

**Being the Bigger Person: Investigating the Relationship between  
Workplace Bullying Exposure and Enactment and the Role of  
Coping in Ending the Bullying Spiral**

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## **Abstract**

While most of the workplace bullying research has focused on targets and the devastating consequences they face from being exposed to such negative behaviour, bullying does not occur in a social vacuum. Previous research has suggested that people who are exposed to bullying sometimes engage in such behaviour themselves. In this paper, we wanted to test the reciprocal nature of bullying behaviour over time and potential moderators of this relationship in two studies. In Study 1, using two-wave full panel data, we test whether bullying exposure predicts bullying enactment and vice versa. In Study 2, using another two-wave dataset, we test whether individual coping styles moderate the relationship between bullying exposure and enactment. The results of the two studies provide support for the reciprocal nature of bullying behaviour and show that employees who tend to cope actively and instrumentally with being exposed to bullying have a higher chance of engaging in bullying. The reverse holds for people who tend to cope by disengaging and talking to others. This study has important implications for both the bullying literature and for practitioners working on bullying prevention and resolution.

**Keywords:** workplace bullying; perpetrator; target; coping; emotion focused coping, problem focused coping

## **Being the Bigger Person: Investigating the Relationship between Workplace Bullying Exposure and Enactment and the Role of Coping in Ending the Bullying Spiral**

Interpersonal mistreatment in the workplace, including bullying behaviour, is widespread and can have devastating effects on both employee well-being and organizational functioning. Prevalence rates of workplace bullying range between 3 and 15 percent (Nielsen et al., 2010). Previous research has shown that workplace bullying leads to many negative outcomes, including reduced mental and physical well-being, lowered job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance (Hoel et al., 2020). In their study on the economic impact of workplace bullying, Sheehan et al. (2001) estimated that the annual cost of bullying for organizations ranges between 17 and 36 billion Australian dollars. In other words, workplace bullying is a serious issue and it is important to understand how it develops and, even more, how it can be prevented.

The gross of the current bullying research has focused on the targets, including both the investigation of the factors that precede bullying as well as the consequences following exposure to such negative behaviour (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Definitions typically describe targets of bullying as being powerless and unable to defend themselves against the mistreatment (Einarsen et al., 2020). Yet, targets are not necessarily powerless from the start. Different authors propose that workplace bullying emerges as a result of an escalated conflict in which, after repeated negative interactions between individuals, one person loses the power battle and becomes victimized (Einarsen, 2000; Leymann, 1996; Zapf & Gross, 2001). This suggests that targets of bullying, at least in its early stages, may engage in bullying behaviour themselves. While this idea is supported by some correlational data (Baillien et al.

2011; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006), we currently lack an investigation of the relationship between bullying exposure and enactment behaviour over time. Additionally, it is important to understand what factors can help people leave such a negative spiral of behaviour. While previous studies have looked at coping in relation to targets of bullying, these have often provided mixed results regarding the effectiveness of different strategies in stopping the negative cycle (Nielsen et al., 2020; Van den Brande et al., 2019). It is therefore relevant to investigate whether, and which, coping strategies may play a role in reducing the likelihood of employees exposed to bullying becoming a perpetrator themselves.

In this study, we build on the notion of incivility spirals (Andersson et al., 1999) and social learning and processing (Bandura, 1977; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) in order to investigate the relationship between bullying exposure and enactment in the workplace in two longitudinal studies. First, we test whether people who experience bullying behaviour in the workplace are more likely to subsequently engage in bullying behaviour themselves (Study 1). Furthermore, we investigate whether employees' engagement in problem- and emotion-focused coping styles moderate the relationship between exposure to and enactment of bullying behaviour (Study 2). In other words, we test whether people's tendency to engage in certain coping strategies can end the spiral of bullying behaviour.

This study contributes to the current literature in several ways. First, we expand the focus of the field of workplace bullying by looking at both targets and perpetrators of this behaviour. After all, workplace bullying does not occur in a social vacuum, and given the social nature of workplace bullying it is important to understand its dynamic nature. Second, while Andersson et al. (1999) theorize the existence of departure points that can end the incivility spiral, they do not actually

explain what factors may contribute to this. In our study, we suggest that employees' coping style can be one such factor determining whether negative behaviour persists, adding to the broader incivility literature as well. Finally, we enhance the knowledge of preventive measures that can be taken in order to reduce the occurrence of workplace bullying. In this paper, we suggest that helping employees develop appropriate coping styles can be relevant in reducing negative interpersonal exchanges at work.

### **Relationship Between Bullying Exposure and Enactment**

Workplace bullying refers to enduring negative behaviour in which an employee is systematically and repeatedly targeted with work-related (e.g. withholding information) and/or personal (e.g. social exclusion) negative acts at work (Einarsen et al., 2020). According to several authors, bullying behaviour usually starts with an equal power structure in which the target and the perpetrator are engaged in a conflict that escalates over time, leaving the target depleted and unable to defend (Einarsen, 2000; Leymann, 1996; Zapf & Gross, 2001). This can happen when the target lacks skills to manage the conflict, giving the upper hand to the perpetrator (Baillien et al., 2016; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Interestingly, this suggests that in the initial phase of bullying, both the target and the perpetrator engage in negative behaviour and that being the target and the perpetrator of bullying may be interrelated. Some evidence for this comes from two studies that found a positive association between being the target and the perpetrator of bullying (Baillien et al. 2011; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). However, both of these studies only found correlational evidence for this relationship and did not investigate whether bullying exposure also predicted enactment over time.

The idea that bullying exposure may predict subsequent bullying enactment and vice versa is also supported by theory. According to the model of incivility spirals (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), targets of incivility tend to become a perpetrator of incivility themselves. According to Andersson et al. (1999), interpersonal mistreatment is a social interaction process involving an exchange of incivilities between two or more individuals. That is, negative behaviour of one party provokes negative behaviour of the second party, resulting in negative behaviours of increasing magnitude. The beginning of such a process is the commitment to an uncivil act of one party towards another. The receiving party is likely to perceive this act as unjust and experiences negative affect, causing them to respond in kind. The tipping point of this interaction occurs after both parties' anger and desire for revenge increase, causing them to engage in increasingly coercive behaviour. The existence of incivility spirals has been supported by various studies (e.g., Gallus et al., 2014; Sakurai & Jex, 2012), although mostly cross-sectional and for low-intensity negative behaviours.

Furthermore, a secondary spiral of negative behaviour could also emerge, in which the initial target starts aggressing towards other individuals. This idea is in line with the social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), which argues that information from people's immediate environment influences their attitudes and behaviours, and the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which argues that people model others' behaviour, including aggressive behaviour. This means that the initial target may start normalizing aggressive behaviour, leading them to engage in such behaviour as well. In support, previous studies have found that in environments where aggressive behaviour is prevalent, people tend to behave more aggressively themselves (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1998; Spector et al., 2007). This is also in line with the notion of displaced aggression (Dollard et al.,

1939) and meta-analytical evidence showing that people who are victimized, sometimes subsequently aggress towards innocent third parties (Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000).

Building on the above theory and evidence, we want to investigate whether employees exposed to bullying are more likely to engage in bullying themselves and vice versa. Namely, following the above evidence, we argue that employees who are exposed to bullying behaviour will be likely to engage in such behaviour themselves, either to retaliate or because of imitation processes (i.e. ‘monkey see, monkey do’-type behaviour; Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly et al., 1998). In a similar vein, people who engage in bullying behaviour will be likely to experience such behaviour, either following tit-for-tat processes, or because their behaviour may set a negative example for others, creating a climate of antisocial behaviour (Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly et al., 1998). We therefore hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 1.* There will be a reciprocal relationship between exposure to and enactment of bullying behaviour, meaning that exposure to bullying behaviour at one time point will predict enactment of bullying behaviour later on and vice versa.

### **Coping Styles and Bullying Behaviour**

If bullying exposure and enactment are indeed interrelated, it becomes important to understand what factors can help people end this negative spiral of behaviour. Whether an employee exposed to bullying behaviour starts engaging in such behaviour themselves is likely to be determined by that individual’s coping styles. Coping can be defined as cognitive and behavioural efforts that people apply in order to master, reduce or tolerate demands that tax or exceed their resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Dewe, 2000), and has been the subject of many studies over the past two decennia (for a review, see Cooper et al., 2001). According to the Cognitive

Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the impact of stressors on strain outcomes depends on people's coping strategies. In the workplace bullying literature, different authors suggest that bullying is a major workplace stressor (e.g., Baillien et al., 2017). As such, coping strategies may play an important role in how people manage being exposed to bullying.

Coping can either be seen as a fluctuating state depending on the context (Folkman et al., 1986) or it can relate a trait-like disposition of people to engage in certain strategies more than others across time and situations (Powers et al., 2002). In this study, we follow the latter approach as we are interested in people's general tendencies to make certain cognitive and behaviour efforts to manage, tolerate or reduce work stressors. The dominant view on coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguishes between two main forms of coping styles – problem-focused and emotion-focused. While problem-focused strategies relate to developing strategies intended to tackle the problem, emotion-focused ones consist of attempts to manage one's own emotional response to the perceived demands (Carver et al., 1989).

Previous research finds that problem-focused coping is more effective than emotion-focused coping in reducing strain and distress (e.g., Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). This can be attributed to the fact that the former relates to attempts to control stressors by defining the problem, planning potential solutions and choosing the most appropriate course of action, while the latter relates to reducing emotions but not addressing the underlying problem (Cosway et al., 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Studies on bullying in the workplace have included investigation of coping in the past. Most of these studies looked at the different coping strategies that targets apply in order to deal with bullying behaviour. These studies suggest that targets tend to avoid using problem-focused coping (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001). Moreover,



previous studies suggest that problem-focused coping may not always help targets and that doing nothing, ignoring the perpetrator or creating distance is to be preferred (e.g., D’Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Zapf and Gross (2001) argue that this is due to the uncontrollable nature of bullying, which makes active approaches neither possible nor useful. According to them, passive coping may help reduce chances of retaliation and thus help de-escalate the situation. This is also in line with some other studies that suggest that emotion-focused coping may outperform problem-focused coping in situations when the problem beforehand does not fall under individual control (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; DeGraff & Schaffer, 2008).

As suggested previously, people exposed to bullying who consequently start engaging in bullying are likely to do so either in order to retaliate or because of imitation processes. In both cases, this relates to more active coping, in which a person decides to take the matters into their own hands. Because of this, we argue that people who are exposed to bullying behaviour and who tend to deal with their problems hands-on (i.e., problem-focused), will be more likely to engage in bullying behaviour themselves. This is in line with the above findings that suggest that problem-focused coping may not be beneficial for the target (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Conversely, we argue that people who are exposed to bullying and tend to deal with stressors passively (i.e., emotion-focused), will be less likely to retaliate or mimic negative behaviour themselves. This is also in line with the proposition by Andersson et al. (1999), that when people choose not to respond to negative behaviour, this can help end the incivility spiral.

*Hypothesis 2.* Problem-focused coping will boost the relationship between exposure to and enactment of bullying.

*Hypothesis 3.* Emotion-focused coping will attenuate the relationship between exposure to and enactment of bullying.

Finally, problem- and emotion-focused coping both consist of a range of different behaviours. Problem-focused coping includes active coping, planning and seeking social support for instrumental reasons. Emotion-focused coping on the other hand includes venting emotions, mentally and behaviourally disengaging and seeking emotional support (Carver et al., 1989). In this study, we additionally want to explore which coping style in particular will be relevant for ending the bullying spiral.

## **Method**

In order to test the hypothesized relationships, we conduct two different studies. In Study 1, we investigate the reciprocal nature of bullying exposure and enactment (Hypothesis 1). We collected two-wave, full panel data and test for normal, reversed, and reciprocal causation between bullying exposure and enactment. In Study 2, using another two-wave dataset, we investigate whether problem and emotion-focused coping moderate the relationship between bullying exposure and enactment (Hypothesis 2) and which coping styles are particularly relevant in buffering or boosting this relationship (explorative hypothesis).

### ***Study 1***

#### *Participants*

We collected data for the first study using online surveys. The majority of the data were collected in two [Anonymized for peer review] organizations. An additional 100 participants were recruited using the snowballing technique by sharing an open link online. This resulted in 1226 participants in total. Of these participants, 92% worked in the public and 8% in the private sector. The response rate for the organizations was 43%. The participants had a mean age of 42 years (ranging from 20

to 69) and 46% were male. The participants were mostly highly educated: 69% had a higher degree, 28% had a secondary school diploma, 1% had a primary or no school diploma and 2% did not specify. All participants were informed that their participation and data would be treated confidentially and that they were free to terminate their participation at any time.

### *Measures*

To capture the experience and enactment of bullying behaviour, we used the validated Short Negative Acts Questionnaire (SNAQ; Notelaers et al., 2019), the shorter version of the most widely used questionnaire for measuring bullying in the workplace, the Negative Acts Questionnaire (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). The SNAQ consists of nine items referring to different types of bullying behaviours in the workplace. In order to measure exposure to bullying, participants were asked whether, in the last six months, they were exposed to certain bullying behaviours (e.g., ‘Someone withholding information which affects your performance’ and ‘Spreading gossip and rumours about you’). In order to measure enactment of bullying, the participants were asked to report whether they had engaged in the same bullying behaviours during the last six months. All items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale (i.e. *never*, *occasionally*, *monthly*, *weekly* or *daily*). Since both bullying exposure and enactment are formative scales, we used the omega indicator of reliability, which does not assume that all items have the same item-construct relations and equal item covariances (Revelle & Zinbarg, 2009). The omega coefficients for experience and enactment of bullying behaviour T1 were .91 and .87 respectively and for T2 .84 and .78 respectively.

Because previous studies suggest that workplace bullying is a gendered phenomenon with women reporting higher exposure than men (Salin & Hoel, 2013),

we controlled for gender when conducting the analyses. We also controlled for age of the participants, as previous studies have shown that employees of different ages differ in how they cope with bullying (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2004).

### *Procedure*

Before running the analyses, we first tested the fit of the measurement model, using Mplus 7.4. At Time 1 and Time 2 separately, we first fitted a single latent variable model in which all items loaded on a general latent bullying construct (Model 1). Second, we fitted a model with two latent variables: exposure to bullying behaviour and enactment of bullying behaviour (Model 2).

Next, a cross-lagged panel analysis was used to assess whether the relationship between exposure to bullying behaviour and enactment of bullying behaviour was reciprocal. We estimated the fit of competing models in four different steps. First, we fitted a model with freely estimated auto-regressive pathways (Model 1). Second, this stability model was compared to a model with a cross-lagged structural path from exposure to bullying behaviour T1 to enactment of bullying behaviour T2 (Model 2). Third, to test for reversed causation, a model with a cross-lagged structural path from enactment of bullying behaviour T1 to exposure to bullying behaviour T2 was fitted (Model 3). Finally, in order to test for reciprocal effects, we included both normal and reversed cross lagged structural paths (Model 4).

In order to estimate the fit of different measurement and structural models, we used full information maximum likelihood and the robust maximum likelihood estimator. In addition, the models were compared using the following fit indices: comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker Lewis index (TLI), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA),

and Satorra-Bentler Scaled chi-square difference ( $\Delta S-B\chi^2$ ). A CFI and TLI of approximate .90 or above and a RMSEA and SRMR of 0.08 or lower, indicate good model fit (Hair et al., 2006). With regards to the  $S-B\chi^2$ , a significant  $S-B\Delta\chi^2$  value indicates an improvement in model fit. However, the robust chi-square difference test can sometimes produce a negative value (Satorra & Bentler, 2010). Consequently, when this occurred, we compared the model fit using the Loglikelihood difference test, which also follows the  $\chi^2$ -distribution.

### *Results*

*[Table 1 near here]*

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics of the study variables over the two time-waves. Comparison of measurement models confirmed that Model 2 (a model with two latent factors, one for each of our study variables) fitted the data better than the alternative model, both at T1 ( $\chi^2 = -20.50$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and T2 ( $\chi^2 = -323.97$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, Model 2 also had a good absolute fit at both time points. Next, we assessed the fit of different structural models (Table 2). The autoregressive model had an acceptable model fit. The Satorra-Bentler Scaled chi-square difference tests between M1 and all other models with cross-lagged structural paths were significant, meaning that cross-lagged models fitted the data better (M2 versus M1,  $\Delta S-B\chi^2 = 7.79$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; M3 versus M1,  $\Delta S-B\chi^2 = 6.66$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; M4 versus M1,  $\Delta S-B\chi^2 = 11.66$ ,  $\Delta df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, the chi-square difference tests comparing M4 to M2 ( $\Delta S-B\chi^2 = 4.40$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and M3 ( $\Delta S-B\chi^2 = 4.73$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) was also significant. This suggested the preference of the reciprocal model over the cross-lagged models. M4 also had the best absolute model fit. Inspecting the results of the reciprocal model, the cross-lagged path from exposure to bullying behaviour T1 to enactment of bullying behaviour T2 was significant ( $\beta =$

0.09, SE = 0.04,  $p < .05$ ). The cross-lagged effect of enactment of bullying behaviour T1 on exposure to bullying behaviour T2 was marginally significant ( $\beta = 0.12$ , SE = 0.06,  $p = .06$ ). The model explained 46% of variance in exposure to bullying behaviour and 39% of variance in enactment of bullying behaviour.

Because the effect of enactment of bullying T1 to exposure to bullying did not reach the significance threshold of .05, we additionally tested a Model 5 in which the path from exposure to enactment and enactment to exposure were constrained to be equal to test whether both paths are statistically different from each other. The results showed that in terms of the *S-B* $\Delta\chi^2$  value, Model 5 did not fit significantly worse than Model 4. Moreover, Model 5 had a better TLI and RMSEA value. In other words, these results suggest that the effect from exposure to enactment and enactment to exposure are of approximately equal strength, giving extra evidence to the reciprocity hypothesis.

*[Table 2 near here]*

### *Discussion*

The results of Study 1 seem to suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship between exposure to and enactment of bullying behaviour. That means that employees who are exposed to bullying behaviour are likely to engage in this type of behaviour later on and employees who engage in bullying behaviour are likely to subsequently become exposed to such behaviour. Importantly, the effect of enactment to exposure was marginally significant, which can probably be attributed to the low prevalence of the bullying exposure variable and thus limited variance left to be explained by our predictor. However, the additional analyses indicated that this effect is not statistically different from the effect from exposure to enactment of bullying.

## *Study 2*

In Study 2, we wanted to test whether individual problem and emotion-focused coping moderated the relationship between bullying exposure and enactment, and thus whether certain coping styles can help end the bullying reciprocity. Additionally, we wanted to explore which specific strategies are relevant in this process.

### *Participants*

For study 2, data were collected using online surveys in eight [Anonymized for peer review] organizations, three of which were private companies and five municipal organizations. This resulted in 1205 participants in total. Of those participants, 27% participated in both waves (N = 324). Given that the link to the survey was sent out to employees by the HR department of the participating organizations, we did not have the possibility to check that the list of recipients was identical in Wave 1 and 2, resulting in Wave 1 and 2 consisting of a partially different pool of participants. This may partly explain the high dropout rate. The participants had a mean age of 47 years (ranging from 20 to 70) and 20% were male. The participants were mostly highly educated: 61% had a higher degree (master, bachelor or similar), 33% had a secondary school diploma, and 6% had a primary school diploma. As in study 1, all participants were informed that their participation and data would be treated confidentially and that they were free to terminate their participation at any time.

### *Measures*

For exposure to and enactment of bullying behaviour, the same validated SNAQ measure was used as in Study 1. Again, we used the omega indicator of reliability. The omega coefficient for experience of bullying behaviour T1 was .85.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for enactment of bullying behaviour at T1 and T2 was .76 and .78 respectively. Given the dropout of participants and the limited variability of the enactment of bullying variable at T1 and T2, this variable was treated as dichotomous in the subsequent analyses. Mirroring the one-act criterion in workplace bullying research (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001), we coded this variable as follows: If an individual did not engage in any of the nine bullying behaviours, this was coded as 0. If an individual engaged in at least one type of bullying behaviour at any frequency, this was coded as 1. In our sample, 62% and 67% at Time 1 and 2 respectively indicated that they had engaged in at least one bullying behaviour.

Individual tendencies to engage in different coping strategies were assessed by 28 items from the COPE (Carver et al., 1989) by asking participants to indicate which strategies they usually adopt to deal with a stressful situation. All items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale (i.e. *almost never, rather seldom, sometimes, often or almost always*). Problem-focused coping strategies were measured with three subscales: active coping (e.g., 'I concentrate my efforts on doing something about it'), planning (e.g., 'I think hard about what steps to take'), and seeking social support for instrumental reasons (e.g., 'I try to get advice from someone about what to do'). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these subscales were .75, .79, and .89, respectively and .86 for the overall measure of problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping strategies were measured using four subscales: focusing on and venting of emotions (e.g., 'I get upset and show my emotions'), behavioural disengagement (e.g., 'I just give up trying to reach my goal'), mental disengagement (e.g., 'I turn to work or other substitute activities to take my mind off things'), and seeking social support for emotional reasons (e.g., 'I get sympathy and understanding from someone').



Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .86, .84, .69, and .92, respectively and .83 for the overall measure of emotion-focused coping.

We again controlled for age and gender of the participants. This was especially important given the overrepresentation of older female participants in our sample.

### *Procedure*

Because of the significant participant dropout over the two waves, we tested whether data were missing completely at random (MCAR; Little, 1988). We therefore performed a missing value analysis for the dependent variable, enactment of bullying T2, and age, which were the only variables in the study with missing data. The results of the analyses confirmed that the missing data pattern for enactment of bullying T2 was completely at random ( $\chi^2 = 1.09$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .30$ ). This warranted further analyses.

We again started by testing the fit of different measurement models. As we treated enactment of bullying as a dichotomous variable, no measurement model was fitted at T2. At T1, we first fitted a single latent variable model in which all T1 items of continuous variables loaded on a general latent construct (Model 1). Second, we fitted a model with two latent variables: exposure to bullying T1 and coping (Model 2). Next, we fitted a model with three latent variables: exposure to bullying, problem-focused coping, and emotion-focused coping (Model 3). Finally, we fitted a model with eight latent variables: exposure to bullying, active coping, planning, seeking social support for instrumental reasons, venting, behavioural disengagement, mental disengagement and seeking social support for emotional reasons (Model 4). Next, we tested the relationship between exposure to bullying T1 and enactment of bullying T2 controlling for enactment of bullying T1 and the moderating effect of different coping styles. In order to do this, we conducted logistic regression analyses in IBM SPSS 25.

## *Results*

*[Table 3 near here]*

Table 3 displays descriptive statistics of the study variables. Comparison of measurement models as seen in Table 4 confirmed that Model 2 fitted the data better than Model 1 ( $\chi^2 = 133.78$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and that Model 3 fitted better than Model 2 ( $\chi^2 = -329.79$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, Model 4 in which subscales of coping were entered as latent factors fitted better than the model in which subscales were combined to represent two coping latent factors, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping ( $\chi^2 = 7103.25$ ,  $df = 25$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the subsequent logistic regression analysis, we therefore entered each type of coping as a separate variable.

Results of the logistic regression analysis (Table 5) confirm a significant interaction effect between different coping styles and enactment of bullying behaviours T2, when controlling for enactment of bullying behaviours T1. Namely, we found a significant and positive interaction between Active Coping and Bullying Exposure T1 (OR = 3.95,  $p < .05$ , 95%CI(1.03, 15.14)), and Seeking Social Support for Instrumental Reasons and Bullying Exposure T1 (OR = 3.10,  $p < .05$ , 95%CI(1.26, 7.63)) on Bullying Enactment T2. Furthermore, we found a significant and negative interaction between Behavioural Disengagement and Bullying Exposure T1 (OR = 0.29,  $p < .05$ , 95%CI(0.10, 0.83)), and Seeking Social Support for Emotional Reasons and Bullying Exposure T1 (OR = 0.34,  $p < .05$ , 95%CI(0.15, 0.73)) on Bullying Enactment T2. We plotted the interaction effects in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4. Figure 1 illustrates that employees high in Active Coping have a stronger increase in bullying enactment as their exposure to bullying also increases. The same applies to employees who cope by Seeking Social Support for Instrumental Reasons (Figure 2). Figure 3 shows that employees high in Behavioural Disengagement have a

stronger decrease in their chance of engaging in bullying as their exposure to bullying increases. The same applies to employees who cope by Seeking Social Support for Emotional Reasons (Figure 4). These findings provide support for H2 and H3.

*[Table 4,5, near here]*

Certain coping styles also had significant direct effects on Bullying Enactment T2. Interestingly, the direct effect of Active Coping and Seeking Social Support for Instrumental Reasons on Bullying Enactment T2 was negative. This suggests that problem-focused coping in general has a negative association with bullying enactment, unless when occurring in combination with being highly exposed to bullying. In a similar vein, Seeking Social Support for Emotional Reasons had a positive direct effect on Bullying Enactment T2, meaning that emotion-focused coping in general has a positive association with bullying enactment, unless when occurring in combination with simultaneously being highly exposed to bullying.

*[Figures 1,2,3,4 near here]*

### *Discussion*

Results of Study 2 confirmed the boosting effect of certain problem-focused coping strategies (i.e., active coping and seeking social support for instrumental reasons) and the attenuating effect of certain emotion-focused coping strategies (i.e., behavioural disengagement and seeking social support for emotional reasons) on the relationship between exposure to and enactment of bullying. These findings suggest that employees who tend to deal with their problems hands-on, may be more inclined to respond to bullying by becoming a perpetrator of bullying behaviours themselves. Conversely, employees who tend to disengage from their problems and talk to others are less likely to respond to bullying by engaging in the same type of behaviour.

### **General Discussion**

Bullying often develops as a consequence of escalated conflicts between two or more individuals (Einarsen, 2000; Leymann, 1996; Zapf & Gross, 2001). This implies that in its early stages, bullying behaviour can be reciprocal and that employees who are victimized, sometimes engage in such behaviour themselves. However, the bullying field lacks empirical studies that investigate this reciprocal relationship over time. In this paper, we wanted to provide support for the reciprocal relationship between bullying exposure and enactment. Furthermore, we wanted to investigate one potentially relevant variable that may help stop the spiral of bullying behaviour, namely, individual coping styles. This study provides a first support of a reciprocal nature of bullying behaviour. Furthermore, our study demonstrates that people who generally tend to deal with their problems actively and instrumentally have a higher chance of becoming a perpetrator of bullying behaviour as a consequence of being victimized by someone else. Conversely, people who tend to disengage from their problems and talk to others, have a lower chance of becoming a perpetrator of bullying behaviour as a consequence of being victimized.

The finding that bullying behaviour can be reciprocal is relevant, particularly given that – despite several referrals by scholars to the interrelatedness of both exposure and enactment of workplace bullying (e.g., Linton & Power, 2013) – empirical research has tended to make a very clear and dichotomous distinction between individuals who hold the ‘victim’ and who hold the ‘perpetrator’ role. In this paper, we show that employees who are victimized sometimes engage in bullying behaviour themselves and there is an important association between these two types of behaviour. This is in line with some previous work, which has distinguished between three groups of people in workplace bullying: bullies, victims and bully/victims (e.g., Pilch & Turska, 2015, Coyne et al., 2003). These authors have

acknowledged that some people may be victims while simultaneously engaging in bullying behaviour themselves and that these people can have distinct associations with various predictive and outcome variables. However, as of now, such contributions have remained limited. Our research suggests that the field of workplace bullying could profit from an increased understanding of the people who simultaneously experience and enact bullying behaviour.

Further, in this study we found that certain emotion-focused coping styles (behaviourally disengaging and talking to others for emotional support) can be beneficial in counteracting enactment in bullying behaviour following exposure to bullying, while the reverse holds for certain problem-focused styles (actively coping or seeking instrumental support from others). This is interesting considering previous research which has considered emotion-focused coping as an exacerbator of bullying and underlined the destructive nature of such behaviour (Van den Brande et al., 2016). It is important to note, however, that this research focused on work stressors as an antecedent of bullying exposure and the role of emotion-focused coping herein. As suggested by previous research, emotion-focused coping is only dysfunctional in situations when one can exercise control over stressors. In contrast, when this is not the case, individuals can actually benefit from such strategies (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; DeGraff & Schaffer, 2008). This study underlines the importance of carefully theorizing which coping strategies can be beneficial for employees depending on the nature of work stressor under investigation.

Finally, it is relevant to consider why we found an exacerbating or buffering effect of certain coping strategies. There are two possible explanations. First, people who tend to cope with their problems actively, when exposed to negative behaviour from others, may tend to take an 'eye for an eye approach'. This requires a certain

confidence and sense of self-efficacy in being able to take on the person who is responsible for harm they are experiencing. In support, previous research has found a positive association between self-efficacy and problem-focused coping (e.g., Trouillet et al., 2009). Second, tying in with social learning (Bandura, 1977), if bullying is prevalent in a person's immediate context, employees exposed to such behaviours could shape the problem-focused coping in line with the acceptable social behaviour they derive from their own experiences with bullying; bullying others. As we had no way of assessing the probability of these two explanations, future research should explore the processes that account for the tendency of people with problem-focused coping styles to be more likely to engage in bullying behaviour following being exposed to bullying themselves.

Regarding the emotion-focused strategy of behavioural disengagement, we argue that in the context of coping, it may be beneficial not to respond to initial provocation, as ignoring such negative behaviour may reduce the chance of further escalation. This has also been supported by previous qualitative research (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Zapf & Gross, 2001). In terms of seeking emotional support from others, this could serve two functions. First, people who talk to others may find it easier to put their experiences into perspective and downregulate their emotions, reducing the chance of them acting upon their negative emotions. In support, previous research has shown that sharing emotions with others has many benefits for people's well-being and social functioning (John & Gross, 2004). Second, people who tend to talk to others about their experiences may be people who desire social approval and want to be liked by others. As such, they may abstain from engaging in bullying behaviour in order to preserve their positive social image. It may be interesting for

future studies to look into the exact processes that make employees who use emotion-focused coping strategies less likely to engage in negative behaviour themselves.

### *Limitations*

As getting organizations to participate in research on bullying is challenging and we had to rely on convenience sampling, a limitation of this study is the overrepresentation of public sector organizations in the two study samples. However, since bullying is prevalent in both sectors (e.g., Yildiz et al., 2008), we do not think that a more balanced sample would have produced significantly different results. Still, future studies should replicate our findings in more diverse samples in order to test for the generalizability of our findings.

Another limitation of our study is the low prevalence rates of our dependent variable bullying enactment, which resulted in very limited variance left to be explained by our predictor, bullying exposure. This can probably be attributed to people's tendency to answer questions regarding misconduct in a socially desirable way, resulting in low prevalence rates of enactment of bullying (Nederhof, 1985). Because of this, employees' self-reports of enactment of negative behaviour are most likely an underrepresentation of the true rates. Related to the previous, our dependent variable was highly skewed, meaning that the assumption of normality central to most statistical tests was not met. In order to account for this, in Study 1, a robust estimator was used that does not assume normal distribution of observations, and in Study 2, we treated the dependent variable as dichotomous. Yet, despite the challenges associated with this, we were able to observe meaningful effects.

Finally, in our study, we ask participants to report on their experience of and engagement in bullying behaviour in general. Because of this, it is impossible to know whether people who experienced bullying engaged in bullying towards the person

who mistreated them in the first place or whether they displaced their aggression towards an innocent third party. In the paper, we argue that both options are very plausible and can be expected to occur. However, in a future study, it would be interesting to detangle these two types of bullying behaviours and test whether coping styles produce the same effect on each type of bullying.

### ***Practical Implications***

The finding that people exposed to bullying may also engage in such behaviour themselves demonstrates the complexity of bullying interactions and the difficulty tied to resolving claims of bullying in the workplace. This underlines the need for careful assessments of bullying situations in which the dynamic nature of this behaviour is considered. Practitioners working to resolve such cases should trace back the origin of this behaviour and the underlying problems that triggered bullying, as this may provide a better starting point for uncovering potential solutions. Furthermore, the finding that certain coping styles may help reduce reciprocity of bullying behaviour is useful in training sessions in which employees are taught how to de-escalate negative interactions and avoid interpersonal aggression at work. This is not to say that employees should be taught that certain coping styles are always better. As pointed out, emotion-focused coping is sometimes associated with negative outcomes as well. However, in the context of bullying interactions in which frustration runs high and a rational approach does not provide relief, such distancing strategies may help release tension and avoid the chance of further escalation, as well as prevent people from engaging in imitation and normalization of disruptive behaviours.



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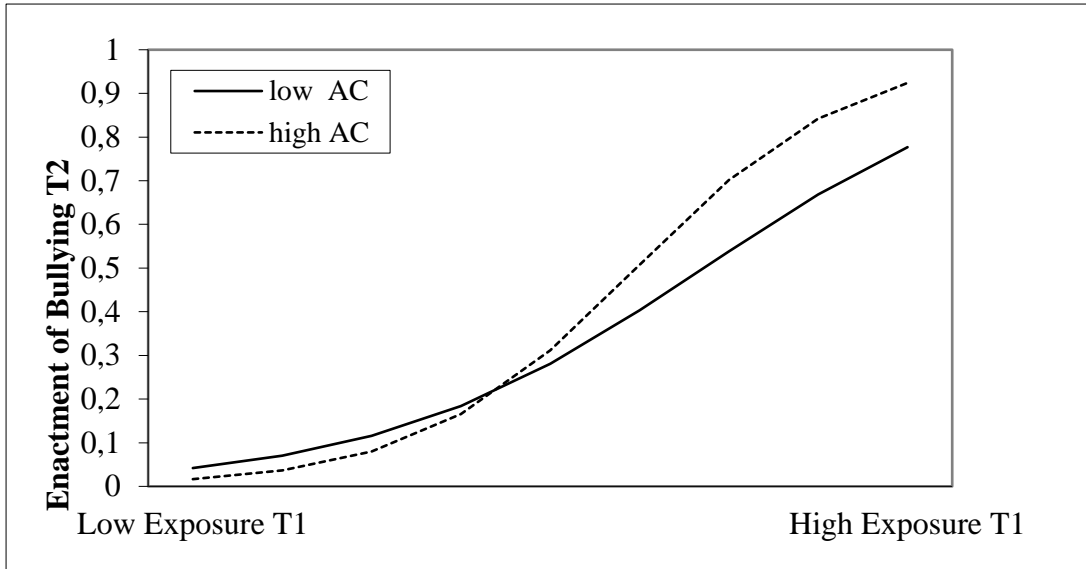
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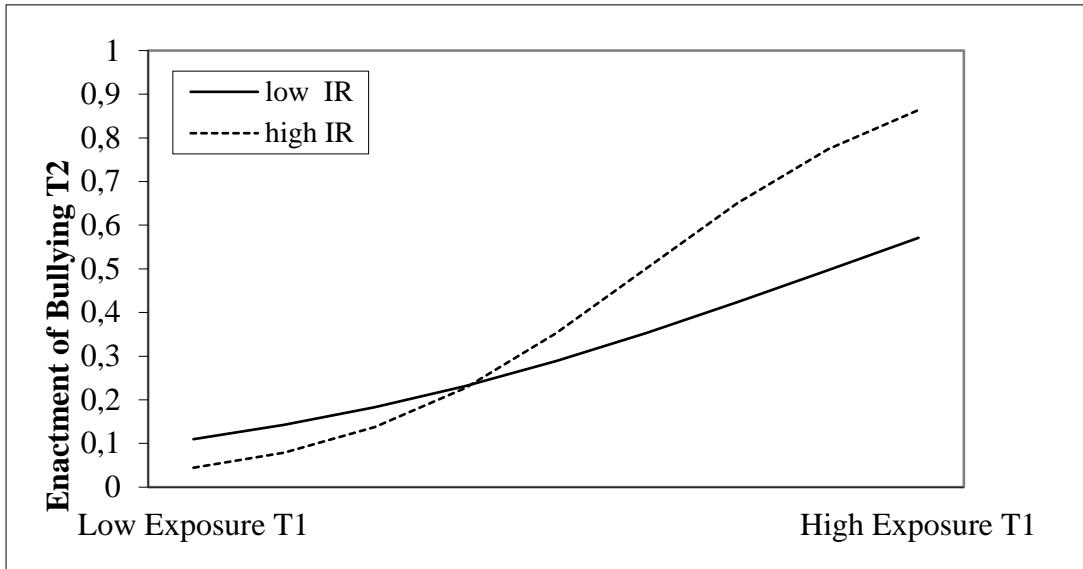
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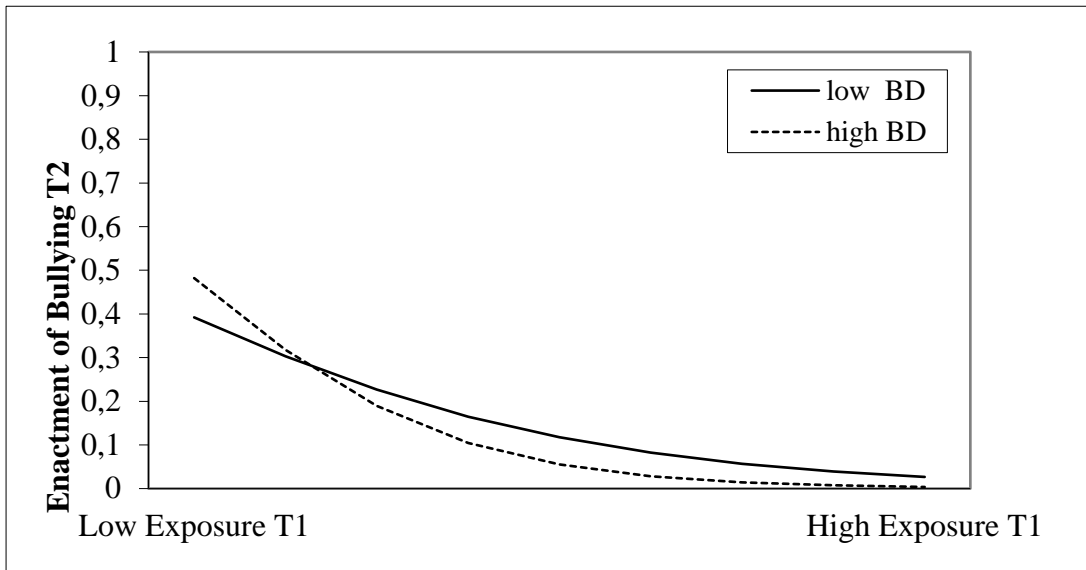


**Figure 1.** Simple slopes for the relationship between bullying exposure and bullying enactment as a function of Active Coping (AC).

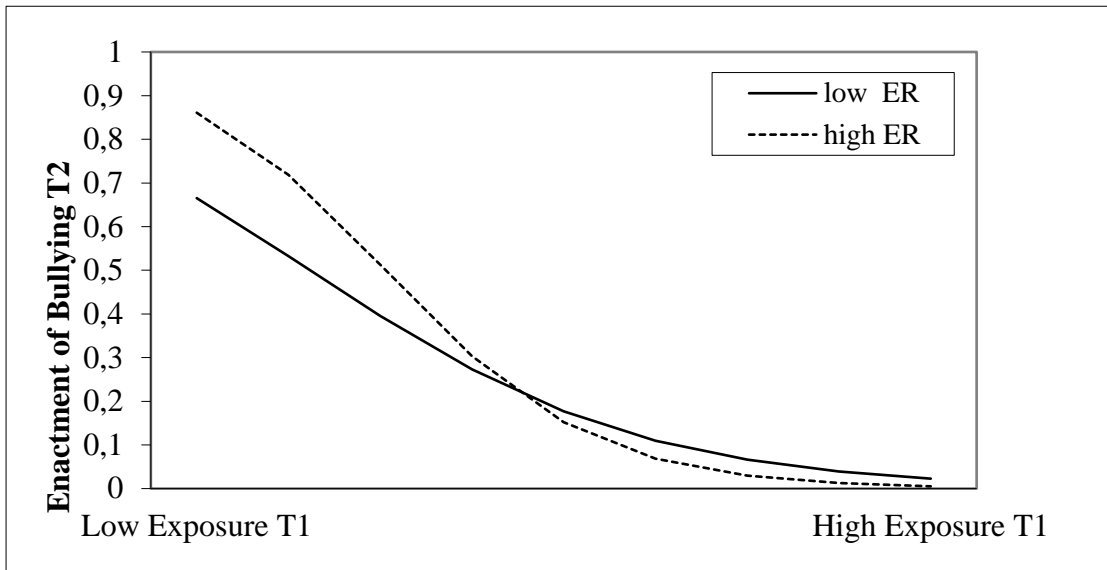




**Figure 2.** Simple slopes for the relationship between bullying exposure and bullying enactment as a function of Seeking Social Support for Instrumental Reasons (IR).



**Figure 3.** Simple slopes for the relationship between bullying exposure and bullying enactment as a function of Behavioural Disengagement (BD).



**Figure 4.** Simple slopes for the relationship between bullying exposure and bullying enactment as a function of Seeking Social Support for Emotional Reasons (ER).

Table 1.

*Descriptive statistics of Study 1 variables*

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	42.40	10.84	-					
2. Sex	1.54	0.50	-.15*	-				
3. Exposure T1	1.38	0.46	.05*	-.03	-			
4. Enactment T1	1.20	0.26	-.05*	-.03	.49**	-		
5. Exposure T2	1.39	0.46	.03	-.03	.65**	.36**	-	
6. Enactment T2	1.20	0.24	-.03	-.04	.31**	.51**	.54**	-

*Note. Pearson Correlations Coefficients are shown in the lower diagonal. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female). \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$ .*

Table 2.

*Goodness-of-fit indices of different structural models*

	$S-B\chi^2$	<i>d.f.</i>	<i>c</i>	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
Model 1	30.304	6	1.36	0.89	0.84	0.06	0.05
Model 2	21.616	5	1.29	0.93	0.88	0.04	0.05
Model 3	22.068	5	1.17	0.93	0.87	0.03	0.05
Model 4	17.130	4	1.03	0.95	0.88	0.02	0.05
Model 5*	17.302	5	1.33	0.94	0.91	0.03	0.04

*Note. c = scaling correction factor. Post-hoc test of effect equivalence.*

Table 3.

*Descriptive statistics of Study 2 variables*

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	47	10.49	-						
2. Sex	0.20	0.40	-.05	-					
3. PFC	3.59	0.60	.03	-.12**	-				
4. EFC	2.62	0.55	.10**	-.26**	.16**	-			
5. Exposure T1	1.50	0.63	.05	.01	-.04	.21**	-		
6. Enactment T1	0.62	0.49	.08**	.05	-.07*	.18**	.31**	-	
7. Enactment T2	0.68	0.47	.12*	.04	.02	.21**	.28**	.64**	-

*Note.* Pearson Correlations Coefficients are shown in the lower diagonal. Gender (0 = female, 1 = male), Enactment (0 = no enactment of bullying, 1 = enactment of bullying). PFC = Problem-focused Coping, EFC = Emotion-focused Coping. \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 4.

*Goodness-of-fit indices of different measurement models*

	<i>Log-likelihood</i>	<i>N of free parameters</i>	<i>c</i>	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
Model 1	-57361.69	111	1.42	0.25	0.21	0.17	0.14
Model 2	-55189.78	112	1.70	0.43	0.39	0.13	0.12
Model 3	-53996.37	114	1.54	0.55	0.52	0.11	0.11
Model 4	-50033.42	139	1.47	.92	.91	0.04	0.05

*Note. c = scaling correction factor.*

Table 5.

*Results of the logistic regression analysis*

	B	SE	Exp(B)	<i>p</i>	95% CI Exp(B)
Gender	0.61	0.48	1.84	.21	[0.71, 4.73]
Age	0.02	0.02	1.02	.27	[0.99, 1.05]
Bullying Enactment T1	2.84	0.38	17.12	.00	[8.14, 36.00]
Bullying Exposure T1 (BEX)	-0.87	3.40	0.42	.80	[0.00, 327.84]
Active coping (AC)	-1.94	0.98	0.14	.05	[0.02, 0.97]
Planning (PL)	1.79	0.84	5.99	.03	[1.14, 31.35]
Seeking emotional support for instrumental reasons (IR)	-1.53	0.63	0.22	.02	[0.06, 0.75]
Venting (VE)	-0.26	0.60	0.77	.66	[0.24, 2.51]
Behavioural Disengagement (BD)	1.32	0.73	3.73	.07	[0.88, 15.78]
Mental Disengagement (MD)	-0.83	0.70	0.44	.24	[0.11, 1.72]
Seeking social support for emotional reasons (ER)	1.54	0.56	4.69	.01	[1.57, 13.98]
Interaction Effects					
BEXxAC	1.37	0.68	3.95	.04	[1.03, 15.14]
BEXxPL	-0.83	0.60	0.44	.17	[0.13, 1.42]
BEXxIS	1.13	0.46	3.10	.01	[1.26, 7.63]
BEXxVE	0.56	0.43	1.74	.19	[0.76, 4.02]
BEXxBD	-1.24	0.54	0.29	.02	[0.10, 0.83]
BEXxMD	0.67	0.51	1.96	.19	[0.72, 5.32]
BEXxER	-1.09	0.40	0.34	.01	[0.15, 0.73]

Note. *Exp(B)* = Odds ratio. *CI* = Confidence Interval.