

# Conflict management climate and the prevention of workplace bullying: a multi-cohort three-wave longitudinal study

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841

Stefan Blomberg

*Department of Health, Medicine and Caring Sciences, Occupational and Environmental Medicine Centre, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden*

Ståle Valvatne Einarsen

*Department of Psychosocial Science, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway, and*

Michael Rosander

*Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to investigate whether a strong conflict management climate (CMC) over time is associated with reduced reports of workplace bullying and whether it buffers the long-term association between workplace bullying at baseline and subsequent exposure to bullying. The authors' hypothesized that CMC would moderate this association over time, even after adjusting for the activity level of the immediate superior.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study used a three-wave longitudinal design spanning three and a half years, with a four-cohort sample of 1,093 employees.

**Findings** – The results showed that the long-term association did depend on CMC, independent of the activity level of the immediate superior. In addition, the study indicated a strong direct effect of CMC on workplace bullying levels. Theoretically, these effects may be understood through facets of the conservation of resources theory.

**Practical implications** – The study highlights the importance of a strong CMC at work as a preventive measure against workplace bullying, fostering employees' trust that interpersonal conflicts will be handled promptly, effectively and fairly, reducing the likelihood of escalation into mistreatment or abusive behaviours.

**Originality/value** – The study's originality lies in its extended timeframe (three and a half years), the separate measurement of CMC between bullying assessments and the adjustment for supervisor activity level, which allows for isolating the effect of CMC. These factors made detecting the moderating effect more challenging, yet the authors' still found a significant moderating effect of CMC.

**Keywords** Workplace bullying, Harassment, Conflict management climate, Longitudinal, Active leadership, Conservation of resources theory, Prevention

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

Workplace bullying has been firmly established as a prevalent and highly detrimental social problem in contemporary working life, affecting both its targets and the wider working environment (Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2020; Nielsen *et al.*, 2024). However, exposure to workplace bullying is seldom a straightforward, either-or problem, rather, it is a gradually evolving and escalating process (Reknes *et al.*, 2021), mainly arising from existing stressors in the psychosocial working environment, such as role stressors and high work pressure (Einarsen *et al.*, 2020; Ågotnes *et al.*, 2023). Involvement in escalating conflicts has been suggested as a major pathway and mechanism through which stressors may instigate such a process, whereby targets, over a longer period, feel increasingly and severely mistreated by their superiors or peers (Einarsen, 1999). Hence, building an organizational climate in which conflicts, interpersonal tension and mistreatment are managed constructively and effectively – preferably early on and before such processes escalate out of control – is crucial for mitigating and preventing the development of workplace bullying in face of otherwise more or less stable risk factors.

In line with this, previous research has indicated that a strong conflict management climate (CMC) can create a favourable social environment where the occurrence and further escalation of workplace bullying are prevented by the organization (Hamre *et al.*, 2022). Such a climate can even alleviate its otherwise detrimental outcomes (Einarsen *et al.*, 2018; Rosander and Nielsen, 2022). It may also buffer the relationship between risk factors and target reports of exposure (Einarsen *et al.*, 2018; Hamre *et al.*, 2022; Rosander and Nielsen, 2022). In a strong CMC, there is trust in that conflicts, disagreements and interpersonal tension, if they arise, will be handled fairly and effectively. This trust is built on having proper procedures in place, as well as on expectations that managers have the will and ability to handle these situations effectively (Einarsen *et al.*, 2018).

The aim of the present study was thereby to investigate the proposition that a perceived strong CMC can prevent the onset and long-term continuation of workplace bullying processes, thereby reducing subsequent employee reports of exposure to bullying and stopping escalation into increasingly severe forms. To achieve this, we used a longitudinal design over a period of three and a half year, as the concept of workplace bullying focuses on prolonged and systematic exposure to negative behaviours over an extended period (Einarsen *et al.*, 2020). Severe bullying may take quite some time to develop, and studies have shown that it is often a long-lasting phenomenon that can persist and gradually escalate over many years (Zapf *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, we independently measured perceived CMC at a separate point during this period, that is, while a bullying process may already be underway.

To date, studies on the potential preventive role of a strong CMC in bullying processes have mainly used cross-sectional designs (e.g. Einarsen *et al.*, 2018; Zahlquist *et al.*, 2019) or prospective studies with more limited time intervals (Hamre *et al.*, 2022; Rosander and Nielsen, 2022). The present study focused on the long-term risks associated with potential future bullying scenarios and the possible preventive effect of the prevailing climate during this period. Furthermore, to thoroughly evaluate the concept of CMC, we adjusted for the influence of having an active superior – that is, a manager who does not adopt a *laissez-faire* approach by ignoring the problem altogether or avoiding necessary action. Numerous studies have shown that a passive, *laissez-faire* superior is a significant risk factor for the escalation of stressors into workplace bullying, both on a daily basis (Ågotnes *et al.*, 2021) and over the long term (Ågotnes *et al.*, 2018). Controlling for the active–passive dimension of the immediate superior is essential, as this is an important correlate and outcome of a strong CMC.

### The nature and risk factors of workplace bullying

Exposure to bullying behaviours at work may involve a range of actions. While some individuals may experience a few types of bullying behaviours frequently, others may be subjected to a wide range of behaviours over time (Rosander and Blomberg, 2019). Bullying behaviours can be active and direct, such as verbal abuse or insulting jokes, or passive and indirect, such as ignoring someone or spreading rumours behind one's back. They may also be work-related, for example, excessive criticism of one's work, or person-related, for example, criticism of one's appearance, values or beliefs (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009; Rosander *et al.*, 2024), and are often characterized by some form of social exclusion or non-inclusion (Zapf and Einarsen, 2005; Robinson *et al.*, 2012).

Bullying and harassment seem to be a gradually escalating process, where the target is increasingly victimized and stigmatized by ever more frequent and severe negative acts over a prolonged period (Einarsen *et al.*, 2020; Zapf and Gross, 2001). A study by Zapf and Gross (2001) showed that exposure to bullying was typically characterized by some kind of escalation in a majority of the investigated cases. Historically, the development of workplace bullying has been described as driven by stressors in the work design and the psychosocial work environment, as proposed by the work environment hypothesis (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994; Einarsen *et al.*, 2020). Examples of work environment deficiencies that may, over time, trigger exposure to bullying behaviours include work demands and, in particular, role stressors (Blomberg *et al.*, 2024; Reknes *et al.*, 2014), often in combination with inadequate leadership practices by the immediate superior (Ågotnes *et al.*, 2023; Blomberg, 2022; Blomberg *et al.*, 2024) and a lack of constructive conflict management (Ågotnes *et al.*, 2018; Baillien *et al.*, 2009; Zahlquist *et al.*, 2019). In addition, bullying tends to occur in workplaces that reward or at least tolerate it (Brodsky, 1976), where anti-bullying norms are absent and the CMC is inadequate.

While a wide range of research from all around the globe exist on risk factors and antecedents of workplace bullying, there is less empirical data on preventive factors and those central to interventions. Identifying preventive factors and moderators with the potential to halt the onset of the process and break this escalating chain of events and prolonged duration is, therefore, of utmost importance. One such potential mechanism, as previously introduced, is the general perceived ability of the organization to handle and manage interpersonal conflicts in a constructive manner, fostering employees' trust in this – that is, a strong CMC. Although strong proponents of this concepts exist (e.g. Einarsen and Einarsen, 2021), empirical data remains scarce. Furthermore, there is a need to separate the effect of this climate factor from the more general effect of having an active and constructive immediate superior.

### Conflict management climate

The concept of CMC was first presented in a thesis by Rivlin (2001) and concerns feelings of trust in situations where one may need to voice issues and speak out about interpersonal conflicts and disagreements, including perceived mistreatment. A fundamental aspect underlying and influencing these feelings of trust is the perceived fair and predictable treatment by one's immediate superiors in such conflict situations. In a strong CMC, employees trust that interpersonal tension and conflicts will be handled promptly, effectively and fairly, while mistreatment and abusive situations will be prevented and stopped (Rivlin, 2001; Einarsen *et al.*, 2018).

The concept of CMC bears some resemblance to another widely used concept, psychosocial safety climate (Dollard and Bakker, 2010). The latter, however, is a broader and more general and distal concept, relating to how employees perceive their organization's

policies, practices and procedures regarding the protection of the well-being, health and psychosocial safety of the organization's employees (Dollard and Bakker, 2010). Thus, CMC may be seen as a proximal and more specific subdimension of this overarching concept and, therefore, more directly related to the issues of perceived mistreatment and workplace bullying.

To theoretically understand why a CMC may have the proposed effect, conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) provides a useful framework. The COR theory was initially developed to address stress and strain processes, but has since expanded into a more comprehensive theory encompassing complex social behaviours in organizational settings. COR combines social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) with evolutionary perspectives (Hobfoll, 2001) and posits that:

[...] stress occurs (a) when central or key resources are threatened with loss, (b) when central or key resources are lost, or (c) when there is a failure to gain central or key resources following significant effort (Hobfoll, 2001: p. 104).

The COR framework also incorporates the concept of *crossover effects* (Bolger *et al.*, 1989), an interpersonal process through which positive or negative effects may spread within the surrounding social environment. Crossover effects extend COR's focus from individuals to groups and the organizational context, potentially explaining how work climates develop through three mechanisms:

- (1) direct crossover effects through empathy;
- (2) indirect crossover effects through behaviours; and
- (3) spurious crossover effects, where a group of individuals react similarly to a given stressor (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018).

Another concept within COR, associated with crossover effects, is *passageways*, which refers to "ecological conditions that either foster and nurture or limit or block resource creation and sustenance [...] among the individuals who are exposed to such environments" (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018: p. 107). In addition, the concept of *resource caravans* may be relevant for understanding the effects of a CMC, as it describes how multiple resources may be interconnected and affected simultaneously, both positively and negatively (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018).

Using the COR framework, we suggest that a CMC rests on the organizational preparedness to act and handle interpersonal conflicts and mistreatments promptly, effectively and fairly. Here, the *passageway* refers to the ecological conditions – such as policies, routines and training – that underlie the willingness to intervene in situations of escalating conflicts, thereby preventing mistreatment and escalating bullying processes. Actions taken by organizational officials and managers in conflict situations may be seen as stimuli that affect several individuals simultaneously, thus, producing a crossover effect through shared experiences and emotions within the organizational social environment. Such crossover effects may, over time, produce a shared perception of trust in the organization's willingness to act fairly and effectively when mistreatments and interpersonal conflicts arise.

In addition, the overall effect may also be understood as a *resource caravan*, which refers to the combined impact of several joint resources. The primary resource that may be protected is, of course, the prevention of conflicts from escalating, as this in itself safeguards the resource of positive and supportive interpersonal relations at work. Other important resources associated with a resource caravan may include (a) an increase in employees' sense of control in situations of interpersonal tension, (b) better access to social support and guidance from colleagues and managers in challenging interpersonal situations, (c) the

promotion of a more active coping style and (d) a heightened sense of safety among employees. Altogether, the COR provides a strong theoretical foundation for an expected preventive effect of a CMC on the onset and potential escalation of bullying processes.

The effect of a CMC has, as previously described, been investigated in association with workplace bullying in several studies. For example, [Einarsen et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrated that a perceived CMC was associated with reduced reports of bullying exposure and also moderated the association between bullying exposure and work engagement. Furthermore, [Zahlquist et al. \(2019\)](#), in a multi-level study, showed that the association between work environment stressors and workplace bullying (measured at an individual level) was buffered by a CMC (as measured at a team-level). The moderating effect of CMC has also been shown in a mediated association between workplace bullying and intention to leave, through burnout ([Najam et al., 2018](#)). A CMC has also been shown to moderate the association between fatigue and exposure to bullying, as well as having a general direct immediate and prospective effect on reported exposure to bullying ([Rosander and Nielsen, 2022](#)). [Rosander and Blomberg \(2025\)](#) showed a general mitigating effect of a CMC on subsequent bullying, particularly for non-native employees, who were identified as a higher-risk group for exposure. Finally, in a two-wave study over one year, [Hamre et al. \(2022\)](#) suggested that a CMC may break the chain of bullying escalation over time, as exposure to bullying increased only for those who reported a weak CMC. However, none of these studies have investigated the effect over a longer period (i.e. for more than one and a half years) or with a measure of CMC collected between measures of exposure to bullying. Nevertheless, the study by [Hamre et al. \(2022\)](#) is promising, as it suggests that a CMC not only has the potential to mitigate the long-term escalating negative effects of bullying but may even stop it altogether.

In the present study, we will further explore the effect of a CMC in a long-term design over a period of three and a half years. We will also highlight the organizational aspect of a CMC by controlling for the degree of activity or passivity shown by one's immediate supervisor or manager. Drawing on the COR framework, the organizational conditions that underlie the actions taken by organizational officials and managers may also by themselves serve as an important passageway. This means that the conditions such as routines, policies and trainings related to how the organization addresses incidents of mistreatments, inequality, harassment, discrimination and destructive conflicts – reflecting its willingness and commitment to prevent conflict escalation – should have an effect even after adjusting for the activity level of supervisors and managers.

Based on COR theory ([Hobfoll, 1989](#); [Hobfoll, 2001](#); [Hobfoll et al., 2018](#)) and empirical findings in the field, we hypothesize the following:

- H1. A perceived strong CMC is related to less subsequent reported exposure to workplace bullying behaviours.
- H2. A perceived CMC moderates the long-term association between reported exposure to workplace bullying behaviours at baseline and subsequent exposure three and a half years later, even after adjusting for the activity level of the immediate superior.

## Methods

### *Sample and design*

The present study was based on a longitudinal, four-cohort data sample, with three data collection waves conducted between 2015 and 2020. Data were collected from a governmental institution ( $n = 754$ ), two small municipalities ( $n = 205$  and  $59$ ) and a private industrial company ( $n = 75$ ) to secure a heterogenous sample. The three waves were collected at different times, starting between 2015 and 2017 in the different organizations,

with a slightly different time span for each cohort. The time span between the first and second waves was 18–22 months, and between the second and third waves, it was 22–25 months, giving a total time span from Waves 1–3 of 41–45 months, that is, around three and a half years. The final data collection (wave 3) was completed in 2020 for all but the governmental institution, which finished in 2018.

A Web-based work environment survey was used. In the first wave, 3,256 employees were invited, and 2,149 participated in the study (66% response rate). The response rate for the second wave was 71%, and for the third wave, 70%. In total, 1,093 employees participated in all three waves.

In the data sample, 60% were women and 40% were men. The mean age at Wave 1 was 45.99 years ( $SD = 9.62$ ), and the participants had worked an average of 7.31 years at their current workplace ( $SD = 7.01$ ). In addition, 9% held a managerial position.

The project was approved by The Regional Ethical Review Board at – Linköping University. Protocol number: 2014-282-31 – and was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study.

### Measures

Workplace bullying was measured using the Swedish version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised (NAQ–R; [Einarsen et al., 2009](#); [Rosander, Blomberg and Einarsen, 2024](#)). The NAQ–R is a behavioural experience method that assesses exposure to bullying behaviours, ranging from one-off incidents to systematic, ongoing exposure to workplace bullying over the last six months. The scale comprises 22 items describing different types of behaviours typical of bullying situations, which may develop into severe victimization if they occur regularly over an extended period, often defined as at least six months (see [Einarsen et al., 2020](#)). For each of the 22 items, respondents indicate the frequency of the exposure over the last six months on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*daily*). In the study, we used the sum of the 22 items as the score, with higher scores indicating systematic exposure to workplace bullying behaviours. The internal consistency of the NAQ–R, measured by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.83 at T1 and 0.88 at T3.

A perceived CMC was measured using three items from the psychosocial work environment questionnaire ([Rosander and Blomberg, 2018](#)). The CMC uses a seven-point Likert scale and assesses the extent to which there is trust and confidence in the organization's and one's manager's ability to handle conflicts in a fair and predictable manner. The three items are as follows:

- (1) If there is a serious conflict, I trust it will be resolved in a good way;
- (2) We are good at resolving conflicts; and
- (3) The supervisor is good at resolving conflicts.

We measured CMC in the second wave (T2), and the Cronbach's alpha of CMC at T2 was 0.90.

Active leadership (AL) was measured using four items from the PSYWEQ ([Rosander and Blomberg, 2018](#)). These items assess the extent to which a supervisor is perceived to be good at making decisions, responding quickly, grasping what is important and being available. The scale also uses a seven-point Likert scale. We used the AL to adjust for the perceived active/passive dimension of the leadership style of the immediate supervisor or manager. We tested using AL as a covariate across all three waves, but only the measure at T2 was significant, so

we present only the results for AL measured at T2, which coincide with measurement of CMC. The Cronbach's alpha for AL at T2 was 0.93.

In the analysis, we also tested gender and age as covariates, as both may affect the levels of reported exposure to bullying behaviours (Zapf *et al.*, 2020). However, only age was significant, so gender was excluded as a covariate in the final analysis.

### *Attrition analysis*

A total of 2,069 individuals who completed the first questionnaire at T1 dropped out, meaning they did not participate in all three waves of the survey. To ensure that attrition was not systematic, a MANOVA was conducted to compare their responses on the study variables – including workplace bullying, CMC, AL and age – with those who continued to participate at both subsequent waves (T2 and T3). The overall results showed a significant difference between the groups, Pillai's Trace = 0.01,  $F(4, 3094) = 5.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.007$ . Examining the individual variables, the only significant differences were in age, where those who dropped out were younger ( $M = 44.69$ ,  $SD = 11.97$ ) than those who remained ( $M = 45.91$ ,  $SD = 9.63$ ),  $F(1, 3097) = 8.12$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.003$ , and in exposure to bullying behaviours, where those who dropped out reported higher exposure ( $M = 26.06$ ,  $SD = 6.01$ ) than those who remained ( $M = 25.38$ ,  $SD = 4.67$ ),  $F(1, 3097) = 10.18$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.003$ . However, for both the overall analysis and the individual variables, the effect sizes were very small. The levels of the other two variables were essentially identical (a mean difference of 0.01 for CMC and 0.09 for AL). We also compared the proportion of men and women among the dropouts and found no significant difference,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.22$ ,  $p = 0.269$  (66% of men and 68% of women dropped out). The conclusion is that although some differences were found, they were very small and do not indicate that the results were affected by a systematic attrition – more likely an effect of a large data sample.

### *Statistical analyses*

For the analyses, IBM SPSS 29 for Mac was used. To investigate the hypotheses, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis. We measured workplace bullying at T1 and T3, and the moderator, CMC, at T2. This approach ensured that we captured perceptions of the CMC during the potential escalation process and the onset of new bullying cases. By assessing CMC in a separate wave, we also reduced the risk of inflated correlations between moderator, the predictor and the outcome variable. Keeping such correlations as low as possible is recommended by Hayes (2018), as it strengthens causal inferences and enhances the clarity of moderation effects. All the analyses were conducted at an individual perceptual level due to inconsistencies in how work groups were defined and used in the data.

## **Results**

The means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of the study variables are presented in Table 1. The correlation between the mediator and the outcome was  $-0.35$ , which should not pose a problem for the moderation analysis (McClelland *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, there was a significant association between exposure to bullying behaviours at baseline and the outcome three and a half years later ( $r = 0.52$ ), indicating that exposure to bullying behaviours is a long-term process.

We conducted a hierarchical moderation analysis to test the hypotheses, with exposure to bullying behaviours at T1 predicting exposure at T3 (approximately three and a half years later), and CMC at T2 as a moderator. Firstly, we examined the simple effect of the CMC on subsequent bullying, controlling for baseline exposure to bullying behaviours. Next, we added the interaction. Finally, we adjusted for AL. The results showed a significant

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the study variables

| Variables                           | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1      | 2        | 3        | 4       |
|-------------------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|--------|----------|----------|---------|
| 1. Age                              | 1,093    | 45.99    | 9.62      |        |          |          |         |
| 2. Workplace bullying (T1)          | 1,061    | 25.47    | 4.69      | −0.04  |          |          |         |
| 3. Workplace bullying (T3)          | 1,078    | 25.46    | 5.43      | −0.07* | 0.52***  |          |         |
| 4. Conflict management climate (T2) | 1,042    | 4.92     | 1.60      | 0.03   | −0.34*** | −0.35*** |         |
| 5. Active leadership (T2)           | 1,069    | 5.40     | 1.48      | −0.02  | −0.29*** | −0.29*** | 0.64*** |

**Note(s):** \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

interaction between workplace bullying at T1 and CMC at T2,  $b = -0.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (see Table 2). This interaction explained an additional 2.6% of the variance in workplace bullying at T3,  $F(1, 975) = 38.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and is visualized in Figure 1. The results supported the hypotheses: Firstly, CMC was associated with lower subsequent exposure to bullying behaviours. Secondly, the association between exposure to workplace bullying behaviours at baseline and at follow-up depended on the level of CMC, even when adjusting for the supervisor's activity level. However, even at very high levels of CMC, workplace bullying at T1 still had a lingering effect on workplace bullying at T3, indicating the long-term duration and potential escalation involved in workplace bullying.

**Discussion**

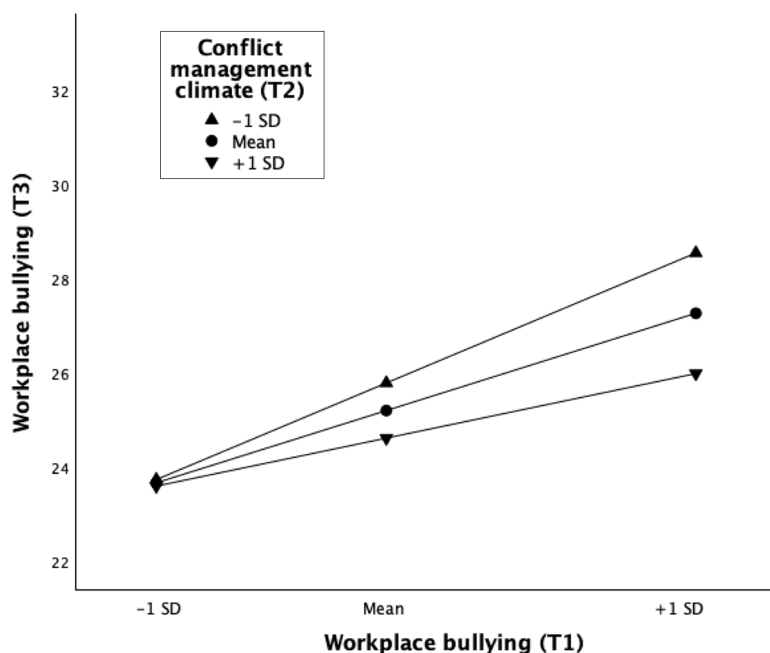
The main aim of the present study was to examine the moderating effect of a perceived CMC on the long-term association between reported exposure to workplace bullying behaviours at baseline and subsequent exposure three and a half years later, while adjusting for the activity level of one's immediate superior. The results showed that this association did indeed depend on CMC,

**Table 2.** Hierarchical regression analysis predicting workplace bullying (T3)

| Variables                             | <i>b</i> | <i>SE b</i> | $\beta$ | 95% CI <i>b</i> | <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> | $\Delta R^2$ |
|---------------------------------------|----------|-------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| <i>Step 1</i>                         |          |             |         |                 | 0.325***              |              |
| Workplace bullying (T1)               | 0.54***  | 0.03        | 0.48    | [0.48, 0.60]    |                       |              |
| Conflict management climate (T2)      | −0.60*** | 0.09        | −0.18   | [−0.78, −0.43]  |                       |              |
| Age                                   | −0.03*   | 0.01        | −0.06   | [−0.06, −0.00]  |                       |              |
| <i>Step 2</i>                         |          |             |         |                 | 0.350***              | 0.026***     |
| Workplace bullying (NAQ–R, T1)        | 0.46***  | 0.03        | 0.41    | [0.40, 0.53]    |                       |              |
| Conflict management climate (CMC, T2) | −0.54*** | 0.09        | −0.17   | [−0.72, −0.37]  |                       |              |
| Age                                   | −0.03*   | 0.01        | −0.06   | [−0.06, −0.00]  |                       |              |
| NAQ–R (T1) × CMC (T2)                 | −0.10*** | 0.02        | −0.18   | [−0.13; −0.07]  |                       |              |
| <i>Step 3</i>                         |          |             |         |                 | 0.354***              | 0.004*       |
| Workplace bullying (NAQ–R, T1)        | 0.46***  | 0.03        | 0.40    | [0.39, 0.52]    |                       |              |
| Conflict management climate (CMC, T2) | −0.38*** | 0.11        | −0.12   | [−0.60, −0.16]  |                       |              |
| Age                                   | −0.03*   | 0.01        | −0.06   | [−0.06, −0.00]  |                       |              |
| NAQ–R (T1) × CMC (T2)                 | −0.10*** | 0.02        | −0.18   | [−0.13, −0.07]  |                       |              |
| Active leadership (T2)                | −0.29*   | 0.12        | −0.08   | [−0.52; −0.06]  |                       |              |

**Note(s):** The predictor and moderator were mean centred; \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Source(s):** Authors' own work



**Figure 1.** The interaction between bullying at baseline (T1) and follow-up (T3) with regard to conflict management climate (T2) plotted at -1 SD, mean, and +1 SD (mean-centred), adjusted for active leadership (T2)

Source(s): Authors own work

independent of the activity level of the immediate supervisor or manager (*H2*). Furthermore, a strong CMC was associated with lower levels of reported exposure over time, supporting *H1*.

The definition of workplace bullying includes the idea that the phenomenon develops and escalates over time, with the potential to be long-lasting (Einarsen *et al.*, 2020), as has been demonstrated in several studies (Zapf *et al.*, 2020). Zapf and colleagues reported results from 18 studies examining the duration of bullying, with an average of 2.7 years, ranging from 1 to 5 years. The results of the present study align with these estimates, showing that the phenomenon can indeed be prolonged. The bullying process, however, is not always linear and may follow different paths, including periods of reduced exposure (Zapf and Gross, 2001). This could also have been the case for some of the targets in the present study. Nevertheless, our findings demonstrated that, despite potential fluctuations, there remained an association between the baseline and the measurement three and a half years later, suggesting that, although not always at peak intensity, the process continues to gradually wear down its targets, who still experience some level of bullying after such an extended period.

Early, constructive and active conflict interventions in an organization may counteract a major pathway and mechanism of workplace bullying – that is, escalation from and through interpersonal tensions, aggression and conflicts (Einarsen, 1999). A recent study by Hamre *et al.* (2022) showed that a strong CMC has the potential to stop the escalation of bullying altogether. The results of the present study are consistent with Hamre *et al.*'s findings but did not show as strong a moderating effect. However, the present study differs from Hamre *et al.*

in several key respects. Firstly, it was conducted over a longer time period (three and a half years versus one year). Secondly, CMC was measured separately, between the two workplace bullying assessments, making it a measure of the climate during the long escalation period, which also significantly reduced the correlation between the moderator and outcome variables. Thirdly, and most importantly, we adjusted for the activity level of the immediate supervisor to isolate the general climate effect, thus, examining the climate independently of the supervisor's general portrayal of active or passive behaviour. These three differences made the design of the present study more challenging when testing for a moderating effect of CMC, yet the effect was significant and clearly present in the results.

### **Conflict management climate and active leadership**

Research has highlighted the importance of *laissez-faire* leadership as a strong moderator that increases the negative effects of organizational risk factors, such as involvement in interpersonal conflicts and role conflict, on workplace bullying (e.g. Ågotnes *et al.*, 2018; Ågotnes *et al.*, 2023). Given that a strong CMC conceptually implies that employees expect actions in the organization to prevent the escalation of interpersonal conflicts and to handle and resolve mistreatment and abusive behaviours effectively in both early and later stages (Rivlin, 2001; Zahlquist *et al.*, 2019), it could be argued that a strong CMC largely represents the opposite of *laissez-faire* leadership.

In the present study, we saw a rather strong correlation between the active/passive dimension of leadership and the CMC ( $r = 0.64$ ). This underscores the importance of the role active/passive leadership may have in shaping or enacting a strong CMC. However, even when adjusting for the active/passive leadership of the immediate supervisor or manager, the moderating effect of CMC remained significant. This suggests that a strong CMC involves more than just having an active immediate supervisor or manager.

According to Rivlin (2001), a CMC is characterized by employees' trust in the organization's ability to manage escalating interpersonal conflicts and to address concerns, such as perceived mistreatment. A fundamental factor underlying this trust is the perception that the organization consistently provides fair, swift and predictable interventions in case of interpersonal conflicts and workplace bullying. A basic assumption in bullying research is that workplace bullying often emerges from escalating interpersonal conflicts, particularly when these conflicts are poorly managed in the organization. Einarsen and colleagues (2018) operationalized CMC as the perception that the organization has reasonable policies and procedures for handling interpersonal conflicts and raising concerns, that managers are competent in managing such conflicts, and that employees are aware of how and where to voice their complaints and concerns. Such fair and predictable treatment seems to involve much more than simply working under a generally active supervisor; it also encompasses policies, trainings, procedures, established values and other factors relevant to the related but more general and distal concept of psychosocial safety climate (Dollard and Bakker, 2010).

In addition to the moderating effect of CMC, adjusted for the active/passive leadership practices of the immediate supervisor or manager, there was also a clear and significant direct negative effect on the subsequent levels of workplace bullying. This indicates that a strong CMC has a substantial general long-term impact in reducing the risk of exposure to workplace bullying. This finding suggests a broader positive effect, consistent with other reports highlighting the beneficial impact of CMC – for example, its effect on work engagement (Einarsen *et al.*, 2018), burnout and intention to leave (Najam *et al.*, 2018), employee silence (Krishna *et al.*, 2024) and its mitigating effects on both organizational (Zahlquist *et al.*, 2019) and individual (Rosander and Blomberg, 2025) risk factors for workplace bullying.

### Understanding the effects of conflict management climate

Why a strong CMC may have such a negative impact on the long-term bullying-to-bullying association, as well as a direct lowering effect on the levels of reported workplace bullying, may be understood through theories of interpersonal conflicts and conflict escalation and their association with workplace bullying (see also [Baillien et al., 2009](#)). The connection between interpersonal conflicts and workplace bullying has been thoroughly and extensively explored by, for example, [Baillien and colleagues \(2016\)](#), as well as by [Hauge and colleagues \(2007\)](#). Poorly managed or ignored interpersonal conflicts can sometimes develop into workplace bullying, particularly when repeated attacks occur over a sustained period and when there is a power imbalance between the parties involved. A strong CMC, reflecting employees' perceptions that conflicts are handled swiftly, fairly and effectively, is likely connected to well-functioning routines, policies and practices addressing interpersonal conflicts and mistreatment, as well as similar issues, and may prevent isolated conflict episodes from escalating into more severe bullying ([Einarsen et al., 2018](#)).

The observed effect of a CMC may also be understood through the concept of resource caravans, as outlined in COR theory ([Hobfoll, 1989](#); [Hobfoll, 2001](#); [Hobfoll et al., 2018](#)), which describes how interconnected resources can produce a combined effect. A strong CMC suggests that employees perceive the organization and its managers as both willing and obligated to intervene fairly in conflict situations. According to the results, even after accounting for the activity level of the managers, CMC still has a strong effect. This effect may not only be due to the prevention of conflict escalation but may also be related to an increase in important employee resources, further strengthening the link to COR theory. Regardless of managerial activity, the organizational conditions that underpin the organization's willingness and obligation to intervene in conflict situations may enhance employee resources by (a) increasing employees' sense of control in situations involving interpersonal tensions, (b) providing better access to social support and guidance from colleagues and managers in difficult interpersonal situations, (c) promoting a more active coping style and (d) fostering a sense of psychological safety among employees. Altogether, a strong CMC may function as a resource caravan, comprising all these resources, which together also produce effects that may be referred to as crossover effects ([Bolger et al., 1989](#)), where the positive impact of combined resources is transferred within the organizational context. In this way, the behaviours of potential perpetrators-to-be may also be affected. The COR theory further introduces the concept of passageways ([Hobfoll et al., 2018](#)), which is also relevant to the present study. Passageways encompass the organizational conditions – in this case, the previously mentioned routines, policies and formal practices for handling interpersonal conflicts (such as harassment or equal treatment policies) – that help foster and sustain interconnected resources, a key aspect of resource caravans. Drawing on these aspects of the COR theory, it is reasonable to conclude that a strong CMC weakens the long-term bullying-to-bullying association. It is also reasonable to expect that a strong CMC will directly reduce levels of reported workplace bullying.

### Practical implications

The study highlights the importance of a strong CMC as a preventive measure against workplace bullying. A strong CMC creates an environment where employees trust that interpersonal conflicts will be handled promptly, effectively and fairly, reducing the likelihood of escalation into mistreatment or abusive behaviours. To achieve this, organizations must develop and implement procedures that demonstrate their commitment to constructive conflict resolution. Such procedures not only build trust among employees but are also likely to have a lasting impact on reducing workplace bullying (see also

Einarsen *et al.*, 2017). Specific examples of relevant HR policies include formal anti-harassment and anti-bullying policies, structured conflict resolution training for managers and employees, and clear mediation and dispute resolution procedures (Einarsen *et al.*, 2019). In addition, organizations can introduce clear and accessible procedures for bystanders, ensuring that employees know how to act when they observe destructive conflicts or actual mistreatment (see Rosander and Nielsen, 2023). Furthermore, holding managers accountable for fostering a constructive CMC – through performance evaluations, leadership training and regular workplace climate assessments – can help move conflict management from being perceived as a ‘soft’ issue to a concrete organizational priority that everyone must actively engage with.

However, a strong CMC is not a singular solution to the issue of workplace bullying. There remains a lingering long-term association between baseline workplace bullying and self-reported levels of bullying behaviours three and a half years later, even when CMC is strong. This suggests that additional risk factors, particularly in combination, contribute to workplace bullying, for example, a defective working environment characterized by role stress and high work pressure (Einarsen *et al.*, 2020; Ågotnes *et al.*, 2023), as well as *laissez-faire* leadership (Ågotnes *et al.*, 2021). Addressing workplace bullying effectively may require a broad approach that combines improvements of the working environment and active, supportive leadership practices, alongside procedures that ensure the fair, prompt and effective management of interpersonal conflicts.

The impact of such preventive measures may extend beyond individuals and organizations, potentially influencing society at large. For instance, improved employee well-being, lower levels of sick leave and reduced occurrence of litigation processes could positively affect the national economy.

### Strengths and limitations

The longitudinal design, with a time lag of about three and a half years and three data collection waves, is a notable strength of the present study, as it allows for the exploration of possible causal links. Furthermore, assessing the moderator in a separate data collection wave represents an important methodological improvement over previous research (e.g. Hamre *et al.*, 2022), where cross-sectional or same-wave designs may have introduced artificial inflation of associations. By strongly reducing the correlations between the moderator, the predictor and the outcome variable, this approach provides a clearer test of moderation effects and reduces concerns related to common method variance. This methodological refinement follows best practices recommended by Hayes (2018) and contributes to a more robust understanding of how CMC influences workplace bullying over time.

Using four cohorts representing different sectors of the labour market, along with a relatively large and diverse data sample, is another notable strength. However, despite the size and heterogeneity of the data set, it is not a probability sample of the workforce and is therefore not representative. In addition, the data were collected exclusively in Sweden, which may limit the general and international applicability of the findings, as the Swedish (or Scandinavian) labour market may be considered atypical from an international perspective. This is due to its strong focus on equality, low power distance (non-hierarchical structures) and high levels of unionization. Furthermore, three of the four participating organizations in the study are public organizations which may make them particularly representative of “Swedish” characteristics. Overall, this suggests that the findings from the study require replication in other countries and cultural settings.

A limitation of the study is that we did not assess CMC at an aggregated group level. Work climates are typically conceptualized as group phenomena, based on shared

perceptions of the actual work climate (Kuenzi and Schminke, 2009). However, in the present study, the grouping variable was coded inconsistently, making a group-level interpretation uncertain. As a result, the CMC was analysed at an individual perceptual level, which is not uncommon when investigating work climates (Einarsen *et al.*, 2018; Kuenzi and Schminke, 2009). However, analysing CMC at a group level would have been preferable, as it could have provided insights into group dynamics that conceptually differ from an individualistic approach (see also Zahlquist *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the measure was operationalized as the employees' trust that conflicts, if they arise, will be handled in an effective manner. This may imply that there are sensible policies and procedures for managing interpersonal conflicts and addressing concerns, as highlighted by Einarsen and colleagues (2018); however, other aspects of the organization may also play a part. It would also have been preferable to have included a measure of the actual organizational policies in the study – for example, policies on harassment, discrimination, equal treatment and dignity at work – as this might have provided a more nuanced understanding of the effects of a CMC (see also Einarsen *et al.*, 2017; Einarsen *et al.*, 2019).

It must be noted that the correlation between the measure of CMC and the measure of active leadership (AL), which was used as a covariate to adjust for leadership activity and to isolate the organizational aspects of the CMC, was rather strong ( $r = 0.64$ ). This may suggest that the activity level of leadership has considerable influence on the CMC or vice versa. However, 59% of the variation in the CMC measure remained after the adjustment, indicating that the climate factor is not solely dependent on AL.

Self-reported data is the most commonly used method in workplace bullying research (Nielsen *et al.*, 2020), as is the case in the present study. Such data captures subjective experiences central to understanding the phenomenon; however, it also entails a risk of social desirability bias and subjective interpretations (Donaldson and Grant-Vallone, 2002), which poses a challenge when interpreting findings. For example, Rosander and Nielsen (2024) showed that victims of bullying often perceive their working environment somewhat differently than their colleagues within the same work group. Another common critique of self-reported data is the risk of common method bias (Donaldson and Grant-Vallone, 2002). However, using a longitudinal sample with three different data collection waves over a period of about three and a half year should alleviate this risk (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Workplace bullying has a strong subjective component, and it is difficult to assess by means of more objective methods (Nielsen *et al.*, 2020). Self-reports are essential for capturing subjective experiences, such as how individuals perceive and interpret their own situations, which are central to understanding workplace bullying. These limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

## Conclusions

In the present longitudinal study, we showed that a CMC has the potential to reduce self-reported exposure to bullying behaviours over a period of three and a half years and to weaken the stability and otherwise proposed escalation process involved in workplace bullying. This effect was present even when adjusting for the activity level of the immediate supervisor/manager, highlighting that a CMC is an organizational issue, not solely about AL.

The results underscore the importance of organizations building a strong and trustworthy foundation of procedures that reflect their commitment and ability to handle disagreements and interpersonal conflicts effectively. The trust that such procedures can foster – creating a belief among employees that conflicts will be handled promptly, fairly and effectively, and that mistreatment and abusive situations will be prevented and addressed – seems to have a crucial and strong long-term effect in preventing and reducing bullying at work.

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**Corresponding author**

Michael Rosander can be contacted at: [michael.rosander@liu.se](mailto:michael.rosander@liu.se)