



The paradoxical effect of social support on the relationship between exposure to bullying behaviors and perceived power imbalance

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Abstract

Power imbalance is a core characteristic in many definitions of workplace bullying. Yet, research on preventive and conditional factors related to power imbalance remains limited. This study investigates whether social support from the supervisor and colleagues moderates the relationship between exposure to bullying behaviors and the perceived power imbalance with the perpetrator(s), as seen from the target's perspective. Grounded in conservation of resources theory, we hypothesized that both types of social support would mitigate this relationship. Drawing on data from 374 Norwegian child welfare social workers, findings from a bootstrapped general linear model with tests for interaction effects contradicted this expectation. Instead, colleague- and supervisor-support were found to exacerbate the positive association between bullying behaviors and perceived power imbalance. More specifically, results indicated that in the context of low exposure, targets experienced less power imbalance when they have access to social support. In cases of high exposure, bullying behaviors were associated with high power imbalance, irrespective of levels of support. Such a reversed buffering effect may be explained by considering the nature of the support provided: while emotional support may heighten the target's awareness of the bullying without alleviating the mistreatment itself, instrumental support may be most effective to help reduce the power imbalance. Thus, the type of support received may be critical in influencing the perceived power dynamics in bullying situations.

Keywords Aggression · Harassment · Defenselessness · Resources · Prevention

Workplace bullying is commonly understood as an escalating process involving two phases (Nielsen et al., 2022). Initially, an employee is exposed to repeated negative and unwanted behaviors from one or more perpetrators and where the exposure intensifies over time (Einarsen, 1999). Prolonged exposure leads to the second phase, in which the

target perceives a psychological power imbalance, making it difficult to retaliate or stop the mistreatment (Einarsen, 1999). This perceived inferiority can foster feelings of helplessness. Accordingly, workplace bullying is defined by both systematic exposure to negative behaviors and the target's impaired ability to defend themselves.

Despite the central role of power imbalance in this process, most empirical research has focused on exposure to bullying behaviors, with power dynamics often overlooked, assumed, or addressed only conceptually (De Cieri et al., 2019). Existing empirical studies have primarily examined how bullying and power imbalance jointly affect outcomes such as anxiety (Nielsen et al., 2017), turnover intention (Nielsen et al., 2022), and future risk of harassment (Rosander & Nielsen, 2023a), rather than exploring how power imbalance develops or under what conditions it is most strongly perceived. Hence, exploring factors that moderate this dynamic could uncover how and why some individuals are more resilient than others when facing bullying behaviors

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in the workplace. Such knowledge is highly important for guiding intervention and prevention strategies.

While there is a shortage of quantitative studies on factors that may alter power imbalance, a noteworthy finding from a qualitative study that explored how targets of workplace bullying may reduce power imbalance between themselves and the perpetrator(s) was that the experience of social support from others when exposed to bullying may contribute to shifting the power balance in favor of the target (Mishra et al., 2021). To further substantiate the potential role of social support as a conditional counteracting factor, the present study will draw on the conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989) to investigate whether receiving social support from the supervisor and colleagues buffers the relationship between exposure to bullying behaviors and perceived power imbalance. We conceptualize bullying behaviors as a primary driver of perceived powerlessness and social support as a critical protective resource that may mitigate targets' sense of helplessness. Hence, by considering social support as a contextual factor that may alter the relationship between exposure to bullying behaviors and perceived power imbalance, the current study addresses an important gap in bullying research.

Bullying behaviors and power imbalance – The role of social support

Power reflects the ability to influence others and has been defined as the capacity to produce intended effects and, in particular, the ability to affect the behavior of another person or persons (Dunbar & Bernhold, 2019). Although power is often associated with a formal hierarchical position in an organization, it should be noted that power is not necessarily just the ability to control resources, but it can also be a psychological state involving a perception of one's capacity and ability to influence others (Gilad & Maniaci, 2022). It is therefore common to distinguish between formal and informal power. Whereas the former is tied to a formal position, where the responsibilities of that position include the ability to influence or make decisions affecting others, the latter arises from interpersonal relations and is typically tied to personal characteristics and interpersonal relationships. This means that informal power is not necessarily bound by formal structures and can operate across different levels. In the context of workplace bullying, power is usually understood as an informal dynamic between the target and the perpetrator(s). However, additional power associated with formal positions can amplify the magnitude and impact of informal power between the perpetrator(s) and the target (e.g. bullying perpetrated by a formal leader).

Consequently, *power imbalance* refers to a situation where the perpetrator(s) of bullying hold power and control over the target, making it difficult or impossible for the target to retaliate in any kind or stop the ongoing mistreatment. That is, it reflects a form of inequality where the target perceives the exposure to bullying behaviors as so severe that they are unable to fight back or defend against the mistreatment. Furthermore, power imbalance is most likely to be a result of the interplay between the nature and frequency of the experienced bullying behaviors. Bullying behaviors can take many forms, ranging from personal attacks on the target to undermining their social standing in the workplace and criticizing their tasks or job performance (Einarsen et al., 2020). As for more specific categories of bullying behaviors, Leymann (1990) described five forms of bullying which include harassing acts reflecting (a) attacks on the victim's reputation, (b) obstruction of work performance, (c) interference with communication with co-workers, (d) disruption of social circumstances, and (e) physical coercion or assaults, or the threat thereof. Irrespective of categorization, bullying behaviors are perceived by the target as belittling and therefore constitute an assault on their personal and/or professional integrity. When these acts escalate in terms of severity and become repeated over a prolonged period of time, it will be gradually more difficult for an exposed individual to withstand the mistreatment and the inequality in power will thereby increase, resulting in a greater sense of defenselessness.

Zapf and Einarsen (2005) suggested that both the nature and the frequency of the bullying acts are likely to drain the resources of the target, especially when there is a lack of social support from important sources within the work environment, that is, colleagues and superiors. Hence, if the target is unable to stop the mistreatment, they may, over time, end up in a state resembling "learned helplessness" or resignation. This psychological state can develop when an individual is repeatedly exposed to painful or otherwise aversive stimuli without the ability to escape or avoid them. In such cases, a sense of fatalism and resignation may emerge, leading the individual to believe that there is no point in trying to improve the situation (Maier & Seligman, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that a large body of both cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence shows that workplace bullying is associated with reduced health, well-being, and work ability for those exposed (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), with some evidence also pointing to the fact that power imbalance can explain variation in these outcomes (Nielsen et al., 2017, 2022; Rosander & Nielsen, 2023a). Due to the considerable consequences of bullying, it is important to identify factors that can help targets cope with the mistreatment, thereby also reducing the power imbalance in relation to the perpetrator(s).

Several theoretical models, such as the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the job demands–resources model (Bakker et al., 2023), emphasize that coping with stressors depends on available resources. These can be internal (e.g., self-esteem, resilience, optimism) or external (e.g., leadership, social support, psychosocial safety climate). However, research suggests that personal resources like sense of coherence or coping styles do not buffer, but rather enhances, the harmful effects of bullying, prompting calls to focus on contextual resources instead (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Among these, social support has emerged as a particularly relevant factor (Trépanier et al., 2021; Trepanier et al., 2023).

Although definitions of social support vary, it is generally understood as the perception of being cared for and having assistance available from others if needed (Sigursteinsdottir & Karlsdottir, 2022). Hobfoll and Stokes (1988) described it as a relationship characterized by care and aid between individuals or groups. According to social support theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985), receiving social support can benefit individuals directly or by buffering the effects of stress. The direct effects model proposes that social support promotes well-being regardless of the presence or intensity of stress. In contrast, the buffering model posits that social support specifically mitigates the adverse effects of stressors, such as workplace bullying, by helping individuals cope more effectively with the strain. Social support is often categorized into emotional support, such as empathy, care, and emotional responsiveness, and instrumental support, which involves concrete assistance (Morelli et al., 2015). It is believed to foster positive workplace expectations by fulfilling needs for respect, feedback, and self-confidence (Sigursteinsdottir & Karlsdottir, 2022). As a key external resource, social support has been shown to mitigate the negative effects of job stressors on employee health (Bakker et al., 2005). In the context of workplace bullying, where personal integrity is under threat, support may thereby buffer the adverse effects of ongoing exposure. Supporting this, some studies have found that social support moderates the health (Berglund et al., 2025) and attitudinal consequences (Sigursteinsdottir & Karlsdottir, 2022) of bullying. It is therefore reasonable to expect that social support may also buffer the impact of bullying on perceived power imbalance.

The COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) is a useful framework for understanding the potential buffering effect of social support on power dynamics in cases of bullying. According to COR, individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and protect resources, including self-esteem, social belonging, and a sense of control. Workplace bullying represents a severe threat to these resources, as persistent exposure to mistreatment depletes a target's personal resources faster than they can be replenished (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). This aligns

with the above-mentioned finding on workplace bullying showing that personal resources alone have little or no protective effect against bullying and that prolonged exposure often leads to resignation and helplessness among targets irrespectively of individual resources (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

COR further suggests that individuals are more sensitive to resource loss than resource gain, and once individuals enter a loss spiral, it becomes increasingly difficult to stop the depletion of psychological and social resources (Hobfoll, 2001). Exposure to bullying has been found to erode key psychological resources, such as self-confidence, optimism, and basic assumptions about oneself as a worthy individual. As people need stability in their conceptual system, threats to core schemas about oneself and others are difficult to cope with and may result in an intense psychological crisis (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In line with COR theory, such disruptions to fundamental psychological resources can leave the target feeling increasingly powerless, reinforcing their perception of power imbalance in relation to the perpetrator(s). However, social support may function as a resource reservoir, providing individuals with access to external resources that can compensate for those lost due to bullying (Hobfoll, 2001). Through emotional and/or instrumental support, others in the workplace, such as colleagues and supervisors, can help replenish diminished resources by reaffirming the target's value, reinforcing their sense of belonging, and offering practical assistance in managing the bullying situation. Access to social support may also prevent the escalation of resource loss, thereby mitigating the perception of power imbalance. Over time, this support can help maintain or restore a target's basic assumptions about oneself and others and their sense of control and worth, counteracting the psychological toll of bullying.

The impact of social support received following exposure to workplace bullying can vary significantly depending on its source (Nielsen et al., 2019; Rossiter & Sochos, 2018). While there are many potential sources of support, both in the workplace and outside the workplace (e.g., family, friends, and support groups), supervisors and colleagues represent two primary sources of such support within the workplace (Jolly et al., 2021). Given their formal authority and influence, support from supervisors can help mitigate the perceived power imbalance between the target and the perpetrator, particularly when the supervisor is not involved in the bullying. For example, when they take corrective actions, such as initiating investigations or implementing disciplinary measures, the target may experience a restored sense of fairness and organizational integrity. From the perspective of COR theory, such tangible support from a supervisor functions as a means of replenishing both

instrumental and emotional resources, thereby reducing the ongoing threat of further resource loss.

Although colleagues lack formal power, their support often exerts a powerful emotional and social influence. Peer support can reinforce prosocial group norms by signaling that bullying is not tolerated within the workgroup, even in the absence of leadership intervention. Additionally, colleagues may advocate for the target or confront the perpetrator directly, actions that can help re-balance the perceived power dynamics. Viewed through the lens of COR theory, support from colleagues aids in restoring emotional and relational resources by fostering empathy, shared coping, and a sense of belonging. Supporting the above reasoning, exposure to workplace bullying behaviors has been found to be positively associated with perceived power imbalance in the few previous studies that have examined this relationship. Depending on the type of assessment tools used to measure power imbalance, significant correlations ranging from 0.14 (single item measure) to 0.63 (scale inventory) have been found between the variables (Nielsen et al., 2017, 2022; Rosander & Nielsen, 2023a). Furthermore, results from confirmatory factor analyses show that exposure to bullying behavior and inability to defend (perceived power imbalance) are distinct concepts (Nielsen et al., 2022). However, to date, a significant knowledge gap is the absence of studies examining how social support may buffer the association between exposure to bullying behavior and power imbalance. Given the potential resource-protective role of social support in the context of bullying, it seems likely that receiving social support when exposed to bullying behaviors will influence its impact on perceived power imbalance. Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Colleague (a) and supervisor (b) social support will moderate the relation between exposure to bullying behaviors and perceived power imbalance, such that the positive relation will be weaker when support is high.

The study hypothesis will be examined in a sample of child welfare workers. Comparisons with other human service professionals suggest that child welfare social work is more demanding on several measures (Tham & Meagher, 2009). Child welfare social workers must regularly deal with occupation specific stressors such as ethical dilemmas, emotional regulation, threats and violence, and vicarious trauma. In addition, workers must cope with more global demands such as an extensive caseload, role stress, time pressure, and make challenging decisions on a daily basis. All of these stressors have been found to be potential risk factors

for workplace bullying (Van den Brande et al., 2016), thus highlighting that child welfare workers serve as a relevant occupational group for examining the process of workplace bullying. Furthermore, their high general stress-level may make them particularly vulnerable for resource losses when under attack from within their working environment, as is the case in bullying situations.

Methods

Procedure and sample

The sample were recruited as part of the “Oslo Workplace Aggression Survey”, a collaborative project between the National Institute of Occupational Health in Norway (STAMI) and the vice mayor of education and child services in Oslo municipality. The survey was conducted electronically in March 2020. All employees ($N=1,264$) working full or part time in the child welfare service in Oslo municipality received an email inviting them to participate in the study by filling in an anonymous self-reporting questionnaire. To ensure anonymity, the research team was not provided with any identifying information regarding potential participants. The Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics in Norway (REC South East) approved the project, including the procedure for informed consent (project number 28496). In line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), STAMI acquired permission from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research ((SIKT; approval: 226309)) to process the personal data in this project for research purposes.

A total of 678 questionnaires were completed, yielding an overall response rate of 53.6%. As the overarching aim of this study was to examine the perceived power imbalance when exposed to bullying behaviors at the workplace, the study sample was limited to respondents who reported exposure to at least one bullying behavior (“occasionally” or more often) over the last 6 months and who also provided responses to the questions about the perceived power relation (see description of measurement instruments below). This resulted in a final sample of 374 employees consisting of 76% women and 24% men. The mean age was 39.4 years ($SD=10.7$). Altogether 65% worked at a child welfare office, whereas 34% worked at a child welfare institution. A total of 84% worked in a full-time position, 8% in a part-time position, while 7.4% were on-call staff (0.4% were on temporary leave). This subsample of targets did not differ from the overall sample regarding demographic characteristics.

Instruments

To secure the quality of the data, previously tested and validated questionnaire scales were employed to assess the study variables:

Exposure to bullying behaviors The nine-item Short Negative Acts Questionnaire (S-NAQ) was used to measure exposure to specific bullying behaviors in the workplace (Einarsen et al., 2009; Notelaers et al., 2018). The respondents were asked how often they had experienced negative and unwanted behaviors at work typical of workplace bullying, such as being withheld information and being excluded or humiliated during the last 6 months, with response categories on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from 1 = “never,” 2 = “occasionally,” 3 = “monthly,” 4 = “weekly,” to 5 = “daily”. The S-NAQ had a Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.85 in the present study.

Power imbalance As the S-NAQ does not measure power imbalance explicitly, power relation between target and perpetrator(s) as seen from the target’s perspective was assessed with a three-item scale developed as an add-on to the S-NAQ (Nielsen et al., 2022). An example item is “If you have been exposed to one or more of the behaviors in the list above, did you experience it as difficult to defend yourself against this treatment?”. Response alternatives were “never,” “sometimes,” “once in a while,” “often,” and “every time.” Higher scores indicate that the target is in power imbalance with the perpetrator(s). Cronbach’s alpha for the power imbalance scale was 0.91 in the present study.

Social support Supervisor support was assessed with two items from the General Nordic Questionnaire for psychological and social factors at work, QPS_{Nordic} (Dallner et al., 2000). The items measure the respondents perceived support and appreciation from their immediate superior. The items were “If needed, is your immediate superior willing to listen to your work-related problems?” and “If needed, can you get support and help with your work from your immediate superior?”. The response categories ranged from “never” (1) to “often or always” (5). Colleague support was measured with four items. Two items were adapted from the QPS_{Nordic} (Dallner et al., 2000), whereas two items were developed for the survey on which this study is based. The responses categories ranged from “Completely disagree” (1) to “Completely agree” (7). Items were “If needed, can you get support and help with your work from your co-workers?”, “If needed, are your co-workers willing to listen to your work-related problems?”, “If I encounter problems at work, I know that my coworkers will try to help me” and “I can trust that my coworkers will help me if I need it”.

The scales measuring both supervisor support (0.86) and colleague support (0.92) had good internal consistency in the present study.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted with JAMOVI 2.6.24. Level of significance was set to $p < .05$. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to test whether study variables were empirically distinct constructs. Construct validity of the study variables was tested with exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. Model fit was determined using chi-squared (χ^2), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI). Values below 0.05 for the RMSEA and close to 0.95 for the CFI and TLI was used as indication of a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Internal consistency of scale variables were determined by Cronbach’s alpha (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Bivariate associations between the variables were determined with Pearson’s correlations. Main and moderating effects were examined with regression analyses. The guidelines by Hayes (2018) were followed, and, in line with Aiken and West (1991), the continuous predictor variables were centered prior to the two-way interaction analysis. Specifically, to examine the hypothesis that social support (from the supervisor and colleague) functions as a protective factor in the relationship between exposure to workplace bullying behaviors and power imbalance, we tested for linear and interaction effects by utilizing a general linear model fit with Ordinary Least Squares in the GAMLj3 module. GAMLj3 is a JAMOVI module designed to estimate a wide range of linear models, including the general linear model (ANOVA/Regression), the generalized linear model (logistic, multinomial, Poisson, etc.), and random coefficients models (mixed and multilevel models) for both continuous and categorical dependent variables. Generalized Linear Models offer several advantages over traditional approaches to linear regression, particularly when dealing with non-normal data or complex relationships. GAMLj3 offers tools to estimate, visualize, and interpret General Linear Models, and allows bootstrapping. Bootstrapping is a statistical procedure that can calculate effect sizes and conduct hypothesis tests for an estimate even when the underlying distribution is unknown. In the current study, bootstrapping was set to 1000 resamples. The predictor variables were mean centered prior to inclusion in the general linear models. As previous research indicates that reports of workplace bullying are influenced by age and gender (Feijó et al., 2019), these variables were included as potential confounding factors in the general linear models. By default, missing data was deleted listwise in the general linear models.

Results

Preliminary analyses and descriptive data

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among all study variables are presented in Table 1. Prior to model testing, preliminary analyses were conducted to assess the distribution of the data and evaluate potential multicollinearity among predictor variables. Skewness analyses revealed that the bullying behavior variable exhibited substantial asymmetry, whereas the remaining variables fell within acceptable limits of -2 to 2 , as recommended by Hair et al. (2006). Kurtosis values indicated a leptokurtic (peaked) distribution for power imbalance, bullying behavior, and colleague support. Additionally, the Shapiro–Wilk test was significant ($p < .001$) for all study variables, suggesting departures from normality. To address these non-normal distributions, bootstrapping procedures were employed during model estimation.

It is generally suggested that multicollinearity does not become a problem until the variance inflation factor (VIF: $1/\text{tolerance}$) for a variable reaches 10, with some suggesting more conservative cut-offs of 4 or 5 (O’Brien, 2007). In the present study, the VIFs were in the range of 1.01–1.87, which were well below even conservative cut-off values, thereby suggesting no evidence of multicollinearity. The directions and magnitude of all correlations were as to be expected. Exposure to bullying behaviors was positively related to perceived power imbalance, whereas social support, be it from supervisors or colleagues, was negatively associated with exposure to bullying behaviors and power imbalance. An exploratory factor analysis with Variamax rotation of the scale items suggested a four-factor model, that is power imbalance, exposure to bullying, behavior, colleague support, and supervisor support, with the items loading on their respective scales. A confirmatory factor analysis, carried out to confirm that the study variables represent empirically different constructs, had good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 246.0$; $df = 98$; $p < .001$; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.06 (95% CI RMSEA = 0.053 – 0.072)).

Main and interaction effects

To explore the main and interactive associations between exposure to bullying behaviors and colleague support with power imbalance, we tested a general linear model, including age and gender as control variables. Findings are presented in Table 2. The results showed that being female ($b = 0.10$; $p = .008$ and exposure to bullying behaviors ($b = 0.73$; $p < .001$) were positively associated with power imbalance, whereas colleague support did not significantly predict this variable ($b = -0.05$; $p = .32$). The interaction term

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables ($N = 374$)

Variable	Range	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age		39.4	10.7	0.56	-0.66	--					
2. Gender	0–1	0.74	0.44	--	--	-0.06	--				
3. Power imbalance	1–5	1.56	0.86	1.93	3.68	0.02	0.15**	--			
4. Bullying behaviors	1–5	1.20	0.31	2.73	11.2	0.01	0.05	0.64***	--		
5. Social support - colleagues	1–7	6.21	0.96	-1.65	3.26	-0.05	0.04	-0.31***	-0.50***	--	
6. Social support - supervisor	1–5	4.04	0.87	-0.78	0.25	0.02	-0.02	-0.36***	-0.39***	0.34***	--

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female

Table 2 Interaction between exposure to bullying behaviors and colleague support regarding perceived power imbalance as an outcome ($N=331$; $R^2=0.42$; $F=47.5$; $df=326/5$; $p<.001$)

Variables	B	SE B	t	b	95% CI b
Gender	0.23	0.09	2.68	0.10**	0.03–0.19
Age	0.00	0.00	0.35	0.01	–0.06–0.08
Bullying behaviors	2.06	0.16	12.53	0.73***	0.55–0.94
Colleague support	–0.05	0.05	–1.00	–0.05	–0.16–0.05
Bullying behaviors*Colleague support	0.26	0.07	3.60	0.09***	0.02–0.16

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$

Table 3 Interaction between exposure to bullying behaviors and supervisor support regarding perceived power imbalance as an outcome ($N=330$; $R^2=0.41$; $F=45.6$; $df=325/5$; $p<.001$)

Variables	B	SE B	t	b	95% CI b
Gender	0.23	0.09	2.67	0.11**	0.04–0.19
Age	0.00	0.00	0.40	0.01	–0.05–0.9
Bullying behaviors	1.75	0.15	11.35	0.63***	0.46–0.84
Supervisor support	–0.15	0.05	–3.21	–0.14***	–0.25––0.05
Bullying behaviors*Supervisor support	0.22	0.09	2.35	0.07*	0.02–0.15

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$

was significant ($b=0.09$, $p<.001$) and explained 2.3% of the variance in power imbalance. In total, the predictor variables explained 42% of the variance in power imbalance. The overall model was significant ($N=331$; $F(5, 326)=47.50$; $p<.001$). To examine the nature of the interaction, scores were plotted at the mean, low (1 SD below the mean) and high (1 SD above the mean) values of exposure to bullying behaviors and colleague support. Going against expectations of a buffering effect of social support, the findings showed a stronger association between exposure to bullying behaviors and power imbalance among respondents who received high levels of colleague support ($b=0.81$; $p<.001$), compared to those who received mean ($b=0.72$; $p<.001$) and low levels of colleague support ($b=0.63$; $p<.001$). The interaction is graphically displayed in Fig. 1. These results do not support Hypothesis 1a.

As presented in Table 3, relatively similar findings were observed for supervisor support ($R^2=0.41$; $F(5, 325)=45.60$, $p<.001$), the main difference was that

supervisor support had a significant negative main effect on power imbalance ($b = -0.14$; $p<.001$), thus indicating that respondents that experienced support from their immediate supervisor perceived lower power imbalance with the perpetrator(s). The interaction term between exposure to bullying behaviors and supervisor support was significant ($b=0.07$; $p=.02$) and displayed a relatively similar pattern as for colleague support and explained 1% of the variance in power imbalance. Although exposure to bullying behaviors were significantly associated with power imbalance irrespective of levels of supervisor support, there was a somewhat stronger association between exposure to bullying behaviors and power imbalance among those reporting high levels ($b=0.68$; $p<.001$) of supervisor support compared to mean ($b=0.61$; $p<.001$) and low levels ($b=0.55$; $p<.001$) of supervisor support. The interaction is graphically displayed in Fig. 2. The results do not support Hypothesis 1b.

Fig. 1 The interactive effect of exposure to bullying behaviors and colleague support on power imbalance (Mean centered predictor variables)

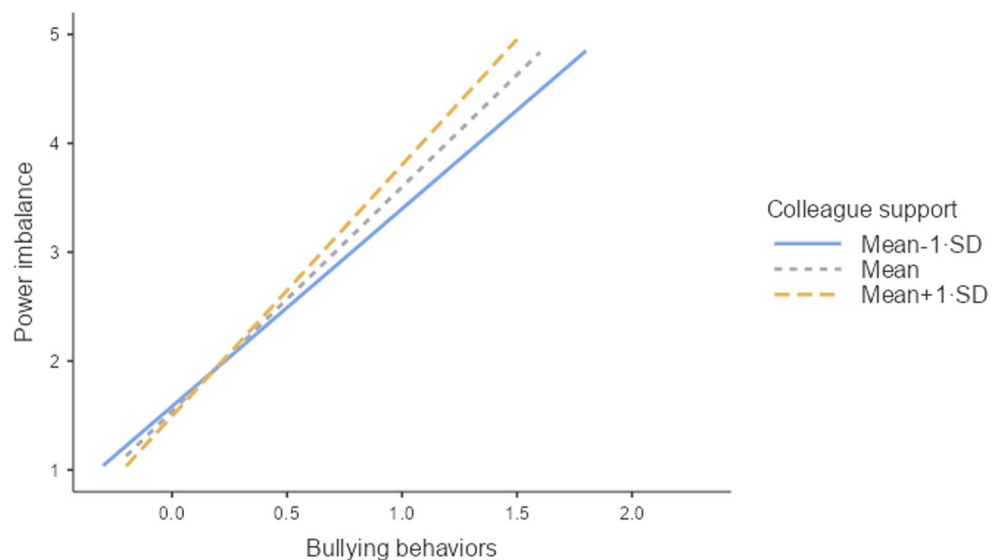
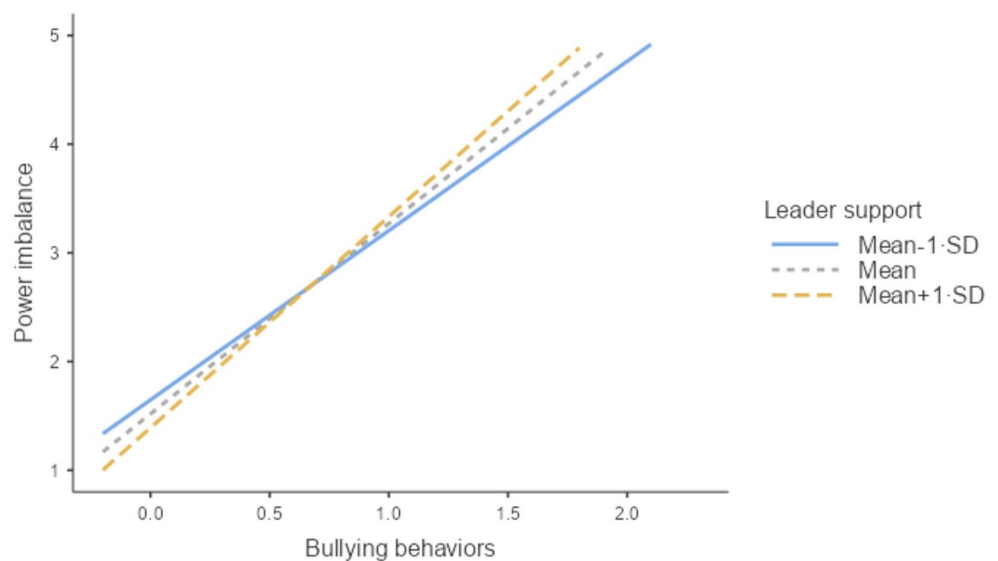


Fig. 2 The interactive effect of exposure to bullying behaviors and supervisor support on power imbalance (Mean centered predictor variables)



Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to examine whether social support from the immediate supervisor or colleagues moderates the relationship between exposure to bullying behaviors and perceived power imbalance between perpetrator(s) and target. Drawing on conservation of resources (COR) theory, it was hypothesized that high levels of support would buffer the impact of bullying by helping targets maintain a perceived power balance. In terms of direct relations, exposure to bullying behaviors was strongly associated with power imbalance. Supervisor support was negatively related to perceived power imbalance, while support from colleagues was not significantly associated with the outcome variable. These findings suggest that exposure to bullying behaviors is the primary antecedent of perceived power imbalance.

Regarding moderation, high levels of supervisor or colleague support did not buffer the impact of bullying exposure. Instead, while social support was associated with lower power imbalance at low levels of bullying, its protective effect diminished as exposure increased. At high levels of bullying, perceived power imbalance remained strong regardless of social support, indicating that support may only be beneficial under low exposure. Contrary to COR theory's expectations, these results suggest that social support offers limited protection in the context of severe or persistent exposure to bullying behaviors. In extreme cases, the psychological toll of bullying may overwhelm the potential benefits of support. Notably, findings related to support from colleagues may even align with the stress-exacerbation hypothesis, which posits that the negative effects of stressors can intensify in the presence of social support (Bavik et al., 2020). This counterintuitive result is explored further in the discussion.

Although COR theory initially suggests that social support should buffer the effects of workplace bullying, some of its underlying assumptions also help explain why support may sometimes sustain, or even worsen, the impact of stressors. Drawing on Hobfoll and Stokes' (1988) perspective on the costs of providing support and extending it to the recipient's experience, we argue that social support can fail to serve as a protective resource under certain conditions. First, support may be of poor quality or misaligned with the target's needs. According to COR, support must help replenish lost resources in a meaningful way (Hobfoll, 1989). When support is ambiguous, inconsistent, or reinforces dependency, it may inadvertently heighten the target's sense of powerlessness. Hobfoll and Stokes (1988) noted that support providers can, intentionally or not, reinforce their own superior status, leaving recipients feeling more dependent and disempowered. In such cases, failed support attempts may erode trust and contribute to a breakdown in the target's basic assumptions about the social environment, as noted earlier. This idea is consistent with Zapf and Einarsen (2005), who argued that bullying can distort workplace relationships and reduce the quality of available support. In these contexts, rather than restoring a sense of control, social support may only deepen the target's awareness of their lack of power. Moreover, since workplace bullying is often viewed as an escalating process in which the target becomes increasingly victimized, social support may gradually diminish, and the target may become progressively less able to utilize whatever support remains available..

Second, seeking and receiving social support comes at a cost. Hobfoll and Stokes (1988) argued that social support often creates implicit social obligations, meaning that individuals may feel indebted to those who support them. From

a COR perspective, this can be understood as a resource investment that may not always be beneficial. Targets of bullying may hesitate to seek support if they fear that doing so will deplete their remaining resources or create a future obligation to reciprocate, especially if they are already experiencing resource loss spirals. This could explain why those who reported receiving higher levels of social support in the present study also reported a high power imbalance as the support-seeking process may have contributed to further depletion rather than restoring resources.

Third, seeking social support requires effort and can drain additional resources (Hobfoll & Stokes, 1988). The act of reaching out for help takes time, cognitive effort, and emotional energy, all of which may already be limited in stressful situations. Moreover, acknowledging the need for support may force the target to confront their own vulnerability, potentially reinforcing feelings of helplessness and resignation, something that may challenge the basic assumptions about oneself. COR theory suggests that when resource investment does not lead to resource gain, it may accelerate a loss spiral (Hobfoll, 2001). Hence, if seeking support when exposed to bullying does not result in effective intervention or a decrease in exposure, it may exacerbate the target's feeling of powerlessness.

The nature of the social support received may also help explain the findings of this study. While some survey items clearly captured emotional support (e.g., "If needed, is your immediate superior willing to listen to your work-related problems?"), others were somewhat ambiguous, and few directly assessed instrumental support. Discussing negative workplace experiences, particularly subjective stressors like bullying, with supervisors or colleagues may increase reflection and heighten awareness of the problem rather than alleviate it (Beehr et al., 2010). Moreover, receiving support that fails to address or stop the mistreatment may worsen the target's feelings of inadequacy or helplessness (Beehr et al., 2010). Similarly, Rayner (1997) found that employees not directly exposed to bullying often underestimate its severity, offering superficial advice that may unintentionally reinforce the target's sense of powerlessness. Emotional support alone may therefore contribute to an increased perception of power imbalance. This effect may be particularly pronounced when emotional, rather than instrumental, support comes from supervisors. Given their responsibility for managing the psychosocial work environment, a lack of intervention following acknowledgment of the problem may create an expectation-resource mismatch. In COR theory terms, this represents a failed resource investment, where the target expends effort seeking protection but receives only empathy without meaningful action. When anticipated resource gains do not materialize, perceived power imbalance may intensify rather than diminish.

Overall, rather than acting as a buffer, social support may, in the context of high exposure to bullying behaviors, increase awareness of power imbalance if the support received does not lead to real change. It may also lead to resource depletion if seeking or receiving support expends more resources than it restores. Failure to meet targets' actual needs may reinforce, rather than alleviate, distress and sense of helplessness. Additionally, it may highlight the limits of intervention, particularly when support from powerful figures (e.g., supervisors) does not translate into action. Thus, our results suggest, from a COR perspective, that the effectiveness of social support in bullying situations depends not just on its availability but on whether it meaningfully restores lost resources. When this does not happen, social support may reinforce, rather than reduce, the perception of power imbalance.

In relation to COR theory, it is important to acknowledge that this study did not account for individual differences in personal resources (e.g., resilience, optimism, self-efficacy). COR theory posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valuable resources, and that stress arises when these resources are threatened or lost. In this framework, individuals with a larger resource reservoir are typically better equipped to withstand and recover from stressors, as they can draw on surplus resources to cope, adapt, and potentially grow through adversity. However, as noted in the introduction and supported by prior research (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018), exposure to workplace bullying appears to be uniquely damaging. Regardless of baseline resource levels, bullying has been shown to consistently deplete resources across individuals, leaving even highly resilient employees vulnerable. This suggests that bullying functions as a severe and chronic stressor, one that overwhelms coping capacities and erodes personal resources to such an extent that individual differences in resilience offer limited protection. Therefore, workplace bullying may represent an exception to the typical COR model, as it results in resource loss that is difficult to buffer, even for those who would normally be well-equipped to manage adversity. One explanation for this may be that bullying is experienced more as an existential trauma rather than a work-related stressor.

Practical implications

The results, and our interpretations, have some important implications for practice. As highlighted in the introduction, workplace bullying is by definition a two-phase process beginning with an exposure phase which, if prolonged and systematic, may be followed by a phase in which the target finds it increasingly difficult to handle the situation and experiences a power imbalance in relation to the perpetrator(s). The finding that frequent (high) exposure to

bullying behaviors is strongly related to a perceived power imbalance, irrespective of perceived support, indicates that employers and Human Resource (HR) personnel should aim at addressing bullying as early as possible, preferably through preventive measures. Organizational efforts such as building a strong psychosocial safety climate or a strong climate for constructive conflict management may be the most effective way to prevent workplace bullying from occurring and harming employees and the organizations (Kwan et al., 2016). Yet, organizations tend to perceive social support as something inherently beneficial. Our findings suggest this is not always the case, especially in situations with high levels of bullying. This indicates that HR personnel must recognize that poorly matched or passive forms of support (e.g., emotional reassurance without intervention) can backfire and reinforce the powerlessness of targets. One task for HR is to train supervisors not only to listen to employees' concerns but also to intervene in cases of bullying. When support is limited to empathy or vague assurances, it may create an expectation-resource mismatch that leaves targets feeling worse. Hence, HR systems must ensure that reporting bullying leads to clear, fair, and timely interventions.

In the context of low exposure our results show that targets with access to social support, be it from colleagues or their supervisor, experienced less power imbalance. Given that negative behaviors can be experienced infrequently in the first phases of the bullying process, providing support to targets may prevent the situation from escalating by protecting their sense of control. However, in the context of high exposure, our results show that targets experience high power imbalance, irrespective of the support received. If our findings reflect emotional rather than instrumental support, an implication of our study is that supervisors and colleagues need to be informed and trained about the potential differential effects of different forms of support and that they should be encouraged to use instrumental support when dealing with cases of bullying. Previous research have shown that active attempts from bystanders at helping targets may be highly beneficial for both the target and the bystander themselves and organizations should therefore invest in ways to increase instrumental support from bystander when observing negative social situations at the workplace (Rosander & Nielsen, 2023b). Even more, organizations cannot rely on either the ability of targets to handle the situation themselves nor on the usefulness of informal support from peers and superiors. Hence, formal procedures and intervention methods by HR must be made available, functioning as building bricks in a strong ethical infrastructure in the organization to combat such detrimental problems (Einarsen & Einarsen, 2021).

Strength and limitations

All employees within a specific occupational group in one municipality were invited to participate, and the response rate was relatively high. While the municipality was not randomly selected and the sample does not qualify as a probability sample of the general working population, it offers an in-depth view of workplace dynamics in a real-world context. The findings may provide indicative insight that could be relevant in other organizational settings. Still, it is also necessary to highlight some limitations of this research. First, the study is based on cross-sectional data, a design that does not allow for causal inferences. However, knowledge pertaining to the association between investigated variables, even without knowing their causal connections, is extremely valuable as a basis for both theory and intervention development (Spector, 2019). Second, all data were collected using self-report questionnaires, which could hamper the internal validity of the findings. For instance, there is the possibility of subjective interpretations, common method variance, and response set tendencies (Spector, 2006). Nonetheless, as exposure to bullying behaviors, social support, and power imbalance all have strong subjective components and are influenced by individual perceptions, it is difficult to assess these phenomena by using more objective methods. Furthermore, several steps were taken to reduce problems associated with common-method variance, including varying response anchors for different subscales, ensuring that the independent variables were presented in different sections of the survey from the dependent variable, and emphasizing to participants that their responses would be anonymous (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

The interaction effects observed in the current study accounted for 1% and 2.3% of the variance in power imbalance. Although these figures may appear modest, they are consistent with findings in the occupational stress literature (Bechtoldt et al., 2007; Tepper et al., 2009). These results align with long-standing evidence that interaction effects in field studies are typically small and difficult to detect (McClelland & Judd, 1993). Importantly, small interaction effects can still be theoretically meaningful and practically significant, especially when they highlight nuanced processes or identify vulnerable subgroups. In complex psychosocial contexts like workplace power dynamics, even modest interaction effects may signal critical leverage points for intervention. Thus, the current findings not only support prior research but also underscore the importance of testing theoretically grounded interactions despite their often limited contribution to explained variance.

Although we adjusted our analyses for age and gender, two factors that have been associated with the key study variables in previous research, other confounding variables may

have influenced the examined associations. For instance, individual dispositions, such as negative affectivity or emotional stability, may play a key role in understanding how exposure to bullying behaviors relates to power imbalance. Such variables should be considered in future replications and extensions of this study. Similarly, knowledge about the perpetrator's formal role within the organizational hierarchy would enhance the interpretation of our findings, as power imbalances are likely exacerbated when the perpetrator holds formal authority over the target, such as a supervisory role.

Another limitation of the current study is its exclusive focus on work-related sources of support, such as supervisors and colleagues, while support from nonwork sources, such as family, friends, and online support groups, was not examined. Although social support from personal networks can play an important role in general stress recovery and emotional regulation, its effectiveness in the context of workplace bullying may be limited. As noted by Nielsen and colleagues (2019), nonwork support may have little influence on the actual dynamics within the workplace, particularly when the bullying involves persistent power imbalances, structural issues, or organizational culture. Friends and family are typically removed from the work environment and therefore lack the capacity to intervene, advocate, or alter the stressor at its source. Moreover, targets of workplace bullying may find it difficult to fully convey the nuances of the situation to those outside the organization, further reducing the efficacy of external support. Thus, while nonwork support may offer emotional comfort, it is unlikely to substitute for the instrumental and contextual support that only workplace actors can provide in mitigating the effects of bullying. A related limitation is that our study has only examined the behavioral (instrumental) and affective (emotional) aspects of social support, whereas more cognitive aspects related to appraisal and self-esteem were not considered in the study (Oh et al., 2013).

Lastly, it should be noted that the examined sample is restricted to Norwegian child welfare workers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. To further strengthen the external validity of our findings, the study should be replicated in other occupational groups, cultures, and countries.

Conclusion and avenues for future research

Theoretical frameworks such as conservation of resources (COR) theory suggest that social support from supervisors and colleagues should buffer the negative effects of workplace bullying. However, our findings indicate that opposite effects also can be observed. Specifically, social

support appears to be beneficial only under low levels of bullying exposure. As exposure increases, the protective effect diminishes and may even intensify perceived power imbalance. This counterintuitive result suggests that when bullying becomes severe or prolonged, social support alone may be insufficient to mitigate its psychological impact on targets.

As the first empirical study to examine the antecedents and conditional factors associated with perceived power imbalance in the context of bullying, these findings offer an important starting point. Practically, they suggest that interventions aimed at mitigating workplace bullying should not rely solely on peer or supervisory support but also address the bullying behaviors directly and early, before they escalate. Employers may also benefit from tailoring support mechanisms to the severity of bullying exposure and ensuring that support is perceived as meaningful and effective.

Due to the previously mentioned limitations of this study, future research should employ longitudinal designs to explore how the relationships between exposure to bullying behaviors, social support, and power imbalance unfold over time. It would also be beneficial to examine these dynamics across diverse occupational groups and with more nuanced measures of support, particularly by distinguishing between emotional and instrumental forms, as well as the availability and perceived effectiveness of that support (Mathieu et al., 2019). Lastly, future studies should consider testing more complex moderation models (e.g., three-way interactions) to better understand the conditions under which social support influences the outcomes of exposure to bullying behavior, including perceived power imbalance.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author Morten Birkeland Nielsen. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Declarations

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants.

Competing interests The authors declare no financial or non-financial interests directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication.

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