Conflicts and conflict management styles as precursors of workplace bullying: a two-wave longitudinal study

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CONFLICTS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES AS PRECURSORS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING: A TWO-WAVE LONGITUDINAL STUDY.

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationships between the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit, the employee's conflict management styles and workplace bullying in a full panel two-wave longitudinal design ($n = 277$). We assumed a positive relationship between the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 and being a target or being a perpetrator of bullying at T2. Matching the bullying and conflict literature, we expected a negative association between problem solving at T1 and being a target or a perpetrator of bullying at T2. We hypothesised that yielding at T1 and avoiding at T1 relate positively with being a target at T2 and negatively with being a perpetrator at T2. We expected that forcing at T1 associated negatively with being a target at T2 and positively with being a perpetrator at T2. We moreover assumed that the relationship between the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 and being a target or a perpetrator of bullying at T2 is moderated by the conflict management styles at T1. Results only revealed main effects of forcing at T1 ($\beta = .10$; $p < .05$) and of problem solving at T1 ($\beta = -.17$; $p < .01$) on being a perpetrator at T2. The other hypothesised relationships were not significant.

Keywords: bullying, mobbing, Dual Concern Theory, conflict management styles, longitudinal study.

INTRODUCTION

An exponential increase of publications in work and organisational psychology has focussed on workplace bullying; a form of counterproductive work behaviour that has been linked to a range of detrimental outcomes for targets, observers and the organisation as a whole (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Rodriguez-Muñoz, Baillien, De Witte, Moreno-Jimenez, & Pastor, 2009). Despite valuable indications that workplace bullying may be triggered by conflicts, few studies to date have unravelled this issue in more detail. Specifically, incident-based models drawing on qualitative studies including perspectives of targets and key informants underlined that the occurrence and management of conflicts at work may create a breeding ground for becoming a target or a perpetrator of bullying (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2009; Leymann, 1996). This proposition was quantitatively confirmed for targets in a range of cross-sectional studies (Agervold, 2009; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Vartia, 1996; Zapf, 1999). Three studies moreover specified which particular reactions from the employee confronted with a conflict associated with bullying. Their findings linked conflict to being a target of bullying through ‘productive’ (i.e. ‘problem-solving’) and ‘destructive’ (i.e. ‘yielding’, ‘avoiding’ or ‘fighting’) conflict management styles (Aquino, 2000; Ayoko, Callan and Härtel, 2003; Baillien & De Witte, 2009). The current study aims to advance this line of research by investigating the lagged relationship between the occurrence of conflicts, the employee’s conflict management styles defined in line with the Dual Concern framework (De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997), and bullying using a two-wave longitudinal design. In addition, we try to extend our findings to bullying enactment by including both targets and perpetrators.

Workplace bullying

Workplace bullying refers to a long-term process (i.e. minimum six months) in which minor negative acts accumulate to a pattern of systematic maltreatment (Notelaers, Einarsen, De Witte, & Vermunt, 2006; Salin, 2008). These acts may concern work-related (e.g. withholding information) or personal issues (e.g. gossiping, social isolation). They may harm the target's health and well-being (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002), and may affect the target's attitudes and behaviour in terms of, for example, job satisfaction, commitment, intention to leave and absenteeism (Rodriguez-Muñoz et al., 2009; Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2004). Whereas earlier studies on workplace bullying distinguished this concept from 'mobbing' in which a target was belittled by a 'mob' or a group of co-workers, scholars recently agreed that both phenomenon may be regarded as synonyms (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010).

Although some scholars considered bullying as a subset of conflicts (De Dreu, Emans, Euwema, & Steensma, 2001) or as an extreme form of (relational) conflict (De Dreu, Van Dierendonck, & Dijkstra, 2004), this vision is not shared by scholars in the workplace bullying research domain. They underline that equating bullying with conflict underestimates its unethical and counterproductive nature (e.g. Keashly & Nowell, 2003; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010); an idea that has been supported by four arguments. First, bullying typically involves a power imbalance between the parties involved: targets often experience problems to defend themselves against the negative acts (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Einarsen, 1999; Leymann, 1996) and are gradually stigmatised into an inferior position (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Stigmatisation is not a defining characteristic of conflict (e.g. Jehn, 1995). Second, bullying is by definition long-standing and refers to the outcome of a subsequent number of episodes in which negative acts escalate over time (Einarsen et al., 1994; Olweus, 1990). Conflicts, in contrast, may be short as well

as long-standing. They may include a single episode (for instance, unclear procedures are clarified as soon as it is clear that they cause a misunderstanding) or a series of episodes (for instance, a long-lasting discussion between two employees regarding who is responsible for a certain task). Third, workplace bullying has a clearly negative connotation which is reflected in systematically directing negative acts towards a specific employee. Conflicts do not necessarily yield a negative connotation (Thomas, 1992; Deutsch, Coleman & Marcus, 2006). And fourth, bullying contains an actual or by the victim perceived intention to cause harm (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997), which is not a defining element of conflicts.

Building on the conceptual difference between conflict and workplace bullying, research explored their association both in incident-based models and using quantitative data. Drawing on the analyses of bullying incidents, scholars have developed models describing conflicts as an important trigger of workplace bullying. Elaborating on insights from targets, these models attribute bullying to unresolved conflicts in which the parties involved focus on each other's differences (Glasl, 1982, 1994; Zapf & Gross, 2001) and in which the weaker party is gradually stigmatised in his or her role as a target (Leymann, 1996). Recently, based on bullying incidents elaborated by key informants such as union representatives and human resource managers, Baillien and colleagues (2009) developed a Three Way Model that advances the earlier models in two ways. Firstly, it further specifies the meaning of 'unresolved conflicts' by defining two conflict components: the occurrence of conflicts at work and the way conflicts are managed by the parties involved (i.e. their conflict management styles). These two conflict components may independently contribute to bullying (i.e. main effects); or the conflict management styles may boost versus weaken the relationship between the occurrence of conflicts and bullying (i.e. interaction effects) as certain ways of dealing with conflicts may particularly lead (many) conflicts to escalate into

bullying while others prevent such an escalation. Secondly, the Three Way Model explicitly describes the mechanisms that may lead an employee confronted with one or more conflicts to become a target versus a perpetrator of bullying. Specifically, when the employee in conflict adopts a de-escalative conflict management style, this will prevent him/her from becoming a target or a perpetrator of bullying. However, when the employee adopts an escalative conflict management style, he/she may become a target versus a perpetrator of bullying based on the amount of power he/she claims in the conflict situation. Being a perpetrator of bullying will most likely develop from applying escalative conflict management styles that reflect power and will be prevented by applying conflict management styles that reflect less power, yielding a weaker position in the conflict. Being a target of bullying by contrast, will most likely develop from less powerful escalative conflict management styles and will be prevented by adopting powerful conflict management styles that empower the employee in the conflict.

Workplace bullying and the occurrence of conflicts

In line with qualitative findings, also quantitative studies successfully revealed that workplace bullying may be triggered by the occurrence of conflicts at work. Presented with a list of possible triggers of bullying, unresolved conflicts belonged to the top five most indicated causes of bullying from the target's perspective (Zapf, 1999). Targets of bullying perceived more conflicts than non-victims. Likewise, departments with many bullying incidents showed a poorer social climate with more conflicts as compared to departments with few bullying incidents (Agervold, 2009). Similarly, investigating the relative strength of a broad range of organisational antecedents of bullying (i.e. job stressors, leadership behaviour and organisational climate), interpersonal conflicts proved to be one of the strongest predictors of being a target of bullying (Hauge et al., 2007). These results align with

Ayoko and colleagues (2003) who, by means of a multi-method approach, found that conflict incidents successfully predicted workplace bullying; and with Baillien and De Witte (2009) who observed that bullying among Belgian employees was predicted by a high number of conflicts in the team.

While valuable in gaining insight in the relationship between conflicts and bullying, these studies show two limitations. First, studies so far relied on cross-sectional designs and cannot draw conclusions regarding causality. Second, these studies have generally adopted a target perspective (Einarsen, 1999) and do not shed light on the perpetrator's side. The current study wants to address these issues (a) by using a two wave cross-lagged design and (b) by including reports from targets as well as perpetrators of bullying. Given these earlier qualitative and quantitative findings, we assume that the occurrence of conflicts in the employee's 'direct' work environment will predict later exposure to bullying. Specifically, we will focus on the occurrence of conflicts in the own work unit as these conflicts are most likely more personal and emotional. They may have a more negative impact on health and well-being (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008) and are more prone to trigger negative behaviour. With regards to targets, we therefore assume:

Hypothesis 1a: The occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 relates positively to being a target of workplace bullying at T2.

According to the Three Way Model (Baillien et al., 2009), the occurrence of conflicts may not only result in being a target of bullying, but could also be a breeding ground of bullying enactment by perpetrators. We therefore expect a similar relationship between conflicts in the work unit and being a perpetrator of bullying:

Hypothesis 1b: The occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 relates positively to being a perpetrator of workplace bullying at T2.

Workplace bullying and conflict management styles

As qualitative studies, quantitative findings revealed that workplace bullying may also be triggered by the way they are managed by the employees involved. Earlier observations in this respect showed that at workplaces with many bullying incidents, differences in opinion were mostly settled by forcing or by taking advantage of one's position of authority. At bullying-free workplaces, these differences were usually managed by open communication (Vartia, 1996). Investigating conflict management at work, Ayoko and colleagues (2003) found that 'productive' reactions to conflicts (i.e. solving the conflict) related to a decrease in bullying, whereas 'destructive' reactions to conflicts (i.e. ignoring the conflict or struggling for power) encouraged bullying. Aquino (2000) found a positive association between yielding and indirect victimisation (i.e. rather invisible forms of aggression, such as being sabotaged in the job) as well as between avoiding and direct victimisation (i.e. more overt, visible forms of aggression, such as being cursed at). In a study focusing on conflict management styles within the team, exposure to bullying was predicted by a high tendency in the team to use a forcing conflict management style and by a low tendency in the team to apply a problem solving conflict management style (Baillien & De Witte, 2009). In sum, several studies have detected a range of reactions to conflict that may encourage or discourage bullying, albeit exclusively from the target's perspective. Drawing on the Three Way Model (Baillien et al., 2009), conflict management may also be linked to being a perpetrator of bullying: (a) de-escalative conflict management styles may discourage both being a target or being a perpetrator of bullying, whereas (b) escalative conflict management styles associate

differently with being a target versus being a perpetrator based on the different levels of power reflected by these conflict management styles.

To define de-escalative versus escalative conflict management styles, the current study builds on the Dual Concern Theory (De Dreu et al., 2000; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997). This theory describes four¹ conflict management styles that stem from the combination of two concerns: the concern to reach the own goals (assertiveness) and the concern for the opposite's party welfare (cooperativeness) (See Figure 1). *Problem solving* reflects a genuine attention for one's own as well as for the opposite party's goals. This conflict management style includes a process of open negotiation in order to find a win-win solution. *Yielding* is characterised by a high concern for the opposite party's goals and a low concern for one's own goals. Employees who yield typically give in to the opponent's view or demands and forget about their own goals and interests. *Forcing* results from a high care for one's own goals and a low interest in the opposite party's goals; and reflects the need to prevail at the expense of the opposite party. *Avoiding* combines a low concern for one's own as well as for the opposite party's goals. These employees try to avoid any attempt to explicitly deal with the conflict.

¹ The Dual Concern Theory (De Dreu et al., 2000; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997) also defined a fifth conflict management style, i.e. 'compromising'. This style refers to the pursuance of a mutually acceptable settlement in which each of the conflicting parties makes some concessions; and contains an average concern for one's own and the opposite party's goals. As Pruitt (1993) described this style as a 'lazy' approach to problem solving that involves a half-hearted attempt to satisfy both parties' interests and as we wished to focus on the extreme poles of the concerns as well as the dimensions, we decided to exclude compromising from this study.

Figure 1
Distributive and integrative dimension of conflict management strategies (Van de Vliert, 1997; De Dreu et al., 2001).

The escalative versus de-escalative nature of these conflict management styles are determined along the distributive versus integrative dimension (De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001; Van de Vliert, 1997). The distributive dimension is about maximising the outcomes for one party at the expenses of the other party. Both low (yielding) as well as high scores (forcing) on this dimension encourage conflict escalation. The integrative dimension is about maximising or minimising the outcomes for all parties involved. A low score on this dimension (avoiding) is related to conflict escalation. A high score (problem solving) is related to conflict de-escalation. Thus, whereas problem solving can be described as a de-escalative conflict management style; yielding, forcing and avoiding reflect escalative conflict management styles. Applying these conflict management styles to bullying, de-escalative conflict management styles have been demonstrated to prevent both being a target and being a perpetrator of bullying (Baillien et al., 2009). As respects problem solving we may thus expect:

Hypothesis 2a: Problem solving at T1 relates negatively to being a target of workplace bullying at T2.

Hypothesis 2b: Problem solving at T1 relates negatively to being a perpetrator of workplace bullying at T2.

How the escalative conflict management styles relate to being a target versus a perpetrator of bullying depends of the amount of power reflected by the different conflict management styles (Baillien et al., 2009). In this context, research in the realm of conflict linked the escalative conflict management styles to both objective (e.g. the formal position one occupies) and subjective (e.g. the perceived amount of power) power differences: Whereas forcing is predominantly applied by the powerful party in the conflict, withdrawal behaviour is mostly enacted by individuals with little power (Aquino, Tripp & Bies, 2006; Fitness, 2000; Van de Vliert, Euwema & Huismans, 1995). These findings reflect respectively approach (i.e. high power) versus inhibition (i.e. low power) tendencies (Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003) and may be explained by the fact that the less powerful party in the conflict often feels vulnerable and unable to change the situation. Generally, particularly forcing has been related to a high power position in the conflict, whereas avoiding and yielding are associated with less power. As elaborated in the Three Way Model (Baillien et al., 2009) escalative conflict management styles reflecting less power would strengthen the target's position over time; whereas this position may be counteracted by conflict management styles that reflect power. Integrating the conflict and workplace bullying research traditions, we assume that yielding and avoiding will encourage being a target of bullying over time. Forcing, in contrast, will discourage being a target of bullying.

Hypothesis 3a: Yielding at T1 relates positively to being a target of workplace bullying at T2.

Hypothesis 4a: Avoiding at T1 relates positively to being a target of workplace bullying at T2.

Hypothesis 5a: Forcing at T1 relates negatively to being a target of workplace bullying at T2.

As respects perpetrators, in contrast, powerless escalative conflict management styles (yielding and avoiding) discourage being a perpetrator of bullying over time, whereas powerful reactions to conflicts (forcing) encourages bullying enactment. Yielding and avoiding are thus negatively associated with being a perpetrator of bullying over time. Forcing, however, is expected to be positively related to being a perpetrator of bullying

Hypothesis 3b: Yielding at T1 relates negatively to being a perpetrator of workplace bullying at T2.

Hypothesis 4b: Avoiding at T1 relates negatively to being a perpetrator of workplace bullying at T2.

Hypotheses 5b: Forcing at T1 relates positively to being a perpetrator of workplace bullying at T2.

Moderation between the occurrence of conflicts and conflict management styles

In addition to main effects, the bullying literature suggests that the association between the occurrence of conflicts and bullying is moderated by the conflict management styles: the occurrence of (many) conflicts in the work unit may particularly lead to bullying when the employee involved manages them ‘badly’ (e.g., Ayoko et al., 2003; Baillien & De Witte, 2009). Drawing on the Three Way Model (Baillien et al., 2009), the occurrence of conflicts may less likely result in bullying when the employee involved manages them in a de-

escalative way, as is the case for problem solving. Or, in other words, the main effect between the occurrence of conflicts at T1 and bullying at T2 will be weaker when the employee responds to the conflicts in a way that is likely to resolve the conflicts. This applies for both targets and perpetrators of bullying: when the employee responds to the conflict by applying a problem solving management style, he or she will less likely become a target or perpetrator.

Alternatively, the main effect between the occurrence of conflicts at T1 and bullying at T2 will be stronger when the employee responds to the conflicts in an escalative way (forcing, avoiding or yielding). These escalative conflict management styles however have a different impact on the association between the occurrence of conflicts and being a target versus being a perpetrator of bullying; again based on the power reflected in the conflict management style the employee chooses in response to the conflict. With respects to being a target of bullying, the association between the occurrence of conflicts and bullying may be intensified by powerless escalative conflict management styles, as is the case for yielding and avoiding. The relationship between the occurrence of conflicts and being a target of bullying will decrease when using powerful escalative conflict management styles, such as forcing. In contrast, with respects to being a perpetrator of bullying, powerless escalative conflict management styles (yielding and avoiding) may impair the association between the occurrence of conflicts and bullying. Powerful escalative conflict management styles (forcing) may boost this relationship. In all, we assume:

Hypothesis 6: The relationship between the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 and being a target of bullying at T2 is moderated by the conflict management styles. Specifically, we expect a stronger relationship between the occurrence of conflicts within the work unit at T1 and being a target of bullying at T2 under the

conditions of (a) low problem solving, (b) high yielding, (c) high avoiding, and (d) low forcing at T1.

Hypothesis 7: The relationship between the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 and being a perpetrator of bullying at T2 is moderated by the conflict management styles. Specifically, we expect a stronger relationship between the occurrence of conflicts within the work unit at T1 and being a perpetrator of bullying at T2 under the conditions of (a) low problem solving, (b) low yielding, (c) low avoiding, and (d) high forcing at T1.

METHOD

Sample

Procedure

Data were collected in November 2007 (T1) and in April 2008 (T2) in establishments of two large organisations with headquarters in Belgium. The 6-months time lag was inspired by de Lange and colleagues (2004) who call for longitudinal studies with time lags shorter than one year. Applying a short temporal lag allowed us to test whether the occurrence of conflicts and the conflict management styles may impact on bullying rather fast². The organisations were chosen based on expected variation in workplace bullying and possibilities for generalisation to blue- and white-collar workers. In both organisations, access to the workers was facilitated by the Human Resource department. Participation was voluntary and the respondents were instructed to mail their questionnaires under sealed envelopes directly to the authors' research department. To guarantee confidentiality, T1 and T2 responses were linked by means of anonymous codes provided by the respondents themselves.

² As, following the definition of bullying, the minimum period for workplace bullying to develop is 6 months (Leymann, 1996), a time lag shorter than six months is not appropriate.

The first organisation, in which we sampled all 555 respondents from one establishment, belonged to the textile industry. The second organisation, in which we sampled 1275 respondents in different establishments, provided financial services. Establishments were chosen based on company records of earlier bullying incidents. A total of 680 respondents ($n_{\text{organisation1}} = 179$; $n_{\text{organisation2}} = 501$) returned their questionnaire with a longitudinal code in the T1 survey (response rate = 37%). This response was satisfactory and within the range of response rates reported in earlier studies with organisation-specific samples (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Of these respondents, 357 ($n_{\text{organisation1}} = 79$; $n_{\text{organisation2}} = 278$) participated in the T2 survey as well (response rate relative to T1 = 53%). Two factors may have influenced the response rate at T2. First, approximately a month before T2 data gathering, organisation 2 unexpectedly launched a work satisfaction survey that partly addressed the same employees as those selected for our study. Consequently, some employees may have chosen to participate in the satisfaction survey instead, or may have mistaken the satisfaction survey for the previously announced T2 measurement. Second, response rates in organisation 1 may have been affected by highly unfavourable economic prospects for the Belgian textile industry which were communicated to the organisation's employees during January 2008 and may have discouraged them to participate at T2. After eliminating respondents who experienced job change since T1 ($n = 25$) and who did not answer all crucial measures in our current study, we obtained a definitive two-wave sample of 277 respondents ($n_{\text{organisation1}} = 59$; $n_{\text{organisation2}} = 218$).

Sample and drop-out

More male (62%) than female employees (38%) participated in our two-wave study. The sample's mean age was 42.45 years ($SD = 8.91$). White-collars dominated the sample (51%), followed by managers (38%). A logistic regression analysis tested if participation in the two

waves versus drop-out after wave 1 (1 = retention; 0 = drop-out) was predicted by age, gender (1 = male; 0 = female), blue-collar worker (0 = white-collar worker/management; 1 = blue-collar worker), management (0 = white/blue-collar worker; 1 = management), organisational membership (0 = organisation 1; 1 = organisation 2) and all study variables at Time 1. Age, gender, blue-collar worker, management and organisational membership were entered in Step 1. Occurrence of conflicts, the four conflict management styles (forcing, avoiding, yielding, problem solving), being a target of bullying and being a perpetrator of bullying were entered in Step 2. χ^2 was not-significant for both Step 1 ($\chi^2(5) = 3.03$; $p = 0.70$) and Step 2 ($\chi^2(7) = 9.85$; $p = 0.20$). Participants of both waves did not differ in any of the variables under study, suggesting limited selection effects.

Measures

We adopted a ‘complete panel design’ in which all variables were measured in both T1 and T2 (i.e. de Lange, De Witte, & Notelaers, 2008; Taris, 2000). To make sure the respondents attributed the same meaning to ‘the work unit’, this concept was defined as ‘[...] all employees performing their job under supervision of the same supervisor’. Item-level confirmatory factor analyses (CFA; AMOS 19.0) distinguishing seven factors (i.e. the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit, forcing, yielding, avoiding, problem solving, being a target of bullying, and being a perpetrator of bullying) revealed a satisfactory fit at both T1 ($\chi^2(469) = 627.82$, $p < .001$; RMR = .03, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .95) and T2 ($\chi^2(476) = 691.19$, $p < .001$; RMR = .03, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .95). This seven-factor model revealed a better fit as compared to the one-factor model ($\chi^2_{T1}(497) = 2048.84$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2_{T2}(497) = 2408.71$, $p < .001$), indicating that our self-reports are less likely to be biased by common method variance (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

The *occurrence of conflicts in the work unit* was measured with one self-constructed item. Specifically, we presented a definition that, inspired by Pondy (1972), described conflict as ‘[...] a difference of opinion, disagreement, confrontation or quarrel between different members (among co-workers as well as between one or more co-workers and the supervisor) of the work unit’. Based on this definition, the respondents had to rate how frequently they themselves and the other members of their work unit are generally confronted with conflicts at work. The response categories ranged from one to five: ‘almost never’ (= 1), ‘a couple of times a year’ (= 2), ‘a couple of times a month’ (= 3), ‘a couple of times a week’ (= 4) and ‘(almost) every day’ (= 5).

The Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH; Van de Vliert, 1997; De Dreu et al., 2001) was used to investigate the employee’s individual conflict management styles. Response categories ranged from ‘never’ (1) to ‘almost always’ (5). *Problem solving* contained 4 items, such as ‘I examine issues until we find a solution that really satisfies all parties involved’ ($\alpha_{T1} = .83$; $\alpha_{T2} = .84$). *Yielding* consisted of 4 items such as ‘I adapt to the other party’s goals and interests’ ($\alpha_{T1} = .79$; $\alpha_{T2} = .85$). *Forcing* was measured by means of 4 items such as ‘I aim at winning the conflict’ ($\alpha_{T1} = .70$; $\alpha_{T2} = .70$). *Avoiding* was measured by 3 items such as ‘I try to avoid confrontation about differences’ ($\alpha_{T1} = .74$; $\alpha_{T2} = .72$).

Being a target of workplace bullying was measured by means of the 9 items Short Negative Acts Questionnaire (S-NAQ; Notelaers & Einarsen, 2008) that lists various negative acts which may be perceived as bullying when occurring on a regular basis. The items refer to personal (e.g. gossiping) as well as work-related bullying (e.g. being withheld information) and examine how often the respondent was exposed to a specific act during the last six months. The response categories varied from ‘never’ (= 1), to ‘now and then’ (= 2),

‘monthly’ (= 3), ‘weekly’ (= 4) and ‘daily’ (= 5). In line with the bullying literature, all items were included in one scale ($\alpha_{T1} = .76$; $\alpha_{T2} = .79$) (for a discussion, see Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; Nielsen et al., 2009).

Being a perpetrator of bullying was measured by means of the same nine items of the S-NAQ, however slightly adapted to an active formulation (e.g. ‘withholding information’) (see Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011). Respondents rated how frequent during the last six months (1 = *never*; 5 = *daily*) they themselves had engaged in each of the nine acts. Reliability was somewhat lower, though satisfactory for a newly developed scale ($\alpha_{T1} = .65$; $\alpha_{T2} = .68$) (Nunally & Bernstein, 1994).

Finally, the questionnaire included the following control variables taken from T1 measurement: gender dummy coded as ‘male’ (1 = male; 0 = female), age (in years), job status dummy coded as ‘blue-collar worker’ (1 = blue-collar worker; 0 = white-collar worker/management) and ‘management’ (1 = management; 0 = blue/white-collar worker), and organisational membership (‘organisation 2’).

Analyses

Hypotheses were tested by means of lagged Moderated (Hierarchical) Regression Analyses (list wise deletion) (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003; Zapf, Dormann & Frese, 1996) in which being a target/perpetrator of workplace bullying at T2 were predicted by (a) the controls (Step 1), (b) being a target/perpetrator of bullying at T1 (Step 2), (c) the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 and the four conflict management styles at T1 (Step 3), and (d) the interactions between occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 * forcing/avoiding/yielding/problem solving at T1 (Step 4). As recommended by Cohen and

colleagues (2003), all predictors were mean centred in order to avoid multicollinearity. The interaction term was calculated by multiplying the centred occurrence of conflicts and conflict management style scales. We additionally inspected the possibility of reversed relationships between the occurrence of conflicts/the conflict management styles at T2 and bullying at T1. Using hierarchical regression analyses we tested whether the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T2 and each of the conflict management styles at T2 were predicted by (a) the control variables, (b) the occurrence of conflicts/the conflict management style at T1, and (c) being a target/being a perpetrator of bullying at T1 (Zapf et al., 1996).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, the standard deviations and the correlations between the T1 and T2 scales. This table reveals a number of interesting observations. First, the test-retest correlations of the variables under study ranged between .46 (for occurrence of conflicts) and .69 (for problem solving and for being a target of bullying), which aligns with other cross-lagged studies in the workplace bullying and conflict management domain with rather short time lags (e.g. Baillien et al., 2011; Van de Vliert, 1990). Second, the occurrence of conflicts at T1 was positively related to being a target/perpetrator of bullying at T1. As respect the de-escalative conflict management style, problem solving was negatively related with being a target and being a perpetrator of bullying. As respects the escalative conflict management styles, forcing associated positively with being a perpetrator of bullying, but was unrelated to being a target of bullying. Avoiding and yielding were not associated with being a target or being a perpetrator of bullying. Finally, note that avoiding correlated positively with yielding and negatively with problem solving (Cohen, 1988, 1992; Field, 2005), indicating that high scores on avoiding associated with high scores on yielding and low scores on problem

solving. Problem-solving associated positively with forcing: higher scores on problem solving were related to higher scores on forcing, too.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations for T1 and T2 ($N = 277$).

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.	17.	18.	19.
1. Age	42.45	8.91	-																		
2. Male	-	-	.14*	-																	
3. Blue-collar	-	-	.18**	.23**	-																
4. Management	-	-	.19**	.16*	-.27**	-															
5. Organisation 2	-	-	.04	.07*	.62**	-.17**	-														
6. Conflict T1	2.08	1.06	-.10	.01	-.05	-.03	.03	-													
7. Conflict T2	2.06	0.96	-.09	.10	-.04	-.02	.02	.46*	-												
8. Forcing T1	2.69	0.61	-.14*	.13*	.10	.13*	-.11*	.10	.03	(.70)											
9. Forcing T2	2.67	0.62	-.11	.13*	.07	.04	-.05	.08	.06	.61**	(.70)										
10. Yielding T1	3.11	0.52	.14*	-.04	-.10	-.18**	.02	-.14**	-.18**	-.08	-.16**	(.79)									
11. Yielding T2	3.14	0.51	.14*	.04	-.07	-.27**	-.02	-.05	-.01	-.16**	-.18**	.63**	(.85)								
12. Avoiding T1	2.94	0.82	.06	-.07	-.21**	-.16**	.04	-.06	-.06	-.09	-.18**	.30**	.29**	(.74)							
13. Avoiding T2	2.96	0.84	.08	-.02	-.15**	-.12*	.12*	-.01	.06	-.14*	-.11	.28**	.40**	.63**	(.72)						
14. Problem solving T1	3.81	0.69	.03	.12*	.27**	.32**	-.19**	-.06	-.10	.19**	.11	.02	.01	-.27**	-.26**	(.83)					
15. Problem solving T2	3.77	0.67	.01	.12*	.28**	.30**	-.11	-.03	-.10	.13*	.17**	.03	.08	-.31**	-.31**	.69**	(.84)				
16. Target T1	1.35	0.33	-.06	.06	-.08	-.06	.03	.42**	.27**	.10	.06	-.12	-.03	.05	.05	-.26**	-.21**	(.76)			
17. Target T2	1.36	0.36	-.12*	.01	-.09	-.04	.09	.30**	.37**	.10	.03	-.08	.06	.02	.09	-.22**	-.22**	.69**	(.79)		
18. Perpetrator T1	1.32	0.26	-.13*	.14*	-.01	-.06	-.07	.30**	.18**	.19**	.20**	-.11	-.08	.01	.01	-.20**	-.15*	.46**	.36**	(.65)	
19. Perpetrator T2	1.30	0.27	-.16*	.16*	-.17**	-.01	-.01	.21**	.24**	.21**	.25**	-.07	-.04	.04	.02	-.22**	-.17**	.45**	.58**	.65**	(.68)

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

Regarding being a target of bullying, the results of regression analyses revealed no significant main effects of the variables under study at T1 on being a target of bullying at T2. Specifically, there was no main effect of the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 and no main effects of the four conflict management styles forcing, avoiding, yielding and problem solving at T1 on being a target of bullying at T2; rejecting hypotheses 1a to 5a. In addition, there were no significant interaction effects of the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 * each of the four conflict management styles at T1 when predicting being a target of bullying at T2 (Table 2, Step 3 and Step 4). Hypothesis 6 was thus rejected as well. In summary, being a target of bullying was neither predicted by the occurrence of conflicts within the work unit, nor by the four conflict management styles, nor by the interaction between the occurrence of conflicts * each of the conflict management styles six months earlier.

Table 2

Summary of the Moderated Hierarchical Regression Analyses ($N = 277$).

	Target of workplace bullying T2, β				Perpetrator of workplace bullying T2, β			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Age	-.11	-.07	-.07	-.05	-.18**	-.09	-.08	-.08
Male	-.03	.06	-.07	-.07	.18**	.09	.10*	.10*
Blue-collar worker	.23**	.11	.12	.12	.11*	.03	.02	.02
Management	.02	.04	.05	.06	-.03	.01	.05	.06
Organization 2	-.04	.01	.01	.01	-.18**	-.15*	-.15*	-.14*
Target/Perpetrator of workplace bullying T1	-	.68***	.68***	.68***	-	.63***	.58***	.57***
Occurrence of conflicts T1	-	-	-.01	.01	-	-	.01	.01
Forcing T1	-	-	.03	.03	-	-	.10*	.10*
Yielding T1	-	-	.05	.06	-	-	.03	.03
Avoiding T1	-	-	-.04	-.05	-	-	.01	.01
Problem solving T1	-	-	-.04	-.04	-	-	-.17**	-.17**
Occurrence of conflicts*forcing T1	-	-	-	.02	-	-	-	.06
Occurrence of conflicts*yielding T1	-	-	-	.06	-	-	-	.02
Occurrence of conflicts*avoiding T1	-	-	-	-.02	-	-	-	-.04
Occurrence of conflicts*problem solving T1	-	-	-	.05	-	-	-	-.02
R ²	.05*	.50***	.50***	.51***	.08***	.45***	.48***	.48***
ΔR^2	-	.45***	.00	.01	-	.37***	.03*	.00

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

Regarding being a perpetrator of bullying, the results revealed no significant main effect of the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit at T1 and no main effects of yielding or avoiding at T1 on being a target of bullying at T2; rejecting hypotheses 1b, 3b and 4b. Results did however show a significant main effect of forcing at T1 and of problem solving at T1 when predicting being a perpetrator of bullying at T2 (Table 2, Step 3). These effects remained significant when introducing the interaction-terms in Step 4. In line with hypothesis 2b, forcing at T1 associated positively with being a perpetrator of bullying at T2; so that high(er) scores on forcing relate to high(er) scores on being a perpetrator of bullying six months later. As assumed in hypothesis 5b, problem solving at T1 was negatively related to being a perpetrator of bullying at T2: high(er) scores on problem solving associate with low(er) scores on being a perpetrator of bullying six months later. Contrary to our expectations, there were no significant interaction effects between occurrence of conflicts at T1 and each of the conflict management styles at T1 on being a perpetrator of bullying. Hypothesis 7 was rejected. Being a perpetrator of bullying was thus only predicted by high scores on forcing and high scores on problem solving six months earlier.

Our test for reversed associations between the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit/the conflict management styles at T2 and bullying at T1 showed no significant results (See Table 2). The occurrence of conflicts in the work unit and the conflict management styles – more particularly forcing and problem solving - were antecedents rather than consequences of being a perpetrator of bullying.

DISCUSSION

One of the current study's main findings is perhaps that the conflict components were only related to being a perpetrator and not to being a target of bullying over time. These findings seem to suggest that conflicts and the way they are handled may only be regarded as triggers for bullying enactment, and not for being a target of these negative acts. Two observations further sustain these findings. First, our tests for the reversed hypotheses (Zapf, et al., 1996) revealed no lagged effects of bullying on the conflict components, suggesting that these were antecedents rather than consequences of bullying. Second, adding or omitting a broad range of control variables did not alter our results, suggesting the above-mentioned lagged effects to be robust and fairly consistent.

One possible explanation for our (lack of) results could relate to the rather short time lag of six months; which might indicate that being a perpetrator is affected by conflicts rather quickly, whereas being a target may require a longer time lag. Future research may therefore benefit from replicating our findings in studies applying longer time lags, as to date little is known about the "causal interval" of the workplace bullying process (de Lange et al., 2008). Another explanation could refer to the processes leading to being a target versus being a perpetrator of bullying that may actually be different; an aspect that has been put forward by scholars in the field (Baillien et al., 2011; Van den Broeck, Baillien, De Witte, 2011). In this context, studies have successfully linked being a target of bullying to a stress process and indicated that employees worn out by either exposure to stressors or by having few resources may become 'easy targets' for bullies. The link between stressors and resources and being a perpetrator of bullying appeared less straightforward, which might indicate that other processes, such as conflicts, may additionally trigger bullying enactment by future perpetrators. Our current study may accordingly refine earlier studies that linked conflicts to

being a target of bullying using cross-sectional data. Conflicts and conflict management styles could perhaps not be directly related to being a target. As there is at least one target for each perpetrator, conflicts could have been found to relate cross-sectionally to victimisation through their impact on (others) being a perpetrator of bullying. A related issue when comparing processes leading to being a target versus being a perpetrator may then be the target-perpetrator reciprocity cited by scholars in the field: Perpetrators often see themselves as targets (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Glomb & Liao, 2003), while targets may engage in bullying towards other colleagues in an attempt to shift the perpetrator's attention to a 'new' scapegoat (Thylefors, 1987). Inspecting in more detail how and why being a target versus a perpetrator of bullying are intertwined, may therefore serve as a fruitful avenue for future research. Drawing on the fairly strong lagged associations between being a target and being a perpetrator at T1 and T2 in our study, bullying could be a predictor of future bullying (e.g., Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007): being a target of bullying at T1 and/or T2 could predict being a perpetrator at T1 and being a perpetrator of bullying at T1 and/or T2 could predict being a target at T1 (i.e. the relative stability of being a target versus being a perpetrator of bullying). Additional tests, in which we (a) included being a perpetrator at T1 as well as T2 when predicting being a target at T2 and (b) included being a target at T1 as well as T2 when predicting being a perpetrator at T2, did however not significantly alter our results³.

As respects the specific conflict components, our results did not reveal a significant association between the occurrence of conflicts at work and being a perpetrator of bullying over time. These findings contradict earlier suggestions that higher base rates of conflicts in the work environment will lead to higher rates of workplace bullying (Zapf, 1999). First, these results may be owed to the broad range of connotations inherent to conflicts at work, so

³ Results are available from the first author upon request.

that conflicts may be positive too (Deutsch et al., 2006). Only conflicts bearing a negative connotation may be linked to bullying, as only they may elicit frustrations and strains which in turn may encourage escalation to bullying (Baillien et al., 2009; De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008). In line with the Revised Frustration Aggression Theory (Berkowitz, 1989), frustrations may cause bullying by (systematically) venting one's negative emotions on a co-worker, which leads to becoming a perpetrator of bullying. On the other hand, frustrations may encourage bullying as suggested by the Social Interactionist framework (Neuman & Baron, 2004; Felson, 1992). In this respect, frustrations may stimulate violation of social norms through a process of psychological dissociation (e.g., the frustrated employee makes more job related mistakes or adopts a more unfriendly attitude). Such employees may provoke negative reactions from colleagues as a form of retaliation, and may become a target of bullying. Second, the lack of a relationship between the occurrence of conflicts and bullying could be owed to the idea that bullying may perhaps be regarded as an extreme way of dealing with conflicts (i.e. a conflict management style) and the general observation in conflict research that conflict management styles moderate rather than mediate the relationships between conflict and outcomes of conflict (e.g. Dijkstra, De Dreu, Evers, & van Dierendonck, 2009; Huan, 2009; Lui, Fu, & Liu, 2008). Third, our results may be explained by a lower 'epistemic motivation'⁴ of the most powerful party in the conflict, which leads this party to be less affected by the actual (work) context and to be more determined by their own goals and initiatives (De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003). Or, in view of being a perpetrator of bullying (i.e. the powerful position), the fact that there are conflicts at work may not be as important as the employee's own goal oriented behaviour as reflected in, for example, conflict management styles.

⁴ 'Epistemic motivation' refers to the desire to develop and maintain an accurate understanding of situations. It determines whether individuals will engage in systematic and thorough information processing.

Regarding the conflict management styles, we detected significant lagged main effects from problem solving and forcing and no lagged effects from avoiding and yielding on being a perpetrator of bullying. In terms of the Dual Concern Theory's dimensions, only the conflict management styles related to high integration (i.e. problem solving) and high distribution (i.e. fighting) related to being a perpetrator of bullying over time. Whereas problem solving as a de-escalative management style discouraged being a perpetrator over time; forcing (an escalative conflict management style) encouraged being a perpetrator over time. In terms of the Dual Concern Theory's concerns, problem solving and forcing share their high concern for the own goals⁵. Drawing on the current study's results, this may imply that (only) conflict management styles that reflect a high concern for the self may relate to being a perpetrator of bullying. How these conflict management styles relate to being a perpetrator of bullying is then determined by the concern for the other party's goals. Specifically, combined with a high concern for the other party (problem solving), the conflict management style will discourage being a perpetrator of bullying. Combined with a low concern for the other party (forcing), the conflict management style will encourage being a perpetrator of bullying. Avoiding and yielding are fuelled by a low concern for the own goals and did/do not associate with being a perpetrator of bullying over time. Note however that the current study did not measure the dual concerns as such and focussed on the specific conflict management styles instead. Future research may therefore benefit from a more explicit investigation of the link between the concerns and bullying.

Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that the current study has some drawbacks. A first limitation may concern the bullying concept and common method variance. More specifically, the bullying literature

⁵ Forcing combines a high concern for one's own goals with a low concern for the opposite party's goals; problem solving combines a high concern for one's own goals with a high concern for the opposite party's goals.

has paid a great deal of attention to the distinction between (dealing with) conflicts and bullying. Simultaneously, various researchers have defined workplace bullying as an escalated conflict (Leymann, 1996; Glasl, 1982; Baillien et al., 2009; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Therefore, it might be argued that conflicts in the work unit might include incidents of workplace bullying; an aspect that is of particular resonance in view of the fairly broad definition we used to measure the occurrence of conflicts in the work unit. Or, it could be reasoned that conflict management styles might reflect a form of bullying in an attempt to ‘win’ the conflict, or, conflict management styles as forcing or problem solving could perhaps give feedback regarding the enactment of bullying acts. A confirmatory factor analysis however revealed that bullying, the occurrence of conflicts at work and the conflict management styles can be regarded as distinct latent factors. Future studies may however include more specific operationalisations of conflict such as, for example, task versus personal conflicts (Jehn, 1995). A related issue concerns our self-report data that prevented us from separating method variance from true score variance. Yet we feel confident that common method variance did not strongly affect the importance of our findings. For a start, there is considerable debate about the magnitude of possible inflation of relationships owing to common method variance (Spector, 1987, 2006). Second, we relied on two-wave full panel data, which diminishes the risk for common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, we followed suggestions on questionnaire design that reduce potential risks associated with common method variance, such as anonymity and instructing the participants that there are no correct or wrong answers (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Fourth, CFA showed that the occurrence of conflicts, the conflict management styles, being a target of workplace bullying and being a perpetrator of workplace bullying were not one but distinct latent factors. Nevertheless, future studies could strengthen the design used in this study by gathering multi-source data.

A second limitation may refer to social desirability, which may have reduced the likelihood of obtaining accurate responses particularly in view of being a perpetrator of bullying. Our findings may therefore reflect the experiences of a subgroup of perpetrators willing to admit their negative conducts. In this sense, social desirability may imply an underestimation of effects due to a lack of variance. In other words, relationships may become even stronger when accounting for social desirability. Yet, to strengthen this research design, future research may benefit from objective measurements. Examples are including managerial reports or scores from a third party (e.g. researchers). Note however that assessing third party scores on workplace bullying without trying to counteract such behaviour raises ethical concerns, as workplace bullying yields many negative consequences for the parties involved as well as for the work unit and the organisation (Einarsen et al., 2009).

Another limitation could be that our sample was not representative for the Belgian working population, which is for example reflected in a strong dominance of white-collars. A related issue concerns the non-response during T1 and T2 measurements, which may have hampered study's generalisability to similar organisations. Our sample was also rather small, yielding some limitations in view of statistical methods that could be applied such as, for example, distinguishing groups of non-targets/targets and non-perpetrators/perpetrators when addressing our hypotheses. Future research may therefore replicate our findings in more representative and bigger samples.

Fourth, the current study particularly builds on the 'one best way' perspective on conflict management styles. Or, distinct conflict management styles have a mutually exclusive influence on the conflict outcomes. Yet, studies in the conflict management

research domain revealed that effects towards escalation and de-escalation may be time dependent (Van de Vliert, 1997) and could relate to adopting a specific combination (i.e. ‘conglomeration’) of the conflict management styles over time (Van de Vliert et al., 1995). One interesting avenue for future studies could then be to inspect the impact of different sequences of the conflict management styles over time (e.g., first forcing, then avoiding, then problem solving, etc.) on bullying.

And last, the current study explored the direct effect of the Dual Concern conflict management styles and did not account for situational elements that may have influenced the conflict management styles’ availability and effects (Keashly & Nowell, 2003). One situational factor that might play a role could be that the employees in conflict occupy a different hierarchical position in the organisation; a factor we now controlled for in our analyses. In this respect, research has indicated that employees occupying a position of authority are more inclined to apply powerful ways to manage conflicts (e.g. forcing and problem solving); whereas employees that do not have such a position tend to avoid or yield as they fear the potential consequences of not showing such behaviour towards their powerful opponent (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Fitness, 2000; Keltner et al., 2003; Van de Vliert et al., 1995). Investigating the adopted conflict management styles in dyads in which parties occupy different hierarchical positions and their effects on being a target versus perpetrator of bullying may therefore be an interesting avenue for future research. Similarly, studies could explore the effect of conflict management styles that do not align with the expected ‘in-role’ behaviour in these dyads and investigate its potential impact on being a target versus a perpetrator of bullying.

CONCLUSION

The current study's implications are twofold. First, our results underlined that being a perpetrator of bullying may successfully be predicted by how employees deal with conflicts at work. Specifically, our findings revealed that problem solving discouraged and forcing encouraged being a perpetrator six months later. Particularly conflict management styles reflecting power or revealing a high concern for the own goals combined with a low concern for the other party's goals escalated into being a perpetrator of bullying; underlining the Dual Concern Theory's added value in further understanding in the bullying phenomenon. Second, our general finding that one can prevent workplace bullying by certain reactions to conflicts, may provide some valuable leads for organisations that wish to pursue a policy against workplace bullying. Specifically, organisations may stimulate problem solving conflict behaviour and discourage forcing as a way to solve conflicts. This may, for example, be accomplished by specific training sessions for managers and their employees on how to deal with conflicts and by stressing the importance of addressing conflicts in a cooperative instead of a competitive way. Stressing the importance of problem solving is important as other studies revealed that managers who intervene in conflicts mainly rely on problem solving and forcing techniques (Conlon, Carnevale, & Murnighan, 1994); with the latter, as indicated in this study, potentially giving rise to bullying. Another possibility is to develop a scheme or a protocol which specifies who to contact in case of conflict in order to get the conflict solved in a satisfactory way. Potential interveners may be mediators, coaches, consultants, facilitators or even managers specifically trained in this respect.

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