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Prevention of and interventions in workplace bullying: a global study of human resource professionals' reflections on preferred action

Denise Salin^{a,b}, Renee L. Cowan^c, Oluwakemi Adewumi^d, Eleni Apospori^e, Jaime Bochantin^{f,g}, Premilla D'Cruz^h, Nikola Djurkovicⁱ, Katarzyna Durniat^l, Jordi Escartín^k, Jing Guo^l, Idil İşik^m, Sabine T. Koeszegiⁿ, Darcy McCormack^o, Silvia Inés Monserrat^p, Miguel R. Olivas-Luján^q and Eva Zedlacherⁿ

^aDepartment of Management and Organization, Hanken School of Economics, Helsinki, Finland; ^bSwedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; ^cDepartment of Communication, Queens University of Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA; ^dFaculty of Business Administration, Department of Industrial Relations & Personnel Management, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria; ^eDepartment of Marketing and Communications, Athens University of Economics and Business, Athens, Greece; ^fDepartment of Organization Science, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, NC, USA; ^gDepartment of Communication Studies, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, NC, USA; ^hOrganizational Behaviour Area, IIM Ahmedabad, Ahmedabad, India; ⁱFaculty of Business and Law, Swinburne Business School, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, Australia; ^lFaculty of Historical and Pedagogical Sciences, Institute of Psychology, University of Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland; ^kDepartment of Social Psychology, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain; ^lFaculty of Business Administration, Guangdong University of Business Studies, Guangzhou, People's Republic of China; ^mDepartment of Psychology, Istanbul Bilgi University, İstanbul, Turkey; ⁿInstitute of Management Science, Vienna University of Technology, Vienna, Austria; ^oSt Mary's College, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia; ^pCentro de Estudios en Administración, UNICEN, Tandil, Buenos Aires, Argentina; ^qManagement & Marketing Department, Clarion University of Pennsylvania, Clarion, PA, USA

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyze Human Resource Professionals' reflections on the prevention of and intervention in workplace bullying across different countries. More specifically, the study sought to identify what actions were, in the experience of human resource professionals, best to prevent and intervene in bullying and uncover organizations' motives for engaging in such work. The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews ($n = 214$) in 14 different countries/regions, representing all continents and all GLOBE cultural clusters. Qualitative content analysis was performed to analyze the material. The findings indicate that bullying was largely conceptualized as a productivity and cost issue, and that was largely driving efforts to counter bullying. Training and policies were highlighted as preferred means to prevent bullying across countries. In contrast, there were large national differences in terms of preferences for either disciplinary or reconciliatory approaches to intervene

KEYWORDS

Bullying; human resource professionals; intervention; multi-country study; prevention; qualitative content analysis

in bullying. This study advances our understanding of what human resource professionals consider preferred ways of managing workplace bullying, and adds to our understanding of cross-national differences and similarities in views of this phenomenon. As such, the results are of relevance to both practitioners and scholars.

Workplace bullying, and in particular the negative consequences associated with bullying, have received increased attention over the past decades (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). This study responds to calls for more research on prevention and intervention (e.g. Hodgins, MacCurtain, & Mannix-McNamara, 2014; Mikkelsen, Hogh, & Puggard, 2011), by analyzing Human Resource Professionals' (HRPs) views on the prevention of and interventions in workplace bullying across different countries. More specifically, the study sought to identify what actions were considered the best to prevent and intervene in bullying and to uncover organizations' motives for engaging in such work.

Workplace bullying is a form of systematic mistreatment in the workplace. It has been defined as 'harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks' (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 22). The same authors further highlight a number of criteria that must apply for negative behavior to become bullying. First, the behavior has to be repeated and exist over a long period of time. Second, the target of the behavior must feel inferior in the situation, that is, unable to defend themselves successfully.

To date, much of the research has focused on measuring prevalence, and on identifying risk factors and consequences (cf. Einarsen et al., 2011). In contrast, research on prevention has been scarce (cf. Hodgins et al., 2014; Mikkelsen et al., 2011). Moreover, to date, with rare exceptions (e.g. Power et al., 2013), bullying research is fairly western-centric. Studies on bullying and risk factors, which often provide the basis for recommendations on how to prevent it, have typically been conducted in Northern Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world, notably Australia and the UK (e.g. Einarsen et al., 2011). Although some research investigating bullying from a culture perspective has begun to emerge (Power et al., 2013; Salin et al., 2018), the different contexts are still seldom acknowledged (cf. Galanaki & Papalexandris, 2013). While bullying is a universal phenomenon, there may be national and cultural factors that may impact perceptions of which behaviors are considered bullying and how to deal with them. For instance in a global study on perceptions of bullying Salin et al. (2018) found that power distance, performance orientation, and collectivism all affected whether certain behaviors were considered as bullying and how bullying was typically expressed. Similarly, cultural aspects may affect whether organizational representatives feel there is a need to address certain behaviors.

To date, the HRPs' voice concerning bullying and bullying situations is largely absent from the conversation (Harrington et al., 2012; Salin, 2008). While some attempts have been made to study what action HRPs have taken (e.g. Salin, 2008,

2009), such studies have thus far been scarce, and focused on individual sectors and countries. This lack of HRP voice is surprising, considering their central role in providing and executing anti-bullying policy (Fox & Cowan, 2015; Salin, 2009), and represents a significant gap in our understanding of the phenomenon. As HRPs play a significant role in drawing up company guidelines and policies on bullying (Fox & Cowan, 2015), their beliefs about bullying and about effective measures are likely to strongly influence organizational action on bullying. Hence, our study focuses specifically on the HRP perspective on recommended actions for managing workplace bullying. Moreover, while much bullying research so far has had an Anglo-Saxon or European focus (cf. Power et al., 2013), we seek to contribute to the literature by adding a more global perspective, where these issues are studied in a heterogeneous sample of countries across the world. In the following section, we start by providing an overview of existing research on why bullying matters and what measures typically have been recommended to combat it.

Managing workplace bullying: motives and strategies

Workplace bullying: why does it matter?

Bullying has been portrayed as a form of unethical behavior (cf. Salin, 2013), and studies show that bullying has strong detrimental effects on those concerned. There is ample evidence that bullying has negative effects on the mental and physical health of both victims and bystanders, negatively impacting job satisfaction, organizational commitment and willingness to stay (see Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012 for an overview). There may also be financial implications for organizations.

Although several potential costs have been identified – such as increased absenteeism, higher personnel turnover, bad publicity, lengthy internal investigations, litigation, as well as decreases in employee productivity, motivation, and creativity (Hoel et al., 2001) – the empirical evidence for many of these is still modest. However, given the strong effects on job satisfaction and commitment, we can expect clear financial implications for organizations, at the minimum in terms of turnover and replacement costs. This also gives organizations incentives to address workplace bullying.

Work on risk prevention in the workplace typically focuses on three types of intervention: primary, secondary, and tertiary (e.g. Di Martino et al., 2003; Vartia & Leka, 2011). In the next section we discuss these three forms of interventions in bullying situations.

Prevention and intervention

Primary interventions

Measures recommended to reduce the risk of bullying, or primary interventions, typically include redesigning the work environment, conflict management/resolution systems, leadership training, anti-bullying policies/codes of conduct, and raising awareness of bullying and its consequences (Bille et al., 2008; Vartia & Leka,

2011). Leymann's (1996) formative work strongly emphasized the role of the work environment in how bullying develops, and the 'work environment hypothesis' is a central tenet of the workplace bullying research (e.g. Hauge et al., 2007). With a high number of large empirical studies confirming associations between certain organizational characteristics and higher levels of workplace bullying (e.g. Hauge et al., 2007), anti-bullying recommendations often include addressing these factors through *redesigning the job environment* (Resch & Schubinski, 1996; Salin, 2013; Vartia & Leka, 2011). This might include reducing role ambiguity, increasing control and decision latitude, and addressing high strain jobs, all factors identified as correlates of workplace bullying (cf. Hauge et al., 2007).

Interpersonal conflict has been shown to be a possible precursor of workplace bullying (e.g. Hauge et al., 2007), and effective *conflict management/resolution systems* can reduce the risk of such conflicts escalating into bullying. Baillien, Notelaers, deWitte and Matthiesen (2011), and Leon-Perez et al. (2015), found that problem-solving (as opposed to other conflict management styles) reduced the risk of bullying. Similarly, Einarsen, Skogstad, Rørvik, Lande and Nielsen (in press) found that employees' assessment of the organization's conflict management procedures was negatively related to bullying.

Changes in leadership behavior and leadership training (Resch & Schubinski, 1996; Salin, 2013; Vartia & Leka, 2011) have also been highlighted. This follows from risk factor studies, which have shown that leadership style is an important predictor of workplace bullying (Hauge et al., 2007). In this context, also the standards and expectations set by top-management have been argued to play a crucial role (Salin, 2013).

Further, the introduction of specific *anti-bullying policies* is typically recommended in the literature. Such policies should contain not only a clear statement from the top of the organization on the unacceptability of bullying behavior, but also definitions of what constitutes bullying and clarified procedures for dealing with it (e.g. Salin, 2008). The empirical evidence on the effectiveness of policies has been mixed. For example, Salin (2009) reported that having policies in place did not affect HR managers' willingness to take action.

Finally, another major theme in the literature on workplace bullying involves *raising awareness* (e.g. Salin, 2013; Vartia & Leka, 2011). This would indicate information and attitude campaigns to help both managers and employees recognize bullying behavior and understand its consequences. In a review of different interventions, Vartia and Leka (2011) reported mixed results for such programs: whereas some of the interventions involving training and attitude campaigns led to a reduction in inappropriate behaviors and bullying, other intervention programs failed to produce any significant results (e.g. Hoel & Giga, 2006).

In discussing preventive measures, it is important to highlight the fact that they often support and also overlap each other. In a recent study, Einarsen et al. (2017)

found that different anti-bullying measures were often highly correlated with each other and organizations typically adopted bundles of practices, rather than only individual measures. For instance, the adoption of anti-bullying policies would often be accompanied by some form of attitude campaign to raise awareness on the topic.

Secondary interventions

When primary interventions have failed, and bullying behavior has already occurred, we see secondary interventions employed. While many of the recommendations to prevent bullying take academic research on risk factors as a starting point, the literature on interventions is largely based on consultants' own anecdotal experiences. Research on the effectiveness of interventions is scarce (e.g. Hodgins et al., 2014; Mikkelsen et al., 2011).

Secondary interventions can be categorized in different ways: some draw a distinction between informal and formal approaches, the former referring to initial attempts to address inappropriate behavior by talking to the perpetrator or seeking reconciliation within the unit; and the latter involving formal investigation procedures conducted by HR (e.g. Rayner & Lewis, 2011).

In a Finnish study, Salin (2009) found that to a great extent HR managers tended to adopt informal or reconciliatory approaches to bullying, including mediation, or tried to separate parties by transferring one of them. Saam (2010) interviewed German specialist consultants on bullying, and found that mediation and coaching were very common strategies. However, the use of mediation in highly escalated conflicts with a power difference between perpetrator and target (such as bullying) has been questioned (Saam, 2010; Vartia & Leka, 2011).

Formal processes may result in disciplinary action against the perpetrator e.g. written warnings, withdrawal of supervisory responsibilities/demotions, and even dismissal. However, disciplinary action has been reported to be relatively rare in cases of workplace bullying (Salin, 2009). Nevertheless, sanctions may be a powerful signal. In fact, Einarsen et al. (2017) reported that applying sanctions was the strongest correlate of HR managers' and health and safety representatives' perceptions of successfully resolving bullying cases.

Tertiary intervention

Tertiary intervention comprises counselling and other forms of rehabilitation and after-care seeking to reduce and heal potential damage (Vartia & Leka, 2011). While there is significant literature on the rehabilitation of bullying victims (e.g. Tehrani, 2012), these interventions would typically be accomplished outside of the organization by external parties. From the organization's perspective, agreements with occupational health care services, or referral to the like, may be the most concrete measure in this respect.

Research questions

We have sought to summarize recommendations on prevention and intervention from the organization's perspective. Yet, we know little about which of these measures are considered useful and effective by the organizational actors who are making the relevant decisions. Also, we know little about possible differences across countries. This study seeks to address these gaps by interviewing HRPs about their views on the best ways to prevent and manage bullying. We contrast these views with the recommendations typically made in the literature, and also seek to identify possible differences across countries. Our research questions were:

- (1) What are the most effective ways to prevent bullying, in an HR professional's experience?
- (2) What are the most effective ways to manage bullying, in an HR professional's experience?
- (3) What are the organizations' most important reasons for taking action against bullying (if they choose to do so), in an HR professional's experience?

Method

Design, sample and data collection

In-depth interviewing and qualitative data analytic techniques were used to explore HRP perceptions of the best ways to prevent and intervene in workplace bullying. Data collection was undertaken by a global team of researchers, conducting interviews in 14 different countries. Deploying a global team ensured local knowledge and the potential to conduct interviews in the informant's language of choice. The team members (co-authors) served as a touch point for localization, translation and interpretation, as well as quality assurance.

The results reported in this article are part of a larger project, whose aim is to explore national differences in definitions of bullying and to identify ways of preventing and managing bullying. This article reports only on the latter part. Given that definitions of bullying could be influenced by national cultures and are subject to localized interpretations (Salin et al., 2018), differences across cultures may be key in determining not only what could be considered bullying behavior, but might also determine the mechanisms through which HR practitioners deal with instances of bullying. Differences may include cultures where particular behaviors are widely considered unacceptable and for which HR professionals are expected to take swift action based on specific organizational policies or any relevant work legislation.

Informants in this study were asked open-ended questions about preventing and managing bullying (e.g., What do you think is the best way to prevent bullying? What do you think is the best way to manage bullying?). Informants were

also asked about why, in their opinion, organizations took action (if indeed they did). Country partners used a common interview guide, to ensure consistency, and to ensure that all relevant issues were addressed in all countries. The interview guide (see Appendix 1) was developed by the two first authors, based on focus group interviews with HRPs in Finland and the US.

The sample comprised 214 interviews conducted in 14 different countries/regions around the world: Argentina, Australia, Austria, China, Finland, Greece, Gulf countries (Bahrain/Saudi Arabia), India, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the United States. Fifteen interviews were conducted per country, with exceptions for the Gulf country cluster ($n = 11$), China ($n = 18$), and Finland ($n = 20$). All continents and GLOBE cultural clusters (House et al., 2004) were represented in the material to maximize heterogeneity and diversity. A purposive and network sampling technique was used to assemble the participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), allowing us to engage HRPs in varying sectors and organizations. HRPs were recruited by the authors from their local networks of professional and academic associates, including HRM associations, and their affiliated universities.

Informed consent was ensured by carefully communicating to the interviewees the aims of the study and procedures used, highlighting their rights, including their right not to respond to individual questions or to withdraw from the interview. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were completed with each of the participants, ranging from 25 to 120 min. All interviews were conducted in the language the participant would typically use in a business setting, except for the Gulf countries sample, where the interviews were conducted in English by a non-local working in Bahrain. All country partners reported that satisfactory saturation was reached in their samples. This occurred most quickly in the Gulf countries and Finnish samples, where the similarity in the responses of individual interviewees was particularly striking. Interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy, transcribed, and translated into English by the interviewing author or a translation firm.

Of the interviewees, 51% were women and 85% held a university degree. The mean age was 41 years ($SD = 9.6$), and 47% had worked in HR for 11 years or more. All country partners were asked to seek out a heterogeneous sample, with interviewees representing different industries, sectors and organizations of different sizes. Of the organizations included, 12% employed fewer than 100 persons, 33% had 100–499 employees, 11% 500–999, 26% 1000–9999, and 18% had more than 10,000 employees. All country samples included organizations from several different size categories.

Data analysis

The first author and a research assistant analyzed the interview data using qualitative content analysis (QCA) via ATLAS.ti (a qualitative analysis software package). The first step in QCA is to develop the coding frame (Schreier, 2012). The first

author conducted a literature review to identify measures typically recommended in the existing literature and developed a preliminary, theory-driven version of the coding frame. We then further tested and developed the coding frame from a data-driven perspective, coding two interviews from each country, and adding subcategories to the coding frame where appropriate. The next step was to determine both the face and content validity of the coding frame (Schreier, 2012). The coding frame was deemed facially valid after pilot testing, because most of the data could be coded into existing categories. To determine content validity, two content experts were asked to review the coding frame and assess whether it was appropriate and exhaustive. After making a few additions, both experts stated that it was, thus demonstrating content validity.

The resulting coding frame comprised three main categories: (1) action recommended to prevent bullying, (2) action recommended to manage bullying, and (3) reasons given for managing bullying. The first main category included subcategories such as ‘anti-bullying policies’, ‘raising awareness’, and ‘redesigning work environment’; the second included, for example, ‘investigations’, ‘disciplinary action’, and ‘separating parties’; and the third, for example, ‘productivity’, ‘legal aspects’, and ‘image’ (See Tables 1–3). The first author and a research assistant coded each interview using the developed coding frame. During the process, we met to discuss the coding, comparing our initial individual codings, and discussing differences and similarities (cf. Schreier, 2012). When we found ourselves in disagreement, the first author compared the codings and made the final decision on which category best fit the interview response.

We first analyzed the transcripts country by country to identify patterns and typical responses. The first author articulated these findings for each country and asked the country partners to act as member checks to see if the interpretation reflected their observations of the interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The frequencies reported for each subcategory were further used to corroborate the overall impressions and ensure that no individual, particularly articulate responses led us to make claims not supported by the rest of the (national) material. Individual subcategories, such as ‘policies’ or ‘disciplinary action’ were studied in more detail to see how informants from a certain country talked about them. The last step in the coding process involved identifying the most common and typical replies in the data-set as a whole (see Tables 1–3) and identifying differences between countries.

Findings and interpretation

Primary interventions

Our first research question concerned the interviewees’ perceptions of the best ways to prevent bullying, that is, primary intervention (see Table 1). The most common themes are presented below.

Table 1. Number of interviewees mentioning different ways of preventing bullying.

Best ways to prevent bullying, according to interviewees	Number of interviewees mentioning action (n = 214)
Raising awareness	98 (45.8%)
Anti-bullying policies/codes of ethics	89 (41.6%)
Good and constructive leadership	79 (36.9%)
Values and culture promoting dignity/respect	57 (26.6%)
Communication climate that enables raising concerns about mistreatment	53 (24.8%)
Redesigning work environment	36 (16.8%)
Zero-tolerance for bullying	31 (14.5%)
Target responsibility	29 (13.6%)
Societal factors	20 (9.3%)
Introduction of new employees	20 (9.3%)
Recruitment and selection	13 (6.1%)
Performance appraisals	10 (4.7%)
Empower bystanders	10 (4.7%)

Note: Actions with less than 10 responses not listed.

Raising awareness

Interviewees in all countries emphasized the importance of raising awareness through training. Training fulfills multiple functions: awareness of the target's rights, making potential perpetrators aware of their behavior and its consequences, and helping managers be better equipped to intervene.

The best way is to create awareness. The effects of the behavior should be shown. The individual should put himself in another's place. Empathy and communication should be strengthened. Training can be useful in understanding what really qualifies as bullying. Creating awareness among employees can also help them be more careful. (Turkey_HRP3)

Anti-bullying policies and codes of conduct

Clear rules, procedures, and company regulations were identified by the second highest numbers of interviewees. In countries with a deep awareness of bullying, and anti-bullying legislation (e.g. Finland, Poland, Australia), interviewees often referred to specific written anti-bullying policies. In countries with less social awareness of workplace bullying (e.g. Nigeria, India, Mexico), the interviewees used a different terminology, referring to general ethics codes or company regulation. Nevertheless, the same underlying ideas were echoed across all countries: interviewees felt that clear rules on how to deal with transgressions, and clear codes of conduct, were needed to prevent bullying. An interviewee from Nigeria commented 'You just put rules and regulations in place, policies and processes, then enforce them' (Nigeria_HRP5).

Good leadership

The third highest number of interviewees mentioned constructive and active leadership. Good leadership encompassed a number of different factors: modelling

appropriate and ethical behavior, taking a clear stance on bullying, and not remaining passive:

We also need managers and employees who people would look up to, acting appropriately and not bullying. They need to be championing the fact that that's not acceptable for the workplace. And being good role models for everyone else. (US_HRP4)

While most of the interviewees talked about leadership in general, some emphasized the standards set by managers further up the hierarchy, and others explicitly acknowledged there was often a ripple-down effect, with the behavior of higher level managers affecting that of lower level managers. This was also linked to perceived 'zero-tolerance' for bullying and an organizational culture that discourages bullying.

Culture and values

As hinted above, interviewees also mentioned the idea of working on the company culture and organizational values. Compared to the previous three themes, national differences were more pronounced on this matter, with a high proportion of the suggestions coming from Australian, Chinese, and Greek interviewees. A Greek interviewee commented: 'The best way is to have an appropriate culture and values that prevent and discourage such behaviors' (Greece_HRP_5). This was echoed by a Chinese interviewee arguing that the best way to prevent bullying was to 'create a harmonious work environment and a harmonious organizational culture' (China_HRP14).

Communication climate

Comments on culture and values were often accompanied by a more detailed discussion of the communication climate, one where it is safe to raise potential problems and discuss them:

The best way to prevent bullying is having an open door policy. Every employee should feel that they can say things openly, and can trust someone who does not do or say things behind their back, someone who knows how to deal with delicate and difficult issues. The company has to have this culture that employees are not afraid to talk. (Greece_HRP9)

Redesigning work environment

Although research on the causes of workplace bullying points to the importance of organizational factors, and many of these studies suggest redesigning the work environment to reduce the risk of bullying (e.g., Resch & Schubinski, 1996; Salin, 2013), such ideas very rarely surfaced in the responses. Finland and China were two exceptions, with several interviewees highlighting issues around job design, reward systems, and knowledge sharing routines. Some Argentinian interviewees also highlighted the importance of the work environment, voicing the belief that as long as the work environment was generally sound, no specific anti-bullying measures were needed.

Everyone has their own job description, a clear area of responsibility, knows what to work with and what's expected of them, what results are expected, so you can concentrate on that and won't have to spend too much time pondering over other matters. A good work community climate, an open climate, sharing information, respecting and valuing others ... (Finland_HRP9)

HR practices

Some interviewees drew attention to specific HR practices, such as the selection and proper introduction of new employees, and performance appraisal procedures that also take into account interpersonal behavior among the evaluation criteria.

This kind of action should be included into orientation programs for new employees, it should start on the very first day of their work. I think that any new employee who gets this knowledge and [clear] expectations, won't allow himself to behave this way in the workplace. (Poland_HRP1)

Target and observer responsibility

Some of the interviewees highlighted the responsibility of targets: either the need for the target to be assertive and confront perpetrators or to report inappropriate treatment before it escalates into bullying. Building moral courage among colleagues and bystanders is a theme that has surfaced in the literature on preventing bullying (Salin, 2013). Nevertheless, empowering colleagues to take a stance is very rarely mentioned. An exception was Finland, where one-quarter of the interviewees emphasized the responsibility of bystanders and colleagues. The low power distance in Finland and the fact that peer bullying is as common as downwards bullying may help to explain this national pattern.

In my opinion every member of the work community should take care of each other and intervene if they notice something. [...] If they don't intervene themselves, then they should at least tell the manager ... [who] has to intervene. (Finland_HRP5)

Overall, it is worth noting that the interviewees' knowledge of bullying and their willingness to provide in-depth answers varied significantly from country to country. The highest number of different prevention strategies was presented by the Australian, Finnish and Austrian interviewees, whereas the Argentinian, Gulf countries' and Mexican interviewees yielded the lowest number of strategies. Also, several Argentinian interviewees did not really see the need for specific measures taken by HR.

We never faced those kinds of situation ... [Argentineans] act when things happen. It would be weird – from the employees' perspective – if we began designing strategies to prevent bullying. [Employees] would ask themselves ... what happened?? Why are we talking about that now? Is there something they want to cover up? (Argentina_HRP3)

In sum, interviewees strongly emphasized preventive measures that sought to address the behavior of individual employees, for instance through training and policies. They placed comparatively less emphasis on addressing organizational factors, such as redesigning the work environment. Similarly, conflict management

Table 2. Number of interviewees mentioning different interventions.

Best ways to manage bullying, according to interviewees	Number of interviewees mentioning intervention (n = 214)
Fact finding/investigations	82 (38.3%)
Disciplinary action	76 (35.5%)
Prompt action	69 (32.2%)
Reconciliation (incl. mediation)	45 (21.0%)
Informal talks with perpetrator/counselling	38 (17.8%)
Having a clear contact person	33 (15.4%)
Anonymous helpline	31 (14.5%)
Separating parties	28 (13.1%)
Turning to external experts	23 (10.7%)
Redesigning work environment	16 (7.5%)
Therapy for target	12 (5.6%)

Note: Actions with less than 10 responses not listed.

and conflict management resolution systems were mentioned by only four interviewees in total, either when discussing prevention or intervention. A few interviewees also highlighted societal factors, such as national legislation, societal values, or the upbringing and education of children. These are, however, beyond the scope of this article. Next are presented the findings on preferred measures for secondary interventions.

Secondary interventions

Our second research question concerned secondary intervention, that is, the measures HRPs considered the best to manage instances of bullying that are already manifest (see Table 2).

Fact finding

Broadly, interviewees strongly highlighted the need for thorough investigation procedures and prompt action. Fact finding was generally considered the first important step, with the exceptions of China and Nigeria where it was not mentioned. While interviewees highlighted the importance of talking to those involved, little additional detail was forthcoming about how investigation procedures should be carried out: 'First, as HR professionals, we need to evaluate the case by listening to both sides and determine the level of bullying. This is the first thing to do for managing bullying' (Turkey_HRP6).

Prompt action

A high degree of agreement was also expressed for the need to react promptly and 'nip it in the bud'. This was considered very important in order to stop the problem escalating or spreading. In addition to stopping the behavior, prompt action was also seen as a signal and reminder to others of what kind of behavior was expected. Some interviewees also voiced the belief that by reacting to inappropriate behavior very early the spiral towards workplace bullying could be stopped.

The best way to manage it is to prevent it, nip it, the first time someone bullies someone you just call, like, 'You know what? I understand that we are under pressure and all that but I really don't appreciate the way you spoke to that person.' (Nigeria_4)

Disciplinary measures

Although the interviewees typically emphasized the need for prompt action, they provided less detail on the actual measures that could be taken. Nevertheless, a clear difference could be drawn between recommending disciplinary action and recommending reconciliation (at least as a first step). In this respect, clear national differences were found. The Chinese and Greek interviewees most strongly recommended disciplinary action, very seldom mentioning reconciliation. A clear preference for disciplinary action over reconciliation was also seen in India, Nigeria, Spain, and the US, albeit the tendency was not as pronounced. Disciplinary action would typically involve (threats of) dismissal or formal warnings; over half of those discussing punitive measures explicitly mentioned the possibility of dismissal. Interviewees in the Gulf countries, Nigeria, and China also highlighted the possibility of pay cuts.

If he repeats this behavior, dismissal is the best way, this is also good for educational purposes, everybody has to know that bullying leads to dismissal. As simple as that. (Greece_HRP9)

The bully needs to be punished. Mediation should not be used. What are you going to tell [the bullied person]? Only yield three times a week? The harasser needs to be punished, and the victim needs to be protected. (Argentina_HRP8)

It is interesting to note that the alleged perpetrator and their rights were rarely mentioned by interviewees. Although several talked about the possibility of severe disciplinary action, including pay cuts and dismissal, interviewees did not provide detail on how to deliver a fair process and protect the rights of the alleged perpetrators until actually proven guilty. In fact, out of all the interviewees only six discussed this, the majority of those from Australia.

Reconciliation

Finland was the only country with a clear preference for reconciliation, followed by Austria. Furthermore, Australian interviewees were slightly in favor of reconciliation. These beliefs in reconciliation (and mediation) were sometimes in stark contrast to views expressed by interviewees from other countries:

What I often find difficult in these kinds of process is that the bullied often wants the bully to be punished for what he or she has done. But that's not the point here. Our aim is to see that everything functions smoothly and that people are able to work with each other regardless of what has happened in the past. [...] I don't want to have any focus on the punishment part. (Finland_HRP2)

Informal counselling

Several interviewees, in particular from India and the US, suggested informal discussions with the perpetrator as a 'soft' and less formal way of addressing the problem. In contrast to reconciliation/mediation, these discussions involved the perpetrator only and had a clearly 'corrective' function. The discussions could for example serve to remind the perpetrator of the codes of conduct and company values, and give the perpetrator a chance to change their behavior before moving to disciplinary action. An interviewee from the US commented 'whether it's bullying or not, if it's inappropriate for the workplace, we would have a conversation with that person to help them to understand why what they did or said was unacceptable' (US_HRP1).

Separating parties

Transfers, whereby targets and perpetrators are separated, are often discussed in the literature (e.g. Salin, 2009). However, these were seldom mentioned by the interviewees. Approximately one-third of the Finnish and Austrian interviewees raised the possibility, as well as some individuals in other countries. Some expressed the concern that all too often it was the target who was actually transferred, rather than the perpetrator. Some Argentinian interviewees addressed the same concern from a slightly different angle, pointing out that the targets themselves sometimes ask for a transfer to another unit to get away from the bully, when no other action was taken.

And one would do very well to separate the people who are involved in a bullying situation. And it's quite reasonable that one should make sure that they don't work in the same room anymore, or not even in the same organizational unit. (Austria_HRP15)

A number of additional themes surfaced in the interviews. Several interviewees discussed the importance of making it easy for targets to seek help and make complaints, either by having anonymous hotlines or clearly assigned contact persons. Others mentioned that external expertise would be sought, in the form of turning to external consultants or occupational health care services. In these cases, little was revealed about how bullying would actually be addressed. A small minority of interviewees pointed out the need to identify root causes in the organization and possibly redesign the work environment.

In their responses on how to manage bullying, interviewees typically focused on immediate actions, such as investigations and prompt outcomes, possibly in the form of reconciliation, disciplinary action, or separation of the parties. In contrast, tertiary intervention, that is, the rehabilitation of targets, attracted little attention although a few interviewees mentioned helping the target get access to therapy. As with prevention, the interviewees' knowledge of the topic and their willingness to provide in-depth answers varied significantly from country to country, and seemed to be strongly influenced by national legislation and societal awareness of bullying.

Table 3. Number of interviewees mentioning different reasons for intervening.

Different reasons for intervening	Number of interviewees mentioning reason (n = 214)
Productivity and efficiency	86 (40.2%)
Organizational climate	55 (25.7%)
Employee attitudes	39 (18.2%)
Legal aspects	37 (17.3%)
Image	35 (16.4%)
Sickness absenteeism	28 (13.1%)
Ethical aspects	21 (9.8%)

Underlying motives

Our third research question concerned organizations' motives for addressing bullying (see Table 3). The most prominent themes are presented below.

Productivity aspects

Overall, we found that interviewees reckon bullying primarily in terms of its financial consequences, and this is a typical motive for any action taken. Actions to prevent and intervene in bullying were largely motivated by a concern for productivity. The belief that 'a happy worker is a productive worker' was strongly echoed across the countries. As an HRP from Spain commented: 'happy workers perform better and produce more' (Spain_HRP12). Moreover, an interviewee from Bahrain lamented 'We need to foster healthy organizational environments and I think my company knows how important this is. Happy employees are more productive employees.' (Bahrain_HRP9)

Employee absenteeism, commitment, and climate

Interviewees also acknowledged that bullying was linked with increased employee turnover and absenteeism, resulting in costs for the organization. Trying to create a bullying-free environment was seen as a way of improving the climate, enhancing employee commitment, and retaining good employees. A good workplace climate and positive employee attitudes were often described as intertwined, and often discussed from a cost and productivity perspective:

See even from a pure monetary bottom line context, if you keep losing people because you have a negative environment you are constantly going to hire and train and lose, and hire and train and lose, that's not a great model. Don't think for a minute that they said, 'wow, bullying is immoral.' No. No. No. They said, 'bullying does not add to the bottom line.' (India_HRP5)

Legal aspects

In some of the countries with specific anti-bullying legislation (or other harassment legislation that could be applied), the legal perspective has provided another incentive. In Finland and Australia, interviewees often discussed this from a compliance perspective: 'It's a compliance issue as well, because bullying is part of Occupational Health and Safety and we want to comply with our legal

responsibilities and ensure that all our employees are safe and healthy' (Australia_HRP4). In contrast, the potential for costly lawsuits seemed to be a major driver in the US: 'I think their motivation is to avoid ramifications. Lawsuits and whatnot. I think that's what their motivation is.' (US_HRP5)

Image

Company image and employer branding were also highlighted. Interviewees acknowledged the risks of reputational damage ('bad PR') to the organization. In particular, the Polish interviewees highlighted image aspects as often as productivity aspects, and also Austrian interviewees highlighted PR and image. By contrast, although the Chinese and Greek interviewees provided in-depth replies concerning motivations in general, none discussed image aspects.

And in the time of social media it's a good thing when people feel comfortable in a company, because otherwise it's on Facebook immediately. Right? And it is also unbelievably difficult to find people for certain jobs. So I think that this, this [...] yes this image, this branding and so on, all of this is definitely a reason, as well, to address the issue. (Austria_HRP5)

Ethical aspects

Ethical motivations were mentioned only by a small minority of interviewees, these replies were mostly given by Australian, Finnish, or Mexican participants:

Our vision is to have a safe, comfortable and sustainable world. So, this is very much part of our vision. Both outside and within. There is a strong sense of respect as a human being, that is, leaving aside the issue of productivity, the company puts a very high value on respect for human rights. So, that's what motivates us. Where we all are included and we all have a say. [Mexico_HRP1]

In sum, the different reasons for how bullying is approached seemed highly intertwined. For example, work climate, image, turnover, employee attitudes, and legal aspects were all typically linked to costs and productivity. All in all, bullying was mostly seen as a financial issue with the ethical issues seldom mentioned. However, it is worth pointing out that some HRPs expressed concern about ethical motivations being overlooked.

Discussion and conclusion

This study advances our understanding of what HRPs view as preferred ways of managing workplace bullying, and adds to our understanding of cross-national differences and similarities in views of this phenomenon. The findings indicate that bullying is largely conceptualized as a productivity and cost issue, and that this is driving efforts to counter bullying. The HRPs interviewed thus clearly also align themselves with management and see their role as managing people effectively to bring strategic advantage, rather than as employee champions (cf. Ulrich, 1997 on HR roles).

In terms of prevention, we note that HRPs express strong preferences to raise awareness, provide training, and develop policies. Thus, we find partial support for Hodgins et al.'s (2014, p. 65) findings that measures were often 'underpinned by the assumption that workplace mistreatment will be lessened if more people know about it, know how to recognize it and be more assertive in their responses to it'. Just as in their study, we found bullying was mostly addressed as a problem of interpersonal behavior, rather than stemming from shortcomings in the work environment (cf. Leymann, 1996 on the work environment hypothesis). This is likely to affect HRPs views on their responsibility to get involved.

In contrast with Hodgins et al. (2014), we found interviewees who emphasized the role of organizational factors. Nevertheless, when they did so, they often referred to more intangible aspects, such as climate and leadership. Whereas empirical studies also identify several aspects of job design and organization, for example, role conflict, job demands, and lack of decision authority, as strong correlates of bullying (e.g. Hauge et al., 2007), our interviewees seldom reflected upon addressing these underlying factors when thinking of how to prevent or address bullying. Instead their suggestions (e.g. mediation or disciplinary measures) seemed to focus on interpersonal dynamics, without recognizing underlying organizational issues that may have prompted these 'interpersonal conflicts'.

In terms of intervention, we found that most interviewees talked about 'thorough investigation' and 'prompt response', yet revealed little detail on the processes themselves or who should be carrying them through. This echoes Cowan's (2011) findings from the US that companies may have policies they think address bullying and related themes, but not even HR managers were very familiar with their actual contents.

The fairly strong emphasis on disciplinary action over reconciliation and mediation was striking. Reconciliation was favored primarily in Finland, but rather common also in Austria. Studies on national and cultural differences in bullying reveal that these countries have several features in common: First, bullying often takes place between peers (Salin et al., 2018), suggesting relatively small power differences between perpetrators and targets. Second, social exclusion is a typical form of bullying in these countries (Salin et al., 2018), and due to the subtle nature of social exclusion it may be difficult to prove and officially punish through disciplinary action. And third, power distance is low (cf. GLOBE study, House et al., 2004), which is typically seen as a prerequisite for successful mediation (Saam, 2010). With much bullying research stemming from low power distance countries, we need to be aware that these ideas may not travel well to other cultural and structural contexts. This is also in line with Beale and Hoel's (2010) arguments that distinctive industrial relations and political-economic models and different legal provisions may make both employers and workers think about and respond to the issues differently in different countries. For instance, the power of trades unions and the history and nature of relationships between management and workers can have a major impact.

The previous research has shown that cultural norms may influence the acceptability of bullying behaviors (e.g. Power et al., 2013; Salin et al., 2018). Therefore, we had assumed that responses to workplace bullying would also be strongly influenced by national culture. However, with the exception of the importance of power distance, our data provided little support for this. Differences between countries belonging to the same cultural cluster (cf. House et al., 2004), were typically found to be as large as those between clusters.

Practical implications

This study points to both similarities and differences in managing workplace bullying across countries. While some thoughts are echoed across borders, the results show although bullying exists across the globe, views on it and how to prevent it may differ from country to country. This could have implications in particular for global companies, which may seek to standardize policy across countries. Organizations should consider taking what Stohl (2001) describes as a divergence approach, and reflect the customs and norms of local communities when designing anti-bullying policy. For instance, the results highlight very different views on preferences for reconciliatory versus disciplinary measures, and acknowledge that interventions need to take into account the perceived power distance between target and perpetrator, industrial relations, and political-economic conditions.

Second, regardless of whether HRPs prefer reconciliatory or disciplinary approaches or transfers, the interviewee responses reflect that bullying is treated as an interpersonal rather than organizational problem. One implication of treating bullying accordingly is that organizations do not have to acknowledge or address pertinent structural factors (see Salin, 2013) that could make tangible differences in the work environment. In fact, the HRPs' tendency to see bullying as mostly an interpersonal problem (or possibly cultural one), may make them less compelled to take action. The findings, thus, point towards a need to further educate HRPs on the relationships between work environment factors and bullying. This might encourage both managers and HRPs to be more active in their approach to bullying.

Finally, the results indicate that HRPs and organizations are concerned with bullying primarily because of the economic costs they associate with the phenomenon. As empirical evidence on the economic costs and effects on productivity are still relatively scarce, this is something of which researchers need to be aware. To get the attention of managers, researchers need to understand what drives organizations to take action (or not). Further research on the economic costs of bullying should thus be encouraged, in order to provide HRPs with the 'hard evidence' for which their organizations seem to be looking.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study found relatively little support for the role of cultural factors in explaining responses to workplace bullying, pointing to the need for a more systematic analysis on the importance of other national factors. For instance, to what extent does national legislation shape responses to bullying? To what extent do societal awareness and economic insecurity shape sentiments towards acceptability of bullying and measures required? Also, we need further studies on how legislation, industrial relations, knowledge about bullying, and personal experiences all interact to shape interviewees' perceptions of effective interventions.

Managing and preventing bullying may also be influenced by organization size, degree of internationalization, and the professionalization of the HR function. This study provides some indirect support for this; several interviewees spontaneously mentioned that policies are particularly common in large and international companies. A potential limitation of this study stems from the participants being based mostly in medium to large organizations. Small businesses, however, are a major provider of employment in several economies and experiences of bullying in such organizations (in some cases operating with no designated HR professional or department) may be quite different to large organizations containing general HR practitioners and associated HR specialists (such as health and safety officials). Therefore, aspects including the size and internationalization of organizations are contextual factors that merit further consideration in future research.

While this study analyzed the best ways to prevent and intervene in bullying from the perspective of an HRP, no attempts have been made to evaluate the extent to which organizations follow these recommendations, or the effectiveness of their anti-bullying measures. We need to acknowledge that there might be organizational, political and personal factors limiting the potential for HRPs to adopt the measures they consider most effective. Woodrow and Guest (2014) drew attention to significant shortcomings in the implementation of anti-bullying policies, and D'Cruz et al. (2014) reported that sometimes the HR department may even be seen as an accomplice in bullying. National differences in actual responses to bullying – as well as national differences in the effectiveness of different responses – could thus be relevant for further research.

Finally, given the support of the 'work environment hypothesis' in the bullying literature (e.g. Hauge et al., 2007; Leymann, 1996), it is surprising to see how few of the interviewees consider the role of job design or work organization when discussing prevention. While shortcomings in the work environment have been associated with more bullying (e.g. Hauge et al., 2007), there have been few attempts to evaluate the effects of trying to redesign the work environment. Conducting such studies, and communicating these results to HRPs and managers, appear to be important endeavors for the future.

Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of what human resource professionals consider preferred ways of managing workplace bullying, and adds to our understanding of cross-national differences and similarities in views of this phenomenon. Across countries, anti-bullying initiatives are largely driven by conceptualizations of bullying as mostly a productivity and cost issue. While training and policies appear to be preferred means to prevent bullying across countries, there appear to be significant national differences in terms of preferences for either disciplinary or reconciliatory approaches to intervene in bullying.

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Appendix 1. Interview Guide

I will be asking you questions about three topics; your ideas on what makes a situation bullying, managing and preventing bullying, and some background questions. Please answer the questions from your role as a HRP.

Part I: What is bullying? (not used for this article)**Part II: Preventing & Managing Bullying**

- (1) What do you think is the best way to prevent bullying?
- (2) What do you think is the best way to manage bullying?
- (3) If someone is bullied to whom do they generally turn for assistance?
- (4) Who would be involved in managing complaints of bullying?
- (5) We would like to better understand how human resources professionals (HRPs) view their role in bullying situations. In your experience, what is HR's role in bullying situations?
- (6) We would also like to know how you, as an HRP, think others in the organization view your role in bullying situations:
 - (a) How does leadership view HR's role in bullying situations?
 - (b) How do employees who complain of having been bullied view HRs role in bullying situations?
- (7) In your experience, what are organizations' motivations for addressing bullying (if they do so)?
- (8) In your region/country, would organizations have policies meant to address bullying?
 - (a) If yes, please describe these policies.
 - (b) To what extent are these policies enforced?

Part III: Interviewee background

formal position, industry, education, work experience, cultural affiliation, year of birth, [gender]