

Perpetrators and Targets of Bullying at Work: Role Stress and Individual Differences

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A workplace survey study ($N = 2215$, response rate 47%) revealed that about 16% of the sample may be categorized as either perpetrators (5.4%), provocative victims (2.1%), or as targets of bullying (8.3%). Targets of bullying, provocative victims, and bullies were compared with those 84% who do not report any involvement with respect to bullying at work, self-esteem, aggressive tendencies, prior experiences of bullying, or experiences of role stress. Perpetrators were found to have a higher level of aggression than did the comparison group and the targets. Provocative victims manifested a low level of self-esteem and social competency combined with a high level of aggressiveness. Targets of bullying revealed low levels of self-esteem and social competency. Targets, provocative victims, and perpetrators reported elevated levels of role stress in the form of unclear or conflicting demands and expectations around work tasks and daily work.

Keywords: bullying at work; harassment at work; provocative victims; bullies; personality; workplace aggression

Bullying is considered to be a subset of the overarching concept of aggression (Griffin & Gross, 2004). The first empirical studies in which the term “bullying” or “mobbing” was applied without referring to schoolyard bullying were published in Scandinavia around 1990 (Leymann, 1990; Matthiesen, Raknes, & Rökkum, 1989). Since then, several studies have shown that bullying is a widespread phenomenon in many countries, and large-scale studies in Scandinavia have indicated that approximately 3%–4% of the working population are exposed to this kind of misbehavior (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1992). Finnish and British studies have revealed even higher prevalence rates of approximately 10% (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Vartia, 1996). Since the onset of this research, the concept of bullying at work has been considered a synonym for the concepts mobbing and harassment at work (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). The Scandinavian approach defines bullying as a situation in which one or more persons systematically and over a long period of time perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative treatment on the part of one or more persons, in a situation in which the person(s) exposed to the treatment have difficulty in defending themselves against this treatment (Einarsen, 2000). This definition is adapted from research on bullying among schoolchildren (Olweus, 1978, 1993, 2003). Keashly and Jagatic (2003) defined bullying as interactions between organizational members that are characterized by repeated hostile

verbal and nonverbal behavior, often nonphysical, directed at a person in such a way that the target's sense of himself as a competent worker and person is negatively affected. "Bullying can be considered as a form of coercive interpersonal influence. It involves deliberately inflicting injury or discomfort on another person repeatedly through physical contact, verbal abuse, exclusion, or other negative actions" (Forsyth, 2006, p. 206).

Hence, bullying is a long-lasting phenomenon that "wears down" its victims (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). Typically the bullying process lasts for more than a year. Previous studies on bullying have revealed approximately equal victimization rates among men and women (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Niedl, 1995; Vartia, 1996). Others have estimated that about two-thirds of the targets are women, while 50%–80% of the perpetrators are managers, most often men (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). Many of the targets of bullying suffer from severe health problems, such as depression, anxiety, compulsive behavior (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002b; Niedl, 1996), or post-traumatic stress symptoms (Leymann & Gustavson, 1996; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002a; Niedl, 1996; Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2005). So far there has been comparatively more research on the consequences of bullying than on its antecedents (Einarsen et al., 2003). An especially controversial issue in the field has been the role of personality characteristic as antecedents of bullying behaviors and experiences of victimization from bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003).

PERPETRATORS OF BULLYING

Important empirical knowledge about the phenomenon of workplace bullying has been collected throughout the last decade (Einarsen et al., 2003). However, a paradox exists, which Rayner and Cooper (2003) refer to as a "black hole" in the research field. Perpetrator behavior and perpetrator characteristics have generally been reported by the targets of bullying (e.g., Adams, 1992; Kile, 1990), or in anecdotal stories in more popular books (e.g., Bing, 1992). There are only a few published studies in which the perpetrators of bullying have been the subjects of empirical research. Some exceptions do exist, however.

A survey study conducted by Coyne Chong, Seigne, and Randall (2003) revealed that 19.3% of a 288 personnel sample (members of various work groups) indicated that they had subjected others to bullying. This somewhat surprisingly high percentage of bully behavior decreased to 2.7%, however, when the role as a perpetrator was defined more strictly operationally, namely as a combination of self-report and peer-report (i.e., the person himself admits bullying of others, a confession validated by at least two colleagues). The self-reported and peer-reported group of perpetrators was found to be different from the control sample in terms of the personality factor mental stability. When personality dimensions such as independence, conscientiousness, and extraversion were assessed, minor and nonsignificant group differences were found.

According to victim reports, perpetrators are male more often than female, and supervisors and managers more often than colleagues (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003; Zapf et al., 2003). Summarizing the sparse empirical findings on the bully as a cause of workplace bullying, Zapf and Einarsen (2003) have suggested three main antecedents of bullying related to perpetrator characteristics: (a) self-regulatory processes with regard to threatened self-esteem, (b) lack of social competencies, and (c) bullying as a result of what has been labeled as micropolitical behavior (Neuberger, 1989), that is, internal rivalry or competition in the workplace, particularly when there is a lack of formal structures and clearly divided work tasks and responsibilities.

Self-Esteem and Social Competence

In a review of self-esteem research, Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) proposed that it is high self-esteem that is related to aggressive behavior. Low self-esteem is linked to depressive reactions and withdrawal. Individuals with low self-esteem are therefore rarely aggressive because they fear losing the encounter (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Individuals with low self-esteem experience self-doubt, anxiety, self-contempt, and ultimately depression (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979), that is, various reactions that on the individual level are inner (intrinsic) directed, against the persons themselves. A high level of self-esteem is not entirely positive, however. High self-esteem can constitute a stable or an unstable self-evaluation. People with unstable high self-esteem may well become aggressive in response to even seemingly minor or trivial threats to self-esteem (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), for example, after receiving unfavorable feedback (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993). Bullying may be regarded as a more external (extrinsic) reaction directed against some part of the daily surroundings. Thus, a high level of self-esteem can lead to external reactions such as facing others with tyrannical behavior. Correspondingly, high self-esteem has been found to be related to perfectionism, arrogance, and narcissism (Ashforth, 1994; Baumeister et al., 1996). Hence, perpetrating bullying behavior and a high but unstable self-esteem should be associated, as proposed by Zapf and Einarsen (2003). Unstable self-esteem can be viewed in different directions, however. Does an unstable self-esteem indicate instability only across time, or is this instability reflected across measures and scale-items applied to map this psychological construct? The latter focus will be taken in the present study.

There is a link between hostile or aggressive behavior and lack of social competency. For example, studies have portrayed that sex offenders have limited skills with respect to close relationships, having a hostile, unempathetic style of relating to others, particularly women (Hudson & Ward, 2000). Social and emotional competence requires the ability to detect, understand, and respond appropriately to the feelings of others (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). Social competency is closely linked with empathy, the capacity to share the emotional state of another, and is also associated with altruistic behavior (Eisenberg, 1986). Hudson and Ward (2000) contend that deficits in social competency, specifically those aspects relevant to close relationships, are clearly linked to engaging in offending or humiliating behavior against others.

A low level of social competency also appears to be a dominant factor among many perpetrators of bullying, at least according to some anecdotal case stories (Adams, 1992). Lack of self-reflection and perspective taking may be important antecedent conditions to workplace bullying, which is why some people become bullies. According to anecdotal reports, perpetrators repeatedly report that they are not aware of the consequences of their behavior (Leymann, 1987). Social competency may be negatively related to anxiety or insecurity. Childhood studies have demonstrated that perpetrators usually report low levels of anxiety or insecurity, or they are roughly average in such dimensions (Olweus, 1991; Pulkkinen & Tremblay, 1992).

Bullying and Micropolitical Behavior

A quite different explanatory model of bullying has been proposed, focusing on micropolitical behavior as an antecedent of workplace bullying behavior (Salin, 2003; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). The concept of micropolitics is based on the premise that organizations do not consist of fully determined structures and processes (Neuberger, 1989). Thus, the organization expects its members to assist and close the gaps in the formal structure, for instance, by striving for achieving personal goals, participating in decision making, improving

their level of influence, protecting their status, or rivalry. Intense micropolitical behavior may, however, be experienced as highly stressful for those involved. For example, it may result in increased levels of role conflict and role ambiguity because of frequent collisions between various role senders or role sets (van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981). Thus, micropolitical behavior can lead to role stress. Role stress, such as role ambiguity and role conflict, can also be regarded as integrated parts of ongoing micropolitical behavior at the workplace. One may also argue that high levels of role stress are an invitation to micropolitical behavior. In line with this, emotional abuse at work is found to be associated with role conflict and role ambiguity (Keashly, Hunter, & Harvey, 1997). A function of micropolitical behavior could be that it is a strategy for protecting one's self-interests and improving one's own position (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Hence, micropolitical behavior may result in frequent episodes of interpersonal conflicts or aggression (De Roche, 1994). Bullying may therefore constitute an extreme type of micropolitical behavior or be a next-step consequence after intense interpersonal striving or conflicts, in line with the conflict-escalating model of Glasl (1980). If so, both perpetrators and targets of bullying should report higher levels of role stress and micropolitical behavior.

TARGETS OF BULLYING

Several studies have investigated targets of bullying, searching for individual antecedent conditions or risk factors of victimization. A Norwegian study of psychiatric and personality disorders, using the MMPI-2 among 85 targets of bullying, portrayed clinically elevated levels of psychosomatic complaints, depressive thoughts, compulsory behavior, and paranoid or disturbed thoughts (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). Zapf (1999), in a German study, identified two subgroups of bullying targets. One of the subgroups of bullied victims could not be distinguished from the control group in terms of personality dimensions measured. The other subgroup, however, tended to be significantly higher in anxiety and depression as well as lower in social skills. A forthcoming study (Glasø, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einarsen, in press), in which 79 bullied victims are compared with a matched control group, also revealed that bullied victims could be split into two subgroups, when the so-called big five personality perspective (McCrae & John, 1992) was applied. About 75% of the bullied group was not significantly different from the matched control group in terms of "big five" personality, whereas the other subgroup was significantly different on four out of five dimensions (among those, being higher on neuroticism and lower on agreeableness). These Norwegian and German studies highlight the notion that there may be different types of victims, with different pre-existing personality traits (such as general self-esteem and social competency).

Some of the empirical findings regarding victim characteristics in schoolyard bullying may be important to note. Typically, victims tend to be more anxious and insecure than what is typical among the pupils in general (Lagerspetz, Björkquist, Berts, & King, 1982; Olweus, 1993). They are often cautious, sensitive, and quiet (Olweus, 2003). Olweus labels this victim group as passive or submissive. When bullied, they frequently react by crying and withdrawal. Thus, the targets of school bullying evidence low self-esteem (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1993). Most commonly, they have few friends as a source of emotional support, and often have higher rates of problems such as depression or anxiety (Carney & Merrell, 2001). Targets of bullying also have negative attitudes toward violence and violent means, according to Olweus (2003). Olweus concludes that

the behavior of passive-submissive victims signals to others that they are insecure and worthless individuals, who will not retaliate if they are attacked or insulted.

Provocative Victims

Olweus (1978), furthermore, labeled a subgroup of victims as “the provocative victims.” They are characterized by a combination of both anxious and aggressive reaction patterns. This group of children often has problems with concentration, and behaves in ways that may cause irritation and tension in their surroundings, be it among fellow pupils or among teachers. They also risk social isolation or exclusion, because others perceive their behavior as annoying and aggressive. Hence they may bully younger and weaker children while being bullied themselves by older and more powerful children. Such targets may have a history of involvement in bullying situations, both as targets and as perpetrators.

Such bullying targets have also been studied among adults. A U.K. study of 5,288 adults in various workplace settings (Smith, Singer, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003) asked respondents to recall their experiences with childhood bullying. An association between childhood and workplace bullying was found: Former school victims were found to be more exposed to bullying at work. This childhood-adulthood link was especially pronounced among the bullying victims. Some 11% among former school victims and 13% among former school bully-victims reported that they were exposed to bullying at work. The corresponding numbers were found to be 9% for an ordinary student group as well for the former school bullies. Palmer and Thakordas (2005) made a study among 70 male imprisoned offenders. Here, the bully-victim group reported higher levels of hostility than the other offenders. In this selected prison sample, some 43% were categorized as belonging to the bully-victim group (12% were pure bullies and 16% were classified as pure victims).

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The first aim of the present study was to investigate whether targets and perpetrators of bullying at work portray certain personality characteristics. Second, what is the relative number of provocative victims among self-reported targets of bullying? Provocative victims are defined as those employees who admit to having bullied others at the work place as well as claiming to be targets of bullying. The third aim of the study was to ascertain the number of self-reported perpetrators of bullying in a diverse sample of leaders and employees. The fourth aim was to investigate whether role stress and role ambiguity characterize workplaces where bullying flourishes, creating a fertile soil for intense micropolitical behavior.

Micropolitical behavior, as measured by the concepts of role stress and role ambiguity, has been suggested as a major antecedent of bullying at work. We therefore suggest that bullying may be particularly common in work situations characterized by a high level of role stress. Unclear or conflicting demands and expectations around tasks, obligations, privileges, and priorities lay the foundation for a high level of micropolitical behavior among highly frustrated individuals, which will increase the risk of bullying behaviors. The following hypotheses will be investigated:

1. Provocative victims will report more prior acquaintance with bullying compared to others victims, be it in (a) former job(s) or (b) in their childhood. Provocative victims will also (c) report more childhood experiences as perpetrators of bullying.

2. Perpetrators of bullying will report high levels of aggression, a high but unstable level of self-esteem, and a low level of social competence.
3. Provocative victims will (a) report a low level of self-esteem, combined with a high level of aggressiveness, and low level of social competence. Targets of bullying will report a low level of self-esteem combined with a low level of social competence.
4. Targets of bullying, as well as provocative victims and perpetrators, will report an elevated level of role conflict and role ambiguity.

METHOD

Respondents

Respondents participating in this cross-sectional survey study were randomly selected members from six Norwegian labor unions and members of the Norwegian Employers' Federation (NHO). The participating unions, all situated in the geographical area around the city of Bergen, represented a convenient sample that reflected a diversity of work environments, hence increasing the validity and generalizability of the results. The labor unions included the Teachers Union, the Union of Hotel and Restaurant Workers, the Union of Trade and Commerce (consisting mainly of employees in shops and the administration of private businesses), the Union of Graphical Workers, the Union of Electricians, and the Union of Clericals and Officials (consisting of employees in the city administration of Bergen). All samples were studied as part of a more comprehensive research project on bullying and harassment in the workplace (see also Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen, & Hellesøy, 1994; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996).

A total of 4,742 labor union members and employers' representatives were selected from a total population of 10,616 individuals (a 47% response rate). The number of respondents (4,742) is equal to the number of valid questionnaires received. All of the questionnaires were distributed by mail. In the total sample 53% are men and 47% are women. All age groups between 16 and 70 are covered, with a mean age of 38 years ($SD = 11.9$). About 12% are 25 years of age or less, whereas 5% of the respondents are aged 60 or above. About 80% are employed on a full-time basis. Most of the respondents (62%) are employed in private enterprises. Thus, 38% are public employees. Furthermore, about 20% of the respondents work in organizations with more than 100 employees, and 9% in organizations with 5 or fewer employees.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire used in the present study consisted of demographic variables, health-related variables, scales on psychological traits, single questions and scales on harassment and bullying, and scales and questions measuring perceived work environment quality. The following scales and measurements were included in the present study.

Three single questions measured exposure to bullying at work during the last 6 months as well as earlier exposure to bullying (in present job, or in earlier jobs). Prior to these questions the respondents were presented with the following definition of bullying: "Bullying (harassment, badgering, niggling, freezing out, offending someone) is a problem in some workplaces and for some workers. To label something as bullying it has to occur repeatedly over a period of time, and the person confronted has to have difficulties defending

himself/herself. It is not bullying if two parties of approximately equal 'strength' are in conflict or the incident is an isolated event."

The question on exposure to bullying and harassment was stated as follows: "Have you been subjected to bullying at the work place during the last six months?" The response categories were: "no," "occasionally," "now and then," "about once a week," and "many times a week." All respondents who confirmed that they "occasionally" or more often were targets of bullying were defined as being exposed to bullying at work. This single question has been shown to be a valid measure of exposure to bullying at work (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Salin, 2001). The respondents were also asked if they had bullied others at the workplace. Respondents who confirmed that this was the case were defined as perpetrators of bullying. Provocative victims are those who claim to be both a victim and a perpetrator of bullying. Two additional questions addressed childhood experiences with bullying at school, be it as a target or a perpetrator of bullying. Two questions addressed earlier experiences of bullying at work.

In addition to the single questions on bullying, the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) and Bergen Bullying Index (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen, et al., 1994) were administered. The NAQ consists of 18 items measuring exposure to negative episodes or situations typical of bullying and may be regarded as a quantitative inventory on exposure to bullying, according to Einarsen and Raknes (1997) and Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001). The response categories for NAQ are "daily," "weekly," "sometimes," and "never." The Cronbach's alpha of NAQ was found to be 0.86, indicating a high internal stability. The Bergen Bullying Index is a global measurement of perceived individual and organizational consequences of bullying and harassment. It consists of five items, each scored on a 4-point Likert scale from "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly." The Cronbach's alpha was 0.82, indicating satisfactory internal stability.

Personality Traits. The study contained three measures of aggressive tendencies adopted from research on schoolyard bullying (Olweus, 1987, 1991). Aggression after provocation was measured by three items (with Cronbach's alpha = 0.76). Aggression against superiors contained two items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.52). Aggression against peers was measured by three items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.70). One measure on self-esteem was included in the study, measuring general self-esteem (Alsaker & Olweus, 1986; Rosenberg, 1965). The measure of general self-esteem, consisting of six items, had satisfactory internal stability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84). A four-item measure of social anxiety was also added (Alsaker & Olweus, 1986), measuring perceived incompetence and anxiety in social settings. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was found to be 0.73. In total, the personality inventories consisted of 25 items, all formulated as statements describing oneself as a person. Six response alternatives were applied, with the range from agree completely (1) to disagree completely (6). Negative statements were reversed, resulting in a positive-negative continuum for all scales, with a theoretical range of 1-6 points, with 1 denoting the most positive value.

Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity. These constructs were measured using two scales developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirzman (1970). Role conflict, consisting of eight items, measures the degree to which one perceives contradictory expectations, demands, or values in one's job. Role ambiguity, consisting of six items, measures the degree to which the respondents experience their job situation as unpredictable and not clarified. Both scales are scored on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "totally agree" to "totally disagree." Both scales are scored in a positive-negative direction, with 1 denoting the most positive value. Cronbach's alphas were found to be 0.78 and 0.81 for role conflict and role ambiguity, respectively.

Statistics. The data were analyzed by the use of SPSS 11.5 statistical package. The following analyses were performed: One-way ANOVA, reliability analysis with Cronbach's alpha, cross-tab analysis for categorical data, and frequency statistics.

RESULTS

Some 8% of the sample reported exposure to bullying at work (Figure 1). In addition, 2% can be defined as provocative victims. About 5% of the respondents admitted to being perpetrators of bullying at work. In sum, about 1 in 10 respondents reported to be a victim of bullying, whereas 1 in 20 acknowledged acting as a perpetrator of bullying. Respondents with no experience of bullying were used as a comparison group ($n = 1,838$).

Most provocative victims (78%) and most perpetrators (74%) were males ($\chi^2 = 34.32$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). Most targets and provocative victims (60% and 80%, respectively) were employed in private sector ($\chi^2 = 21.80$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). Both present and former targets of bullying, as well as perpetrators, were overrepresented in companies with 100 or more employees ($\chi^2 = 40.87$, $df = 15$, $p < .001$), and in companies with skewed gender distribution of either males or females ($\chi^2 = 31.62$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$). Union representatives made up about 25% of both the targets and the perpetrator groups, whereas they constituted 36% of the provocative victim group ($\chi^2 = 18.47$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). In the rest of the sample 18% were union representatives.

Acquaintance With Bullying

The first hypothesis addressed whether provocative victims would report more prior experiences with bullying compared to other victims, be it in former jobs or in their childhood. In general, the provocative victim group reported more former workplace experience as bullying targets, relative to all other groups. Thirty-two percent of the provocative victims admitted that they had been bullied earlier in their career, in another workplace. The corresponding number in the target group is 17%, 10% in the perpetrator group, and 5% in the comparison group. The group differences are significant ($\chi^2 = 77.54$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$).

The provocative victims also report more experienced bullying than do the others with respect to childhood experiences (Figure 2). Forty-eight percent of the provocative victims

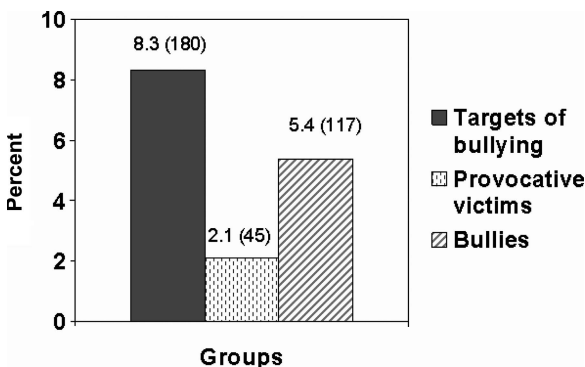


Figure 1. Three bullying groups, percentage distribution (number of respondents in parentheses). The comparison group is omitted (84.3%, $n = 1,838$).

claimed that they were bullied as children. In the target group, as well as among the bullies, the corresponding number was 27%, whereas 19% of the comparison group had experienced bullying in childhood ($\chi^2 = 53.18, df = 9, p < .001$). The provocative victims also frequently admit that they acted as bullies in their childhood. Forty-five percent in this group report childhood experiences as bullies. This number is higher than for the bullies (38%) and for the targets of bullying (14%). The group difference is significant ($\chi^2 = 94.38, df = 9, p < .001$). Summarized, we may regard the first hypothesis as confirmed.

Perpetrators

Our second hypothesis stated that perpetrators will report a high level of aggression, high but unstable self-esteem, and low social competence. The results showed that perpetrators scored significantly higher on aggressiveness compared to targets, provocative victims, and the comparison group (see Table 1 for details). The perpetrators describe themselves as more aggressive after provocation than the others ($M = 3.92$, as compared to mean values between 3.43 and 3.77 for the other three groups; two out of three LSD post hoc tests were significant). Correspondingly, the perpetrator group reported a higher level of aggression against superiors ($M = 3.58$, as compared to mean values between 3.40 and 3.50 for the other three groups; two out of three post hoc tests were significant). On the other hand, provocative victims reported a higher level of aggression against peers than did the other groups, including the perpetrator group ($M = 2.51$, whereas the mean values were 2.24 for the perpetrators, and 1.92 and 1.91 for the bullied victims group and the comparison group, respectively).

Reliability analyses using Cronbach's alpha were conducted to investigate the second part of the second hypothesis, predicting that the perpetrators have a high but unstable within-scale self-esteem. The hypothesis can be verified to the extent that the perpetrators report a high level of self-esteem combined with a low internal stability (that is, a markedly lower level of Cronbach's alpha than for the other three groups) on the scale measuring self-esteem. As shown in Table 1, perpetrators portray a higher level of self-esteem compared to the two target groups (lack of self esteem scores: $M = 2.28$ versus $M = 2.67$ for

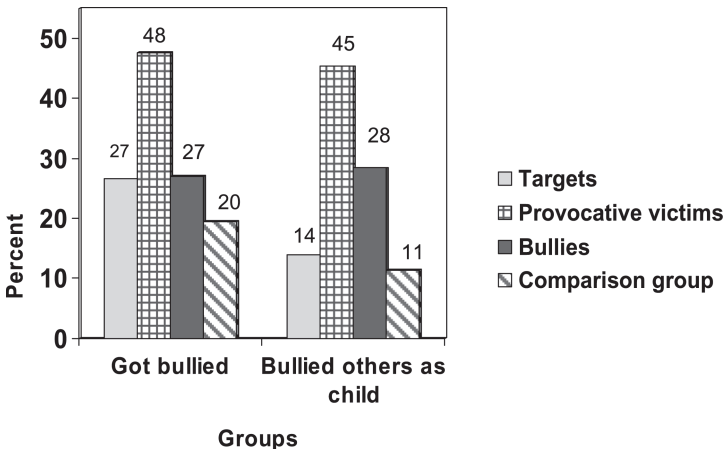


Figure 2. Childhood bullying experiences. Group comparisons ($\chi^2 = 53.19$ and $94.39, p < .001$ for both).

the target group and $M = 2.75$ for the provocative victim group). The highest level of self-esteem was reported by the comparison group (lack of self-esteem score of $M = 2.19$).

Unstable self-esteem can be reflected as low interitem reliability score, summarized as Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients. Whereas the Cronbach's alpha for the general self-esteem scale was found to be 0.76 in the perpetrator group, the corresponding numbers for the other groups were 0.82 (targets), 0.69 (provocative victims), and 0.81 (the comparison group). Hence, the perpetrator group seems to have a more unstable self-esteem than the comparison group, as the internal stability of the scale measuring self-esteem is somewhat lower. The provocative victims, who are also perpetrators themselves, portrayed an internal stability lower than 0.70 (that is, 0.69) on general self-esteem. Coefficient 0.70 is seen as the criterion for a sufficient level of internal stability by Nunnally (1978). Higher instability was also verified, using a sum score procedure, in which all combinations of self-esteem items minus the rest of the other items, compared separately, was calculated. The item comparisons were then summed up to constitute a measure of variability in one's response set. Thus, low score on the variability measure denotes high stability when responding to the items of the scale.

Using this procedure, it was found that the comparison group had the lowest level of self-esteem instability ($M = 23.54$, $SD = 7.79$), whereas the provocative victim group revealed the highest level ($M = 27.43$, $SD = 8.85$). The scores for the bullying target group and the perpetrator group were in-between (respectively $M = 25.12$, $SD = 9.18$ and $M = 24.66$, $SD = 7.50$). The group difference regarding self-esteem instability was significant (one-way ANOVA; $F(3/2064) = 5.56$, $p < .001$). Post hoc tests (LSD procedure) revealed that provocative victims had a more unstable self-esteem than the comparison group ($p = .01$), whereas the other group of bullies, the perpetrator group, did not differ. Summed up, the second hypothesis was partially verified. Only one of the perpetrator groups, the provocative victims, reported a higher self-esteem instability.

Targets and Provocative Victims

The third hypothesis indicated that provocative victims will report a low level of self-esteem, combined with a high level of aggressiveness and a low level of social competence. The hypothesis also states that targets of bullying will report a lower level of self-esteem combined with a lower level of social competence. The provocative victims scored lower on self-esteem and social competency than did the target group and the comparison group ($M = 2.75$ and $M = 2.67$, as opposed to $M = 2.67$ and $M = 2.53$ for the bullying target group and $M = 2.19$ and $M = 2.40$ for the comparison group). Thus, the provocative victim group, as target group, reports a lower level of social self-esteem and social competency than the comparison group. Correspondingly, Table 1 portrays that the provocative victims report more aggression than do targets of bullying, and also more than the comparison group (the three measures of aggression vary between $M = 3.77$ and $M = 2.51$ for the provocative victims, targets scored between $M = 3.43$ and $M = 1.92$, while the comparison group scored between $M = 3.63$ and $M = 1.91$). Only the perpetrator group report more aggression, in terms of aggression after provocation and aggression against superiors, than the provocative victim group. Provocative victims did, however, report more aggression against their friends as compared to the perpetrator group. In sum, the third hypothesis can be regarded as supported.

Role Stress

The fourth hypothesis stated that perpetrators, targets, and provocative victims will report an elevated level of role conflict and role ambiguity. High levels of such role stress may lead

TABLE 1. Personality Differences Between Targets, Provocative Bullied Victims, Bullies, and a Comparison Group

	Targets (1)	Provocative Victims (2)	Perpetrators (3)	Comparison Group (4)	Post hoc ^a	df	F
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)			
Lack of self-esteem and social competency							
General self-esteem	2.67 (1.05)	2.75 (0.91)	2.28 (.81)	2.19 (.85)	1 > 3-4, 2 > 3-4	3/ 2124	21,14***
Social competency	2.53 (0.85)	2.67 (0.68)	2.46 (0.68)	2.40 (0.72)	1 > 4	3/ 2130	3.21*
Aggression							
Aggression after provocation	3.43 (1.22)	3.77 (1.30)	3.92 (1.14)	3.63 (1.21)	1 < 3, 3 > 4	3/ 2130	3.94**
Aggression against superiors	3.40 (0.62)	3.50 (0.76)	3.58 (0.68)	3.41 (0.63)	1 < 3, 3 > 4	3/ 2124	3.03*
Aggression against friends	1.92 (0.82)	2.51 (1.22)	2.24 (0.79)	1.91 (0.81)	1 < 2-3, 2 > 4, 3 > 4	3/ 2130	12.78***

Note. One-way ANOVA with post hoc tests.

^a The numbers in post hoc column refer to significant pair-wise group comparisons. LSD procedure. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Range: 1-4, in which 1 reflects the most positive value.

TABLE 2. Variations in Micropolitical Behavior, Operationalized as Group Differences in Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity: Group Comparison of Targets, Provocative Bullied Victims, Bullies, and a Comparison Group

	Targets (1)	Provocative Victims (2)	Perpetrator Group (3)	Comparison Group (4)	Post Hoc Tests ^a	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>			
Role conflict	3.68 (1.21)	3.88 (1.13)	3.25 (1.11)	2.81 (1.13)	1 > 3-4, 2 > 3-4,	3/ 2132	45.99*
Role ambiguity	3.01 (1.17)	3.24 (1.20)	2.72 (0.91)	2.56 (0.93)	1 > 3-4, 2 > 3-4, 3 > 4	3/ 2130	18.58*

Note. One-way ANOVA with post hoc tests.

^aThe numbers in post hoc column refer to significant pair-wise group comparisons. LSD procedure.

**p* < .001. Range: 1-7, 1 reflects the most positive value.

to micropolitical behavior that in turn may be perceived as or may escalate into bullying, as aggression provoked by frustration, for example. Table 2 provides an overview of the group comparisons regarding role conflict and role ambiguity. One-way ANOVA statistics revealed significant group differences between the four subsamples ($p < .001$ for both role conflict and role ambiguity), with the three bullying groups reporting elevated levels of role stress compared to the comparison group. Table 1 portrays that the two groups of bullying targets, respectively provocative victims and the other target group, reported a higher level of role conflict ($M = 3.88$ and $M = 3.68$) than the perpetrator group ($M = 3.25$) and the comparison group ($M = 2.81$). The group differences are much the same for role ambiguity ($M = 3.01$ and $M = 3.24$, as compared to $M = 2.72$ and $M = 2.56$). The perpetrators also experienced significantly more role stress in terms of role ambiguity than did the comparison group, according to the post hoc test. In sum, the fourth hypothesis may therefore be regarded as supported.

DISCUSSION

The present study has shown that while some 8% claim to be targets of bullying at work, another 2% may be classified as provocative victims, a concept borrowed from schoolyard bullying studies (Olweus, 2003). Additionally, 4% claim to be perpetrators of bullying. Systematic exposure to negative social experiences in childhood, such as bullying, may cause serious negative aftereffects in adult life (e.g., a vulnerable personality). Thus, empirical findings indicate that persons who were victimized at school are more likely to be victimized in the workplace (Smith et al., 2003).

The target group, and especially the provocative victims, has more prior experiences with bullying than others. They reported more exposure to bullying in the schoolyard but also in former jobs. For many of the provocative victims, bullying experience in school also consisted of experiences as perpetrators. Nearly one in two had such experiences. The notion addressed in our first hypothesis was thus confirmed. Some of the provocative victims may possess what Levinson (1978) labeled as an "abrasive personality." An abrasive personality reflects a tendency to behave in an insensitive, ruthless way, especially when the person is confronted with social pressure situations.

This study did also reveal an elevated level of aggressiveness among the provocative victims. Brodsky (1976) has pointed this out quite categorically, claiming that "after studying harassers and studying their victims, it seemed that there was never a victim who would not have made an excellent harasser" (p. 109). This statement seems to be supported in the present study as far as the provocative victims are concerned. Among schoolchildren, Lorber, Felton, and Reid (1984) found that victims of abuse are more often likely to be disruptive, aggressive, and violent than their nonabused counterparts. They explained such results as socially learned behaviors.

A high level of self-esteem has generally been regarded as desirable and adaptive and has been used as an indicator of good adjustment (Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Schoolyard bullying research has indicated that the child bully in general seems to have high self-esteem (Olweus, 2003). In line with Olweus's notion, our findings portrayed that the adult perpetrator report a relatively high level of self-esteem. However, an Irish study of over 8,000 schoolchildren showed that children who had been involved in bullying as victims, were bullies, or both had significantly lower global self-esteem than did children who had neither bullied nor been bullied (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). The notion that perpetrators are characterized by elevated levels of self-esteem runs contrary to an entrenched

body of wisdom that has long pointed to low self-esteem as the root of violence and other destructive kinds of social behavior (Baumeister et al., 1996). Building on a theoretical assumption by Baumeister et al. that violent perpetrators are characterized by an elevated but unstable self-esteem, we proposed that perpetrators of workplace bullying will report an unstable self-esteem. This statement was only partially supported, however.

The perpetrators did report a somewhat lower level of self-esteem stability, operationalized as high interitem correlations between the self-esteem measure items, compared to victims and nonvictims in the comparison group, although above the recommended threshold for acceptable internal stability recommended by Nunnally (1978). However, a low stability, below the recommended threshold, was found among the provocative victims. Furthermore, a measure of variability in response set between items showed significant differences between the groups, where provocative targets, followed by victims, showed the highest variability in scores, again indicating unstable self-esteem. Thus, the second hypothesis in the present study was supported, but for the provocative victims only. However, it is possible that our applied six-item measure of general self-esteem is not adequate or sensitive enough as a measure of stability-instability in self-esteem. A longitudinal design would probably be better, looking at stability over time.

The perpetrators, comprising 5% of the sample, did report more aggressiveness than the victim group and the comparison group. The difference is unambiguous as perpetrators admit stronger aggressive reactions after provocations in the workplace. Correspondingly, the perpetrators also aggress more against superiors and against peers. This is in line with Olweus's (1994, 2003) findings from school bullying research. The bullies in the workplace tend to react more aggressively than others across different social situations. This may lend support to an aggressiveness hypothesis, that is: The perpetrators in general manifest a more aggressive behavioral pattern at the workplace than others. This aggressiveness has been described by Ashforth (1994) as "petty tyranny" among superiors. The workplace, and the bullying that take place therein, may be one of several modes and arenas for the expression of aggressiveness in general. In line with this finding, bullying behaviors have been found to be strongly related to high levels of overall aggression, physical and verbal aggression, hostility, and anger (Buss & Perry, 1992).

Our findings indicate that all targets of bullying, but especially the provocative victims, report a lower level of self-esteem and social competency than do perpetrators and the comparison group, in line with our third hypothesis. Research among schoolchildren has also found that provocative victims had the lowest self-esteem of the subgroups investigated (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). A possible explanation of this group difference may be that many victims possess a more fragile self-esteem, in accordance with Brockner's (1988) "plasticity hypothesis," an explanation also in line with our results on their unstable self-esteem. According to Brockner, individuals with so-called plastic self-esteem are very dependent on good work performance and positive appraisal from others to maintain their self-esteem. Hence, a low self-esteem may then easily become a consequence of bullying. The necessary self-esteem nurturance, leading to a stable, favorable global evaluation of oneself, thus cannot be obtained. It may also be that some of the targets of bullying feel frustrated or irritated because of lack of self-esteem support in the worksite, with the result that they act in a provocative manner, which others may perceive as a general lack of social competency. The low internal stability among provocative targets on the scale measuring self-esteem supports the hypothesis that these victims suffer from a fragile self-esteem.

The importance of social competency in relation to bullying is also demonstrated by Coyne et al. (2003) in their Irish workplace study. Self- and peer-reported victims tended

to be more likely than controls to have difficulty coping with personal criticism, to be easily upset, to view the world as threatening, to be anxious, tense, and suspicious of others. Among schoolchildren, social intelligence has been found to be negatively related to victimization (Kaukainen et al., 2002).

However, bullying has also been explained by references to factors in the psychosocial work environment (Leymann, 1996; Einarsen, 2000). For instance, bullying has been claimed to be a consequence of micropolitical behavior, rivalry, and competition in the worksite (Zapf et al., 2003). The compression of career structures resulting from delayering processes represents fewer opportunities for advancement in many workplaces, thereby increasing the competition between managers for promotion to a shrinking pool of jobs (Sheehan, 1999), with growing interpersonal conflict and bullying as possible outcomes (Hoel & Salin, 2003). Role stress, that is, work roles that interfere with each other (role conflict) or work roles that are experienced as unclear or confusing (role ambiguity) may indicate a certain need for micropolitical behavior. The fourth hypothesis in the present study addressed this issue, claiming that the perpetrator group in particular, with their self-reported bullying behavior, but also the two groups of bullying targets, would report this kind of job stress. The aforementioned hypothesis was supported. The perpetrator group portrayed a higher level of role stress indicative of a need for micropolitical behavior than did the comparison group. However, targets of bullying, both the provocative victims as well as the targets only, reported an even higher level of experienced role stress than did the perpetrators. Previous findings have shown that bullying seems to occur in stressful, competitive, and negative working environments (Vartia, 1996), in particular in workplaces with a high level of role conflict. Thus, it should come as no surprise that targets of bullying report exposure to micropolitical behavior reflected by role conflict and role ambiguity, equal to or even higher than levels experienced by the perpetrator group.

Methodological Constraints

The present study was conducted by the use of survey method. The respondents were asked about sensitive topics, issues that may have led them to respond with denial or social desirability. The respondents were asked not only if they felt subjected to bullying at the workplace, but also if they had acted as perpetrators themselves. Hence, an individual research level was applied (Matthiesen, Aasen, Holst, Wic, & Einarsen, 2003). The result may be valid to the extent that the respondents answered the questions in an honest way and in accordance with their inner, subjective experience. However, measurement of perpetrator behavior is methodologically difficult. The bullying definition presented in our study, and most other bullying studies, does not require any intention about bullying among the perpetrators to meet the definition. When someone is asked if they have bullied others, many will reject or deny the question, because they may never have had any intent to do so. Still, the other part in a dyadic relationship at the worksite may feel subjected to bullying. To admit perpetrator behavior in retrospect, thus, requires a certain level of empathy or skill to imagine social situations from the perspective of other people. "False negative" bullies or provocative victims may then pose a methodological problem in the present study. "False positives" may of course also exist, self-critical individuals who are eager to admit perpetrator behavior, but without ever being in the power position or acting in a manner where others actually feel subjected to bullying. Social desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) or guilt reduction (Sigmund Freud, see, e.g., Gomez, 2005) may cause perpetrators of bullying to reject that they act in the role of a bully.

Another limitation inherent within the present study is its cross-sectional design. The general self-esteem among the targets of bullying, and the proneness to express frustration or complex aggression overtly or covertly, may constitute a function of former bullying exposure, to give an example. The behavior pattern of the victims may have changed as a consequence of bullying. It is possible that some individuals possess a higher propensity to become troubled with bullying than most others, because they have a more vulnerable personality (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). Negative perceptions of the work situation have previously been found to be associated with workplace deviance, with personality traits such as conscientiousness, emotional stability, and agreeableness as moderating factors (Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt, & Barrick, 2004).

CONCLUSION

This study has portrayed, in line with previous research on bullying among children, that individual differences exist when perpetrators and targets of bullying are compared. Bullied victims can be divided into at least two groups: targets of bullying and provocative victims. The provocative victim group has only briefly been focused on in previous workplace research and deserves more attention. Correspondingly, it is time to shed more light on the perpetrator in workplace bullying, and not only from the perspective of the target. Only a few papers have been published so far, such as the aforementioned survey study carried out by Coyne et al. (2003), where perpetrators and their responses have been mapped. Most studies on workplace bullying are anecdotal in this respect, with the consequence that perpetrators mostly have been studied at a distance. This study may therefore provide an important contribution to the field by breaking the “at a distance” research habit regarding research on perpetrators of workplace bullying.

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