

## **Bullying and Harassment at Work and Their Relationships to Work Environment Quality: An Exploratory Study**

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The aim of this study is to explore relationships between organizational and social work conditions and the occurrence of bullying and harassment at work. Bullying and harassment are situations where a worker or supervisor is systematically mistreated and victimized by fellow workers or supervisors through repeated negative acts like insulting remarks and ridicule, verbal abuse, offensive teasing, isolation, and social exclusion, or the constant degrading of one's work and efforts. A postal questionnaire was distributed to 4200 members of six different labour unions, together with 500 representatives from the Norwegian Employers' Federation (NHO). Two thousand two hundred and fifteen responded, yielding a response rate of 47%. The results show that the occurrence of bullying and harassment is significantly correlated with all the seven measures of work environment used in the study. Low satisfaction with leadership, work control, social climate, and particularly the experience of role conflict, correlate most strongly with bullying. The results also show that different work conditions are related to bullying in different organizational settings. Only role conflict shows a partial correlation with bullying in all subsamples. Work conditions account for 10% of the variance in bullying, ranging from 7% to 24% in the different subsamples. The results show that both the victims of bullying and the observers of bullying report a low-quality work environment.

During the last 20 years, both sexual harassment in organizations and bullying among schoolchildren have been areas of great public interest and research (e.g. Brodsky, 1976; Gutek, 1985; Hadjifotiou, 1983; Kreps, 1993;

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Olweus, 1978, 1990). At work, bullying and harassment with no apparent link to sexuality or gender conflicts have, however, not received the same degree of attention. Hostile work environments in the form of repeated insulting or offensive remarks, persistent criticism, personal abuse, or even physical abuse and threats, are nevertheless a reality for employees in both public and private organizations (Adams, 1992a,b; Leymann, 1990; Wilson, 1991).

The qualities of human relationships at work are often seen as an important factor in people's perceptions of stress and job satisfaction. In spite of their likely importance, serious interpersonal conflicts and negative social interactions in the workplace have received limited attention in current research (Appelberg, Romanov, Honlasalo, & Koskenvuo, 1991; Kennan & Newton, 1984; Sørensen, 1992; van der Vliert, 1984). A search of the literature<sup>1</sup> covering the period from 1987 to 1993 revealed about 400 keyword references to "harassment" and 44 references to "bullying". However, almost every reference either dealt with sexual harassment or with bullying among schoolchildren. Some anecdotal clinical accounts of bullying and nonsexual harassment at work do however exist, and these comment on the strong negative effects persistent nonsexual harassment and bullying at work may have upon the victim's health and well-being (Adams, 1992a; Brodsky, 1976; Kile, 1990; Leymann, 1988; Thylefors, 1987).

According to Scandinavian research, bullying and harassment at work is a serious problem. At least 5% of the working population are currently bullied at work (Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen, & Hellesøy, 1994). Leymann (1992) even claimed that in Sweden each year about 100–300 workers commit suicide as a result of bullying and harassment at work. According to Adams (1992b), organizations failing to recognize and deal with bullying in the workplace may in fact be in breach of their legal responsibilities to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of their employees. Bullying and harassment at work is thus an area that deserves more attention by researchers, managers, and consultants than it has received so far.

### BULLYING AND HARASSMENT—DEFINED AND DESCRIBED

In the Scandinavian countries the term "mobbing" is widely used to refer to incidents of nonsexual and nonracial harassment at work, although sexual and racial harassment also can be implied in the term. The term "mobbing" or bullying refers to situations where an employee is persistently picked on or humiliated by leaders or fellow co-workers. Although the term "mobbing" originally referred to group aggression, the Scand-

<sup>1</sup>Using APA's PsychLit database.

avian term also includes situations where a single individual harasses another person (see also Olweus, 1990). In this presentation we will use the terms "bullying" and "harassment" interchangeably when referring to the Scandinavian term "mobbing".

A person is bullied or harassed when he or she feels repeatedly subjected to negative acts in the workplace, acts that the victim may find it difficult to defend themselves against. This definition builds on research on bullying in the schoolyard (Olweus, 1978, 1990, 1993) and stresses that bullying and harassment imply a difference in actual or perceived power and "strength" between the persecutor and the victim. Typically, a victim of harassment and bullying is teased, badgered, and insulted and perceives that he or she has little recourse to retaliation in kind (Brotsky, 1976). Our definition of bullying and harassment covers all situations in which one or more persons over a period of time feels subjected to negative acts that one cannot defend oneself against. Although a single serious episode, e.g. physical assault, can be regarded as bullying and harassment, our definition emphasises the term "repeated negative acts" (Olweus, 1990). Hence, serious conflicts between parties of "equal" strength or isolated episodes of conflict are not considered bullying.

In research among schoolchildren, Olweus (1978) has distinguished between "direct bullying", with open verbal or physical attacks on the victim, and "indirect bullying", which takes the form of more subtle acts, as excluding or isolating the victim from his or her peer group. Among 137 Norwegian victims of bullying and harassment at work, social isolation and exclusion, devaluation of one's work and efforts, and exposure to teasing, insulting remarks, and ridicule, were the most common negative acts, as reported by the victims (Einarsen et al., 1994).

## THEORETICAL MODELS OF HARASSMENT AND BULLYING AT WORK

Different causal models of bullying and harassment at work can be distinguished. From two decades of research on bullying among schoolchildren, Olweus (1990) concludes that the typical victim of bullying is more anxious and insecure than other students and is often seen as cautious, sensitive and quiet. The victims react with withdrawal when attacked, and they have a more negative self-esteem than other students. Bullies, on the other hand, are self-confident, impulsive and do not suffer from lack of self-esteem. They do, however, show a generally aggressive reaction pattern in many different situations. Victims of bullying and harassment at work have been described as conscientious, literal minded, and somewhat unsophisticated, often being overachievers with an unrealistic view of both themselves and their situation (Brotsky, 1976).

On the other hand, Brodsky (1976) also claimed that harassment may in fact be an inherent characteristic and a basic mechanism within all human interaction. A similar view was presented by Thylefors (1987), who regarded bullying as a scape-goating process found in most organizations. However, the causal model of bullying and harassment at work that has received most public attention in Scandinavia emphasizes the quality of the organization's work environment as the main determinant of such misconduct. Norwegian labour union officials, as well as governmental campaign agents, have strongly advocated such a situational view of the problem. According to this view, harassment is primarily caused by work environment and social environment problems within the organization. This view has been strongly supported by Leymann (1992), who stresses that personality factors are irrelevant to the study of bullying, and that work conditions alone are the primary cause of such behaviour and experiences.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There has been little research testing the work environment hypothesis on bullying and harassment at work so far. The aim of the present paper is therefore to explore the relationship between bullying and harassment at work and the organization's work environment quality as perceived by the employees. Work environment quality will be evaluated through aspects that are frequently cited as sources of job stress and job dissatisfaction such as role conflict and role ambiguity, under-utilization of skills, work-overload, resource inadequacy, lack of participation and co-worker interaction (Cummins, 1989). Interaction with supervisors and factors relating to leadership practice will also be included. A broad concept of work environment was considered most appropriate for this exploratory study, which investigates which of these factors are most strongly related to the occurrence of bullying and harassment, and how important work environment factors are in determining bullying and harassment in the workplace.

To increase the validity of the results, a wide range of organizational settings will be included in the study. This also offers us the opportunity to explore similarities and differences in the relationships between bullying and work environment quality across organizational settings. The research questions raised in this respect are whether work environment has a stronger relationship to bullying in some organizational settings than in others, and whether different factors are related to bullying and harassment in the different settings.

Situations where one person (the persecutor) offends, provokes, or otherwise angers a second person (the victim), often involve substantial discrepancies between the subjective perceptions and interpretations of the

conflicting participants (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). Victims may, for instance, perceive the work environment as negative as a consequence more of their own anger, disappointment, and anxiety, than of objective characteristics of their work environment. It is therefore necessary to look more closely into differences between the victims' perceptions of their work environment and the perceptions of their co-workers. Differences in the perceptions and evaluations of the work environment between victims, observers of bullying, and people without knowledge about harassment in their own workplace will therefore also be investigated.

## METHOD

### Respondents

Respondents were randomly selected from six different samples of labour union members and members of the Norwegian Employers' Federation (NHO). The labour unions include the Teachers Union, consisting of primary and secondary school teachers, 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. The participating unions, all from the geographical area in or around Bergen on the west coast of Norway, represented a convenient sample to reflect a diversity of work environments and hence increase the validity of the results. All samples were studied as part of a more comprehensive research project on bullying and harassment in the workplace (see also Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen, & Hellesøy, 1990).

A total of 4742 labour union members and employers' representatives were selected randomly from a total population of 10,611. Table 1 shows population, sample, and response rate for each subsample. An anonymous self-administered postal questionnaire was mailed to each participant, a total of 2215 people responded (a 47% response rate). As shown in Table 1, the response rate varied substantially from sample to sample.

In the total sample 52.6% are men and 47.4% women. All age groups between 17 and 70 are covered, with a mean age of 38 years (SD 11.9). While 4.8% of the respondents are aged 60 or above, 12.1% are 25 or less. As many as 80.1% are employed on a full-time basis. Most of the respondents, 61.5%, are employed in private enterprises. The rest (38.5%) are in public employment. Whereas 19.5% of the respondents work in organizations with more than 100 employees, 8.7% report working in organizations with five or fewer employees. The main demographic characteristics of each sample are given in Table 2.

TABLE 1  
Membership Number, Sample<sup>a</sup>, Number of Responses, and Response Rate  
in Each Subsample

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>	<i>Response Rate (%)</i>
Teachers Union	2700	945	554	59
Trade and Commerce Union	2800	940	383	41
Clerical and Officials Union	974	470	265	56
Graphical Workers Union	800	397	159	40
Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union	1187	490	172	35
Electricians Union	1100	1020	480	47
Employers' Federation	1050	480	181	38
Total <sup>b</sup>	10,611	4742	2215	47

<sup>a</sup>These numbers are corrected for questionnaires returned with "addresses unknown".

<sup>b</sup>21 respondents did not indicate organizational membership.

TABLE 2  
Main Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents in Each Subsample

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Sex Ratio</i>		<i>Age (Mean &amp; SD)</i>	<i>Years of Service<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>In Public Employment</i>
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>			
Teachers Union	39%	61%	41.6 yrs SD = 9.0	10.0 yrs	99.3%
Trade and Commerce Union	23%	77%	38.0 yrs SD = 13.8	8.3 yrs	3.7%
Clerical and Officials Union	22%	78%	41.8 yrs SD = 12.5	9.0 yrs	92.3%
Graphical Workers Union	85%	15%	41.4 yrs SD = 12.4	14.1 yrs	6.5%
Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union	28%	78%	32.5 yrs SD = 11.4	5.8 yrs	3.7%
Electricians Union	97%	3%	33.4 yrs SD = 10.8	9.2 yrs	0.4%
Employers' Federation	79%	21%	42.3 yrs SD = 10.8	12.3 yrs	2.9%

<sup>a</sup>This refers only to the respondent's current employment, not to union membership seniority or to overall seniority in profession or work life.

## Questionnaires

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

*Bullying and Harassment.* A large proportion of the questionnaire covered various aspects of bullying and harassment in the workplace. Before answering these questions the respondents were introduced to the following definition of bullying and harassment.<sup>2</sup>

Bullying (harassment, badgering, niggling, freezing out, offending someone) is a problem in some workplaces and for some workers. To call something bullying it has to occur repeatedly over a period of time, and the person confronted has to experience difficulty in defending himself or herself. It is not bullying if two people of approximately equal "strength" are in conflict or the incident is an isolated event.

Three measures of bullying and harassment were used: two single questions and one index. The single questions addressed, first, whether the respondents themselves have been subjected to bullying during the last six months and, second, whether they have observed someone else being bullied at their own workplace the last six months. The question on actual exposure to bullying and harassment was stated as follows: "Have you been subjected to bullying at the workplace during the last six months?", with the following options "no", "seldom", "now and then", "about once a week", and "many times a week". The second question was stated: "Have you seen others being subjected to bullying at your workplace during the last six months?". This question had the options "yes" and "no".

The third measure of bullying was an index measuring the degree to which bullying is perceived to be a problem at one's workplace and for oneself personally. This measure, called the "Bergen Bullying Index", is a global measurement of potential individual and organizational consequences of bullying and harassment. Scales and single question measurements have both also been used in studies of bullying among children (Alsaker, 1989; Olweus, 1978, 1990). The index will be used to explore the relationships between bullying/harassment and work environment quality. Since the scale does not distinguish between observers and victims, the single questions will be used when investigating differences in work environment perceptions between victims, observers, and other workers.

The Bergen Bullying Index consisted of five items, each scored on a four-point Likert scale from "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly". The index had an acceptable internal stability (Cronbach alpha = 0.86) with all item total correlations above 0.60 (using the data of the present study). Table 3 shows the items and item total loadings on the scale.

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<sup>2</sup>The actual term used is the word "mobbing". Mobbing is the Scandinavian term for phenomenon which in English would be labelled bullying and harassment. Origin and use of the term "mobbing" is discussed by Olweus, 1990. The definition used is adopted from Olweus' (1978, 1990, 1993) research on schoolchildren, presented in studies on over 100,000 Scandinavian children.

TABLE 3  
Items and Corrected Item Total Loadings for the  
Bergen Bullying Index

<i>Item</i>	<i>Item Loading</i>
Bullying is a serious strain in my daily work	0.62
Bullying at my workplace reduces our efficiency	0.74
Bullying at my workplace reduces my well-being	0.74
Bullying is a serious problem at my workplace	0.61
Bullying at my workplace reduces my work motivation	0.73

N = 2190.

*Work Environment Questionnaire.* All participants were asked to rate 32 different aspects of their work environment by stating how satisfied they were with each of these aspects. The scale was derived from O'Brien, Dowling, & Kobanoff (1977) and Marek, Tangenes, and Hellesøy (1984), with several new items included for this study. In our sample, a factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed five factors with Eigenvalue > 1 prior to rotation, accounting for 57.0% of the variance. The first factor alone accounted for 35.0% of the variance (Eigenvalue 10.84). None of the other factors accounted for more than 8% (Eigenvalues from 2.37 to 1.28). The five factors were labelled Challenge, Social Climate, Leadership, Work Control, and Work-load. Table 4 shows items and factor loadings for each factor after varimax rotation.

TABLE 4  
Items and Factor Loadings in the Work Environment Questionnaire After Factor  
Analysis with Varimax Rotation

<i>How Satisfied are You with . . . ?</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
<b>Factor 1: Challenge</b>					
1. The possibilities of using your abilities and qualifications?	0.60				
2. The possibilities of learning new things?	0.72				
3. Changes and variation in your job?	0.75				
4. The possibilities of doing different jobs?	0.74				
5. The possibilities of doing something really useful?					
6. The possibilities of advancement and promotion?					
7. The possibilities of doing challenging and interesting work?					
8. The possibilities of personal growth and development?	0.70				

Continued

TABLE 4  
Continued

<i>How Satisfied are You with</i> ?	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
<b>Factor 2: Social Climate</b>					
1. The people you talk to and work with?					
2. The possibilities of getting to know other people at work?					
3. The respect and social support you experience at work?					
4. The co-operation relationship with your closest colleagues?					
5. The co-operation relationship with your working group?					
6. The co-operation relationship with any subordinates?					
<b>Factor 3: Leadership</b>					
1. The quality of guidance and support?			0.66		
2. The clarity of your working instructions?			0.55		
3. The management's organization and adaptation of the work you are to perform?			0.75		
4. The feedback you receive on the work and the tasks you perform?			0.72		
5. The recognition you receive for your performance at work?			0.63		
6. The co-operation relationship with your closest superior?			0.63		
<b>Factor 4: Work Control</b>					
1. The possibilities of deciding the way you do your job?				0.69	
2. The possibilities of doing your job without interference from your superior?				0.68	
3. The possibilities of changing the parts you dislike about your job?				0.61	
<b>Factor 5: Work-load</b>					
1. The possibilities of having sufficient time to do your job properly?					0.77
2. The degree of hustle and bustle at work?					0.74
3. The equipment and tools you have access to at work?					0.54
4. Logistical and practical conditions at work?					0.45

All factor loadings below 0.40 are excluded from the matrix; N = 2190.

*Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity.* This was measured using a scale originally developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtsman (1970), but translated from Cook, Hepworth, Wall, and Warr (1981). 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 perceive their

job situation as predictable and clarified. Both scales are scored on a seven-point continuum ranging from "totally agree" to "totally disagree". Both scales had a satisfactory internal stability in this sample ( $\alpha = 0.78$  and  $0.81$  for role conflict and role ambiguity respectively).

## RESULTS

A one-way analysis of variance on the bullying index showed that the degree of bullying differed significantly between the seven subsamples ( $F = 15.40$ ,  $Df 1/1997$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). The teachers and the employers' representatives reported least bullying and the graphical workers and the hotel and restaurant workers reported the highest level of bullying at work. No significant differences were found between men and women.

Pearson's product-moment correlations were then computed between the bullying index and each of the work environment factors using the mean scores of each index. This was done both for the total sample and for each subsample. Table 5 provides an overview of these results. As can be seen, the degree of bullying perceived by the respondents correlates significantly with all seven work environment factors ( $P < 0.001$  for all correlations). The directions of the correlations show that a high degree of bullying is associated with low satisfaction with work-load, work control, social climate, leadership, and challenge, and with a high degree of role conflict and role ambiguity. In the total sample the factors leadership ( $r = 0.26$ ), work control ( $r = 0.24$ ), and role conflict ( $r = 0.26$ ) are those most strongly correlated with bullying.

Both the work environment factors most strongly related to bullying and the overall level of relationships between bullying and work environment quality vary between the subsamples (Table 5). Among teachers, social climate ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and leadership ( $r = 0.27$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) are the factors most strongly correlated with bullying, while only role conflict is related to bullying among the the employers' representatives ( $r = 0.17$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). In the sample of graphical workers, leadership ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and role conflict ( $r = 0.39$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) are the strongest correlated variables. The strongest correlations between bullying and work environment are also found in this sample. In the group of trade and commerce workers role conflict ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), leadership ( $r = 0.34$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), and work control ( $r = 0.33$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) were the most important work environment factors according to the correlational analyses. Among the electricians, leadership is the lowest correlated factor ( $r = 0.13$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). Among officials and clericals only social climate ( $r = 0.18$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), leadership ( $r = 0.21$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), and role conflict ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) correlate with the degree of bullying that is reported by the respondents. All other factors had a non-significant relationship with bullying in this sample.

TABLE 5  
Pearson Product–Moment Correlations Between Bullying and Work Environment

	<i>Total Sample N = 2117</i>	<i>Teachers Union N = 545</i>	<i>Clerical and Officials Union N = 250</i>	<i>Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union N = 166</i>	<i>Electricians Union N = 466</i>	<i>Trade and Commerce Union N = 362</i>	<i>Graphical Workers Union N = 151</i>	<i>Employers' Federation N = 169</i>
Challenge	0.19***	0.20***	ns	0.18*	0.15**	0.19***	0.29***	ns
Social climate	0.19***	0.30***	0.18**	0.20**	0.19***	0.20***	0.25**	ns
Leadership	0.26***	0.27***	0.20**	0.28***	0.13**	0.34***	0.45***	ns
Work control	0.24***	0.17***	ns	0.29***	0.19***	0.33***	0.27**	ns
Work-load	0.14***	0.20***	ns	0.25**	0.17***	0.26***	0.23**	ns
Role conflict	0.26***	0.22***	0.26***	0.27***	0.23***	0.30***	0.39***	0.17*
Role ambiguity	0.11***	0.22***	ns	ns	0.11*	0.16**	0.26**	ns

ns = non-significant; \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \* $P < 0.05$ .

Since the work environment factors considered in this study often overlap to a significant degree (Cranny, Smith, & Stone, 1992; Marek, Tangenes, & Hellesøy, 1984), a stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to investigate which of the factors that were most strongly connected to bullying. The bullying index was the dependent variable in this analysis. The analyses were computed for both the total sample and for each subsample. The results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 6 using standardized beta scores. The multiple regression analysis confirms the results reported above, where bullying seems mainly to be associated with role conflict, leadership, and work control, although this pattern shows some variations among the subsamples. Taken together, these work environment factors explain 10% of the variation in bullying in the total sample ( $R = 0.32$ ,  $R^2 = 0.10$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Among graphical workers 24% of the variation in bullying is explained by the quality of the work environment as measured in this study ( $R = 0.49$ ,  $R^2 = 0.24$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ).

The bullying index measures the degree to which bullying is considered a problem for the individual respondent and his or her workplace. It does not, however, differentiate clearly between victims of harassment and observers of harassment. By combining the responses given to the questions "Have you been subjected to bullying at the workplace during the last six months?" and "Have you seen others being subjected to bullying at your worksite during the last six months?" it was possible to make a distinction among victims, observers, and non-observers of bullying. Out of 2023 respondents a total of 13.0% ( $N = 262$ ) were rated as observers of harassment, 7.0% ( $N = 141$ ) were rated as observers and victims, while 2.7% ( $N = 55$ ) were rated as victims. The rest of the respondents were considered non-observers (86.9%,  $N = 1757$ ). The term observers refers to respondents who are not bullied themselves, but who report knowledge of others being bullied at their worksite. Non-observers are respondents who neither report knowledge of others being bullied nor are they bullied themselves. Victims/observers are respondents who are victims of bullying in the last six months and also report knowledge of other victims at their present worksite. The last group, the victims, are presently subjected to bullying but report no knowledge of other victims at their own worksite.

One-way ANOVA with Least Significant Difference (LSD) were computed for the four groups on each of the work environment measures that were found to be most strongly related to bullying, namely Leadership, Work Control, Role Conflict, and Social Climate. The analysis showed significant and similar results on all four dimensions. The non-observers evaluated their work environment consistently more positively than did both victims and observers (see Fig. 1).

On work control (overall statistics:  $F = 35.31$ ,  $df = 3/1997$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), the non-observers rated their work environment significantly more

TABLE 6  
 Partial Correlations Between Bullying and Work Environment After Multiple Regression Analysis

	<i>Total Sample N = 2063</i>	<i>Teachers Union N = 539</i>	<i>Clerical and Officials Union N = 255</i>	<i>Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union N = 161</i>	<i>Electricians Union N = 449</i>	<i>Trade and Commerce Union N = 355</i>	<i>Graphical Workers Union N = 148</i>	<i>Employers' Federation N = 161</i>
Challenge	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Social climate	0.05*	0.19***	ns	ns	0.12**	ns	ns	ns
Leadership	0.16***	0.12*	ns	ns	ns	0.24**	0.36***	ns
Work control	0.11***	ns	ns	0.23**	ns	0.25**	ns	ns
Work-load	-0.07*	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Role conflict	0.18***	0.11*	0.24***	0.21**	0.19**	0.15**	0.20**	0.16*
Role ambiguity	-0.08**	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
	R = 0.32*** R <sup>2</sup> = 0.10	R = 0.34*** R <sup>2</sup> = 0.11	R = 0.26*** R <sup>2</sup> = 0.07	R = 0.38*** R <sup>2</sup> = 0.15	R = 0.26*** R <sup>2</sup> = 0.07	R = 0.41 R <sup>2</sup> = 0.17	R = 0.49*** R <sup>2</sup> = 0.24	R = 0.17* R <sup>2</sup> = 0.03

Partial correlations are presented as standardized beta weights; ns = non-significant; \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \* $P < 0.05$ .

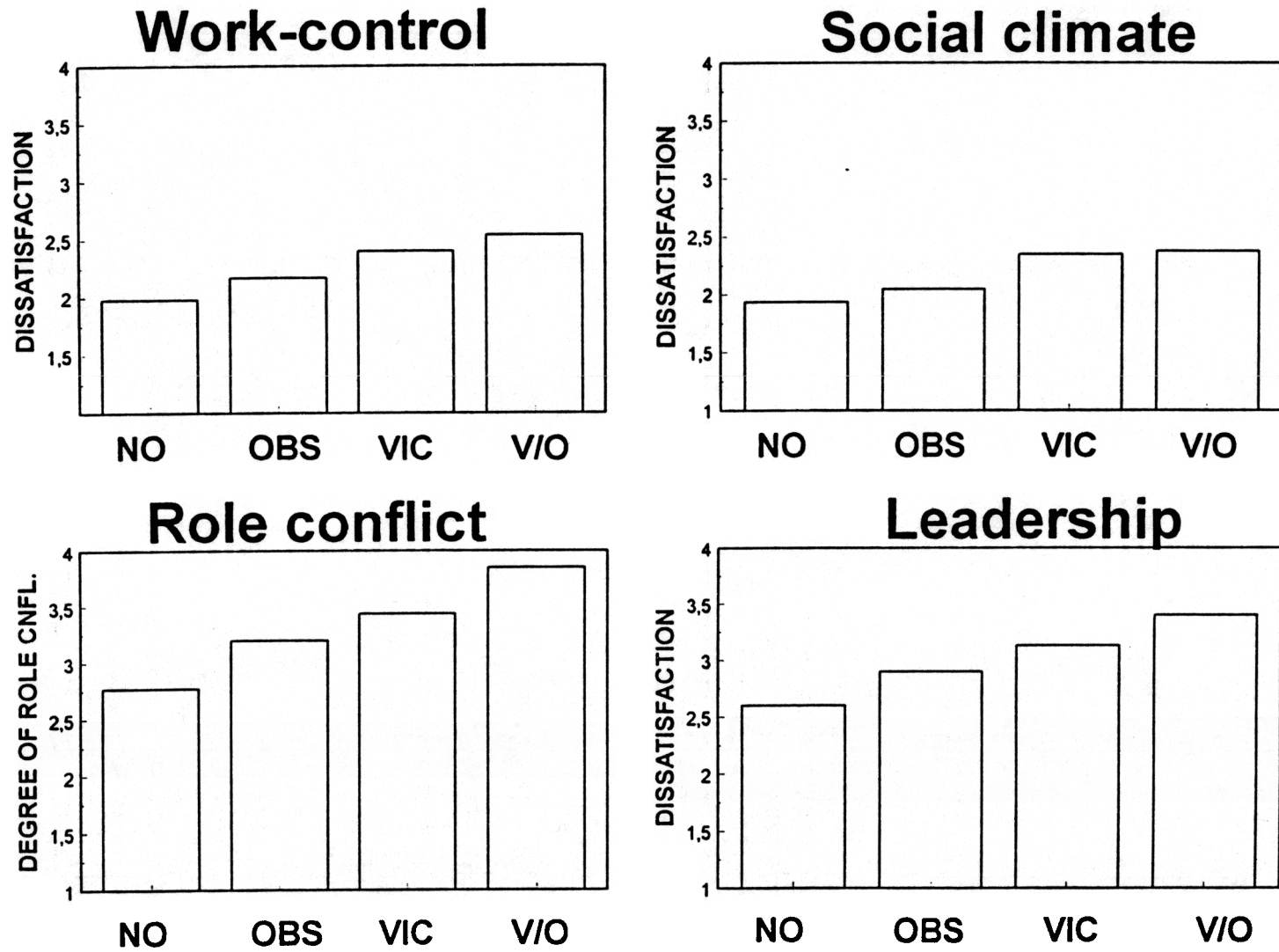


FIG. 1. Work environment evaluations made by non-observers (NO), observers (OBS), victims (VIC), and victims/observers (V/O). High scores denote negative evaluations.

positively than both observers and victims ( $P < 0.05$ ), while the observers were also significantly more positive than the two groups of victims ( $P < 0.05$ ). The results were identical on the social climate dimension ( $F = 40.68$ ,  $df = 3/1993$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). On role conflict ( $F = 50.21$ ,  $df = 3/1976$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) it was also found that the non-observers differed significantly from all other groups ( $P < 0.001$ ). The observers did not differ significantly from the victims on this dimension ( $P > 0.05$ ). The results revealed that the respondents who were both victims and observers had significantly more role conflict in their jobs than the observers, the victims, and the non-observers ( $P < 0.001$ ). On the leadership dimension we found significant differences between all four groups (overall:  $F = 67.15$ ,  $df = 3/1992$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ).

These analyses were computed for the total sample only. A factorial ANOVA with a Hierarchical Multiple Classification Analysis showed, however, that the differences found between observers, victims, and non-observers were not distorted by subsample differences. Union membership did not affect the mean differences between the groups on any of the four work environment measures involved, although the degree of bullying varied from union to union.

## DISCUSSION

According to Cooper and Payne (1978) and van der Vliert (1984), a wide range of work environment factors may act as precursors to organizational stress and interpersonal conflict. However, no previous other study has been published which investigates the impact of work environment on bullying and harassment in the workplace. Although exploratory in nature, this study therefore gives the first empirical support to the role of work environment factors in bullying and victimization in organizations.

The occurrence of bullying and harassment correlates significantly with several different aspects of the organizational and social work environment. Both the correlations and the regression analysis show, nevertheless, that leadership, role conflict, and work control are the most important factors in predicting such experiences at work. The quality of the interpersonal relationships within the immediate work group (social climate) is also of importance in some organizational settings. Role conflict is, however, the only variable which shows a partial correlation with harassment and bullying within all seven organizational settings. The study also shows that it is not only the victims who suffer from an ill-conditioned work environment; observers of bullying report an elevated level of role conflict as well as dissatisfaction with the social climate, the leaders of the organization, and the possibilities of monitoring their own work.

In a Finnish study, Appelberg et al. (1991) found a relationship between work-related factors (hectic and monotonous work) and the experience of interpersonal conflicts and problems at work. Significant relationships between harassment/bullying and both work-overload and monotonous and unchallenging work are also found in the present study. What our study indicates, however, is that it is not necessarily hectic and monotonous work in itself that causes serious interpersonal conflicts at work, but rather the lack of possibilities to monitor and control one's own work and the lack of clear and unconflicting goals as well as the lack of constructive leadership within this situation.

Both role conflict and lack of self-monitoring opportunities are seen as strong sources of work stress and emotional distress (Daniels & Guppy, 1992; French & Caplan, 1972). The tension, stress, and frustration caused by a job situation characterized by high role conflict, lack of self-monitoring possibilities, and poor performing supervisors can therefore in itself be perceived as harassment when attributed to hostile personal intentions. Role conflict and lack of work control can also be related to bullying and harassment through its creation of elevated tension, stress, and frustration in the workgroup. This situation, then, can act as a precursor of conflict and poor inter-worker relationships. The experience of high work strain is generally found to have a negative impact on a person's relationships with colleagues (French & Caplan, 1972; Marcelissen, Winnbust, Buunk, & de Wolff, 1988).

Although the impact of both role ambiguity and role conflict on stress, frustration, conflicts, and other job-related attitudes and behaviours in a work group is pervasive (Netemeyer, Johnston, & Burton, 1990), in this case it is role conflict that is most strongly related to bullying and harassment. In a study of precursors of organizational frustration it was also found that role conflict contributed more than any other measures of role stress (Kennan & Newton, 1984). This fact was then explained through role conflict's production of angry reactions and latent hostility. Since it may be less obvious that role ambiguity is a result of someone's behaviour, it may also be less obviously attributed to someone's actions and intentions. Conflicting demands around tasks, obligations, privileges, and priorities as measured by role conflict may therefore be a more notable risk factor for poor relations among co-workers and between subordinates and supervisors (French & Caplan, 1972). Bullying and harassment may, then, be behavioural strategies used in the interpersonal conflicts that can arise from these conflicting demands. It is also possible that the victim perceives the sender of conflicting demands as a bully, in the sense that these demands are experienced as threatening and difficult to guard against. Also, a victim can be harassed as a consequence of the resentment and personal offence that the rejection of demands could bring.

Theoretically, at least two frameworks can account for the relationships between work environment and bullying found in this study. According to the revised frustration–aggression hypothesis (Berkowitz, 1989) a high-stress work situation can lead to aggressive behaviour through the production of negative affect. In the context of the present study this implies that harassment and bullying may flourish in ill-conditioned work environments, most probably through environmental effects on aggressive behaviour. The fact that observers of bullying report a more negative work environment than other respondents yields some support to this position. Alternatively, a social interactionist approach to aggression (Felson, 1992; Felson & Tedeschi, 1993) would argue that stressful events will indirectly affect aggression through its effect on the victim's behaviour. Distressed persons may violate expectations, annoy others, perform less competently, and even violate social norms describing polite and friendly interactions (Felson, 1992) and, hence, elicit aggressive behaviour in others. Since victims do report significantly more role conflict than the observers of bullying, this explanation of the actual process cannot be ruled out.

A more structured test on these competing theoretical models requires that both bullies/perpetrators and victims participate in a study on bullying and work environment. According to the social interactionist view, victims should report more work stress than bullies and perpetrators. On the other hand, the frustration–aggression hypothesis would predict that the bullies should have the highest level of work stress. Minimally, they should report a similarly high level of work stress to the observers.

In some subsamples, the leadership variable is strongly correlated with bullying at work. This may suggest that bullying is a symptom of inadequate leadership, even when the aggressors are co-workers or colleagues. While two out of five victims in this study report their immediate supervisor as the persecutor, 50% see co-workers as the bullies (Einarsen et al., 1994). The relationship between bullying and leadership evaluation can therefore be a function of workers describing a bully–supervisor, or it can reflect that such (mis)behaviour prospers in a group where there is a lack of firm leadership. The results therefore support Brodsky's (1976) view that the harassment elements must exist within a culture that permits and rewards harassment for harassment to occur. Thus, harassment is inevitably linked to an organization's leadership system.

Yet, the findings of the present study show that bullying and harassment are related to different aspects of the work environment in different kinds of organizations. The explanation of these findings may be found both in the unique characteristics of these organizational settings and in the nature of the work involved. For instance, among electricians the regression analysis shows that bullying is not related to leadership, but relates mainly to climate and role conflict; from the nature of their work, this does not

seem unreasonable. Electricians work in pairs or in groups moving around between different worksites. They have little or no daily interaction with their supervisors, but interact highly with co-workers and workers in other groups and organizations. The ability and leadership style of their supervisor is therefore in itself of minor importance for the performance and well-being of the workers. In contrast, many graphical workers are employed in small businesses, often supervised by the owner. In these organizations, leadership is a much more salient factor than among the electricians. The leadership factor was clearly the strongest predictor of bullying in that subsample. Among teachers, the social-psychological climate of the work group is a stronger predictor of bullying than are leadership and work control. Traditionally, teachers are very independent in their work, with little or no supervision. Thus, the collegial group and the classroom climate may be more salient factors regarding job satisfaction and job stress.

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss in detail the differences found between the subsamples. These results, nevertheless, suggest that future research on work environment and harassment must include organizational setting as an important variable. This conclusion is also made by Knapp, Putnam, and Davis (1988) who claim that organizational setting should be brought to the forefront of research on interpersonal conflicts in organizations.

The results of this study suggest that it is unlikely that bullying and harassment can be explained exclusively in terms of work conditions. In none of the subsamples did work environment factors account for more than 24% of the variance in bullying. Overall, only about 10% of the bullying can be explained in terms of work environment conditions. These results hardly seem to justify Leymann's (1992) position that work environment conditions are the sole causes of bullying and harassment at work. Although research on personality and conflict management has revealed some mixed results (Utley, Richardson, & Pilkington, 1989), personality is seen as the prominent factor in a person's capability of operating in his or her social environment (Appelberg et al., 1991).

In studies on bullying among children, personality traits are found to be of great importance in both predicting aggressive behaviour and becoming a target of aggression (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Olweus, 1990). Also, French and Caplan (1972) claim that personality traits are highly important in relationships with role conflict. The study of work environment conditions and bullying at work should therefore be extended to include personality factors. In addition, personality and work environment should be studied as interacting variables within a person-environment fit perspective (see also Edwards, 1991).

## Methodological Limitations

Some methodological concerns about the present study must be mentioned. First, the correlational design permits no inferences to the causality of the work environment factors with regard to bullying and harassment. It could be argued that bullying may cause a deterioration of the workers' trust in their supervisor and a high degree of tension and conflict in the work group, combined with a low degree of trust and respect, which could account for the results found in this study. A vicious circle of events and conduct may also account for the relationships found. In a climate with poor inter-worker relationships and a poor-performing supervisor, serious interpersonal conflicts and harassment may occur more often than in other groups. This may then cause an even worse relationship between co-workers and perhaps expose the supervisor's inability to handle interpersonal problems and conflicts. Longitudinal or experimental studies must be conducted before conclusions can be made on the causality between work environment and bullying and harassment in the workplace.

Perhaps the most interesting and important results in the study concerns the work environment perceptions made by the observers of bullying and harassment. The observers are employees who are not harassed themselves, but acknowledge that others are bullied in their workplace. The results show that, although to a lesser degree than the victims, the observers also experience a high degree of role conflict and express dissatisfaction with their work environment. These results therefore give us some evidence that low work environment quality is a prevailing characteristic of workplaces where bullying and harassment prosper.

However, as the individual was the level of analysis in this study, the results cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as expressions of the work environment quality on an organizational level. As the victims and the observers may very well come from different organizations, and even regard different conduct and situations as bullying, the results must still be considered preliminary.

Hence, studies that allow the aggregation of individual level results to organizational or workgroup level, studies that include observer/victim reliability investigations and studies with a longitudinal design must be conducted in this field before conclusions can be drawn on the relationships between work environment and the occurrence of bullying and harassment within organizations.

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