

## Workers' perception of workplace bullying: A cross-cultural study

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This study is one of the first studies to approach workplace bullying cross-culturally. It sought to compare employees' understanding of workplace bullying in two different world regions: Central America and Southern Europe, regarding three aspects of workplace bullying: psychological vs. physical harassment, hierarchical vs. horizontal bullying, and direct vs. indirect aggression. A convenience sample of 246 workers provided their own definition of workplace bullying through a single, open-ended question. The results showed that employees from Central America emphasized the physical component of workplace bullying more than the Southern European employees. However, similarities in the conceptualization of workplace bullying across both cultures were found as well. Both Southern European and Central American employees defined workplace bullying mainly as a hierarchical phenomenon, where the aggression took the form of direct strategies. Such differences and similarities bring to the field some positive inputs for the development and implementation of different strategies for dealing effectively with this phenomenon.

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45 Research on workplace bullying has joined the interest of scientists who have studied many kinds of abusive behaviour at work under a myriad of terms, such as violence, aggression, abuse, harassment, bullying, mobbing, etc. (Branch, 2008). Despite such a proliferation of terms, some authors have tried to confine them into broad constructs such as workplace aggression (Barling, Dupré, & Kelloway, 2009) or workplace victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009). The scope of the present study is to focus on workplace bullying, mainly characterized by negative acts that occur in a persistent and systematic way (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003).

50 Current research on workplace bullying demonstrates that this phenomenon not only involves bullies and bullied victims, but may also have a negative impact at an organizational level (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). Several studies (e.g., Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Vartia, 2001) suggest that bullying may have a negative effect on witnesses or bystanders. In the study of Hoel and Cooper (2000), more than 30% of the participants agreed with the statement “bullying reduces our efficiency”. Hoel, Sparks, and Cooper (2001) highlighted that such phenomenon can lead to increased pressure on social services and welfare, growing medical costs, premature retirement, or potential loss of productive workers. The negative consequences that bullying may bring to the workplace (Lewis & Rayner, 2003) have promoted interest in the study of different aspects of the issue, such as the frequency and duration of the workplace bullying behaviours (Leymann, 1996) or the imbalance of power (Harvey, Treadway, Heames & Duke, 2009; Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2001). However, the question of how the cultural context impacts the individuals’ comprehension of workplace bullying has been neglected in most investigations (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Several authors have stressed that researchers should examine cultural structures that enable, trigger, and reward bullying, in order to reduce its occurrence (e.g., Hoel & Salin, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007).

70 This aspect is important since many studies have shown that the prevalence of workplace bullying varies not only according to the workers’ perceptions (Ireland, 2006), but consistent with Hofstede’s theory (1980) also according to their national culture (Moayed, Daraiseh, Shell, & Salem, 2006). The overall emerging picture from such studies is that some countries such as those in Southern Europe (e.g., Spain), characterized by a higher power distance and a considerably higher degree of uncertainty avoidance, indicate a high prevalence rate of bullying in international comparisons (Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Salin, & Benadero, 2008). Countries in Northern Europe, UK, and Australia, which are characterized by negative attitudes towards signs of abuse of power, low power distance, feminine values, and individualism, tend to have a lower threshold for experiencing inadequate behaviours as bullying and may be more ready to

use the right to complain about it (Einarsen, 2000). One possible explanation is that the cultural variation in construing the meaning of specific behaviours makes it harder to reveal which behaviours are and are not to be considered abusive. Some forms of interaction in the workplace, traditionally accepted in the past, are perceived today as improper, abusive, and unethical in certain cultural environments. Thus, in order to enhance the understanding of workplace bullying, it becomes relevant and necessary to understand the cultural context (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007). So, clarifying the definition of bullying is important both theoretically and practically, because of the possible underreporting or overreporting of workplace bullying as a result of differing definitions regarding what workplace bullying is. As a result, this may have serious consequences for interventions in organizations (cf. Branch, 2008; Saunders, Huynh, & Goodman-Delahunty, 2007). In that sense, some studies have stressed how employees may have different conceptualizations of workplace bullying to those of the researchers (Escartín, Rodríguez-Carballeira, Porrúa, & Martín-Peña, 2008; Escartín, Rodríguez-Carballeira, Zapf, Porrúa, & Martín-Peña, 2009; Liefoghe & MacKenzie-Davey, 2003), which has also been pointed out by Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, and Liefoghe (2002, p. 1131): “This imperfect correspondence between popular and scientific definition of terms such as bullying is an issue that the researcher must remain aware of.” Therefore, different authors have emphasized the necessity for employing different qualitative research methodologies to explore the meaning of different social phenomena as experienced by individuals themselves (Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007).

Furthermore, although there are several studies on individual acts of violence within certain cultures, remarkably few cross-cultural studies have been developed (Bond, 2004; Tedeschi & Bond, 2001; Zapf, Escartín, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2010). One reason for this is the difficulties that these studies bring forth, as noted by Triandis because “cross-cultural research is tricky and difficult” (2004, p. 15). He stated that “to do research that is ignorant of or insensitive to the major features of the local culture often means to do poor research and thus wastes the time of local subjects, as well as the funds, and that is unethical” (Triandis, 1992, p. 232). Peterson and Smith (1997) provided a comprehensive list of cultural determinants, other than country, that should be considered, such as: language, proximity and topography, religion, economic development, technological development, political boundaries, industry type, and climate. These factors may influence meaning and thus the measures of a study. This suggests that with regards to the study and management of bullying at work, the question of whether the knowledge generated in one cultural setting is transferable to different parts of the world has not yet been resolved. It is likely that what works in one culture may not work in another.

When dealing with workplace bullying it is important to know precisely what employees think constitutes “workplace bullying”. Moreover, for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, it is interesting to know whether it is the same over time and place and across cultures. How might workplace bullying vary cross-culturally? Do people from different cultures experience similar kinds of aggression at work? Is there only one blueprint for workplace bullying? Or is this concept related to the context it is studied in? Although this article will not try to answer all these questions, they have directed the present study. Hence, this study will seek to compare employees’ understanding of workplace bullying in two different world regions: Central America (Costa Rica) and Southern Europe (Spain).

### CULTURAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COSTA RICA AND SPAIN

According to House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004, p. 15), culture is defined as: “shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations”. In relation to cultural issues, Hofstede (1980, 1994) ranked national cultures according to four cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. He suggested that amongst European countries, four clusters could be identified, one of them being the Southern European countries (Spain, Italy, Portugal, France, and Greece), heavily influenced by Roman culture (Latourette, 1965) and whose main characteristics are high uncertainty avoidance and high power distance. Uncertainty avoidance could be defined as “the extent to which members of an organization or society strive to avoid uncertainty by relying on established social norms, rituals and bureaucratic practices” (House et al., 2004, pp. 11–12), and power distance as “the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be stratified and concentrated at higher levels of an organization or government” (pp. 11–12). In the same way, Central American countries such as Costa Rica, El Salvador, Panamá, and Guatemala were also ranked with similar characteristics to those presented by Southern European countries, namely being high in power distance and high in uncertainty avoidance. In addition to this, the population is predominantly Catholic in both Central American and Southern European nations, which was also related to such cultural dimensions by Hofstede (see Verweij & Nauta, 1997, for further information). In that sense, as noted by Rosenn (1998, p. 128), it could also be argued that Central American countries “share a common Roman law heritage, a common Iberian colonial past, and present-day patterns of social organization”.

In our study we chose to compare Spain and Costa Rica because the fact that both countries share the same language (Spanish) facilitated such cross-cultural study. Since both world regions show several similarities mostly due to their common heritage, the question could arise whether a comparison of Spain and Central America can, at all, be called cross-cultural. However, according to Transparency International (2008) and the World Economic Forum (2008), significant differences between Costa Rica and Spain exist. In the Corruption Perceptions Index<sup>1</sup> of Transparency International (2008), Spain is ranked in the 27th position and Costa Rica in the 53rd, which is a substantial difference (notice that higher ranking means more corruption). In the Global Competitiveness Index Ranking<sup>2</sup> (2008–2009), Spain is ranked in the 29th position and Costa Rica in the 59th (notice that higher ranking means less competitiveness). In this second report, Spain and Costa Rica are compared according to several features such as basic requirements (institutions, infrastructure, macroeconomic stability, health and primary education), efficiency enhancers (higher education and training, goods market efficiency, labour market efficiency, financial market sophistication, technological readiness, and market size) and innovation and sophistication factors (business sophistication and innovation) (Table 1). Data suggest that Costa Rica systematically receives worse scores than Spain. As an example, with regard to institutions (basic requirements), comparisons about business cost of crime and violence, organized crime, or ethical behaviours of firms, substantial differences exist (i.e., ranking position between Costa Rica and Spain: 108 vs. 59, 73 vs. 53, and 38 vs. 33, respectively).

Azfar and Gurgur (2004) argued that corruption has been shown to increase theft, crime levels, the amount of homicides, and human trafficking. Mayhew and Chappell (2007) pointed out that external workplace violence is more common in some geographical areas than in others, which could bring a “spillover” effect whereby community violence, like street crime or muggings, is extended into vulnerable businesses and their workforce. In sum, there is evidence that crime rates and the presence of gangs are substantially higher in Central America than in Southern Europe, and levels

<sup>1</sup>The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is a composite index that ranks countries of the world on a scale from zero (highly corrupt) to 10 (highly clean) presented by Transparency International and can be defined as “the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians”. According to it, Sweden, Denmark, and New Zealand are perceived to be the world’s least corrupt countries, and Somalia, Iraq, Haiti, and Myanmar are perceived to be the most corrupt.

<sup>2</sup>The Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) is published by the World Economic Forum and “assesses the ability of countries to provide high levels of prosperity to their citizens. This in turn depends on how productively a country uses available resources. Therefore, the Global Competitiveness Index measures the set of institutions, policies, and factors that set the sustainable current and medium-term levels of economic prosperity.” According to it, the United States tops the overall ranking (1st) and Chad is in the lowest position (131st).



TABLE 1  
 Ranking positions of Spain and Costa Rica compared across 134 nations

	<i>Ranking</i>	
	<i>Costa Rica*</i>	<i>Spain*</i>
Total population (millions)	4.5	43.6
GCI 2008–2009	59**	29
220 Basic requirements	63	27
Institutions	50	43
Infrastructure	94	22
Macroeconomic stability	85	30
Health and primary education	37	35
Efficiency enhancers	60	25
225 Higher education and training	49	30
Goods market efficiency	49	41
Labour market efficiency	35	96
Financial market sophistication	70	36
Technological readiness	60	29
Market size	78	12
230 Innovation and sophistication factors	39	29
Business sophistication	42	24
Innovation	38	39

Extracted from the Global Competitiveness Report 2008–2009.

GCI = Global Competitiveness Index.

235 \*Gross Domestic Product (current prices) in millions of US dollars: Spain 1438.95 (rank 8) vs. Costa Rica 26.23 (rank 79).

\*\*Higher values in the ranking means worse competitiveness.

240 of education are lower (CID Gallup, 2005; Cruz, 2006; PAHO, 1998).  
 ④ Criminal statistics indicate that Central America is one of the most violent  
 245 regions of the world (ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, & IUDOP, 2004; Huhn,  
 Oettler, & Peetz, 2006a, 2006b; Oettler, 2007; Rico, 2006). Moser and  
 McIlwaine (2004, pp. 194–195) in a Latin American context stressed that  
 “violence erodes, transforms and reconstitutes both productive and perverse  
 social capital” and “the gangs, paramilitary or delinquent groups are highly  
 250 destructive to daily life”. This is related not only to recorded and actual  
 crime rates but also to the social perception of crime as noted by Arriagada  
 and Godoy (1990, p. 10), who stated, “sensationalist treatment of violence  
 and delinquent events can generate a climate of fear and a strong feeling of  
 vulnerability in the population, which is not always real, or corresponding to  
 the observed level of violence”. In that sense, although physical aggression is  
 not accepted, it has a significant presence in Central American daily life.  
 ⑧⑭ Moreover, different international reports (PREAL, 2007; UNESCO, 2004)  
 255 have systematically shown a lack of investment and public spending on

education in Central America. Similarly, inequity and high levels of dropping out of school have also been a matter of concern.

Taking these findings together we believe that it can be justified to say that a comparison of Spain and Costa Rica represents a comparison of different cultures. As noted by Gelfand et al. (2007) in a recent annual review on cross-cultural organizational behaviour, there is a substantial body of cross-cultural research that has, for example, found similarities and differences between countries with regard to concepts such as commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour, or work autonomy (e.g., Andolsek & Stebe, 2004; Lam, Hui, & Law, 1999). However, to date there has been little cross-cultural research on workplace bullying (Zapf et al., 2010). It is, however, not unlikely that significant differences between countries exist according to the way workplace bullying is conceptualized. Therefore, the main question to be addressed in this article is: Are there differences in the way workplace bullying is understood by employees in Central America (i.e., Costa Rica) and Southern Europe (i.e., Spain)?

### INTERNATIONAL WORKPLACE BULLYING CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

There is some scientific evidence that different countries have different conceptualizations of workplace bullying (Di Martino, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003). In Europe, where the interest in the bullying phenomenon originated, a large number of studies on workplace bullying can be found (Nielsen et al., 2009; Zapf et al., 2010). The European tradition has proposed one of the most accepted definitions of the phenomena to date (Einarsen et al., 2003, p. 15): “Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months).” These authors also defined bullying or mobbing as “an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts”. As in this case, most definitions of workplace bullying used by researchers include the essential criterion of power imbalance (i.e., Moayed et al., 2006). Hodson, Roscigno, and Lopez (2006) conceptualized power imbalances in relationships in the workplace as potentially occurring in a bidirectional manner between superiors and subordinates, and among peers. Thus, bullying is not limited to vertical aggression from supervisors toward subordinates, as co-workers can derive power from informal networks or interdependency of job tasks, whereas subordinates’ power may derive power from group-based support such as unions (LaVan & Marty, 2008).

300 Keashley and Jagatic (2003) and Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) argued that  
 US researchers have studied a wide variety of negative acts at work, in  
 particular, various minor forms of negative social behaviour such as  
 workplace incivility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), social  
 undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), and also serious physical  
 305 violence (e.g., Budd, Arvey, & Lawless, 1996; Kelloway, Barling, & Hurrell,  
 2006; Rayner & Keashly, 2005). In contrast, US studies have given less  
 attention to the phenomenon of bullying as it is conceptualized in many  
 European studies. This is consistent with Yamada (2004), who pointed out  
 that the concept of workplace bullying has very European roots, with the  
 term only becoming more widespread among American employees in the  
 310 late 1990s. Therefore, according to Rayner and Cooper (2006) in North  
 America, a noncohesive picture has emerged and an acceptance of the  
 concept of bullying has been held back by other competing topics.  
 Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott (1999) were among the first in the US  
 who adopted the term “mobbing”. Keashly (1998) referred to workplace  
 315 bullying as “emotional abuse”, characterized by hostile verbal and  
 nonverbal, nonphysical behaviours directed at a person(s) such that the  
 target’s sense of him- or herself as a competent person and worker is  
 negatively affected.

320 Within Europe there is still a lack of empirical studies in the Southern  
 European countries (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2008; Topa, Depolo, &  
 Morales, 2007), despite the high social relevance of workplace bullying in  
 the area (Hirigoyen, 2001). The existing studies adopted the position of  
 Einarsen et al. (2003) and Leymann (1996) and have mainly emphasized the  
 psychological dimension of workplace bullying (e.g., Rodríguez-Carballeira,  
 325 ⑨ Escartín, Visauta, Porrúa, & Martín-Peña, in press).

Paying specific attention to Central American countries, the major  
 emphasis in such countries is on practical intervention strategies, which is  
 understandable from a sociohistorical approach (Cruz, 2006; Huhn et al.,  
 2006b). Nevertheless, this emphasis on the intervention side of the equation  
 330 has diminished the efforts on the empirical research side. In addition to this,  
 although sexual harassment has received greater attention (Cortina, 2004),  
 the few studies that have been conducted on workplace bullying are more  
 theoretical (Escartín, Arrieta, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2009) or from a  
 legal or medical perspective (Campos, Abarca, & Prado, 2005; Romero-  
 335 Pérez, 2006; Salas, 2005), with a considerable lack of empirical research in  
 the field (Pando, Aranda, Franco, & Torres, 2008).

## AIMS OF THE STUDY

340 Taking the preceding discussion into account, it is speculated that Central  
 American countries receive a greater influence from North America,



whereas Southern European countries receive a greater influence from North and Central Europe. Thus, differences in the way workplace bullying is understood by employees in Central America and Southern Europe are expected. Based on the literature reviewed in the previous sections, we will discuss differences between these two world areas with regard to three aspects of workplace bullying: psychological vs. physical harassment, hierarchical vs. horizontal bullying, and direct vs. indirect aggression. 345

The first aspect to be addressed is whether workplace bullying is perceived to be more physical or more psychological. There are several reasons why we believe that the physical component will be more salient in Central America whereas the psychological component is more salient in Southern Europe. First, we assume that Central America is more influenced by the US, whereas Southern Europe is more influenced by Central and North European concepts. As discussed earlier, there are several competing concepts of bullying in the US and the physical aspects are historically more prominent than the psychological or emotional aspects (i.e., Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Kelloway et al., 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). In particular, cases of severe physical violence found more attention in the public media compared to Europe. In Europe an occupational health perspective distinguishing between bullying and physical violence has been adopted, and is thus present in European research studies. Literature on workplace bullying in Europe has not found the physical component to be significant (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). Moreover, in Europe (psychological) bullying received more public attention than physical violence. 350 355 360 365

Second, as already outlined, Central American societies are much more exposed to physical violence than Spain. Ubiquitous violence may lower the threshold to use physical violence even in the workplace. Therefore, physical violence may be a more prevalent feature of harassment in the workplace and may thus influence workers' understanding of workplace bullying as being physical in nature. Moreover, in a developing country, "simple" and easy to recognize acts such as physical aggression could be more important, above all when crime and violence rates are considered (Cruz, 2006; Huhn et al., 2006a). Therefore, it could be speculated that the physical component of workplace bullying is more significant for the Central American employees than for the Southern European ones (Hypothesis 1a), whereas the psychological dimension would be considered as more significant by Southern European employees as compared to Central American employees (Hypothesis 1b). 370 375

The second aspect to be addressed is whether workplace bullying is perceived as a hierarchical or a horizontal phenomenon. The Northern and Central European tradition initiated by Leymann (1990, 1996) emphasized the perspective of the victim, conceptualizing workplace bullying as a process occurring between supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates, 380

385 including top-down, horizontal, and bottom-up bullying (Zapf & Einarsen,  
2005). In contrast, the English tradition has focused more on the  
perpetrator's behaviour (i.e., the bully) and has mainly understood and  
conceptualized workplace bullying as directed from a supervisor or manager  
390 to a subordinate (Adams, 1992), emphasizing a downward process (Hoel &  
Beale, 2006). This may have to do with semantic aspects. The term  
"bullying" is used in the Commonwealth countries (e.g., Great Britain, or  
Australia). The *Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1995) defines a  
bully as someone "whose claims to strengths and courage are based on the  
395 intimidation of those who are weaker". This has typically been associated  
with a supervisor who is more powerful because of his or her formal  
position. Moreover, bullying is often associated with a one-to-one situation.  
In contrast, in Northern and Central Europe, many countries use the term  
"mobbing", which was introduced by Leymann. According to Webster's  
400 dictionary, a mob is "a large disorderly crowd often tending to violent or  
destructive action". The term is used in ethology and describes how a crowd  
of weaker animals (e.g., geese) cast out a stronger animal (e.g., the fox).  
Given this context, this term tends to emphasize horizontal aggression by a  
group.

405 Among researchers, several authors have stressed that American  
perspectives of bullying imply different concepts compared with the  
⑩ European tradition (i.e., Saam, in press), whereas others have stated that  
the terms workplace bullying, mobbing, employee emotional abuse, and  
nonsexual generalized harassment are synonymous (i.e., Lutgen-Sandvik,  
2008). In particular, Einarsen et al. (2003) pointed out that although the  
410 concept of bullying as used in English-speaking countries and the term  
mobbing as used in many other European countries may have some  
semantic differences and connotations, for all intents and purposes they  
refer to the same phenomenon. Although from a scientific perspective, we  
agree with these authors that "bullying" and "mobbing" should be used as  
415 synonyms, we believe that in practice the semantic differences of both terms  
have an effect. In particular, the different connotations of the terms bullying  
and mobbing may contribute to a different emphasis of vertical versus  
horizontal aggression.

420 To sum up, it is expected that the English tradition has a greater influence  
in the way Central American employees understand workplace bullying.  
Thus, in Central America it would be more likely understood as supervisor  
bullying (Hypothesis 2a) which is a top-down process, whereas in Southern  
European countries it would be more likely perceived as a horizontal process  
among colleagues, but also as a top-down as well as a bottom-up process.  
425 Thus, in contrast to Central America, in Southern European countries  
bullying will be understood more often as a horizontal as well as a bottom-  
up process (Hypothesis 2b).

The third and final aspect to be addressed in this article is whether workplace bullying is based mainly on direct vs. indirect aggressive behaviours. Baron and Neuman (1996) applied Buss' (1961) conceptualization of human aggression to hostile workplace behaviours along three dimensions and differentiated between direct and indirect, physical and verbal, and active and passive behaviours. Using this framework, Rodriguez-Carballeira et al. (2005; for further discussion see Rodriguez-Carballeira et al., in press) proposed six dimensions of workplace bullying. These dimensions were differentiated with regard to emphasizing either direct aggressive acts (directly causing harm to the victim) or indirect aggressive acts (harm caused through the actions of other agents or through assaults on persons or objects valued by the victim). With regard to direct aggressive acts, three categories were differentiated according to their emphasis on emotion ("emotional abuse", such as yelling or threats), cognition ("professional discredit or humiliation", such as belittling knowledge or performance), and behaviour ("devaluation of professional role", that is, undervaluing the role or unjustifiably relieving responsibilities). Three categories of indirect aggressive acts were also differentiated ("isolation" such as physically separating or impeding communication; "control and manipulation of information" such as delaying or not passing on information; and "control-abuse of working conditions", such as intervening or acting negligently in the work environment).

For the different types of harassment, different bases of power may play a role (Keashly, 1998). The indirect negative acts that are very difficult to identify, analyse, and harder to complain about should be more prominent in bottom-up and colleagues' bullying. In contrast, overt offensive or abusive behaviours should be more prominent in supervisor bullying (Kelloway et al., 2006). That would be coherent with the effect-danger ratio theory of aggression (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Hjelt-Back, 1994), because indirect strategies carry a lower risk of being discovered in comparison to tangible behaviours. Therefore, it is expected that the direct aggressive behaviours of workplace bullying would be more significant in the understanding of the phenomenon for the Central American employees than for the Southern European employees (Hypothesis 3a). Furthermore, it is also expected that the Southern European employees would emphasize more the indirect aggressive behaviours than the Central American employees (Hypothesis 3b).

To summarize, the following three sets of research hypotheses will be investigated, corresponding to the three aspects of workplace bullying discussed previously:

**Hypothesis 1a:** The physical component of workplace bullying will be more significant in the understanding of the phenomenon by the

Central American employees than for the Southern European employees.

**Hypothesis 1b:** The psychological component of workplace bullying will be more significant in the understanding of the phenomenon by the Southern European employees than for the Central American employees.

**Hypothesis 2a:** The hierarchical (top-down) component of workplace bullying will be more significant in the understanding of the phenomenon by the Central American employees than for the Southern European employees.

**Hypothesis 2b:** The hierarchical (top-down and bottom-up) and horizontal components of workplace bullying together will be more significant in the understanding of the phenomenon by the Southern European employees than for the Central American employees.

**Hypothesis 3a:** The direct strategies of workplace bullying will be more significant in the understanding of the phenomenon by the Central American employees than for the Southern European employees.

**Hypothesis 3b:** The indirect strategies of workplace bullying will be more significant in the understanding of the phenomenon by the Southern European employees than for the Central American employees.

## METHOD

### Participants

In the present study, 246 employees, 120 from Costa Rica and 126 from Spain participated. The participation of all employees was completely voluntary and their anonymity was assured (Table 2). Both subsamples were further divided according to the way in which the participants were recruited. Some employees were recruited following a workshop held by the authors on “Prevention of Workplace Bullying” (referred to as “course participants”). The courses were conducted in both world regions and employees attended on a voluntary basis (58 workers of the Health Sector in Costa Rica and 51 of the Education Sector in Spain). The remaining 137 participants were recruited from administrative services (referred to as “service participants”) in both countries (62 employees from Costa Rica and 75 from Spain).

The average age in the sample was 35.20 ( $SD = 10.06$ ), 154 workers were female and 92 were male, 55.7% of the sample worked in the private sector, and 44.3% in the public sector. Approximately 60% of the sample had

TABLE 2  
Characteristics of the sample

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Costa Rica</i> <i>(n = 120)</i>		<i>Spain (n = 126)</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Participant groups				
Course participants	58	48	51	40
Service participants	62	52	75	60
Gender				
Male	40	33	52	41
Female	80	67	74	59
Age				
30 or under	56	47	45	36
Over 30	64	53	81	64
Educational level				
Elementary	2	1	2	1
Secondary	29	24	11	9
Higher education	89	75	113	90
Socioeconomic level				
Low	33	27	15	12
Medium	67	56	92	73
High	20	17	19	15
Professional category				
Manager or director	15	12	7	6
Middle management	19	16	17	13
Baseline employee	86	72	102	81
Type of contract				
Permanent	73	61	75	60
Temporary	47	39	51	40
Tenure in job position				
6 years or less	63	52	53	42
More than 6 years	57	48	73	58
Activity branch				
Education	–	–	51	40
Administration	62	52	75	60
Health	58	48	–	–
Sector				
Public	58	48	51	40
Private	62	52	75	60

Total sample *N* = 246 workers.

permanent contracts, whereas 40% were employed on temporary contracts. In accordance with suggestions of several studies (e.g., Schaffter & Riordan, 2003; Tsui, Nifadkar, & Yi, 2007), the equivalence between samples was



assessed using the Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistic, as normal distribution was not assumed. This nonparametric test brings all scores in a rank order and tests for chances of obtaining greater observations in one sample versus the other. If sample size  $N > 20$ , the test statistic  $U$  is normally distributed and  $z$  can be used instead. No significant differences between samples were found, except for the level of education: 90% of the Spanish employees had higher education, and 75% of the Costa Rican employees had secondary education,  $z = -3.11$ ,  $p < .01$ .

## Instruments

A questionnaire consisting of two sections was utilized. The first section measured sociodemographic and professional variables such as those given in Table 2. The second section asked workers to give their own definitions of workplace bullying through a single open-ended question: “Think about mobbing for a minute: What is mobbing in your opinion? (You can use examples, for instance)”. The question was presented in Spanish and the term “mobbing” was used as this is the expression used in both countries. An open-ended question was used as the authors assumed that, within a culture, words are the medium through which reality construction takes place (Newman, 2008), with language evolving to reflect a phenomenon.

## Procedure

The authors conducted a series of workplace bullying prevention courses between November 2006 and May 2007, focusing on occupational groups identified as having a particularly stressful job (Dollard et al., 2006). The courses were conducted in Costa Rica (within the health sector) and in Spain (within the educational sector). As an initial evaluation before starting the workshop, participants were asked if they would be interested in taking part in a survey about workplace bullying. To prevent researcher bias and/or influence it was agreed that only the word “mobbing” would be used throughout the entire process and no indication of what should be understood by the term was given to the participants. This was to ensure that researchers did not impose an interpretation framework, which might affect the participants’ own perceptions of workplace bullying. To approach those employees who did not attend any of the courses (the service participants), the questionnaire was sent via e-mail to different public administrators requesting their voluntary collaboration and assuring them that participants’ anonymity would be respected.

All of the 246 definitions of workplace bullying offered by participants were postcategorized by two academic judges according to three criteria

corresponding to the three sets of research hypotheses (Tables 3 and 4): 600  
 (1) emphasis on the physical or psychological components (e.g., quotes  
 from participants: “psychological pressure on the worker”; “physical  
 aggression”); (2) emphasis on the direction of the abuse (supervisor,  
 colleagues, or bottom-up bullying) (e.g., quotes from participants:  
 “psychological aggression by a superior”; “work colleagues or bosses  
 make life impossible”; “intense psychological pressure on a colleague,  
 subordinate, or superior”); and (3) emphasis on the direct or indirect  
 workplace bullying behaviours (e.g., quotes from participants: “to insult  
 or humiliate an employee”; “being treated with silence”). In order to  
 investigate the third research question, the Rodriguez-Carballeira et al. 610  
 (2005, in press) categorization of six components was used. The interrater <sup>9</sup>  
 agreement for all the 246 definitions showed high reliability between  
 scores (Cohen’s kappa: .92 for symmetric measures,  $p < .01$ ). As the  
 distributions for the variables were different in the samples, non-  
 parametric statistics were used, and the level of significance was set at 615  
 $p < .05$ .

## RESULTS

### Physical or psychological components of workplace bullying 620

With regard to the type of abuse shown in Table 3, about 80% of the entire  
 sample described workplace bullying as a psychological phenomenon; the  
 remaining 20% also included physical aspects in their descriptions. No  
 participant described workplace bullying as an entirely physical phenom- 625  
 enon. As normal distribution was not assumed, the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test  
 for the comparison of two independent samples was conducted to determine  
 whether the components highlighted varied by nationality of the different  
 subsamples. The results revealed a significant difference between employees  
 of different nationalities with regard to the emphasis on the physical or 630  
 psychological component of workplace bullying. The South European  
 employees defined it mainly as a psychological phenomenon, whereas the  
 Central American employees stressed also the physical dimension of such  
 phenomenon,  $U = 5949.00$ ,  $z = -4.17$ ,  $p < .01$ .

In both world regions, no significant differences in type of abuse were 635  
 found between course participants and service participants, as shown in  
 Table 4: Spain,  $U = 1858.50$ ,  $z = -0.53$ ,  $p = .60$ ; Costa Rica,  $U = 1745.00$ ,  
 $z = -0.35$ ,  $p = .73$ .

Hence, in relation to Hypothesis 1a, where it was speculated that the  
 physical component of workplace bullying would be more significant in the 640  
 Central American employees’ definitions than in the Southern European  
 ones, the data supported this hypothesis. Results showed that 30% of the

TABLE 3  
 Characteristics of the study variables for the entire sample, Central America, Southern Europe, service participants, and course participants

Variable	Entire sample		Central America		Southern Europe		Service participants		Course participants	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Type of abuse										
Psychological	197	80.1	83	69.2	114	90.5	109	79.6	88	80.7
Psychological and physical	49	19.9	37	30.8	12	9.5	28	20.4	21	19.3
Direction										
Vertical descendent	88	35.8	48	40.0	40	31.7	62	45.3	26	23.9
Vertical descendent + horizontal	77	31.3	39	32.5	38	30.2	50	36.5	27	24.8
All directions	81	32.9	33	27.5	48	38.1	25	18.2	56	51.4
Emphasis on categories										
1. Isolation	24	9.8	10	8.3	14	11.1	11	8.0	13	11.9
2. Control/manipulation of information	1	0.4	0	0.0	1	0.8	1	0.7	0	0.0
3. Control/abuse of working conditions	23	9.3	7	5.8	16	12.7	17	12.4	6	5.5
4. Emotional abuse	126	51.2	68	56.7	58	46.0	64	46.7	62	56.9
5. Professional discredit or humiliation	31	12.6	15	12.5	16	12.7	17	12.4	14	12.8
6. Devaluation of professional role	41	16.7	20	16.7	21	16.7	27	19.7	14	12.8

definitions applied by the Central American employees stressed the physical component of workplace bullying as well as the psychological one. In comparison, only 10% of the Southern European employees' definitions did. In relation to Hypothesis 1b, where it was speculated that the psychological component of workplace bullying would be more significant in the Southern European employees' definitions than in the Central American ones, the data supported this hypothesis as well. Results showed that 90% of the Southern European employees defined workplace bullying in psychological terms, but only 70% of the Central American employees did.

### Supervisor bullying, colleagues, and bottom-up bullying

With regard to the direction of the abuse shown in Table 3, a third of the study participants considered workplace bullying a phenomenon perpetrated by supervisors (i.e., vertical descendent), whereas another third believed that this type of behaviour could also come not only from supervisors, but also from co-workers, establishing the possibility of colleagues bullying (i.e., vertical descendent and horizontal). Finally, the

TABLE 4  
 Characteristics of the study variables for the entire sample and subgroups

Variable	Entire sample		Service participants				Course participants				
			Costa Rican		Spanish		Costa Rican		Spanish		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Type of abuse											
Psychological	197	80.1	42	67.7	67	89.3	41	70.7	47	92.2	
Psychological and physical	49	19.9	20	32.3	8	10.7	17	29.3	4	7.8	
Direction											
Vertical descendent	88	35.8	30	48.4	32	42.7	18	31.0	8	15.7	
Vertical descendent + horizontal	77	31.3	24	38.7	26	34.7	15	25.9	12	27.5	
All directions	81	32.9	8	12.9	17	22.7	25	43.1	31	60.8	
Emphasis on categories											
1. Isolation	24	9.8	6	9.7	5	6.7	4	6.9	9	17.6	
2. Control/manipulation of information	1	0.4	0	0.0	1	1.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	
3. Control/abuse of working conditions	23	9.3	4	6.5	13	17.3	3	5.2	3	5.9	
4. Emotional abuse	126	51.2	31	50.0	33	44.0	37	63.8	25	49.0	
5. Professional discredit or humiliation	31	12.6	8	12.9	9	12.0	7	12.1	7	13.7	
6. Devaluation of professional role	41	16.7	13	21.0	14	18.7	7	12.1	7	13.7	

last third of the sample stated in their definitions that workplace bullying could occur between colleagues, bosses, and subordinates alike, indicating the existence of bottom-up workplace bullying as well (i.e., all directions).

When the results between the employees from Central America and Southern Europe were compared, marginal effects for the direction of the abuse were found ( $U = 6627.00, z = -1.77, p = .08$ ). However, as shown in Table 4, within these world regions, significant differences according to the direction of the abuse were found between course participants and service participants: Costa Rica,  $U = 1246.00, z = -3.09, p < .01$ ; Spain,  $U = 1095.50, z = -4.32, p < .01$ . The Southern European and Central American employees who participated in the courses conceived workplace bullying mainly as a multidirectional process (supervisor, colleagues, and bottom-up bullying), and the ones who did not participate defined it mainly as a top-down process.

Thus, the data showed marginal support for Hypotheses 2a and 2b, stating that Central American employees would understand workplace

730 bullying more as supervisor bullying and Southern European employees  
 would understand it more as colleague and bottom-up bullying as well. In  
 both subsamples, definitions were similarly distributed, but Southern  
 European employees presented a stronger tendency to understand work-  
 place bullying as an all directions process (supervisor, colleagues, and  
 735 bottom-up bullying) rather than a top-down process. Finally, data revealed  
 that almost half of the employees' who participated in the courses  
 understood workplace bullying as an all-directions process, whereas almost  
 half of the service employees who did not participate in any course defined it  
 mainly as supervisor bullying.

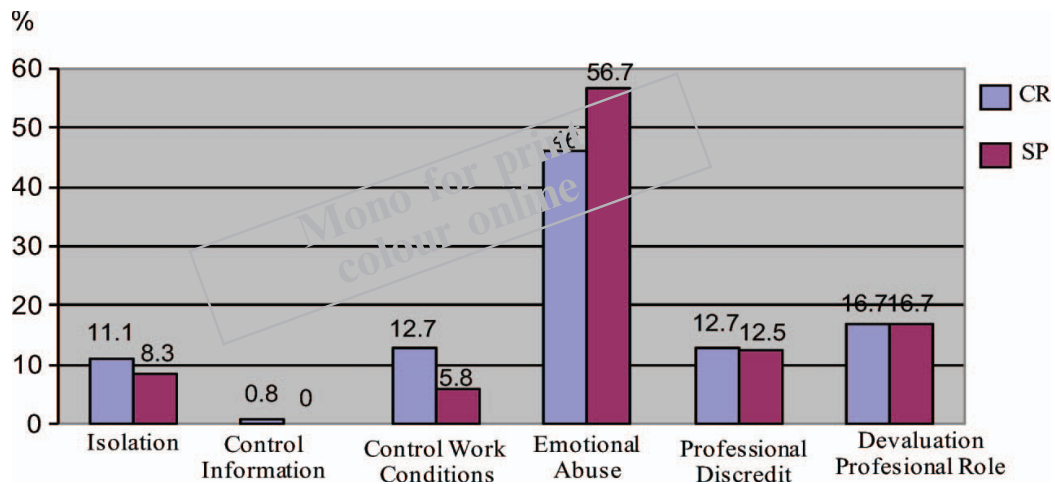
### 740 Direct and indirect aggressive behaviours of workplace bullying

To investigate differences regarding the emphasis placed on the different  
 workplace bullying categories (see Table 3), we used the Friedman test. It is  
 745 a nonparametric test based on the analysis of multiple rank orders. It works  
 like the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test and is used for the comparison of more than  
 two nonindependent/related groups. It provides a test statistic  $Q$ , which can  
 be approximated by  $\chi^2$  if sample size is large ( $N > 15$ ). The Friedman test  
 was applied as normal distribution was not assumed. It showed significant  
 750 differences between the six categories of abuse used to classify the definitions  
 given by the entire sample (the Costa Rican and the Spanish),  $\chi^2 = 236.22$ ,  
 $p < .01$ ,  $df = 5$ . Emotional abuse was by far the most used category to  
 describe workplace bullying (51.2% of the entire sample). In contrast,  
 control and manipulation of information was almost not used (0.4% of the  
 755 entire sample).

However, as indicated in Table 4, no significant differences were found  
 for employees who took the course and those who did not regarding their  
 emphasis on different categories of workplace bullying in either Central  
 America,  $U = 1683.00$ ,  $z = -0.67$ ,  $p = .50$ , or Southern Europe,  $U = 1819.00$ ,  
 760  $z = -0.50$ ,  $p = .62$ . Furthermore, as can be seen in Figure 1, when the data  
 was compared between both world regions, no significant differences were  
 found,  $U = 7021.00$ ,  $z = -1.04$ ,  $p = .30$ , between the single categories, e.g.,  
 isolation:  $U = 7350.00$ ,  $z = -0.73$ ,  $p = .46$ ; control-abuse of working  
 conditions,  $U = 7041.00$ ,  $z = -1.84$ ,  $p = .07$ .

765 Thus, the results showed that the employees in Central America and  
 Southern Europe conceptualized workplace bullying in a similar way,  
 according to the type of aggressive behaviour used. Specifically, using a  
 nonparametric statistical hypothesis test for the case of two related samples  
 (the Wilcoxon signed-rank test), the data indicated that direct workplace  
 770 bullying behaviours (such as emotional abuse) were considered more  
 frequently by both the Central American and the Southern European





**Figure 1.** Use of bullying categories for the Central American (CR) and Southern European (SP) sample. Note: No significant differences between Costa Rica (CR) and Spain (SP). To view this figure in colour, please see the online issue of the Journal.

employees,  $z = -9.64, p < .01$ . Moreover, for both the Southern European and Central American employees, the indirect strategies were conceptually less significant.

Hence, according to Hypothesis 3a, where it was speculated that direct components of workplace bullying would be more relevant in the conceptualization of the phenomenon for the Central American employees than for the Southern European employees, the data did not support the hypothesis, because in Southern Europe direct components were highly relevant, as well. According to Hypothesis 3b, where it was speculated that indirect components of workplace bullying would be more relevant in the conceptualization of the phenomenon for the Southern European employees than for the Central American employees, the data also did not support the hypothesis, because in Southern Europe indirect components were also not very relevant.

## DISCUSSION

The main research question of this study was whether there would be differences in the way workplace bullying is understood by employees in Central America and Southern Europe. According to the results, some differences have been found between both world regions. However, the data also suggests similarities in the conceptualization of workplace bullying across cultures. This is against what was expected, with more similarities than differences being found.

With respect to the first set of hypotheses (1a and 1b), whether workplace bullying is a physical or a psychological phenomenon, the results showed that one-third of the employees from Central America said that physical

815 strategies together with psychological strategies are part of their workplace  
bullying definitions. In contrast, most of the Southern European employees  
defined workplace bullying as a psychological phenomenon. It could be  
argued that in Southern Europe more subtle strategies could be used in  
820 order to lower the risk of being identified and/or punished, which is coherent  
with the effect-danger ratio theory of aggression (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994). In  
contrast, in Central America, as noted by Wilkinson (1998, cited in Bond,  
2004), physical behaviours could be seen as a way to get respect from others.  
825 Also, such differences could be explained by the influence of the North  
American research tradition on workplace violence and hostile workplace  
behaviours, which is defined also by physical behaviours (Keashly & Jagatic,  
2003; Neuman & Baron, 2005). In addition to this, the fact that such a  
phenomenon has received public and scientific attention recently in Central  
830 America could facilitate an easier recognition of overt aggression towards  
employees (Forrest, Eatough, & Shevlin, 2005). This is opposed to covert  
aggression, which is normally more difficult to recognize, although not  
necessarily less damaging than other types of abuse. In comparison to  
Southern European countries, recent interest and commitment to preventing  
sexual harassment (Cortina, 2004) in some Central American countries  
could have led to an overestimation of the physical component. Never-  
835 theless, although significant differences occurred, some similarities between  
both subsamples were found as well. This could be partially explained by an  
extrapolation of the influence from European on American research, which  
may have taken place since the late 1980s, as it is noted by Keashly and  
Harvey (2006, p. 107): “Leymann’s (1990) work on mobbing in the  
840 workplace fuelled an incredible burst of empirical research in the European  
Community that was and continues to be influential in thinking about and  
examining workplace emotional abuse in the United States and Canada.”  
Thus, such European research could have influenced Central America, as  
well.

845 With respect to the second set of hypotheses (2a and 2b), whether  
workplace bullying is a hierarchical or a horizontal phenomenon, workplace  
bullying has been understood in both world regions as supervisors bullying  
employees, which is coherent with previous research about abusive  
supervision (e.g., Ashforth, 1997; Tepper, 2000). However, the course  
850 participants defined it not only as supervisor bullying, but also as colleagues  
and subordinates bullying. It has been argued that power distance is a  
crucial variable (Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2001) and that strong  
hierarchical relations make workplace bullying behaviours more likely to  
arise. Thus, according to the definition of power distance provided by House  
855 et al. (2004, p. 12), it could be argued that in both Southern Europe and  
Central America, where there exists high levels of male domination, work  
relations facilitate some top-down behaviours that could be commonly

understood as workplace bullying. This is in line with other studies on this topic (Aryee, Sun, Xiong, & Debrah, 2007; Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Schanke, & Hetland, 2007) and the so-called “macho culture” (Tedeschi & Bond, 2001). The difference between the course participants and the service participants is likely to be explained by their motivation and interest in the topic, which could have led them to be better informed about the phenomenon of workplace bullying. These interested participants whose motivation or interest may have been a result of witnessing workplace bullying developed a more differentiated picture of bullying independently of the work region they were coming from. 860 865

With respect to the third set of hypotheses (3a and 3b), the entire sample emphasized the direct aggressive behaviours, specifically the emotional aspects, in their understanding of workplace bullying. Scientific literature has offered several definitions that have also stressed such an emotional dimension through the term “emotional abuse” (Einarsen, 1999), a concept introduced by Keashly, Trott, and MacLean (1994) as a significant component of the workers’ experience. In addition to this, the indirect aggressive behaviours were used less to define workplace bullying. Aspects of workplace bullying such as social isolation, obstructionism, or misuse of information were generally not used by the employees in their definitions. Furthermore, these results add weight to the distinction provided by several authors, between person-oriented acts (acts directed at the person and his or her personality and behaviours, e.g., being ignored, ridiculed, or shouted at) and work-oriented acts (i.e., indirect aggressive acts directed at the person’s work tasks and work role, e.g., being given tasks with impossible targets or deadlines; e.g., Notelaers, Einarsen, de Witte, & Vermunt, 2006). Person-oriented acts best fit with the “emotional abuse” category, whereas most of the other categories fit with the work-oriented acts. In the task of defining workplace bullying, attacks against the person and strategies that focus on direct abusive action have more relevance than those aimed at influencing the working environment. This is consistent with various studies (e.g., Hansen et al., 2006) that have analysed how the aggressors or actors in the workplace bullying process tend to use those abusive strategies that attack the fundamental aspects of the self, thus gradually bringing about changes in the perceptions and beliefs of their victims. However, it is contrary to other studies that have found indirect negative acts to be most frequently reported (i.e., Kelloway et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the fact that the direct negative acts were far more considered when defining workplace bullying is explained by Keashly (1998), who pointed out that the preponderance of certain acts may be because targets and witnesses can identify the action and its harmfulness. And conversely, Keashly (2001) pointed out as well that certain subtle acts are more difficult to describe being more complex to discern for targets and witnesses. 870 875 880 885 890 895 900

To sum up, this is one of the first studies that has tried to analyse how workplace bullying can vary across cultures, reflecting not only the differences but also the existing similarities. Hence, these results highlight the nature and the phenomenon per se, which have some “core aspects” shared by different working populations in different world regions, such as Central America and Southern Europe. These small differences could be caused by the globalization processes, which is leading to a worldwide cultural convergence (Dorfman & House, 2004), where “the nature of the industry influences organizational culture through the constraints it places on the behaviour of all persons in the organization” (Dickson, Aditya, & Chhokar, 2000, p. 454).

From a practical point of view, the fact that the workers’ understanding of workplace bullying does not differ substantially among these world regions has some positive implications for the development and implementation of different strategies for dealing effectively with this phenomenon (Agervold, 2007; Hoel & Beale, 2006; Zapf & Gross, 2001) in parts of the world where little research exists such as Central America. These findings should contribute to the development of intervention strategies in which the emphasis lies above all on prevention processes, reflecting how a detailed understanding of the abusive behaviours is an essential step in establishing a preventive action plan. Likewise, information campaigns and specific training programmes could facilitate the emergence of shared meanings among the employees of an organization, with the objective of marking acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, and leading to the development and implementation of codes of conduct in such organizations.

Some of the limitations of the study should be stated. For example, although the use of a convenience sample could have provoked a self-selection bias, the insignificant differences between subsamples stressed that it did not drastically affect the study. Particularly, the potential bias related to the different way to approach the sample, which could be explained by their motivation and interest in the topic, should be further addressed in future research. Furthermore, the qualitative approach of this study does not exclude that researchers may have been biased towards their research hypotheses when analysing the data. However, the high interrater agreement suggests that such a bias may not be too strong. Although possible differences in the media in both world areas could have influenced the data, the study of Lewis (2001) suggests that the conceptualization of bullying is only marginally influenced by such sources.

Summing up, this is one of the few studies to look at workplace bullying from a cross-cultural perspective; the challenge ahead is very inspiring and lies in conducting research within a wider set of world regions. This study adds value to the field, in the sense that it offers a set of results that will

hopefully stimulate research on the cross-cultural similarities and differences of workplace bullying, which might provide a scientific basis to protect and promote occupational health worldwide.

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