

Workplace Bullying Across the Globe: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study was to analyze cross-national and cross-cultural similarities and differences in perceptions and conceptualizations of workplace bullying among Human Resource Professionals (HRPs). Particular emphasis was given to what kind of behaviors are considered as bullying in different countries and what criteria interviewees use to decide whether a particular behavior is bullying or not.

Methodology: HRPs in 13 different countries/regions (n=199), spanning all continents and all GLOBE cultural clusters (House *et al.*, 2004), were interviewed and a qualitative content analysis was carried out.

Findings: Whereas interviewees across the different countries largely saw personal harassment and physical intimidation as bullying, work-related negative acts and social exclusion were construed very differently in the different countries. Repetition, negative effects on the target, intention to harm, and lack of a business case were decision criteria typically used by interviewees across the globe – other criteria varied by country.

Practical implications: The results help HRPs working in multi-national organizations understand different perceptions of negative acts.

Originality/value: Findings point to the importance of cultural factors, such as power distance and performance orientation, and other contextual factors, such as economy and legislation for understanding varying conceptualizations of bullying.

Keywords: workplace bullying, cross-cultural comparison, harassment, human resource professionals, performance orientation, power distance

Workplace Bullying Across the Globe: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

From a Western perspective, workplace bullying is typically described as repeated and enduring negative acts that are unwanted by the victim and which cause humiliation, offence and distress and that may interfere with job performance or cause an unpleasant work environment (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997; Rayner and Keashly, 2005). While bullying is a universal phenomenon, there are institutional, legal, organizational, and cultural factors that may impact upon perceptions of which behaviors are to be considered bullying (Escartin *et al.*, 2011; Fox, 2012). The aim of this study is to explore national and cultural differences and similarities in perceptions of the concept of workplace bullying and in what behaviors are perceived as bullying and the conditions under which these behaviors may be labeled as such.

Drawing a line between what does and does not constitute bullying is a complex issue. Almost everyone agrees that blatant aggression or threats are unacceptable; however, these behaviors have the lowest base rate in bullying research (e.g. Einarsen *et al.*, 2011; Zapf *et al.*, 2011). Most targets report subtle or ambiguous behaviors, deemed to be bullying based on values that we argue are steeped in their cultural, socio-economic and legal context. Values and beliefs influence the degree to which behaviors are viewed as legitimate, acceptable, and effective (Javidan *et al.*, 2006). What is perceived as bullying in one culture likely differs from other cultures, because of differing value systems, communication norms, hierarchical relationships, and the larger institutional context (Fox, 2012).

To date, with rare exceptions (e.g. Power *et al.*, 2013; cf. Van de Vliert *et al.*, 2013), workplace bullying research is fairly western-centric. We have little understanding of what constitutes bullying beyond some European countries (notably Scandinavia, Germany, and the UK), Australia, and North America. Although some research investigating bullying from a culture perspective has begun to emerge (Omari and Paull, 2016; Power *et al.*, 2013), no

research, to our knowledge, questions the predominantly Western notions of what constitutes bullying behaviors and what particular factors might turn these behaviors into bullying situations in the eyes of targets and bystanders. Additionally, a systematic in-depth understanding using qualitative methodologies is also missing in this area of workplace bullying research.

Most bullying research has explored the target's perspective, neglecting an important actor, the Human Resource Professional (HRP). The HRPs' role and perceptions of what constitutes bullying is important because they are arguably the organizational actor tasked with investigating and responding to employee issues and needs (Cowan and Fox, 2015; Fox and Cowan, 2015; Harrington *et al.*, 2012). It is important to understand how bullying is conceptualized in different societies in order to give HRPs in each location the resources they need to craft and refine anti-bullying policies and organizational training and development that will be effective within their own cultural and political frameworks. HRPs in multi-national corporations are particularly in need of this research, as they must contend with varying and potentially conflicting views of what kinds of behaviors actually violate societal norms, in order to develop integrated corporate policy. The present project is an attempt to respond to the limitations discussed above and is meant to explore perceptions and conceptualizations of workplace bullying through a cross-cultural and cross-national lens.

The concept of workplace bullying

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction, or process, the bullying behavior has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person

confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal strength are in conflict. (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011: p. 22)

The definition above points to many of the factors that characterize how bullying is typically depicted in (European) academic research. The definition draws attention to bullying being about *negative acts*, but acknowledges that this negative behavior can take many forms. Einarsen and Raknes (1997) identified four different forms of bullying: attacking the private person (personal harassment), work-related harassment, social isolation, and physical violence.

Different definitions of bullying further show agreement that bullying is about *repeated and enduring behavior* (e.g. Einarsen *et al.*, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2007; Salin, 2003). A *power imbalance*, meaning that the target for one reason or another has difficulties defending him or herself and coping with the behavior, is another criterion typically highlighted in academic definitions (e.g. Rayner and Keashly, 2005; Salin, 2003).

A lot of research has shown that bullying has severe *negative consequences* for victims (e.g. Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012). These negative consequences are thus seen as a defining characteristic by some authors (e.g. Einarsen and Raknes, 1997; Rayner and Keashly, 2005; Salin, 2003). Furthermore, the dominant Northern European conceptualizations of bullying typically focus on processes where one or more targets end up in an inferior position, rather than individual bullies terrorizing whole departments (e.g. Einarsen *et al.*, 2011). A *target orientation* – sometimes combined with the idea of *singling out individual employees* – is thus often seen as a defining characteristic, particularly in North-European bullying research (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011).

The role of intentionality is often raised in discussions of bullying. However, in contrast to aggression researchers, bullying researchers typically question “intent” as a critical defining element (e.g. Einarsen *et al.*, 2011; Rayner and Keashly, 2005). Despite this, research indicates that both laypersons and HRPs often use assumed intent to harm as a criterion when deciding if something is bullying (Fox and Cowan, 2015; Saunders *et al.*, 2007).

Cultural Differences in Bullying

In their overview of factors influencing workplace bullying, Einarsen *et al.* (2011) highlighted the importance of cultural and socio-economic factors for the process of bullying and argued that these affect all stages of the bullying process. More recently, Omari and Paull (2016) have pointed to the heterogeneity in understandings of workplace abuse and bullying by providing readers with in-depth accounts of how bullying is described in different countries and cultures. Still, little research has still been undertaken to understand the significance of culture for perceptions of workplace bullying.

Several attempts to measure and classify national cultures have been made (e.g. Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1999). A fairly recent and extensive study, focusing particularly on leadership and work behaviors is the GLOBE study, which surveyed more than 17,000 middle managers in 62 regions around the world (see House *et al.*, 2004). Based on the findings the authors grouped the countries into ten different cultural clusters and identified nine dimension of national culture: assertiveness, performance orientation, power distance, in-group collectivism, institutional collectivism, gender egalitarianism, uncertainty avoidance, humane orientation, and future orientation.

While cultural values have been shown to be a strong determinant of many organizationally relevant behaviors (Gelfand *et al.*, 2007), only few attempts have been made

to empirically study differences in bullying behavior and in conceptualizations of bullying. One notable exception is the global study by Power *et al.* (2013) that sought to explore the impact of culture on the acceptability of bullying on six different continents. After surveying MBA students, they found future orientation and humane orientation decreased the acceptability of bullying behaviors, whereas performance orientation increased it. Based on theoretical reasoning Jacobson *et al.* (2013) further hypothesized that high assertiveness and a high power distance would be associated with higher levels of bullying in society, whereas in-group collectivism would be associated with lower levels of bullying. Van de Vliert *et al.* (2013) reported support for the latter, by empirically showing that employee harassment was lower in cultures high on in-group orientation.

In addition, studies comparing individual countries have highlighted national differences in bullying behaviors, possibly related to culture. For example, Escartín *et al.* (2011) found that Latin American participants were more likely to conceptualize bullying as physical aggression than Spanish participants. Beale and Hoel (2010) who contrasted bullying in Sweden and Britain reported that a typical characteristic of bullying in Sweden is that it is mainly about expulsion and ostracism from the work group, whereas in Britain it is typically a downwards phenomenon, often linked to oppressive work regimes. Furthermore, Loh *et al.* (2010) found that Australian employees reacted more strongly to bullying than employees from Singapore, arguing that the lower power distance in Australia made employees less accepting of such behaviors.

As the examples above show, culture may affect both expressions of bullying and target perceptions and reactions. So far, our understanding of the significance of culture for perceptions of bullying is, however, still rather fragmented. This study seeks to address this gap by looking at a broad range of different negative behaviors and systematically analyzing if and under what circumstances organizational representatives making decisions concerning

anti-bullying measures (in this case HRPs), consider behaviors unacceptable and label them bullying. This study seeks to empirically explore these issues through rich qualitative data.

Research Aims

Motivated by the research gaps identified earlier, we are interested in exploring cross-national similarities and differences in HRP perceptions and conceptualizations of workplace bullying. In particular, we explore the differences with reference to cultural values, but also acknowledge socioeconomic factors and the existence of anti-bullying legislation. More specifically, our research questions are:

RQ1: What behaviors are seen as bullying in the different countries? What differences can be found between countries? What patterns can be discerned?

RQ2: What decision criteria are used to decide when a behavior becomes bullying? What differences can be found between countries? What patterns can be discerned?

Method

This project used in-depth interviewing and qualitative data analytic techniques to explore HRP perceptions of bullying behaviors and the factors that turn the behaviors into bullying. The sample consisted of HRPs in 13 different countries/regions across the globe. To provide high levels of variance the sample comprised countries from all continents and all 10 cultural clusters identified in the GLOBE study (House *et al.*, 2004): Germanic Europe (Austria), Eastern Europe (Greece and Poland), Latin Europe (Spain), Nordic Europe (Finland), Anglo (Australia and the United States), Latin America (Argentina), Confucian Asia (China), Middle East (Turkey and Gulf Country Region [Bahrain/Saudi Arabia]), South Asia (India), and Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria).

The first two authors fulfilled executive and administrative responsibilities as principal investigators. Each author, including the principal investigators, were responsible for collecting data in their respective countries. All authors served as a touch point for localization and interpretation, as well as quality assurance.

Design, Instrumentation, and Sampling

In order to develop our interview guide a total of four focus groups were conducted in the US and Finland. Each focus group consisted of 4-6 HRP. The final interview guide consisted of two major areas of inquiry: bullying behaviors/criteria and managing and addressing bullying. In this paper we focus on the first area. Interviewees were first asked what, in their opinion, constituted workplace bullying, if they had heard any complaints of bullying that in their opinion did not qualify as bullying, and then asked to comment upon 12 specific behaviors (see Appendix). For each of the behaviors the participants were asked to comment upon the acceptability, and under what circumstances (if any) they would label it bullying. Also, participants were asked to list additional behaviors they felt constituted bullying.

The list of behaviors was generated by first combining all the behaviors listed in three major scales from different parts of the world currently used to measure bullying: Negative Acts Questionnaire (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009), Workplace Bullying Checklist (Fox and Cowan, 2015), and Taxonomy of Workplace Bullying (Escartín *et al.*, 2009). Based on different themes the scales are supposed to measure (work and person-related bullying, social exclusion/isolation, and overt aggression/intimidation), the first two authors chose behaviors from each category. We chose these based on our expertise with the intent to include behaviors that were subtle or ambiguous forms of bullying and might be more likely to be

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"A total of four focus groups were conducted in the US (Texas and Illinois) and Finland (Helsinki area). Each focus group consisted of 4-6 HRP with the goal of testing the interview questions on actual HRP in an effort to discover new areas of inquiry important to HRP and refine the actual interview questions. The interview questions were amended and supplemented based on the results of the focus groups."

seen differently across cultures. The resulting semi-structured interview protocol was then translated and back translated by the country partners.

A purposive and network sampling technique was used to gain participants (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011) from a variety of sectors and organizations. HRPs were recruited by the authors from their local networks of professional and academic associates, including HRM associations (for a total of 199 interviews). Specific participant counts include: China n = 18, Finland n = 20, Gulf country cluster (Bahrain/Saudi Arabia) n = 11, all other countries n = 15 each. Of the participants, 53.6% were female, mean age was 40.7 years and the vast majority (85%) had university-level education. All interviewees consented to being interviewed after the study and procedures were explained to them.

Data Collection

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were completed with each of the participants. These interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 2 hours and were conducted by the authors representing the respective countries. All interviews were conducted in the participants' typical language used in a business setting except in the case of Bahrain/Saudi Arabia sample where the interviews were conducted in English by a non-local working in Bahrain. Interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy, transcribed and translated into English by the interviewing author or a translation firm. These efforts yielded 2,640 single-spaced pages of analyzable text.

Data Analysis

The first two authors analyzed the interview data using qualitative content analysis (QCA) and Atlas ti® qualitative analysis software package. The first step in QCA is to develop the coding frame. The coding frame developed was largely theory driven and based on existing bullying research (Schreier, 2012). However, because much existing research on

bullying is from a western perspective, we further tested and developed the coding frame from a data-driven perspective. Both authors used one interview from each country (resulting in 26 different interviews) to further refine the coding frame adding subcategories to the coding frame where appropriate. Our next step was to determine both face and content validity of the coding frame (two types of validity important to QCA) (Schreier, 2012). The coding frame was determined to be facially valid after pilot testing because data could be coded in existing categories. To determine content validity, we asked two bullying experts to review the coding frame and assess if it was appropriate and exhaustive; both related it was, thus demonstrating content validity.

The resulting coding frame included five main categories: 1) bullying behaviors in interviewee's own definition, 2) the 12 specific behaviors, 3) bullying criteria, 4) what is not bullying, and 5) what factors make the behavior appear more/less acceptable. Using the developed coding frame, the first two authors coded each interview. Regarding the 12 specific bullying behaviors, two research assistants were trained to code the interview replies as clearly bullying, can be bullying (if certain criteria are met), bullying only under exceptional circumstances, not bullying, and N/A. Interrater agreement across all samples was 0.81 (with individual countries ranging between 0.78 - 0.88). When the coders disagreed, the first author made the final decision on which category best fit the interview response.

In regards to coding the other categories, the first two authors coded the 13 countries separately applying the coding frame. Examples of subcategories used to code bullying criteria can be seen in Table 1. We met to discuss our individual coding, comparing our initial individual coding, and analyzing differences and similarities (cf. Schreier, 2012). We then moved to the next step in our coding process which was to compare the countries in regards to how they understand bullying, bullying behaviors and what might make the different criteria turn the behaviors into bullying. We compared our initial coding looking for

similarities and differences, discussed these, and came to agreement on areas of difference. We also attended to co-occurrences of particular behaviors being seen as bullying and criteria associated with these behaviors. We articulated these findings for each country and asked the country partners to serve as our member checks to see if our interpretation represented the interviews (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). We then compared and contrasted the results from each country identifying interesting and seemingly important patterns that speak to the research questions. Here we relied on the GLOBE scores for cultural practices (House *et al.*, 2004), World Economic Forum data about socio-economic conditions (Schwab and Sala-i-Martin, 2015) and information about bullying legislation provided by the local country partners. These results are reported in the next section.

Results and interpretation

Bullying behaviors across the globe

Our analysis focused on comparing perceptions of bullying among the different countries and cultural clusters. In an effort to answer RQ1, we first looked at the most important elements presented by participants when asked to spontaneously define bullying. It is clear different elements identified in previous research - personal harassment, work-related harassment, social exclusion, and physical violence - all appear here.

It could be anything from a small little word to almost physical violence. It could be anything in between those two extremes really, as it has so much to do with how the other person perceives it. It could be single words, statements, a joke, giving someone a work task that isn't acceptable, unprofessional behavior or perhaps ignoring the person, if it's a manager who ignores some of his or her team members and so on. It could be anything that doesn't categorize under normal behavior. Of course, bullying

can take place in different ways depending on whether we're talking about two colleagues or about a manager and his subordinates. (Finland_HRP1)

However, there were differences in the extent to which the different elements were mentioned in different countries. While work-related and personal-related forms of bullying were typically mentioned in many of the countries, it is worth noting that social exclusion was repeatedly emphasized only in Austria, Finland and to some extent in Poland.

While many participants highlighted that managers are often the perpetrators, power and power abuse were in particular emphasized in India, Nigeria and Turkey. We found that in countries with a high power distance bullying was often primarily conceptualized as a (rather overt) form of power abuse, typically enacted by superiors. For instance, in both Nigeria and India power was often described as “entitlement to abuse” and targets were often expected to suffer in silence and were seen as having few opportunities to address the problem.

You can say workplace bullying is when a boss or an associate is using his position to oppress you at your place of work; to hurt you, cheat you, deprive you of so many things that you are entitled to in an organization (Nigeria_HRP1)

But you will never confront the bully because the bully is well within the limits to do whatever it is that they do. So, you know, we have this power distance that creates a psychological consent in that sense to say, okay, if I am bullied and victimized maybe it's a part of being who I am. (India_HRP5)

When asked about the 12 specific behaviors (see Appendix) participants generally found physical intimidation - in the form of unwanted physical contact and intimidating body language - as the most severe and most unacceptable. However, some interviewees were unwilling to label these acts as bullying, as they were even described as “worse” than

bullying. Participants were overall in agreement that insulting and putting someone down was, or could be, bullying. Similarly, participants typically considered verbal abuse as bullying.

Overall, participants were most ambivalent about whether to label jokes about someone as bullying. Nevertheless, participants in many countries could give clear examples of when such jokes could possibly turn into bullying. Several interviewees, in particular from Australia, also spontaneously pointed out that racist jokes or jokes about sexual orientation would automatically qualify as bullying and be unacceptable.

If it's a joke about a 'protected category' – for example, a joke about somebody's race or religion or age – particularly in those cases it would be regarded as bullying. If you're having a joke about and at somebody's expense then it may be bullying (Australia_HRP9).

Spreading rumors was one of the items that clearly divided the participants. Whereas the Argentinean and Nigerian interviewees largely saw it as a normal and acceptable part of work culture, this act was seen as particularly heinous to the Gulf Country participants, who often described it as one of the worst forms of bullying. This seems to fit well with the image of the latter ones as honor-based cultures, where reputation is a critical asset (Aslani *et al.*, 2016). Also the Finnish and Turkish participants were very likely to consider this as bullying.

It really just isn't our culture. It goes against what we know and are taught as children. Our parents and Mohammed himself would be shamed if they thought we behaved like that. It's not acceptable to talk negatively about someone behind their back. It's very simple. We don't do that. (Bahrain_HRP7)

Social exclusion was another item that clearly divided the participants, both when discussing the acts and when spontaneously defining bullying. In their spontaneous

definitions, Finnish and Austrian interviewees saw social exclusion as a central feature of bullying. When specifically asked about social exclusion as an item, also other European interviewees typically saw this as (potential) bullying. In contrast, this was the act least likely to be considered bullying by the Nigerian and Gulf Country nationals.

I don't call it bullying. I mean if I feel I don't need to invite you to my party, to my office or to my departmental party you should just take it that I'm not inviting you. It's not bullying, I am not bullying you. I just don't want you there, that's all. [...]It's a personal choice. (Nigeria_HRP8)

In-group collectivism has in previous research been hypothesized to affect the prevalence of bullying (Jacobson *et al.*, 2013). While we initially assumed that employees scoring high on in-group collectivism would be particularly sensitive to social exclusion, we found no such pattern. Nevertheless, in-group collectivism seemed to shape how the social exclusion of out-group members was perceived. Those scoring high on in-group collectivism typically make a bigger distinction between in-groups and out-groups (Jacobson *et al.*, 2013), possibly resulting in different treatment of those not perceived as sharing salient characteristics. The Australian, Austrian, Greek and Finnish participants, all from countries scoring low or relatively low on in-group collectivism, were particularly sensitive to any negative behavior towards minority group employees (based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, etc.) and pointed out that they would be particularly vigilant if negative behavior or exclusion concerned employees from any of these groups. In contrast, several Gulf Country participants saw difference in terms of gender, religion, or country of origin as factors that could make social exclusion acceptable or even desirable. For example, interviewees explained that unwillingness to socialize with those representing other social categories (e.g. migrant workers or Sunni/Shia employees) was considered as “a norm/state of affairs rather than a negative behavior” (Bahrain_HRP5) or that spending time with people your family

members considered inappropriate (e.g. Sunni employees) could get you “in trouble with your family” (Bahrain_HRP2).

Overall, work-related negative acts were seen as more ambiguous by the participants than person-related acts and participants typically listed more criteria for these before considering them bullying. Also, when asked about bullying complaints that in the participants’ opinion did not qualify as “real” bullying participants typically mentioned issues related to performance management and/or managerial prerogative. The listed work-related acts (imposing unreasonable deadlines, replacing tasks, persistent criticism, ignoring someone’s opinions and withholding information) were seen as acceptable as long as there was a clear justification and a business case for them. However, variations were large. Overall, our data indicated a clear link between a high performance orientation and a lower tendency to classify work-related behaviors as bullying. Interviewees from countries with a high performance orientation, such as the US, China and Austria, expressed a high tendency to accept work-related negative acts – at least as long as a business case could be made for these decisions. Participants in these countries appeared to have a very broad understanding of managerial prerogative, considering these acts normal and acceptable.

[Persistent criticism] is acceptable. If someone keeps making mistakes and the counterpart always corrects him, then it is clear that the counterpart still thinks that he can make progress. (China_HRP4)

In contrast, in the Gulf Countries, which score low on performance orientation, interviewees found many of these acts – such as criticism in any form - highly unacceptable. Similarly, many of the Argentinian interviewees were likely to consider these acts, particularly removing work tasks, as bullying. Also most of the Finnish interviewees saw these acts as potential bullying behaviors. An exception not fitting the pattern was Nigeria, where there was a high acceptance of work-related negative acts despite a low performance

orientation. Nigeria's high scores on both power distance and assertiveness practices may, however, provide the explanation for this discrepancy.

(On removing key areas of responsibility) This is unacceptable behavior, it makes people feel uncomfortable. I've seen this behavior, a person's employment status is reduced, and this is done to force this person to quit their job. It is bullying.

(Argentina_HRP12)

All in all, the results showed that interviewees were largely in agreement concerning physical violence/intimidation and concerning personal harassment in the form of insults, verbal abuse and jokes, but clear differences were found for work-related acts, social exclusion, and social manipulation in the form of rumors and gossip. Cultural factors, in particular performance orientation, power distance, and in-group orientation, seemed relevant for explaining cross-national differences in perceptions.

Bullying criteria across the globe

In an effort to answer RQ2, we also wanted to understand the criteria used to decide when and if a particular behavior should be classified as bullying. Predominantly we found repetition, negative effects on the target, and intention to harm as the main criteria used for determining a bullying situation across the countries as can be seen in Table 1.

----- Insert Table 1 appr. here -----

The criterion mentioned clearly most often was the requirement that a behavior needed to be repeated to be considered bullying. This was mentioned by a majority of interviewees in most countries, giving support for this as a rather "universal" criterion. Exceptions were China and the Gulf Countries. In the latter, the participants generally found the behaviors so

unacceptable that no further criteria were needed. In some countries repetitiveness – or duration - was also clearly linked to existing anti-bullying legislation (e.g. Australia, Finland, and Poland).

Generally speaking, to label some set of behaviours bullying, we must be sure that these acts of violence occur regularly and for a long period of time. Thus, if that behavior occurred for let's say about 6 months, or for several months – no doubt we could call it bullying. However, we couldn't if it was just one incident.

(Poland_HRP10)

That the behavior had negative effects on the targets – either on their health or work performance – was the second most common criteria participants mentioned and also one that emerged across the different countries.

At the end of the day, you have to look at the effect on the physical and emotional health of the victim. (Spain_HRP3)

While intention to harm has been a criterion highly controversial in the bullying literature, it was among the most frequently mentioned factors that participants looked to decide whether a behavior was to be classified as bullying. It seemed to be a largely defining factor in Nigeria, India, and China, but also in most other countries participants listed this as a key issue.

If it happens continuously, I would check for bad intentions. [...]It is bullying if there are bad intentions (Turkey_HRP9)

Being unwarranted or lacking a business case was the fourth most common criterion. Again, it appeared across countries, typically in relation to work-related acts.

[Replacing work tasks] can be bullying under certain circumstances. But when it is the result of an assessment of performance - if someone is a low performer - then it isn't

bullying. Bullying is when the boss does so, without reason, just to put down the employee. (Greece_HRP10)

The remaining criteria seemed to be more country-specific. One of these was “being singled out” or treated differently than other employees, which was very prevalent among the European interviewees and to some extent the Anglo-Saxon ones, but less so in other countries. In Austria this was often used in combination with “several against one”, pointing to bullying often being a group phenomenon in that particular context.

Both the target’s subjective feeling of being bullied and the unwelcome nature of the behavior – for instance, expressed by the target’s clear statement he or she found it offensive – were two criteria often used specifically by the Finnish and US interviewees. Both of these give high importance to the target’s own experience, while at the same time also partly making the target responsible for being the one who labels the behavior and confronts the perpetrator(s). Other criteria mentioned by participants included a non-accidental nature, in other words, the behavior was intentional, albeit not necessarily undertaken with the (primary) intention of harming, and a target orientation, that is, the behavior was directed towards specific individuals.

Power differences, which are often emphasized in the literature, but less so in our material, were most clearly emphasized by the Indian and Nigerian participants, who sometimes even described power as an entitlement to abuse. Power as a defining characteristic was also explicitly brought up by Chinese and Greek participants. While interviewees in most countries argued that the hierarchical position of the perpetrator was irrelevant for deciding whether a behavior was bullying when explicitly asked about it, responses still indicated that behaviors were typically seen as more severe if committed by a superior.

Other important contextual factors

Above we have primarily focused on cultural explanations for the differences discovered. Other contextual factors should not be ruled out. We note that the most extreme examples of abuse (incl. sexual assaults, bodily harm, and slave-like work conditions) were described in our two poorest countries, Nigeria and India. Furthermore, the Greek participants also made it very clear that the economic crises currently being experienced by the country has led to a situation where managerial prerogative has been redefined and behaviors previously seen as unacceptable have become normalized. Also some participants in other countries pointed to the fact that economic insecurity both increased bullying and led workers to stay silent about mistreatment.

The crisis, certainly, increased bullying. There is a fear of dismissal and unemployment; almost 30 percent unemployment. In this working and financial environment, bosses can engage in bullying behaviors, while employees cannot do much about it. (Greece_HRP5)

The Gulf Country Cluster data further pointed to religion playing an integral part of understandings of bullying in some parts of the world. For instance, a majority of the Gulf Country participants spontaneously referred to religious values and norms when explaining why the listed acts were seen as unacceptable and should be labelled as bullying.

We don't tend to engage in those behaviors very regularly because of our religion. If you are devout, you are not going to do anything on that sheet (referring to the 12 listed acts). You just won't. It's only the non-devout people or the non-Muslims that tend to bully others in the workplace. (Bahrain_HRP9)

Moreover, the role of legislation should not be overlooked. In countries with established specific anti-bullying legislation, e.g. Australia, Poland, Finland, we could clearly see how interviewees very often referred to terminology from the legislation. Both when definitions and criteria were discussed the interviews within these countries showed striking similarities, suggesting that existing national legislation had largely shaped interviewee replies within those countries. While the results point to legislation being an important shaper of perceptions of bullying, a more-in depth analysis of its role is beyond the scope of this paper.

Discussion and implications

The aim of this study was to analyze cross-cultural differences and similarities in perceptions of bullying. Particular emphasis was given to what kind of behaviors were considered as bullying in different countries and what criteria interviewees used to decide whether a particular behavior was bullying or not. Results show that whereas interviewees across the different countries largely saw personal harassment and physical violence as bullying, work-related negative acts and social exclusion were construed very differently in the different countries. Repetition, negative effects on the target, intention to harm, and lack of a business case were decision criteria typically used to decide if a behavior was bullying or not. Cultural factors, above all power distance and performance orientation, but also legislation and economic situation, helped to interpret the diverse findings of the current study.

Overall, participants across the globe seem to consider that both work-related negative acts, such as persistent criticism and unreasonable deadlines, and personal harassment, such as insults and being put down, can be bullying. This is also in line with prevailing conceptualization of bullying (e.g. Einarsen *et al.*, 2011). However, when it comes to work-related acts it is important to note that the interpretation of legitimate managerial prerogative

varies considerably from country to country and seems to be associated with the level of performance orientation in that country. As much research on bullying has originated in the Scandinavian countries, which have fairly low levels of performance orientation, this is important to keep in mind. This may explain some of the differences in reported prevalence rates between different countries. For instance, in countries such as the UK and the US researchers have often reported significantly higher prevalence rates for individual acts than researchers in the Scandinavian countries (e.g. Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2007; Zapf *et al.*, 2011). Also, it may explain why US researchers have seen a need to change cut off points for bullying scales (e.g. Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2007 using two negative acts per week rather than one as the criterion) or why Fox and Cowan (2015) found little support among US HRPs for including certain work-related items in bullying scales.

While interviewees across the globe seem to identify personal harassment, such as insults and verbal abuse, as bullying, views on social exclusion seem more varied. While social exclusion is part of the most widely used definition of bullying (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011), we found that this is not necessarily seen as a universal character of bullying. Social exclusion was emphasized by the European interviewees as a core part of bullying, but less so by our Asian, African and US participants. Also, our results seem to indicate that in high in-group collectivism countries the social exclusion of out-group members was not even necessarily seen as something negative. These findings are preliminary and warrant further exploration.

As for criteria, the results showed that participants across the globe were in agreement that bullying was about repeated negative acts with negative consequences for the target. This was clearly in line with existing academic definitions (e.g. Einarsen and Raknes, 1997; Rayner and Keashly, 2005; Salin, 2003). However, in contrast to most definitions participants seldom considered power aspects and the victims' possibilities to cope or not cope with the

situation when deciding whether a behavior was bullying or not (cf. similar results in Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Nevertheless, power as such was brought up by a number of interviewees. This was particularly the case in high power distance countries where interviewees on the one hand largely conceptualized bullying as “power abuse” and on the other hand discussed power as “entitlement to abuse”.

Another finding worth noting was the high reliance of intention to harm as a defining characteristic. The issue of intent has been heavily debated in bullying research, but bullying researchers have typically decided not to include it because of difficulties in establishing it (e.g. Einarsen *et al.*, 2011; Rayner and Keashly, 2005). Also, it has been pointed out that systematic negative behavior done merely out of thoughtlessness, low social skills or when striving for an ulterior goal, may still harm the target despite the lack of a direct intention to harm. The high tendency among HRP to require intention to harm is still of high interest and requires further exploration, for instance how HRP, in practice, establish such intent.

Practical implications

Our results have important practical implications. Due to globalization we see employees and managers from different cultures interacting more and more often, both face to face and through electronic channels. Our findings draw attention to the risk of possible misunderstandings in such encounters.

The findings highlight that the line between legitimate managerial prerogative and unacceptable bullying behavior varies a lot between the different cultural clusters. While the North-Americans had a very wide interpretation of managerial prerogative many of these behaviors were seen as totally unacceptable by, for instance, Gulf Country employees. A US manager seeking to give feedback to a Gulf Country employee or requesting him/her to work overtime may thus easily be perceived as a bully. This was also evident in the interviews with the Gulf Country HRP, who often spontaneously revealed that the only times they had

witnessed bullying, the perpetrator had been a Western expatriate. Similar cultural clashes could also easily arise between employees from other clusters that differ in terms of performance orientation and managerial prerogative.

These findings point to practical implications for multinational organizations in regards to policy on bullying and harassment. These results underscore the need for clear policies that detail the firm's perspective on bullying. HR and organizational policy makers should also be cognizant of the differences revealed by this investigation and possibly re-evaluate existing policies associated with bullying and harassment determining if additional training is needed. What seems particularly important would be how the firm defines bullying and what constitutes a bullying situation, anonymously reporting possible violations of policy to third parties beyond management and clear no-retaliation policies. These areas seem particularly important in multinational firms because the present research reveals a wide variety of possible definitions and ideas of bullying that could be at odds with firm values and culture.

Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This project has involved data collection in 13 regions and the coordination of a large research team. Cross-national comparisons obviously entail many challenges, with regard to understanding the local context and using several different languages. By relying on local partners with extensive understanding of both the local context and the field of bullying we have sought, to the best of our ability, to deal with these challenges. To enable participants to reply as freely and in as much detail as possible, we asked local partners to conduct the interviews in the local language(s). Despite all the measures taken to ensure high quality translations of the material we cannot, however, rule out the possibility that some of the nuances may have been lost during translation. Also, although care was taken to find terms that corresponded as well as possible with the English term "bullying", we acknowledge that

translations may have slightly different connotations, as demonstrated by Smorti *et al.* (2003) in their work on school bullying.

All in all, this study has provided new insights into national and cultural differences in perceptions of workplace bullying. Also, it has provided an organizational HR perspective on a topic that has so far mostly been studied from a target perspective (cf. Fox and Cowan, 2015). Particularly, the results point to differences in where to draw the line between managerial prerogative and work-related harassment. This study has focused on perceptions of different acts future research should seek to analyze to what extent these differences in perceptions are also related to differences in prevalence rates of these acts. Also, while this study reflects an HR perspective it would be of interest to see whether a similar study among employees would reflect similar national differences in perceptions of managerial prerogative versus bullying. Further, it would be of interest to see if employees in countries representing a broader understanding of managerial prerogative actually report less effect on their health and work-related attitude when facing such ambivalent behavior. Also the cultural differences in perceptions of social exclusion at work merit further attention. Given that much of the bullying research stems from the Scandinavian countries where social exclusion is a central feature of bullying (e.g. Beale and Hoel, 2010), this study points to the importance of conducting more research to establish to what extent these findings can be generalized to other cultures.

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Appendix

List of behaviors

1. Spreading false rumors about someone or their work
2. Insulting someone or putting them down
3. Telling jokes or encouraging others to tell jokes about someone or engaging in practical jokes
4. Verbal abuse (e.g., yelling, cursing, angry outbursts)
5. Making aggressive or intimidating eye contact or physical gestures (e.g., finger pointing, slamming objects, obscene gestures)
6. Making unwanted physical contact (e.g., hitting, pushing, poking, spitting)
7. Giving tasks with unreasonable deadlines/assigning an unmanageable workload
8. Persistent criticism of errors or mistakes
9. Removing key areas of responsibility or replacing them with trivial or unpleasant tasks
10. Ignoring someone's opinion
11. Socially excluding or ignoring someone
12. Withholding necessary information from someone