


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Perceived ability to defend oneself against negative treatment at work: Gender differences and different types of bullying behaviours

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Abstract

A lack of ability to defend oneself against bullying behaviour is considered a defining aspect of workplace bullying. The aim of the present study was to investigate the effects perceived ability to defend has on exposure to bullying behaviour, and whether there are gender differences as well as differences regarding the type of bullying behaviour one is exposed to. The study is based on a longitudinal probability sample drawn from the whole Swedish workforce. The final sample size (394 participants, 43% men and 57% women) included only those who responded at both time points and who reported exposure to at least one bullying behaviour. The results showed that perceived ability to defend oneself only had a protective effect on bullying behaviours for male targets exposed to direct types of bullying behaviours. The study is an important contribution to the understanding of workplace bullying as a concept by showing that the perception of being able to protect oneself from bullying behaviour, in most cases, has little or no effect on the levels of bullying behaviour, and thereby on further escalation of the exposure, especially for women. An implication of the results is that organisations and employers must actively intervene in the early stages of the bullying process rather

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than believing that the targeted worker is able to deal with or withstand the exposure on their own.

KEYWORDS

bullying behaviours, escalation, gender differences, harassment, Sweden, work and organisational psychology, workplace mistreatment

INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying is formally defined as a situation where an employee is exposed to frequent harassing behaviours from others at the workplace (e.g., superiors or co-workers) over a prolonged period of time and where the employee gradually finds it increasingly more difficult to defend themselves against these actions (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Olweus, 1993). Workplace bullying has been established as a key social stressor in contemporary working life (Niedhammer et al., 2013; Schutte et al., 2014). Literature syntheses show that those exposed experience a host of health problems, including psychological and somatic complaints (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Verkuil et al., 2015), symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Nielsen et al., 2015), and suicidal ideation (Leach et al., 2017). Bullying has also been associated with reduced work ability and sickness absence (Nielsen et al., 2016), and does therefore incur large costs to employers and the welfare state (Hassard et al., 2017). However, the mechanisms and conditions that explain bullying and its effects are still largely unknown. For instance, although a power imbalance between the bully and the bullied, as manifested through the latter's perceived lack of *ability to defend* oneself against the negative treatment, is considered a defining aspect of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020), few studies have empirically examined perceptions of the ability to defend oneself. To fill this important knowledge gap, the present study investigates the role of perceived ability to defend oneself when exposed to bullying behaviour at the workplace. Specifically, by portraying bullying as a long-lasting process (Zapf et al., 2020) and by building on the theory of learned helplessness (Abramson et al., 1980; Maier & Seligman, 2016), we aim at determining the effect perceived ability to defend oneself has on bullying. Workplace bullying is a gendered phenomenon (Salin et al., 2013; Zapf et al., 2020) and women in general have lower social power at work (Salin, 2018). Women also often display different reactions than men to mistreatment (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2004) which is why gender differences also will be investigated. Finally, the type of bullying behaviour one is exposed to (direct/indirect and work/person-related bullying behaviours) may affect the opportunity one has to defend oneself. We will investigate if perceived ability to defend oneself depends on the type of bullying for men and women.

The role of perceived ability to defend oneself

The concept of workplace bullying rests on three necessary conditions (Einarsen et al., 1994; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996). The first is that an employee is exposed to negative acts, also labelled as bullying behaviours, at the workplace. The second is that these acts systematically are directed towards the target over an extended time period. The third is that the

target find themselves in an inferior position with a gradually reduced ability to defend themselves against or avert the negative acts. It is the combination of systematic exposure and the experience of disempowerment that differentiate bullying from other forms of aggression at the workplace. This means that workplace bullying can be described as a process with two distinct phases reflecting perceived “exposure to bullying behaviour” and “victimisation.” The “exposure to bullying behaviour” phase refers to the experience of systematic acts of aggression and mistreatment from others at the workplace over a prolonged period, while the “victimisation” phase refers to the disempowerment the employee experiences when they are unable to defend themselves against this mistreatment (Einarsen et al., 2020). Interestingly, this experience of disempowerment resembles the notion of “learned helplessness” (Samnani, 2013), thus indicating that a somewhat similar mechanism can explain how bullying impacts those exposed. Learned helplessness describes a psychological state where an individual feels that they lack control in a given situation and therefore shows a give-up reaction (Rizvi & Sikand, 2020). Central to this is that the reaction may be generalised to other similar situations and that it may be long-lasting (Abramson et al., 1978). Abramson et al. (1978) suggested that three deficits will be encountered when an individual perceives that an event is uncontrollable. First, individuals will experience motivational deficits through their resulting expectation that outcomes will also be uncontrollable in the future. Second, individuals will experience cognitive deficits by learning that events are uncontrollable and encountering challenges in learning appropriate responses to future events. Third, an individual will experience emotional deficits such as depressed affect through their perception that outcomes are beyond control. In cases of bullying, the uncontrollable situation is the experience of being unable to defend oneself against the mistreatment.

Hence, in the context of bullying, being unable to defend oneself against aversive behaviours, the target may perceive the treatment as uncontrollable, which is likely to deter and make them come to believe that resistance will be futile, also when facing other types of negative treatment at work. As explained by Samnani (2013, p. 126), “when targets view the bullying behaviours as uncontrollable, they will tend to experience motivational deficits that will eliminate any motivation to respond to the bullying. Furthermore, targets will tend to experience cognitive deficits through their inability to learn effective responses to bullying behaviours. Thus, this will make them less likely to form resistance-based responses.” The inability to respond to bullying behaviours is likely to determine the further development of the bullying. That is, if a target can withstand and confront the bully it is possible that the exposure to the negative acts will be sustained at the same level, or even decrease, however, in some cases confrontation may also make things worse. On the other hand, if the target passively accepts the bullying situation and cannot form resistance-based responses they will become an even easier prey for the perpetrator, and it is likely that the exposure to bullying behaviour increases. In general, there are different coping strategies ranging from avoidance to confronting the bully to seeking social support to filing a complaint (Karatuna, 2015), all of which may have an effect on the perception of one’s ability to defend oneself. However, the systematic nature of bullying is likely to reinforce the experience of helplessness as research has found that repeated exposure to aversive events contributes to prolong the helplessness reaction (Maier, 2001). To examine this impact of exposure to bullying behaviour on perceived ability to defend oneself, we propose and test the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1. The association between exposure to bullying behaviours at baseline and follow-up is dependent on the perceived ability to defend oneself, that is, the association is weaker for those who feel they have a better ability to defend themselves.

The perceived ability to defend oneself and gender

Evidence indicates that there are important gender differences both regarding outcomes of workplace bullying (Glambek et al., 2018; Rosander et al., 2020) and in helplessness reactions (Baucom & Danker-Brown, 1979; Rubinstein, 2004). It is therefore also likely that such differences also exist regarding perceived ability to defend oneself following exposure to bullying behaviours and therefore also the development of the bullying behaviours over time. One important aspect that could contribute to gender differences in this regard is the lower social power of women (Miner & Eischeid, 2012; Salin, 2018). In an unequal situation at work, the ones in power may try to maintain the power imbalance by discrimination against and mistreatment of the less powerful (Sidanius et al., 2004). This power imbalance may put women that are exposed to bullying behaviours in a more exposed situation from the start in that women already have to deal with the gender inequality that exists in today's workplaces and on top of that also try to handle the negative treatment from a bully. Hence, it is likely that it will be more difficult to handle the exposure to bullying behaviours over time, irrespective of their ability to defend.

It is well established that stereotypes of typical male and female behaviours differ (Eagly & Wood, 2012), and this may also contribute to explaining gender differences in responses to bullying behaviour. Men are expected to be strong, assertive, and agentic, whereas women are expected to be more gentle, caring, and communal. These stereotypes may also influence one's self-concept, that is, becoming internalised and influencing one's behaviour (Turner & Reynolds, 2012) and thereby also the likelihood that the target experiences helplessness following aversive exposures. The gender stereotypes may create an idea that women as bullying targets are easier prey than men, so even if the target perceives that they can defend themselves against the negative treatment, the perpetrator may continue the mistreatment all the same. If the perpetrator thinks the target can bite back, as the stereotype of male behaviour indicates, the negative treatment may become less intense or even stop. Gender may also have a direct impact on how the target responds. Previous research have shown that there are gender differences in coping style in response to bullying behaviours. Ólafsson and Jóhannsdóttir (2004) found that men more often responded actively by confronting the perpetrator, whereas women more often sought emotional support and help, or tried to avoid the bullying situation altogether, that is, actions that are compatible with the gender stereotypes proposed by the social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Dealing with negative treatment by trying to avoid it may be seen as a way to defend oneself against the negative behaviours but is probably less effective in stopping the bullying behaviours as it does not signal a threat of counter actions to the perpetrator. Furthermore, previous research have shown that avoidance coping is dysfunctional and associated with increased psychological distress (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014). Intuitively, one may think that women could aim at displaying more male stereotypical traits in order to show the perpetrator that they are not easy prey (Leskinen et al., 2015). However, such an approach could become a "Catch-22" situation as deviation from the expected gender role opens up the risk of sanctions and exposure to even more negative treatment (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Thus, based on social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), the effects of women's lower social power at work, and the gender differences found in responses to bullying (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2004), a belief in one's ability to defend oneself may have different effects for men and women on the actual possibility to ward off or put an end to sustained bullying behaviours. The following hypothesis will be tested:

Hypothesis 2. The buffering effect of perceived ability to defend oneself on the relationship between baseline and follow-up levels of exposure to bullying behaviours is stronger for men than for women.

Different types of bullying behaviours

Multiple categorisations of bullying behaviours have been identified in the literature (Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen et al., 2009; Leymann, 1996; Zapf et al., 1996). Leymann (1996) suggested five categories capturing behaviours or situations that in relation to the exposed will result in the target (a) being silenced by threats or verbal attacks, (b) getting reduced possibilities to maintain social relations by means of exclusion, (c) getting one's reputation shattered by spreading rumours or ridiculing characteristics of the target, (d) having difficulties in one's work situation by getting too little or too much work tasks or meaningless tasks, and (e) getting physically harmed. Einarsen and Raknes (1997) identified two main categories of behaviour, work-related and person-related bullying behaviours. Person-related bullying behaviours refer to behaviours attacking the personal integrity of the target, such as gossip and rumours, insults, teasing, and offensive remarks. Work-related bullying behaviours denote behaviours directed at the target's work tasks and performance, such as being given an unmanageable workload, excessive monitoring, and being ordered to work below one's level of competence. Bullying behaviours can also be categorised as direct in the form of, for example, verbal attacks, accusations and humiliation delivered directly to the target, or indirect such as rumours or social isolation at work (O'Moore et al., 1998). Despite these categorisations, most research to date have treated exposure to bullying behaviours in a uniform manner, and there is a shortage of empirical knowledge about the differential effects of the specific types of bullying behaviour on the target. There are, however, some theoretical reasons for expecting that perceived ability to defend oneself is dependent upon the type of behaviours one is exposed to. Bullying behaviours are sometimes ambiguous and indirect, and it may be difficult to initially realise one is exposed to bullying (Zapf & Gross, 2001). In a similar vein, some work-related negative behaviours may initially be viewed as a more or less normal work experience by the target (Einarsen et al., 2020). To start seeing them as bullying behaviours may require more repetition and systematic treatment, for example, not getting adequate information or being given unreasonable deadlines. This could mean that the mistreatment already has escalated when the target realises the nature of the behaviours. Some person-related behaviours are probably more easily construed as bullying behaviours earlier on, for example being humiliated or ignored. However, much is unknown about how perceived ability to defend oneself relates to different types of bullying behaviours, and this association may become especially complex when taking gender into the equation. Hence, rather than proposing a specific hypothesis, we investigate these aspects by posing the following research question:

Research Question 1. Does the perceived ability to defend oneself buffer an increase in exposure for different types of bullying behaviours between baseline and follow-up, and are there gender differences in this buffering effect?

METHOD

Design and sample

The data used in this study comes from a probability sample of the whole Swedish workforce. The sample was drawn from all employees working at workplaces with 10 or more employees at ages 18 to 65 years. Baseline (T1) data were collected in autumn of 2017 ($n = 1853$) and

follow-up (T2) data were collected in spring 2019 ($n = 1095$). Between T1 and T2, 174 employees had changed jobs. Changing jobs has a great impact on bullying (Rosander et al., 2022), and consequently they were excluded in the present study leaving 919 employees that had responded at both times. Statistics Sweden, a government agency, was responsible for all aspects regarding sampling procedures and distribution of the questionnaires. They added demographic information directly from the Swedish population register before delivering the data to us. This contributed to the research ethics as all data delivered to us were anonymous. The research project was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board at Linköping University (protocol number: #2017/336-32).

There were 42% men and 58% women. The mean age was 50.1 years ($SD = 9.8$). The participants had worked 14.2 years ($SD = 11.8$) at their current workplace, and 14% had a managerial position.

Measures

Workplace bullying

Exposure to workplace bullying was measured using the Swedish version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised (NAQ–R; Einarsen et al., 2009; Rosander & Blomberg, 2019). The NAQ–R comprises 22 items capturing negative and unwanted behaviours at the workplace. If a person is exposed systematically over time, it may be regarded as bullying. The negative behaviours can be direct or indirect, and person- or work-related (Einarsen et al., 2009). Responses are given on a five-point frequency scale from *never* to *daily* to each of the items, how often they had been exposed during the past 6 months. Level of exposure to bullying behaviour was calculated with the mean score of all 22 items in the NAQ–R. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) at T1 was .89 and at T2 it was .91. The level of each of the bullying behaviour subscales was also calculated using the mean of the included items for each subscale. The internal consistencies for the subscales are presented in the results section.

Perceived ability to defend oneself

Perceived ability to defend oneself was measured using a single item following the 22 items of the NAQ–R: “If you have indicated that you have been exposed to at least some of the above negative acts in the past 6 months—To what extent can you ward off or stop the negative acts you are exposed to?” It had a 5-point response scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *a few times*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *quite often*, and 5 = *always*). The question captures the target's perceived power balance between themselves and the perpetrator as it has a focus on the here and now, rather than on specific strategies that might be used to escape exposure in the future, such as avoiding situations at work where exposure is probable.

Gender and control variables

Information about the sex of the participants was taken directly from the Swedish population register. This means that we only have information about the participants' biological sex. Sex is

a main variable in the study as we investigate gender differences. Other demographic information that was considered for inclusion as covariates in the study were age, seniority at the current workplace, managerial position, and having a fixed contract or not. The reason for controlling for these variables were that they may have an impact on the perceived ability to defend oneself against bullying behaviours.

Data analysis plan

The analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS version 28 and Stata version 17 (for structural equation modelling [SEM]). We used the PROCESS macro version 4.1 for SPSS (Hayes, 2018) to test the hypotheses—for the first hypothesis we used model 1 in PROCESS and model 3 for all other hypotheses. We ran all moderation analyses with and without the control variables. If a covariate was nonsignificant, it was dropped. In none of the analyses the control variables were significant, so the results presented are without the control variables. Bootstrapping was set to 5000 resamples. Bootstrapping is a statistical procedure that allows calculation of effect sizes and hypothesis tests for an estimate even when the underlying distribution is unknown (Hayes, 2018). Hence, bootstrapping is useful as an alternative to parametric estimates when the assumptions of those methods are violated.

For the research question, we categorised the items of the NAQ-R as either direct or indirect behaviours, and as person- or work-related behaviours. This was done in three steps. First, two items that represent physically intimidating behaviours were excluded (“Intimidating behaviours such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking your way” and “Threats of violence or physical abuse or actual abuse”). In addition, to represent a different kind of behaviour, very few participants said they were exposed to them (close to 96% reported *never* being exposed to them, and less than 0.5% reported being exposed on a weekly basis). Second, items that contained both direct and indirect behaviours were excluded. This was true for one item (“Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach”). The other 19 items were categorised based on how the four types of bullying behaviour have been described (Einarsen et al., 2009). The categorisation was then tested using SEM. Four models were tested and compared, a one-factor model with all 19 items, a two-factor model for work- and person-related behaviours, a two-factor model for direct and indirect behaviours, and a four-factor model combining the two types of behaviours. The data used in these analyses were the full baseline data ($n = 1853$). We used maximum likelihood with missing values (MLMV) as analytic method. 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). Model fit was compared using χ^2 differences.

RESULTS

A total of 394 employees answered the question about the perceived ability to defend oneself (out of 921 in the sample); that is, they had reported being exposed to at least one of the 22 items of the NAQ-R in the past 6 months. There were no gender differences in the perceived ability to defend oneself, $\chi^2(4) = 3.83$, $p = .430$. In Table 1, the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the main variables in the study are presented, both for the total number of respondents and for those responding to the question about perceived ability to defend themselves.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations (lower triangle all 921 respondents and upper triangle the 394 that responded about perceived ability to defend oneself)

	Mean (SD) (<i>n</i> = 921)	Mean (SD) (<i>n</i> = 394)	Gender	NAQ (T1)	NAQ (T2)	PAD (T2)
Gender	58% women	57% women	–	–.11*	–.05	–.09
NAQ (T1)	1.23 (0.30)	1.35 (0.37)	–.05	–	.63***	–.16**
NAQ (T2)	1.21 (0.31)	1.38 (0.38)	–.05	.66***	–	–.14**
PAD (T2)		3.10 (1.30)	–.09	–	–	–

Note: Gender: men = 0, women = 1; NAQ = Negative Acts Questionnaire; PAD = Perceived Ability to Defend Oneself.

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

TABLE 2 A two-way interaction between perceived ability to defend and bullying at baseline as predictor for bullying at follow-up (T2)

Variable	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
Bullying, NAQ (T1)	.75	.05	$p < .001$
Perceived Ability to Defend, PAD (T2)	–.09	.03	$p = .004$
NAQ \times PAD	–.43	.09	$p < .001$

Testing Hypothesis 1, stating that the association between exposure to bullying behaviours at baseline and follow-up is dependent on the perceived ability to defend oneself against them, we conducted a moderation analysis. The results showed a significant interaction, $b = -0.11$, $p = .003$ (see Table 2). The slopes at both -1 SD and $+1$ SD were significant but steeper for those with a low level of perceived ability to defend themselves, $b = 0.75$, $p < .001$, than for those with a high level of perceived ability to defend themselves, $b = 0.47$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1). Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Our second hypothesis proposes that there are gender differences to the way perceived ability to defend oneself affects the association between bullying at baseline and follow-up. To test this, we conducted a three-way moderation analysis with perceived ability to defend oneself and gender as moderators. The results showed a significant three-way interaction, $b = 0.24$, $p < .001$ (see Table 3). The interaction is shown in Figure 2. There were almost identical slopes for men and women with a low level of perceived ability to defend against bullying behaviours (-1 SD), and for women with a high level of perceived ability to defend themselves ($+1$ SD), b 's = 0.71 – 0.81 , $p < .001$. The slope for men with a high level of perceived ability to defend themselves was also significant, $b = 0.26$, $p = .003$, but less steep. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Finally, we turn to the research question, whether there are differences regarding the perceived ability to defend oneself depending on the type of bullying behaviours one is exposed to as well as gender differences in this. To be able to test different types of bullying, we categorised the different bullying behaviours covered in the NAQ-R into direct or indirect behaviours, and into person- or work-related behaviours. The result of the categorisation is shown in Table 4.

The theoretically based categorisation was tested using the full baseline data ($n = 1853$). We tested four different models using structural equation modelling, a one-factor model (M1) with all 19 items listed in Table 4 loading on a single factor, a two-factor model for work- and person-related behaviours (M2) as two separate latent factors, a two-factor model for direct and

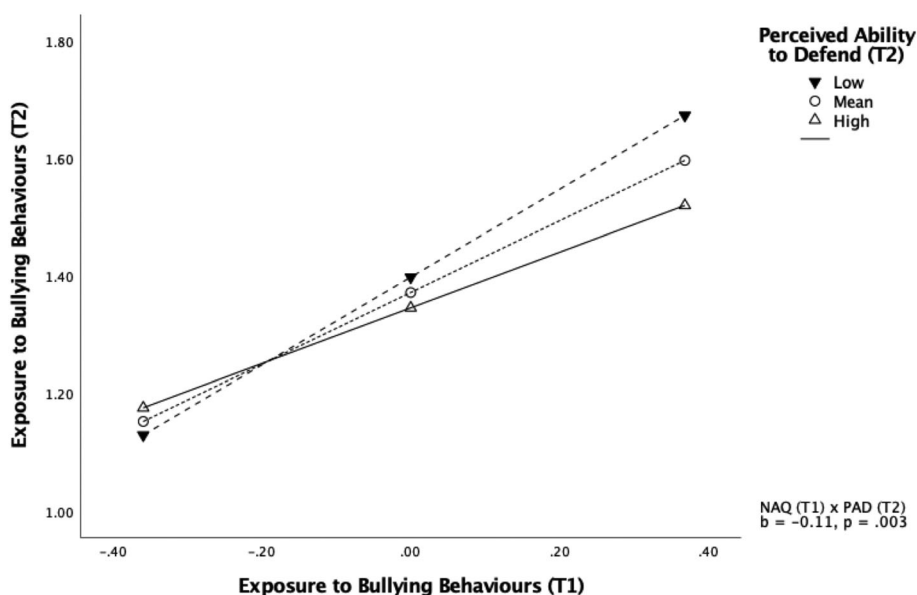


FIGURE 1 The interaction effect of exposure to bullying behaviours at baseline and perceived ability to defend oneself on exposure to bullying behaviours at follow-up

TABLE 3 A three-way interaction between perceived ability to defend, gender and bullying at baseline as predictor for bullying at follow-up

Variable	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
Bullying, NAQ (T1)	.79	.07	<i>p</i> < .001
Perceived Ability to Defend, PAD (T2)	−.08	.04	<i>p</i> = .073
Gender	.03	.04	<i>p</i> = .497
NAQ × PAD	−.64	.11	<i>p</i> < .001
NAQ × gender	−.06	.10	<i>p</i> = .545
PAD × gender	.02	.06	<i>p</i> = .701
NAQ × PAD × gender	.63	.18	<i>p</i> < .001

Note: Adding age, managerial position, seniority at the current workplace, and fixed contract as covariates did not change the results and none of the covariates were significant.

indirect behaviours (M3) as two separate latent factors, and a four-factor model combining the two types of behaviours (M4) as four latent factors. The results showed the best fit for the four-factor model (M4). In Table 5, the fit statistics for the four models are presented. All four types of bullying behaviours showed an acceptable level of internal consistency—for (a) indirect person-related bullying behaviours Cronbach’s alpha was .69 and .73 for T1 and T2, (b) indirect work-related bullying behaviours .72 and .75, (c) direct person-related bullying behaviours .79 and .84, and (d) direct work-related bullying behaviours .76 and .79.

Four three-way moderation analyses, one for each factor, showed the following results. For (a) indirect person-related behaviours, (c) direct person-related behaviours, and (d) direct work-related behaviours there were significant three-way interactions (respectively, *b* = 0.19,

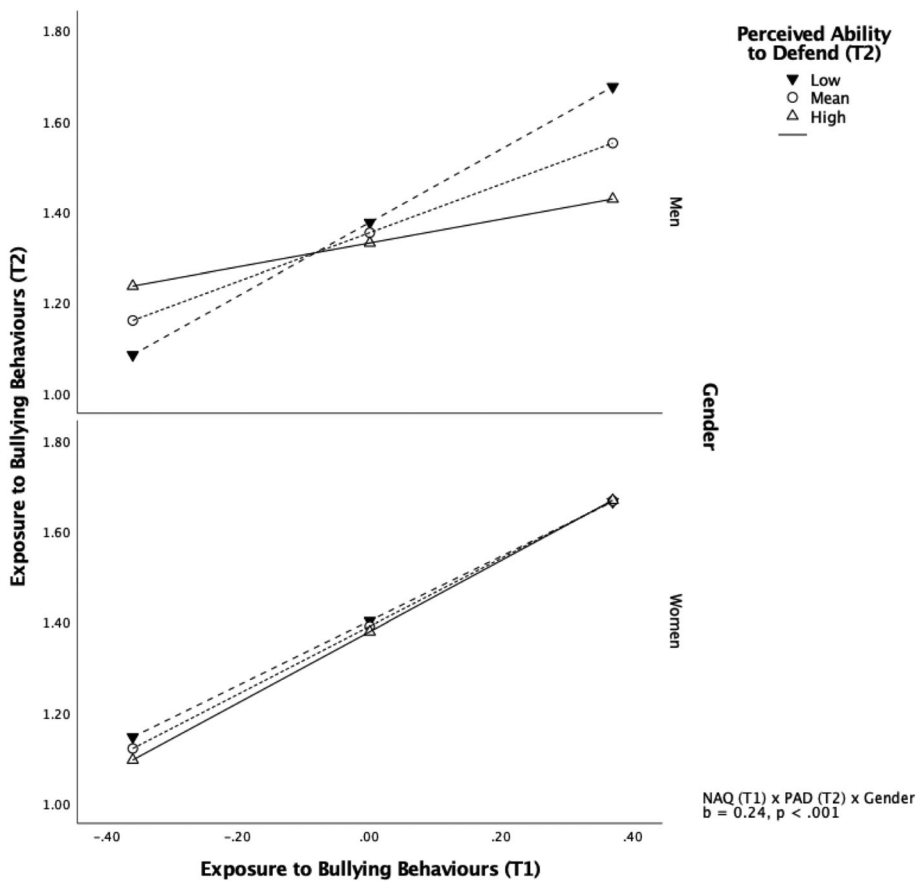


FIGURE 2 The interaction effect of exposure to bullying behaviours at baseline, perceived ability to defend oneself, and gender on exposure to bullying behaviours at follow-up

$p = .006$; $b = 0.27$, $p < .001$; $b = 0.30$, $p < .001$). There was no significant three-way interaction for (b) indirect work-related behaviours ($b = 0.02$, $p = .815$). The interactions are shown in Figure 3 and the slopes are presented in Table 6. The main results were that the associations between exposure to bullying behaviour at baseline and at follow-up were significant for all combinations of type of bullying, for high and low level of perceived ability to defend oneself, for men and for women, with just one exception. For men with a high level of perceived ability to defend themselves, the association was nonsignificant for direct person-related bullying behaviours only. Significant slopes indicate a continued exposure to bullying behaviours from baseline to follow-up. For men, perceived ability to defend oneself had some buffering effect for direct work-related bullying behaviours and indirect person-related bullying behaviours. In none of the four models depicting four different types of bullying behaviours did any level of perceived ability to defend oneself against them have any effect for women.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined perceived ability to defend oneself against exposure to bullying behaviours at the workplace, something that is regarded as a defining aspect of workplace

TABLE 4 Categorisation of the NAQ-R items

Item	Direct/ indirect	Work/ person
2 Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work	Direct	Person
7 Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person, attitudes or your private life	Direct	Person
15 Practical jokes carried out by people you do not get along with	Direct	Person
17 Having allegations made against you	Direct	Person
20 Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm	Direct	Person
5 Spreading of gossip and rumours about you	Indirect	Person
6 Being ignored or excluded	Indirect	Person
14 Having your opinions ignored	Indirect	Person
8 Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger	Direct	Work
10 Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job	Direct	Work
11 Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes	Direct	Work
13 Persistent criticism of your errors or mistakes	Direct	Work
19 Pressure not to claim something to which by right you are entitled (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expenses)	Direct	Work
1 Someone withholding information which affects your performance	Indirect	Work
3 Being ordered to do work below your level of competence ^a	Indirect	Work
4 Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks	Indirect	Work
16 Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines	Indirect	Work
18 Excessive monitoring of your work	Indirect	Work
21 Being exposed to an unmanageable workload	Indirect	Work

^aIn the Swedish (and in the original Norwegian) version of the NAQ-R, “ordered to” is not part of the wording. In Swedish, it reads “Fått arbetsuppgifter” = “Have gotten work assignments,” that is, not a direct order, but a more indirect way of being the one always having to do that kind of work.

TABLE 5 Test statistics for four SEM models

		Test statistics					Model comparison		
		χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA (90% CI)	Comparison	(df)	χ^2
M1	One factor	1745.74***	146	0.90	0.88	0.077 (0.074–0.080)			
M2	Two factors (WRB & PRB)	1701.48***	145	0.90	0.89	0.076 (0.073–0.080)	M2 vs. M1	(1)	44.27***
M3	Two factors (direct & indirect)	1614.04***	145	0.91	0.89	0.074 (0.071–0.077)	M3 vs. M1 M3 vs. M2	(1) (–)	131.70*** 87.44***
M4	Four factors	1421.46***	140	0.92	0.90	0.070 (0.067–0.074)	M4 vs. M1 M4 vs. M2 M4 vs. M3	(6) (5) (5)	324.28*** 280.01*** 192.58***

Note: WRB = work-related bullying behaviours; PRB = person-related bullying behaviours. Model with best fit in bold text. *** $p < .001$.

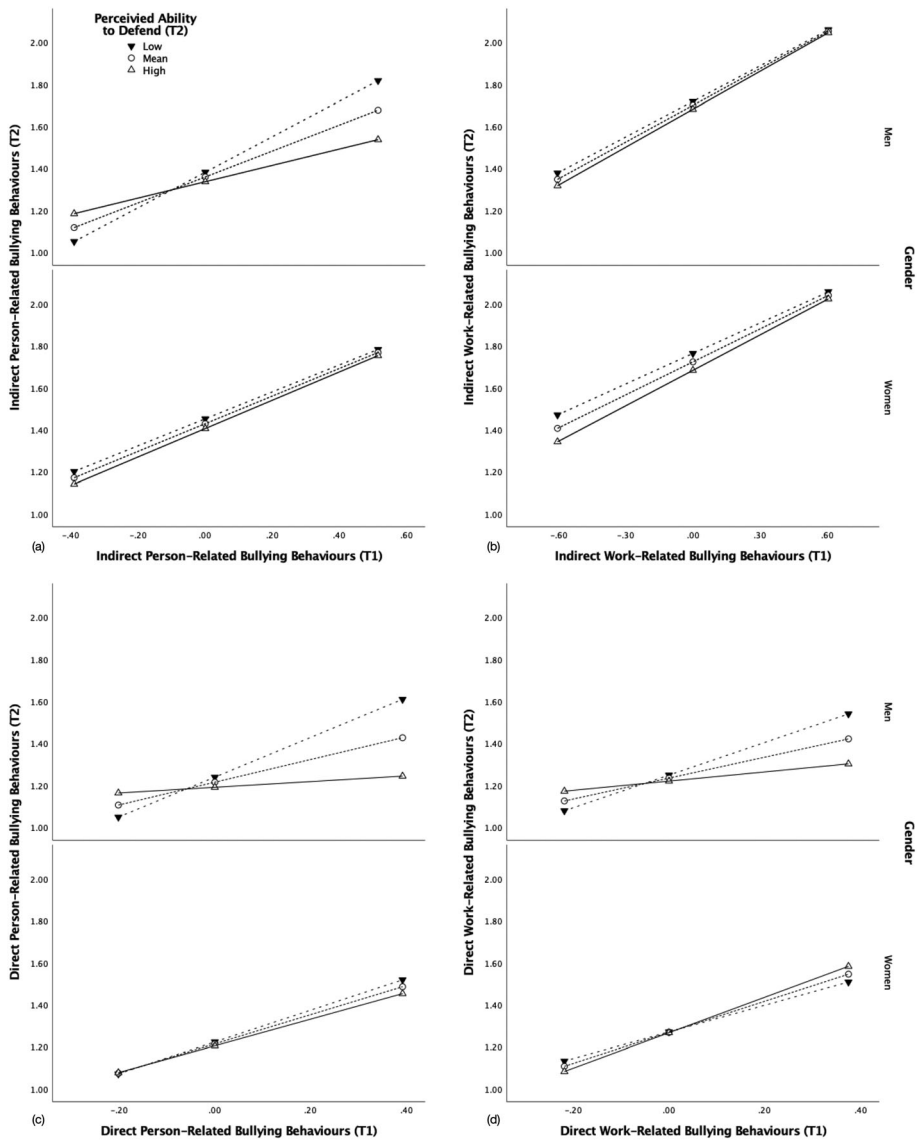


FIGURE 3 The interaction effect of exposure to four types of bullying behaviours at baseline, perceived ability to defend oneself, and gender on exposure to bullying behaviours at follow-up

bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020). We tested the effect perceived ability to defend oneself had on exposure to bullying behaviours. As hypothesised, perceived ability to defend oneself moderated the association between exposure to bullying behaviours at baseline (Hypothesis 1). In line with expectations, the association between baseline and follow-up exposure to bullying behaviours was stronger for those who felt they could not defend against the harassment. However, the association for those who felt they could defend themselves was also significant. This shows that the perceived ability to defend oneself buffered exposure to bullying behaviours but that it does not stop or remove the experienced mistreatment.

These findings were nuanced when gender was considered in the analyses. Our second hypothesis tested if there was a gender difference regarding the effect one's perceived ability to

TABLE 6 Simple slopes for the four factors, for men and women for those who are able to defend and for those who are not able to defend

Factor	Able to defend				Not able to defend			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
Indirect PRB	.35	<i>p</i> = .001	.61	<i>p</i> < .001	.80	<i>p</i> < .001	.65	<i>p</i> < .001
Indirect WRB	.48	<i>p</i> < .001	.50	<i>p</i> < .001	.62	<i>p</i> < .001	.50	<i>p</i> < .001
Direct PRB	.03	<i>p</i> = .737	.53	<i>p</i> < .001	.85	<i>p</i> < .001	.77	<i>p</i> < .001
Direct WRB	.09	<i>p</i> = .360	.61	<i>p</i> < .001	.78	<i>p</i> < .001	.71	<i>p</i> < .001

Note: WRB = work-related bullying; PRB = person-related bullying. Nonsignificant slopes in bold text.

defend oneself had on exposure to bullying behaviours. When targets perceived themselves to have a high ability to defend themselves, we expected that the association between bullying at baseline and follow-up would be weaker for men than for women. The findings supported the hypothesis. Yet, a noteworthy finding was that perceived ability to defend oneself had absolutely no effect at all for women—there was an equally strong association between baseline and follow-up exposure to bullying behaviour for women no matter if they perceived themselves as able to defend themselves or not. For men, perceived ability to defend oneself had a buffering effect on the association between exposure to bullying behaviours at baseline and follow-up, but there was still a significant association even with a high level of perceived ability to defend themselves.

Finally, we investigated how these effects were affected by different types of bullying behaviours (Research Question 1). The results showed that perceived ability to defend oneself had no effect at all on *indirect* work-related bullying behaviours, and only a small protective effect for men on *indirect* person-related bullying behaviours. A clear effect of perceived ability to defend oneself was only found regarding *direct* bullying behaviours and the effect was stronger for direct person-related bullying behaviours than for direct work-related bullying behaviours. The results showed that perceived ability to defend oneself nullified the association between exposure to bullying behaviours at baseline and follow-up only for direct person-related bullying behaviours among men. No buffering effect of perceived ability to defend oneself was found among women.

Supporting the formal definition of workplace bullying, the results showed that there may be a protective effect of perceived ability to defend oneself on exposure to bullying behaviours over time. However, a systematic and prolonged exposure to aggression and mistreatment at work is likely to gradually push the target from exposure to victimisation (Einarsen et al., 2020). The resemblance between the effects of escalation of workplace bullying and the concept of learned helplessness (Abramson et al., 1978) may shed some light on this process. Learned helplessness manifests itself through motivational, cognitive, and emotional deficits in situations one feels are uncontrollable, and a high level of learned helplessness may have an effect on the way a target responds to mistreatment (Samnani, 2013). There are a number of potential strategies one may use as a response to exposure to bullying behaviours, and depending on the level of perceived inferiority, the perceived power imbalance, these strategies may range from more actively attempting to confront the perpetrator to seeking emotional support or just trying to avoid the situation (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, 2004). Over time and with

continued repeated mistreatment learned helplessness will likely result in less active forms of responses, and more of avoidance strategies as the target finds it futile to resist. Such exposure, wearing down the target, may very well lead to an expectation of uncontrollability and a generalisation of the response to similar situations in the future (Abramson et al., 1978). An active coping strategy potentially leading to a higher perceived cost for the perpetrator might help reduce the harassment although it may also escalate the situation (Felson, 1982). The opposite strategy, using avoidance as a coping strategy, has been shown to be dysfunctional increasing psychological distress (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014). The longer the harassment continues, the stronger the consequences since the victim is pushed further and further away from any possibility of handling the situation themselves. That is, each incidence of exposure is likely to reinforce the target's perceptions of being unable to handle the situation, something which increases the experience of helplessness as well as an inappropriate generalisation of the reaction (Abramson et al., 1978). This feeling of helplessness may be what contributes to the detrimental consequences found for workplace bullying in terms of mental health problems, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and suicidal ideation (Leach et al., 2017; Nielsen et al., 2015; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Verkuil et al., 2015).

The gender differences established in the present study may be related to the concept of learned helplessness and specific coping strategies of the target, as well as the more general gender inequality that affects many women at work. Ólafsson and Jóhannsdóttir (2004) showed that men more often than women used more assertive strategies and were more likely to confront the perpetrator. Women on the other hand more often sought help or used avoidance as a strategy—a strategy that may lead to more distress (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014). Trying to avoid the harassment without success may lead to cognitive and motivational deficits pushing the victim into a state of learned helplessness in which any type of negative treatment may be perceived as yet another sign of the perceived uncontrollable nature of the whole situation (Samnani, 2013). The perception of uncontrollability of exposure to bullying behaviours may also be strengthened by the general gender inequality at work and the strategies to maintain this inequality by those in a more powerful position (Sidanius et al., 2004).

Most targets of workplace bullying are not solely exposed to either indirect or direct types of bullying behaviours, nor solely exposed to person- or work-related bullying behaviours, but rather a combination of such behaviours. In the present study we investigated the effect perceived ability to defend oneself has on these different types of bullying behaviours. The results showed little or no changes in levels of indirect bullying behaviours (only a small buffering effect for men exposed to indirect person-related bullying). This could be understood in terms of the more ambiguous nature of indirect bullying behaviours (Zapf & Gross, 2001). When it initially may be unclear as to whether the actions actually are bullying or not, and when the behaviours are not experienced directly, it may be more difficult to ward off or stop them. This may be especially true for indirect work-related bullying as this kind of exposure may be hard to distinguish from a normal variation in workload or monitoring of one's work (Einarsen et al., 2020). For many of the indirect forms of bullying, a target may need to more thoroughly evaluate the systematic nature of the behaviours one is exposed to before realising that it may be harassment or workplace bullying. This may also lead to a realisation later on in the bullying process, which in itself may make it harder to defend against or ward off. Direct behaviours, however harsh they may be, are less ambiguous, and if the target has a perception of being able to defend against bullying behaviours, the defence may be more effective as one knows what to defend against. As before, the gender differences are apparent also when looking at different types of bullying behaviours. A perception of being able to handle the mistreatment, defend

against it, or being able to avert it has no effect for women for any of the examined types of bullying behaviours. The associations between exposure to bullying behaviours at baseline and follow-up for women were almost the same no matter the type of bullying behaviour or whether one has a perception of an ability to defend against them or not. For men, perceived ability to defend oneself only had an effect on direct bullying behaviours. Taken together, the type of bullying behaviours one is exposed to may affect the possible buffering effects perceived ability to defend oneself may have on the outcome. However, as the results show, this effect is limited. Bullies probably do not select bullying strategy based on the type of bullying behaviours that a target is most likely to ward off or stop. It is the systematic and prolonged exposure that wears out a target (Einarsen et al., 2020) that is likely to end up in a disempowered, helpless situation with a perception that defence is futile. The effects different types of bullying behaviours may have on disempowerment as one of the three necessary conditions on which workplace bullying rests (Einarsen et al., 1994; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996) needs more research.

The present study is an important contribution to our understanding of workplace bullying as a concept by showing that the perception of being able to handle or protect oneself from the mistreatment one is exposed to, in most cases, has little or no effect on the levels of the mistreatment, especially for women. Workplace bullying is thought to push a target from exposure to victimisation by gradually disempowering the target (Einarsen et al., 2020). The present study shows that in most cases perceived ability to defend oneself made little difference to the outcome. The only clear exception was exposure to direct person-related bullying behaviours for men.

Strengths and limitations

The present study has some notable strengths as it is based on a probability sample from the whole Swedish workforce. It is the first study investigating the perceived ability to defend oneself from bullying behaviours using a longitudinal design. There are also limitations. All measures were self-reported, which makes them susceptible to social desirability and common method variance (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). However, the use of an 18-month time lag may alleviate the risk of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Workplace bullying has a strong subjective component, and it is difficult to assess it by means of a more objective method (Nielsen et al., 2020). In the study, the measure of the perceived ability defend against bullying behaviours was based on a single item at the follow-up assessment. Directly following the 22 negative acts of the NAQ-R, we simply asked the participants to assess to what extent they can ward off or stop the negative behaviours they are exposed to. It should be noted that this measure of perceived ability to defend has some potential limitations. First, we do not know exactly what lay behind an affirmative answer, or what coping strategy was used as we only measured the perception of inferiority, of power imbalance, operationalised as the perceived lack of ability to defend oneself against the negative treatment one is exposed to. Second, as perceived ability to defend was assessed only at follow-up, and not at baseline, our study deviates from the “classic” interaction effect design where the predictor and moderator variable are measured simultaneously. However, as the defence against exposure to bullying behaviours, by definition, is a response to the mistreatment, one may also argue that there needs to be a time-lag between the assessment of bullying behaviours and the assessment of the ability to defend.

Future directions

The present study and its limitations show a need for more research. One important aspect of this is capturing different coping strategies one may use in response to exposure to bullying behaviours, and their perceived effect on perceptions of inferiority in relation to the perpetrator. A suggestion for future research is to also investigate the longitudinal effects perceived ability to defend oneself may have on subsequent bullying experiences. Also, future studies could include a broader measure of the power imbalance between the target and perpetrator—something that already has been done in a recent study by Nielsen et al. (2022). It would also be interesting to investigate the notion of learned helplessness, in the present study used as a theoretical construct contributing to the discussion of the results. A future direction would be to measure and empirically link learned helplessness to the perceived ability to defend oneself, and also to the consequences of exposure to bullying behaviours.

Conclusions and implications

With exception of male targets exposed to direct person-related bullying behaviour, we found that targets of bullying behaviours experience continued exposure over time, irrespective of whether they perceive themselves as able to defend themselves against the bullying behaviour. Hence, the findings from this study show that a perception of being able to defend oneself against exposure to bullying behaviours has little impact on exposure. As bullying represents both a prevalent and harmful psychosocial hazard at the workplace, an up-front implication of this study is the importance of developing effective human resource strategies to prevent and handle bullying in organisations. That is, as our results show that targets of bullying are unlikely to handle and stop the mistreatment themselves, they are dependent upon help and support from the organisation, including leaders, human resource personnel, and co-workers. Moreover, it is fundamental that these strategies also apply to, and take into consideration, how one should deal with even less intense cases of bullying. As being exposed to systematic bullying behaviours is experienced as problematic even for employees in a relatively balanced perceived power relationship with the perpetrator, organisations and employers must actively intervene in the early stages of the bullying process rather than believing that the targeted worker is able to deal with or withstand the exposure on their own.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no potential conflict of interest to report.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research project was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board at Linköping University (protocol number: #2017/336-32).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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