMC* conflict management climate, *T1* baseline, *T2* 1-year time lag

interpersonal problems. Bullying behaviours that exists in an environment with a weak CMC could therefore more easily trigger more bullying and new cases, fostering further harm towards both existing targets and new targets.

Managers motivated, competent, and committed to intervene in conflicts prevent mere interpersonal conflicts from escalating into bullying behaviour (Rivlin, 2001). Managers who are able to resolve conflicts effectively are suggested to make a big difference as to whether or not employees experience bullying or not (Baillien et al., 2009; O'Moore et al., 1998), indicating the important role of managers in stopping conflict escalation. This directs the attention to leadership, which seem to be particularly relevant in the relation to the escalation of bullying over time (Ågotnes et al., 2018; Blomberg & Rosander, 2019; Nielsen et al., 2020). Bullying allowed to continue because it is tolerated, directly or indirectly, through lack of management intervention, may lead to an escalation in aggressive behaviour (Brodsky, 1976). This corresponds with cross-sectional evidence indicating that a weak conflict management climate increases the negative outcomes associated with bullying as well as being related to less reported exposure to bullying behaviours (Einarsen et al., 2018; Naseem & Ahmed, 2020).

Our results support the idea that a strong CMC can act as a tool to stop this development, thus preventing escalation of bullying behaviours and the negative consequences that follows. The results of the present study are supported by other studies showing that conflict management climate (Zahlquist et al., 2019) and psychosocial safety climate (Dollard et al., 2017) prevented bullying from developing. In our study, we found that weak CMC strengthens the relationship between bullying behaviour at the two different times, which can be seen in the context of Zahlquist and colleagues (2019), who showed that a strong CMC has a buffering effect on the relationship between work stressors and reports of bullying. However, Zahlquist and colleagues' (2019) study was a cross-sectional, yet multi-level, design. An important contribution of the present study is its prospective design.

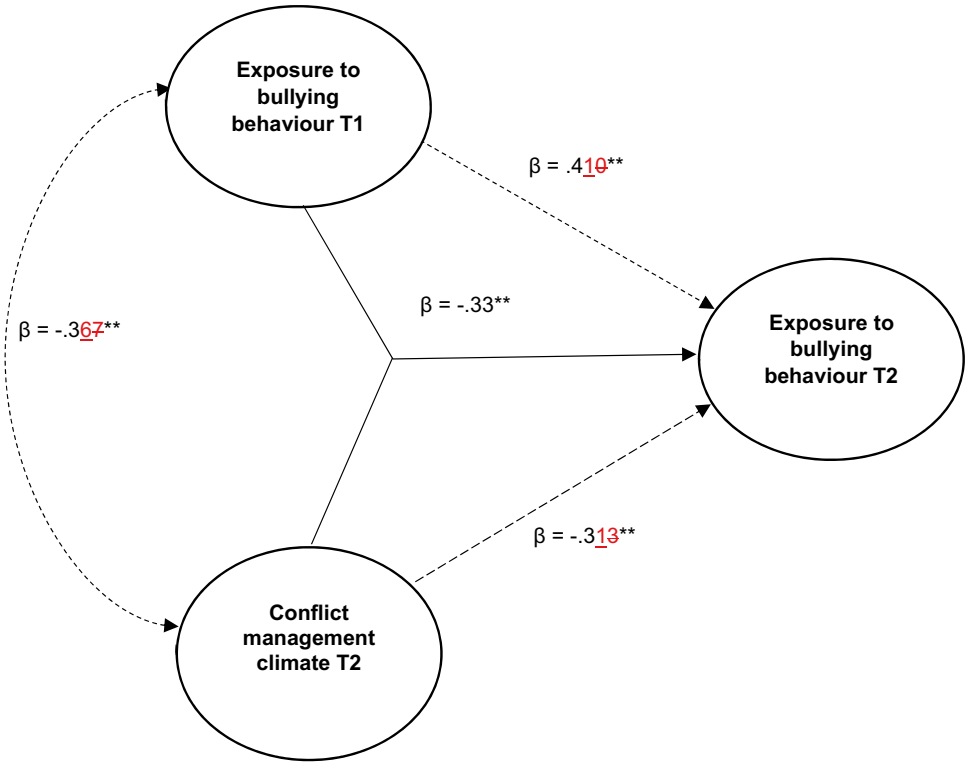

Fig. 2 Results from the moderation analysis of with latent factor interaction (standardized beta coefficients) ($N = 879$)

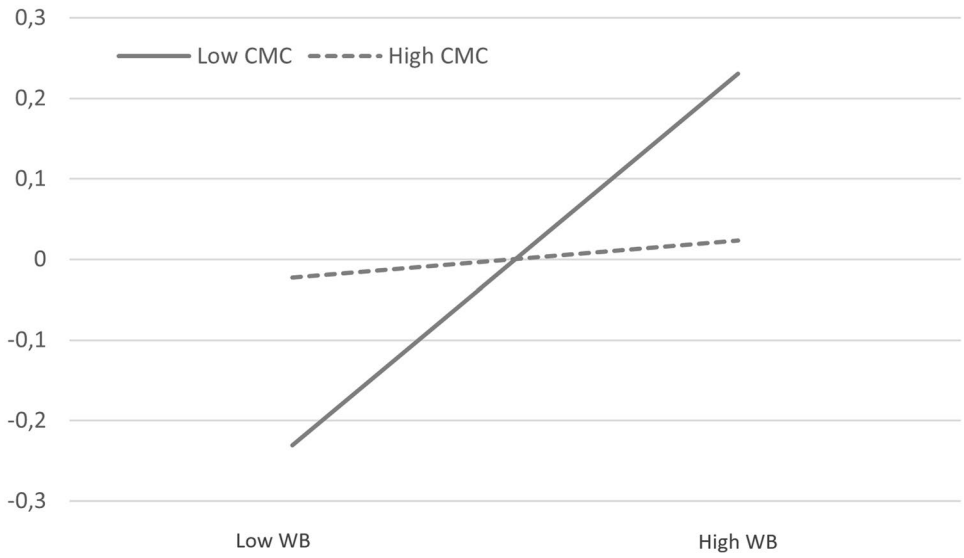

Fig. 3 The interaction effect of exposure to bullying behaviours and conflict management climate on later exposure to bullying behaviours. Low = 1 SD below the mean. High = 1 SD above the mean. WB workplace bullying, CMC conflict management climate

The discovery that CMC entirely buffers the development of workplace bullying 1 year later on fills an important gap in the existing literature. It has long been speculated on the importance of conflict management in the bullying process (Baillien et al., 2009; Leymann, 1996). Revisiting this long-held hypothesis, we illustrated that it is possible to prevent the escalation of new and existing bullying cases by creating a social environment where employees perceive and trust that interpersonal problems are firmly and fairly managed. Further, our findings showed that pre-existing exposure to bullying behaviour largely explain further escalation of existing and new cases of bullying behaviours when the social climate does not hold such qualities. In summary, this indicates that conflict management climate is a noticeable resource which can neutralize the development of workplace bullying.

Methodological Limitations

There are some limitations in the present study that need to be mentioned. The response rate at the first measurement time was low (32%), although the respondents who had responded initially also responded to the follow-up survey to a greater extent (80%). The analysis used self-reported data, and therefore, there may be some specific bias associated with this. When data is collected from only one source and with only one method, the data material can be influenced by, among other things, social desirability, the "halo effect," recall accuracy, and common method variance (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). In sum, these response trends may reduce the internal validity of the data. At the same time, it is impossible to eliminate all biases when using self-reported data. Furthermore, the experience of being bullied is to some extent a subjective one as is the perception of one's social climate. The use of items describing observable behaviours should however reduce these biases somewhat. Our use of longitudinal data should also reduce these effects somewhat.

Conflict management climates can be explored both as an individual perception as in the present study (see also Einarsen et al., 2018) and as a collective experience of a group level climate, as in the study by Zahlquist and colleagues (2019). On may argue that to understand the bullying phenomenon, studies that acknowledge the personal experience are recommended (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). Yet, Zahlquist and colleagues (2019) have shown that such a climate may also exist on a team level and may not merely be a subjective perception by an individual target. However, being exposed to bullying can potentially affect a person's perception of the CMC, which in turn can affect the responses in the survey, a possibility we unfortunately could not test in the present data as CMC was only measured at T2 in the present study.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

The findings of the present study is noteworthy knowledge for both employers, managers, worker representatives, and management consultants alike, as they show that bullying may be prevented by establishing and maintaining a strong climate for conflict management. Such a climate appears to be a noticeable resource in organisations which may prevent, halt, or neutralize the escalation and development of perceived exposure to bullying. Specifically, while weak conflict management climates seem to amplify the risk of increased exposure to bullying behaviour over time, working in an organisation with a strong climate for conflict

management, on the other hand, have the opposite effect and prevents the escalation of workplace bullying. From our study, it therefore seems possible to create a bully-proof environment by focusing on a contextual factor highly under control of upper and middle management. Measures to achieve such a climate would have to include as a minimum information and awareness raising among managers, the development of proper and fair conflict management procedures, and training in conflict management skills in line with these written procedures for managers and HR personnel (see also Hoel & Einarsen, 2020; Einarsen & Einarsen, 2021). Furthermore, information on these procedures needs to be given to employees along with assurances that the organisation will indeed be trustworthy, fair, and consistent in such situations. Developing these procedures in collaboration with health and safety personnel and in particular employee representatives will most likely also be beneficial. Yet, at the end of the day, it will be the quality of and the actual use of these procedures by mangers that will be the most effective factor in creating and shaping such a climate. Hence, the organisation and its managers need to prove its commitment to these procedures over time.

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Data Availability Dataset used in this study is available, for request contact corresponding authors. Any inquiries regarding the dataset can be addressed to Morten Birkeland Nielsen (morten.nielsen@stami.no)

Declarations

Ethics Approval The study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The survey was approved by the Regional Committee of Medical Research Ethics in the East of Norway (REK 2014/1725).

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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