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# A two-wave study on workplace bullying after organizational change: A moderated mediation analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The role of organizational change in the process leading to the development of bullying has received only little attention so far. The present longitudinal study aimed at filling this gap by examining a moderated mediation model through Structural Equation Modelling where the mediating effect of psychological strain in the relationship between workload and workplace bullying is moderated by the experience of organizational change. Data were available for 141 university employees (65.2% females). The moderating role of organizational change was tested through the multi-group method by including in the analysis two groups of employees of the same organization: employees who directly experienced organizational change (e.g. change of job tasks and supervisor) and employees who were not involved in organizational change. Bootstrap test of the indirect effects provided evidence of a mediating effect of strain in the relationship between workload and workplace bullying in the group of employees who directly experienced the organizational change process. Implications and limitations of the obtained results are discussed, together with suggestions for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Workplace bullying represents a severe form of harassment in organizations and it is considered an extreme type of social stressor at work (Zapf, 1999). Specifically, it can be defined as repeated behaviours that occur over a period of time which harass, offend, socially exclude and/or adversely affect the work of an employee (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2003; Moayed et al., 2006). Research has shown a relationship between exposure to workplace bullying and negative health effects, such as higher levels of psychological distress (e.g., Agervold and Mikkelsen, 2004), poorer general health (e.g. Høgh et al., 2011; Vignoli et al., 2015), and mental health problems (e.g. Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012). Moreover, research has reported evidence of a relationship between workplace bullying and increased absenteeism (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012), decreased organizational commitment (Hoel and Cooper, 2000), and job satisfaction (e.g. Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012; Moayed et al., 2006). Factors predicting workplace bullying include, beside personality traits and demographic characteristics of victims and perpetrators (e.g. Nielsen and Knardahi, 2015; Salin, 2015), work

and organizational aspects, such as job stressors and poor environmental conditions (e.g., Agervold and Mikkelsen, 2004; Notealers et al., 2013).

Despite some steps towards a better comprehension of workplace bullying have been done, research on the development of the phenomenon still needs to advance (Balducci et al., 2011). In particular, research on the potential role of stressful and frequent organizational situations, such as workload and work intensity and organizational change, is scant. For example, although several authors referred to organizational change as one of the potentially most important causes of workplace bullying, only few empirical studies have explicitly focused on this relationship (e.g. Baillien and De Witte, 2009; Baron and Neuman, 1996; Skogstad et al., 2007).

The theoretical assumption from which the current study starts is the well-known 'work environment hypothesis' on the development of bullying (Einarsen, 2000; Leymann, 1996), according to which a poorly organized work environment may fuel the conditions (e.g., a conflicting work climate) that are implicated in the development of bullying. However, the mechanism linking a poor work environment to bullying has been rarely explored empirically. In the present study, we took as a crucial manifestation of a poor work environment the level of workload, which includes two prominent stressors of modern workplaces, namely work

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intensity and peace of work (see, e.g. Eurofound, 2012), and postulate that psychological strain is an important intervening mechanism in the relationship between higher workload and workplace bullying.

Thus, on the basis of the above considerations, we designed a prospective study testing a model in which psychological strain acted as a mediator in the relationship between workload and workplace bullying, with involvement in organizational change – a very frequent occurrence in modern organizations (Eurofound, 2015) – playing a crucial strengthening role in such a chain of relationships (see Fig. 1). In brief, the current study attempted to answer the following two questions: What is the mechanism through which workload elicits workplace bullying and does experiencing organizational change make a difference? The rationale for the tested model as well as for each of the hypotheses examined are explained in the following sections.

## 2. The relationships between workload and workplace bullying

According to the Job Demand/Control Model, workload includes mental and physical job demands (Karasek et al., 1998) and high workload may be a manifestation of a poorly managed psychosocial work environment, which has been considered since the beginning of bullying research a crucial starting point for the development of bullying (e.g., Einarsen, 2000; Leymann, 1996). Empirical findings reported evidence of a robust relationship between higher workload on workplace bullying. For example, Agervold and Mikkelsen (2004), after removing bullied employees from the analyses (to reduce the potential bias in the perception of the work environment due to being a victim of bullying) found that departments with higher prevalence of bullying also reported higher levels of workload. Similarly, Notealers et al. (2013) found that high workload was associated with a higher probability of being a target of severe bullying, which was particularly true for those reporting very high levels of workload. Similar results were found also in a number of other studies (e.g. Baillien et al., 2011a,b; Tuckey et al., 2009).

The relationship between workload and bullying has been investigated also in the context of organizational change, a focus of the present study, which is often accompanied by increased workload. For example, Baillien and De Witte (2009) found that high level of workload was related to workplace bullying in a big sample of Belgian employees who were starting or in the middle of an organizational change process. More recently, Spagnoli and Balducci (2017) reported a strong relationship between high level of workload and workplace bullying after organizational change in a sample of Italian employees who had experienced organizational change during the recent economic and financial crisis. However, organizational change was not directly operationalized in the

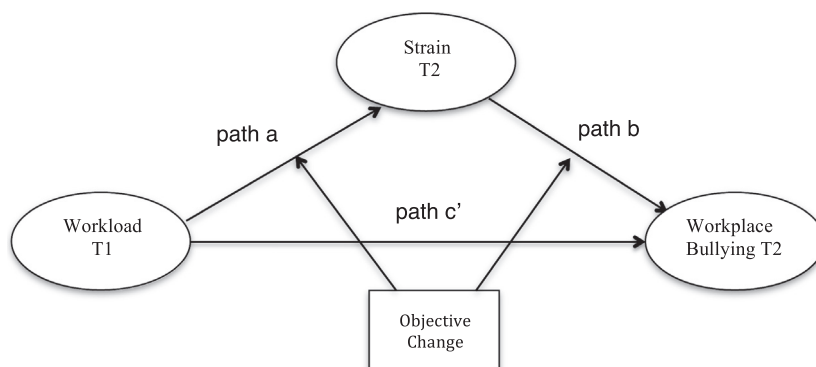
tested model of the latter two studies, so it is not clear which role it played. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of these two studies (i.e., Baillien and De Witte, 2009; Spagnoli and Balducci, 2017) and of most of those examining the relationship between workload and workplace bullying suggests the need for more research.

Thus one of the aims of the current study is to provide further evidence on the relationship between workload and workplace bullying in a work context affected by an important organizational change by using a longitudinal (i.e., two-wave) study design. Thus, the first hypothesis that we put forward is:

**H1.** A direct significant relationship exists between workload at time 1 (T1) and workplace bullying at time 2 (T2) in an organizational context affected by organizational change.

## 3. The mediating role of psychological strain in the relationship between workload and workplace bullying

Different scholars have insisted on the mediating role of psychological strain in the relationship between distressing working conditions and bullying. According to Leymann (1996), very poor working conditions may elicit strain reactions including feelings of frustration. Through a variety of phenomena that may accompany psychological strain such as the development of sinister cognition leading to attribution errors (see Neuman and Baron, 2003), violation of social norms or withdrawal behaviour (i.e., decreased performance) strained employees may blame each other, becoming each other's social stressors, and triggering a bullying situation for a single employee. Thus, according to Leymann (1996), and also others (e.g. Bowling and Beehr, 2006; Einarsen, 2000), psychological strain following poor working conditions may act as a catalyst of interpersonal conflicts, which in turn may develop into bullying if not properly managed. Thus, psychological strain affects both future victim and perpetrator(s), with the difference between the two being that the former ends up in an inferior position (Einarsen, 2000). A similar explanation has been proposed by Baillien et al. (2009), according to whom stressful working conditions may wear employees out, making them “easy targets” for aggressive colleagues or superiors, who may have been ‘aroused’ by the same negative working conditions. Following this line of reasoning, bullying may be considered a behavioural strain phenomenon. This means that work-related stress may not be only a consequence of bullying, as most research in this area has found (e.g. Vignoli et al., 2015), but also one of its antecedents. Interestingly, Nielsen et al. (2012) concluded that the relationship between psychological strain and workplace bullying indicates a vicious circle. Thus, we tested the following second hypothesis:



**Fig. 1.** The moderated mediation model hypothesized. (The tested model included also workplace bullying at T1 as a control variable. Thus the mediating effect of psychological strain in the relationship between workplace bullying at T1 and workplace bullying at T2 was also tested.)

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