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**Perceptions of Workplace Bullying in New Zealand:
A Communication-Centred Analysis**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

Workplace bullying has long been conceptualised as a behavioural and psychological phenomenon, yet persistent definitional ambiguity underscores the importance of approaching it through a communication lens. This thesis, presented by publication, reconceptualises workplace bullying as an interpretive and communicative process situated within the Aotearoa New Zealand context. It comprises three published or publishable studies: (1) a qualitative analysis of managers' sensemaking of "disputed acts" of bullying, (2) a quantitative study situating bullying within organisational dissent and conflict processes, and (3) a quantitative trait-state analysis testing predictors of bullying perceptions. Together, these studies advance theoretical, methodological, and practical understandings of workplace bullying. The thesis demonstrates that bullying is socially constructed, communicatively enacted, and culturally contingent, with significant implications for organisational practice and workplace policy.

The research demonstrates that the same behaviours may be interpreted differently depending on organisational roles, communicative practices, and cultural expectations. The first study shows how managers distinguish between bullying and legitimate managerial action, revealing the interpretive labour undertaken in defining contested behaviours. The second study situates bullying within conflict processes, demonstrating that dissent and voice behaviours can be positively or negatively associated with bullying perceptions. The third study introduces a novel trait-state framework, illustrating how communication predispositions and situational dynamics interact to predict perceptions of bullying. Together, these studies illustrate that bullying cannot be reduced to a checklist of behaviours but must be understood as relational, communicative, and context dependent.

The thesis makes three principal contributions. *Theoretically*, it advances bullying research by integrating communication and conflict perspectives, reframing bullying as perception-driven and interactional. *Methodologically*, it demonstrates the limits of widely used measures such as the NAQ-R in the Aotearoa New Zealand context and introduces the trait-state framework as a new way to investigate bullying perceptions. *Practically*, it offers guidance for managers and organisations, by showing that effective communication training, policies acknowledging interpretive ambiguity, and cultural sensitivity are crucial to managing bullying. By situating bullying within a communication framework and grounding it in Aotearoa New Zealand, the thesis provides insights that are both locally relevant and internationally significant.

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Glossary

Alofa	Samoan term for love or compassion (see fa'aaloalo)
Aotearoa	The Māori name commonly utilised to describe New Zealand
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme
ECA	Employment Contracts Act 1991
ERA	Employment Relations Act 2000
Fa'aaloalo	Samoan noun meaning respect. Evokes a meaning based on the closeness of social relationships inherently built on the reciprocation of giving and receiving respect, service, care and love (Alofa).
HSWA	Health and Safety at Work Act 2015
ICAA	Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1894
LIPT	Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror
Manaakitanga	Māori value denoting care, respect, and hospitality.
Mobbing	Early Scandinavian research term for systematic psychological harassment at work
NAQ-R	Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised, a behavioural checklist measuring exposure to workplace bullying
NZ	New Zealand
OD	Organisational Development
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Pasifica	Describing peoples of Pacific Island descent. Also sometimes spelt Pasifika.
Pākehā	New Zealanders of non-Māori and normally European descent
PCBU	Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (a legal term in the HSWA)
Qualtrics	An online participant-recruitment system used for research surveys
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling, a multivariate statistical analysis technique
Tall Poppy Syndrome	New Zealand idiom describing the tendency to criticise or undermine those perceived as successful or ambitious. References the likelihood that the tallest poppy in a field will be plucked and the need to remain the same height as others
Whakapapa	Māori word evoking the meaning of layers and stacks, usually used as a reference to genealogical lineage and descent. Evokes connections interconnectedness between peoples in the present day and ancestors. Implies standing, leadership, status, kinship and rights

List of Original Articles:

Tootell, B., Croucher, S., Cullinane, J., & Ashwell, D. (2025). Exploring disputed acts of bullying: A study of manager perceptions in New Zealand exploring disputed acts of bullying in New Zealand. *Journal of Management & Organization*.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Workplace bullying is now apparently a ubiquitous part of organisational life, with 97% of respondents in one study saying they had been exposed to general bullying in the past 5 years (Fox & Stallworth, 2010). “Despite this ubiquity, the definition of bullying is often unclear or contested” (West & Turner, 2018, p.3). Researchers of bullying perhaps need to conceptually return to the most basic principles of interpersonal communication, revisiting the idea that ‘messages’ such as bullying, are not merely received and decoded by a single respondent or target of the behaviour, but are instead subject to the risk of complications in encoding, decoding, message channel influences, alongside the many various types of noise that can affect both the delivery and receipt of messages.

Further, researchers may need to explore core interpersonal communication theory, which emphasises that meaning is co-constructed rather than simply transmitted. Bullying is not a fixed message delivered by a perpetrator, but a communicative event shaped by interaction, interpretation, and contextual cues. Framing bullying explicitly as a communication episode helps: senders, channels, receivers, and noise are integral to how bullying is enacted and interpreted, and these model elements are especially apt when designing interventions. (West & Turner, 2018).

In addition, other communication concepts may give insight into the bullying phenomenon, and therefore, this research seeks specifically to understand the influence that dissent practices may have in the decoding of ‘bullying’ incidences in the workplace. This interest is twofold. Prior research (e.g. Garner, 2013) has suggested that where bullying occurs dissent is suppressed, but also the corollary that labelling an activity ‘incorrectly’ as bullying, has been used to intentionally halt dissent (also see Akella, 2016; Ferris et al., 2007). Recent communication scholarship shows workplace power is enacted discursively; dominant-group communicative practices can reproduce or disrupt bullying, which helps explain why dissent may be muted or reframed in bullying climates.

This research therefore contributes to the broader field by attempting to further untangle the conceptual morass that is bullying. While this research was initially motivated by observing how accusations of bullying can arise across multiple domains of social life, the present thesis is concerned exclusively with adult workplace bullying. Early reflections on how the term “bullying” is invoked in non-work contexts highlighted the possibility that individuals may differ in their interpretations of what constitutes bullying behaviour. However, childhood bullying, family relationships, and social interactions outside of employment settings represent distinct areas of scholarship with their own theoretical traditions, developmental considerations, and intervention approaches. References to these broader experiences therefore serve only as background motivation for the research

programme and should not be interpreted as suggesting equivalence between childhood bullying and workplace bullying. The focus of this thesis is firmly situated within adult organisational contexts and seeks to understand how employees, managers, and workplace actors interpret, communicate about, and respond to behaviours perceived as workplace bullying.

1.2 Context

Both in the Aotearoa New Zealand context and globally, bullying remains a major concern for organisations and researchers alike (Bentley et al., 2009a; 2009b; 2012; Blackwood et al., 2017; Catley et al., 2013; 2017; Chambers et al., 2018; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2013; 2014; Forsyth et al., 2021; MBIE, 2020; WorkSafe 2017). Although bullying has attracted attention across multiple settings, including schools and community contexts, the focus of this thesis is adult workplace bullying. Consequently, the prevalence statistics and contextual factors discussed throughout the remainder of this chapter relate specifically to organisational settings and working populations in Aotearoa New Zealand. A Statistics New Zealand (2019) survey also found that approximately one in 10 workers reported experiencing harassment, discrimination or bullying in the past 12 months (also see Diversity Works 2016a; 2016b; 2017a; 2017b; 2018; EEO Trust, 2014a; 2014b; 2015a; 2015b). Marlow et al., (2021, p. 31) speculate these ‘moderately high’ experiences of bullying reflect “Aotearoa New Zealand’s laissez-faire attitude” towards workplace bullying. And yet, such findings appear inconsistent with Aotearoa New Zealand’s frequently invoked image as an egalitarian and relaxed society. It is therefore both important and timely to consider what may be occurring ‘behind the scenes’ of reported bullying experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand workplaces, and to consider how different respondents may differently interpret, understand and then, enact communication. Aotearoa New Zealand also provides an instructive case in how bullying and harassment are treated under employment legislation - as key considerations in providing and maintaining safe and healthy workplaces under workplace safety legislation and employment law (Cullinane et al., 2019). While bullying and harassment are often discussed together in the international literature, they are treated differently across legal jurisdictions and should not necessarily be regarded as interchangeable concepts.

The concept of bullying itself remains both poorly defined (e.g. Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018), and the research surrounding bullying in the Aotearoa New Zealand context has largely focused on qualitative and anecdotal evidence. Where quantitative research studies exist, the literature has yet to yield definitive evidence regarding validity in the local context. One widely used instrument, the *Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised* (NAQ-R) (Appendix 2) was designed in Norway but it was tested in the U.S. and European context. Although it has now been translated and validated in a number of different languages, only limited validation has occurred in other English-speaking countries - perhaps reflecting an assumption that English conveys consistent meanings across different English-speaking contexts. This assumption is particularly problematic in Aotearoa New Zealand, which has recently experienced consistently high levels of migration, that has led to one of the most

diverse workforces in the world, with the accompanying communication challenges that come alongside cultural and language differences.

Further ambiguity arises from the lack of clarity and consistency in how bullying is defined and measured (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). A prevailing view within parts of the literature holds that if a 'target' defines an interaction as bullying, then this self-assessment constitutes a sufficient basis on which to classify the event to have been a bullying event (Way et al., 2013). This subjectivist stance contributes to wide variation in reported rates of bullying being ambiguous at best, with rates being reported from under three percent in some studies to over 37 percent in other contexts, depending on the methodological approach used (Hauge et al., 2009).

1.3 Research Aim

The aim of this thesis is to expand upon behaviour-list and psychology-dominant approaches to workplace bullying by foregrounding the communicative processes through which bullying is constructed, disputed, and normalised in organisational life. By analysing the interaction of perception, dissent, power, and communication style in Aotearoa New Zealand workplaces, the research seeks to explain why the same behaviour may be labelled as bullying, conflict, or legitimate management, and to provide a more analytically robust foundation for future scholarship and organisational intervention.

1.4 Research Programme

This thesis adopts a thesis-by-publication format (see Section 1.6), enabling the development of a coherent body of interrelated studies that cumulatively advance a communication-centred understanding of workplace bullying within the Aotearoa New Zealand context. Although workplace bullying has been extensively examined as a behavioural and psychological phenomenon, persistent definitional ambiguity and divergent organisational interpretations highlight the need for approaches and perspectives that foreground communication processes, meaning making and perception. The three studies presented in this thesis collectively address this gap by analysing how bullying is constructed through interaction; perceived or interpreted within conflict and dissent processes; and sustained through communication practices, and organisational culture. Together they form a progressive research programme linking interpretive, conflictual, and trait-state analyses of bullying as a communicative phenomenon.

1.5 Contribution

This section considers the significance of this research and its contribution to new knowledge within both scholarly and applied domains. It outlines how the findings advance theoretical debates on workplace communication and power, contribute methodological refinement to bullying research, and generate insights relevant to organisational policy and professional practice.

The first article, published in the *Journal of Management & Organization*, investigates how Aotearoa New Zealand managers interpret and make sense of behaviours alleged to constitute workplace bullying. The study focuses on “disputed acts” and reveals the interpretive work undertaken by managers in categorising contested behaviours as bullying, miscommunication, or performance management. This article establishes the centrality of managerial sense-making in shaping the recognition or dismissal of bullying, emphasising that such interpretations are consequential for how bullying is defined and addressed within organisations.

The second article, published in the *International Journal of Conflict Management*, extends this focus by situating bullying within the broader literature on conflict processes. It demonstrates that bullying does not occur in isolation but is embedded within patterns of conflict management, organisational norms, and power dynamics. By integrating bullying research with conflict theory, this study highlights how communicative practices and conflict-handling strategies influence both the escalation of bullying and its organisational management. This article contributes by positioning bullying on a continuum with other forms of workplace conflict and by foregrounding the communicative mechanisms through which it is enacted and maintained.

The third article, submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal, *Evidence-based HRM: A Global Forum for Empirical Scholarship*, and provides an empirical test of the relationship between communication styles and perceptions of workplace bullying. Drawing on an integrative trait-state framework, this study examines how enduring communication traits (argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness) and situational behaviours (organisational dissent and conflict management styles) predict employees’ perceptions of bullying. The findings indicate that destructive communication traits such as verbal aggression and indirect forms of dissent are positively associated with perceptions of bullying, whereas constructive dissent and conflict avoidance are negatively associated. This article advances understanding of bullying as a perceptual and communicative phenomenon shaped by the interaction of individual predispositions and situational dynamics.

Figure 1 Components of the Thesis

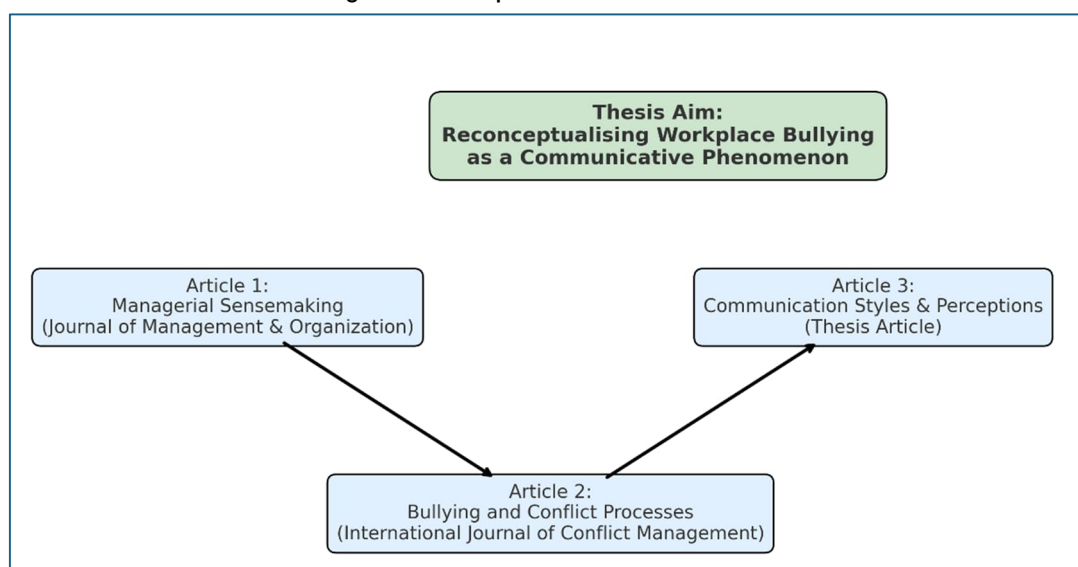


Figure 1 illustrates how the three articles collectively contribute to the overarching aim of reconceptualising workplace bullying as a communicative phenomenon. *Article One* examines how managers make sense of disputed acts, highlighting interpretive ambiguity in recognising bullying. *Article Two* situates bullying within organisational conflict processes, emphasising the communicative practices and power dynamics that sustain or escalate disputes. *Article Three* empirically tests the influence of communication traits and situational behaviours on perceptions of bullying, providing evidence for a trait-state framework. Progressing from interpretive analysis through conflict framing to empirical testing, these studies form an integrated research sequence that offers a coherent body of work advancing both theoretical understanding and practical strategies for addressing bullying in organisational contexts.

This approach departs from prior research by moving beyond a narrow conceptualisation of bullying as solely an interpersonal communicative act, instead situating it within broader organisational power dynamics and individual dispositional factors that influence conflict escalation and expression of dissent (Garner, 2019). This reframing integrates theories of dissent, conflict, and communication traits to offer a more nuanced understanding of how workplace bullying manifests and persists within complex organisational communication ecosystems (Ayoko et al., 2003; Clercq & Pereira, 2022; Combs & Luhrmann, 2007). Methodologically, this thesis comprises three articles: the first provides a rich qualitative and thematic analysis acknowledging contested interpretations of workplace behaviour, while the second and third employ large-scale surveys and statistical modelling that contribute quantitative insights and highlight the limitations of established measures, such as the *Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised*, in the New Zealand context. Additionally, the introduction of a trait-state framework provides a novel methodological tool for future

bullying research, moving beyond singular event analyses to capture the dynamic interplay between individual predispositions and situational factors.

This multi-methodological approach, spanning qualitative explorations of lived experiences (D'Souza et al., 2017; Lempp et al., 2020) and quantitative assessments of prevalence and contributing factors (Roczniewska et al., 2024), offers a robust framework for developing evidence-based interventions tailored to the multifaceted nature of workplace bullying. This framework not only addresses existing gaps in theoretical understanding and methodological practice within the workplace bullying literature but also provides a foundation for developing interventions that target underlying organisational conditions rather than merely addressing superficial symptoms (Karlsen et al., 2024).

Taken as a whole, the thesis contributes new knowledge by offering a deeper and more integrated conceptualisation of workplace bullying. It shifts the focus from identifying discrete behaviours to analysing the communicative conditions under which those behaviours are interpreted as bullying. The research responds to ongoing scholarly debates regarding definition, measurement, and intervention by demonstrating that perceptions of bullying are contingent on communicative traits, situational states, and interpretive frames within organisations. This integrated programme of research therefore addresses the central research aim of the thesis: to examine workplace bullying in Aotearoa New Zealand as a communicative phenomenon shaped by the interplay of perception, conflict, and organisational context.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into nine chapters and follows a thesis-by-publication format in which three peer-reviewed or publishable articles form the empirical core of the research. Chapter 1 establishes the background, research problem, theoretical positioning, and overall aim of the study, as well as outlining the contribution and structure of the thesis. Chapter 2 provides the first literature review, synthesising definitional debates, measurement approaches, prevalence findings, and contextual features of workplace bullying, with particular emphasis on the Aotearoa New Zealand setting. Chapter 3 presents a second literature review that critically examines how different academic disciplines have conceptualised bullying, identifying enduring tensions and the conceptual gap that justifies a communication-centred approach.

Chapter 4 details the methodological foundations of the thesis, including the philosophical stance, research design, sampling strategies, instruments, analytical approaches, and ethical considerations. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 each contain one of the three standalone research articles. Each article is introduced by a short prefatory section and followed by a reflective commentary that explains its contribution and demonstrates how it connects to the subsequent study and to the overarching research aim. Together, these three studies move

from interpretive sensemaking (*Article One*), to the intersection of bullying and organisational dissent (*Article Two*), and finally to a trait-state predictive model of bullying perceptions (*Article Three*).

Chapter 8 provides an integrative discussion that draws together the key findings across all three studies, reframing workplace bullying as a communicatively constructed phenomenon shaped by perception, interaction, and organisational context. Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by articulating its theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions, acknowledging limitations, and proposing directions for future research, policy development, and organisational practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review – Workplace Bullying

2.1 Introduction

Workplace bullying has become a focal concern across psychology, organisational studies, industrial relations, law, and communication research. Foundational scholarship by Leymann (1990, 1996) first conceptualised “mobbing” as a persistent pattern of psychological terror in the workplace, establishing the basis for subsequent empirical inquiry. Building on this early work, Einarsen et al. (2011a; 2011b) consolidated decades of international research, defining bullying as repeated and systematic mistreatment that causes significant harm to individuals and organisations (see Glambek et al., 2015; Leach et al., 2017). Later contributions, such as Hoel and Cooper (2000) and Lewis (2003), advanced understanding of bullying as an organisational and structural issue, connecting it to leadership, culture, and power relations rather than merely individual pathology (see Ågotnes et al., 2023; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Patterson et al., 2018). O’Moore et al. (2003) also undertook important work to estimate impacts on national productivity.

Yet, despite these influential developments, the literature remains fragmented: psychology emphasises stress and mental health, industrial relations foreground power and regulation, and management focuses on organisational costs and risks. This thesis adopts a communication-centred lens, following scholars such as Tracy et al. (2006), proposing bullying is not merely a set of discrete behaviours, but a contested relational phenomenon mediated by meaning, discourse, and interaction (see D’Cruz et al., 2018). This framing extends the communication-based orientation established in Chapter 1 and provides the conceptual foundation for the empirical programme that follows.

This chapter reviews the principal bodies of literature that inform the thesis and situates the research within contemporary debates on workplace bullying, organisational communication, and conflict. It begins by outlining how workplace bullying has been conceptualised and measured within the behavioural and psychological traditions that have been dominant in the field. It then considers critical perspectives that challenge these approaches, highlighting the growing recognition of bullying as a relational and communicative process rather than a discrete set of acts. The review further examines scholarship on organisational conflict, dissent, and communication traits to establish the theoretical foundations for the thesis’s integrative framework.

While much of the workplace bullying literature has been shaped by organisational psychology, alternative traditions have conceptualised harmful workplace experiences more broadly through the lens of workplace ill-treatment. Rather than privileging particular behavioural categories, workplace ill-treatment perspectives emphasise how employees experience, interpret, and make sense of problematic workplace encounters (Fevre et al., 2012; Hodgins et al., 2020). From this perspective, distinctions between bullying,

harassment, incivility, conflict, and other forms of workplace adversity may be less clear-cut than is sometimes implied within behaviourally oriented frameworks.

Lewis (2006, 2011) similarly argues that workplace bullying is frequently characterised by ambiguity and contested interpretations. Such work highlights the importance of language, power, social interaction, and organisational context in shaping how behaviours come to be labelled as bullying. Kline (2016) and colleagues further demonstrate that employees often struggle to categorise their experiences within discrete conceptual boundaries, particularly where organisational cultures normalise certain forms of conduct.

Workplace ill-treatment perspectives do not negate the substantial contribution of organisational psychology to understanding prevalence, antecedents, and consequences of bullying. Rather, they broaden the analytical frame by drawing attention to the social construction of workplace experiences and the role of organisational systems in shaping meaning. These insights align closely with the communication-centred orientation adopted throughout the present thesis.

Although workplace bullying is frequently conceptualised as a broadly experienced organisational phenomenon, a growing body of literature highlights the importance of considering how bullying intersects with experiences of discrimination and marginalisation. Employees belonging to historically marginalised groups, including individuals with disabilities, ethnic and racial minorities, members of sexual and gender minority communities, and other underrepresented populations, may encounter workplace interactions that are simultaneously shaped by both bullying and discriminatory processes.

The relationship between bullying and discrimination is complex. In some instances, discriminatory experiences may manifest through behaviours traditionally associated with workplace bullying, including exclusion, humiliation, excessive scrutiny, or persistent negative treatment. In other cases, organisational norms and communication practices may differentially shape whose voices are considered legitimate, whose behaviours are interpreted as problematic, and whose experiences are validated when concerns are raised.

This thesis does not position bullying and discrimination as interchangeable constructs. Rather, it recognises that the communicative processes through which workplace experiences are interpreted may be influenced by broader social inequalities and organisational power structures. This perspective reinforces the importance of considering intersectionality, inclusion, and organisational justice when seeking to understand the full complexity of workplace bullying experiences.

The purpose of this review is fourfold. *First*, it locates definitional debates and measurement approaches in the international literature. *Second*, it synthesises prevalence and consequence findings, with particular attention to Aotearoa New Zealand evidence. *Third*, it explores methodological and cultural challenges that complicate generalisation and comparability. *Fourth*, it identifies and surfaces the gaps that motivate the empirical programme of this thesis, which seeks to foreground how bullying is constructed and contested through communication in Aotearoa New Zealand. By integrating disciplinary

perspectives, this review justifies a communicative framing in which bullying is understood as a relational, interpretive process - not only a behavioural or structural issue.

In doing so, the chapter provides the theoretical and empirical groundwork for the methodology chapter, laying out propositions and measures that will guide data collection and analysis. The cultural specificity of the New Zealand setting is woven throughout the review, ensuring that the empirical work speaks both to global scholarship and local particularities.

2.2 Definitional Questions

A perennial challenge in bullying research is arriving at a definition that is sufficiently precise or specific to distinguish bullying from ‘ordinary’ interpersonal conflict, yet flexible enough to capture diverse organisational contexts (Hershcovis, 2011). Across disciplines, four core elements frequently emerge: unwelcome and harmful behaviours, repetition over time, a power imbalance, and demonstrable impact (with intent sometimes included as a criterion).

Early research into workplace bullying emerged primarily from Scandinavian scholars (e.g. Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1990). This work from the 1980s and 1990s initially conceptualised workplace bullying (or “mobbing”) as persistent or repeated negative or hostile acts against a target individual who finds it difficult to defend themselves, resulting in psychological injury and occupational dysfunction (see Agrell et al., 2024; Bond et al., 2010; Ciby & Raya, 2015; Einarsen, 2000, 2003; Einarsen et al., 2011b; Glambek et al., 2015). Subsequent research in the 1990s and 2000s (primarily in the United Kingdom and continental Europe) extended Leymann’s framework, employing survey instruments such as the *Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror* (LIPT) and the *Negative Acts Questionnaire* (NAQ) to document prevalence and identify antecedents across industries and occupational groups (Einarsen et al., 2011b; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Hoel & Cooper, 2000).

Over the 1990s and 2000s, the field broadened rapidly, with bullying examined through psychological, managerial, and sociological lenses. Whilst psychological approaches have generated valuable insights into individual antecedents such as personality, coping style, and stress vulnerability (Coyne et al., 2000; Ilies et al., 2011; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Lewis et al., 2008, 2017), they have been critiqued for downplaying the organisational structures, power relations, and cultural conditions that enable bullying to persist (De Cuyper et al., 2009; Hogh et al., 2011; Hutchinson & Jackson, 2015; Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001; Patterson et al., 2018). Sociological and organisational perspectives therefore shift attention from “pathological individuals” to the systemic and relational dynamics through which bullying is normalised, tolerated, or strategically deployed. These approaches emphasise hierarchy, managerial practice, institutional norms, and wider socio-cultural forces as key explanatory mechanisms - foregrounding bullying not as an individual abnormality, but as a patterned organisational phenomenon embedded within workplace power structures (Hoel

et al., 2006, 2010; Lewis & Gunn, 2007; McCord et al., 2018; Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004; Saunders et al., 2007).

While this historical trajectory demonstrates the empirical growth of the field, it also exposes the origins of the definitional features that continue to shape contemporary debate (Hershcovis, 2011). A persistent challenge in workplace bullying research is developing a sufficiently precise definition to distinguish bullying from ordinary workplace conflict, yet flexible enough to accommodate diverse organisational contexts (Ciby & Raya, 2015; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Across disciplines, four core definitional elements recur: unwelcome and harmful behaviours, repetition over time, a power imbalance, and demonstrable impact - with intent sometimes included as a subsidiary criterion. These features are not arbitrary; each emerged from the field's historical development and reflects specific theoretical and methodological choices (Glambek et al., 2015). The remainder of this section traces the origins of these elements and shows how early definitions have continued to shape the way bullying is measured, interpreted, and operationalised in contemporary research.

The different disciplines tend to place different emphasis on definitional aspects of bullying but in general the definitions include four main areas:

First - repetition or continuity - for instance, Leymann (1996) posited that bullying would involve exposure to negative or hostile acts at least weekly over a period of six months or more. This time-bound approach was integral to operationalising the empirical measurement of the phenomenon through instruments such as the *LIPT* and then the later *NAQ* (Einarsen et al., 2009), retained repetition as a diagnostic criterion, ensuring that occasional incivility or isolated aggression would not inflate prevalence estimates.

A *second* foundational definition element is power imbalance: bullying is not simply bilateral conflict but involves asymmetry, whether formal (hierarchical authority) or informal (social capital, control of resources). The imbalance limits the target's capacity to respond or retaliate (Cowie et al., 2002; D'Cruz, 2018; Einarsen et al., 2011b; Hauge et al., 2007; Nielsen et al., 2022; Patterson et al., 2018).

A *third* definitional aspect is impact (or harm). While some definitions emphasize intent, many scholars argue that impact (i.e. negative psychological, physical or social consequences) is more legally and ethically defensible, especially because proving intent is often impossible (Leach et al., 2017; Saunders, et al, 2007). Others treat intent as supplementary or optional. Proving intent in workplace interactions is inherently problematic, as motives are rarely transparent and behaviours that constitute bullying are frequently subtle, relational, and embedded in complex organisational dynamics (Saunders et al, 2007). For this reason, several researchers contend that definitions of bullying should focus primarily on the effects of behaviour rather than its presumed motivation (Einarsen et al., 2020; Leach et al., 2017).

From this perspective, intent may still have interpretive value - for example, in distinguishing between managerial conflict, incivility, and systematic abuse - but it is not considered a necessary condition for classifying behaviour as bullying (Branch et al., 2013). As Einarsen et al. (2020) observe, bullying is best conceptualised as a pattern of persistent negative acts that cause distress, regardless of whether the perpetrator consciously sought to harm the target (also see Hauge et al., 2007). This approach is both legally and ethically defensible, as it centers on measurable outcomes such as psychological harm, social exclusion, or diminished well-being, aligning with broader victim-centred frameworks in harassment and discrimination research (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; also see Blackwood et al., 2018). Thus, intent operates as an auxiliary criterion - potentially useful for understanding context and severity-but not a defining prerequisite.

Communication scholars add a further layer of complexity: the interpretive frame through which behaviour is labelled or resisted. What one person experiences as bullying might be framed by another as “tough management”. Thus, definitions must allow for dispute over whether behaviours count as bullying. The thesis hence adopts a pluralistic but bounded definition: negative and unwelcome acts, repeated over time, under a power asymmetry, resulting in harmful impact - and importantly, open to interpretive contestation in interaction.

2.3 Measurement, Prevalence and Consequences

Estimates of workplace bullying prevalence vary widely depending on definition, measurement approach, timeframe, and cultural context (Nielsen, Notelaers et al., 2020a). A recent review of twelve meta-analyses and systematic reviews found prevalence estimates spanning 1 percent to 90 percent, with a pooled mean around 26.3 percent when behavioural checklists over 6–12 months were used (Goh, et al., 2022; Nielsen et al., 2010). Some reviews suggest lower estimates (10–15 percent) in European contexts using self-labelling surveys (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Way et al., 2013).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, evidence points to a somewhat higher prevalence compared to many OECD peers. The 2018 Survey of Working Life commissioned by Statistics New Zealand reported that about 11 percent of workers acknowledged personal experience of discrimination, harassment, or bullying (a combined measure) (Catley, 2022; Statistics NZ, 2019; WorkSafe, 2021). More specific research from New Zealand employing the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) (Appendix 2) protocol have found that 17.8 percent of respondents acknowledged personal experience of bullying (self-report) (Bentley et al., 2009b; WorkSafe, 2021). A more recent survey led by Haar (2023) found only 8.6 percent of respondents reported *never* being bullied; 24.2 percent encountered bullying monthly or more often; and high-frequency bullying (weekly or more) affected just under 10 percent of respondents.

Caution is needed in interpreting these figures. Self-labelling measures generally produce more conservative estimates than behavioural checklists, owing to under-reporting, normalisation, or stigma (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Nielsen, Notelaers, et al., 2020b; Way et al., 2013). Conversely, behavioural checklist measures such as NAQ-R may inflate prevalence rates by including mild or ambiguous negative acts (McIntosh, 2023). Recent reviews note that prevalence figures vary not only by definition but also by *methodological framing*, with behavioural checklists tending to inflate estimates compared with self-labelling approaches (Cullinane et al., 2019; Einarsen et al., 2011a; Nielsen et al., 2010).

Cross-national comparisons are also complicated by translation, cultural norms around confrontation, and variation in power distance (Nielsen et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the convergence across multiple Aotearoa New Zealand studies suggest workplace bullying has been, and remains a non-trivial and persistent problem in Aotearoa workplaces (Bentley et al., 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Blackwood et al., 2017; Catley et al., 2013, 2017; Chambers et al., 2018; Cooper-Thomas, 2013, 2014; Diversity Works 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018; EEO Trust, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b; Forsyth et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2013, 2016, 2017, 2020; MBIE, 2020).

Consequences at the individual level are well documented: bullied targets show elevated risks of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, psychosomatic complaints, and burn-out, with longitudinal designs identifying enduring mental health sequelae (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Nielsen et al., 2020b; also see Ågotnes et al., 2023; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Rosander et al., 2020). Differential exposure and power asymmetry shape both the likelihood of victimisation and the threshold for recognition, which partially explains sectoral variation in reported prevalence (Cullinane et al., 2019; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Salin, 2001).

Economically, bullying contributes to increased absenteeism, turnover, sick leave, lost productivity, 'time theft', feelings of job insecurity and greater health-related costs (De Cuyper et al., 2009; Fatima et al., 2021; Glambek et al., 2014; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Nielsen et al., 2016). At the organisational level, sustained bullying erodes trust, impairs communication, and undermines collective wellbeing, and makes employees feel that the psychological contract has been betrayed, reinforcing the importance of addressing both the behavioural and communicative dimensions of the phenomenon (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). And employees who have been bullied are more likely to make significant errors at work (e.g. Johnson & Benham-Hutchins, 2020) or behave aberrantly (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

2.4 The Aotearoa New Zealand Context

Although the patterns of workplace bullying in Aotearoa New Zealand mirror global trends - such as its association with organisational change, leadership style, and psychosocial climate - there are several distinctive cultural and institutional features which warrant elaboration.

First, as noted above, prevalence in Aotearoa New Zealand appears moderately elevated, especially when behavioural checklists or hybrid measures are applied. The Haar-led national survey's finding that over 90 percent of respondents reported some exposure to negative acts within the past year underscores how widespread even occasional bullying behaviours may be in Aotearoa New Zealand (Haar, 2023). Certain sectors are particularly vulnerable: education, healthcare, public service, and emergency services consistently report high rates of workplace bullying (Cullinane et al., 2019; D'Souza et al., 2017, 2022; Mental Health Foundation NZ, 2023; Rao & Tootell, 2024, 2025; Silwal et al., 2024). It is notable that even the Parliamentary workplace and the New Zealand Police force have been subject to bullying issues and external reviews, cited systemic harassment and a "too-often-normalised" toxic culture (Francis, 2019; New Zealand Police, 2024).

Second, cultural norms shape how bullying is understood, contested, or tolerated. The "tall poppy syndrome" narrative - where overt displays of power are socially discouraged - may act to mask or delegitimise direct confrontation of bullies. At the same time, Māori and Pacific values offer both protective and complicating frameworks. Care and respect, relational interconnectedness compassion, and reciprocity provide relational frames through which acts of exclusion or disrespect may be experienced as violations of communal norms. Yet tensions arise: the Pākehā egalitarian tradition may resist overt hierarchy, whereas Māori and Pacific cultural systems often accommodate structured leadership and higher power distances. Thus, what is perceived as bullying in a predominantly Pākehā setting might be differently interpreted in predominantly Māori and Pasifica settings.

Institutionally, Aotearoa New Zealand's legislative and regulatory shifts also shape workplace bullying dynamics. The transition from the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act (ICAA) to the Employment Contracts Act (ECA) in the 1990s reduced collective protections and increased managerial discretion in employment relations (Peetz, 2002). The subsequent Employment Relations Act (ERA) re-established principles of good faith, yet in practice many bullying disputes are mediated through narrow grievance mechanisms rather than addressed through systemic prevention. More recently, the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) imposed a duty on PCBUs (persons conducting a business or undertaking) to ensure both physical and psychological safety "so far as is reasonably practicable", thereby bringing bullying within organisational risk-management frameworks (Marlowe et al., 2021; WorkSafe 2017, 2021). However, as commentators note, despite the absence of direct statutory definition of bullying, interpretative enforcement is uneven and reactive.

Some national studies provide additional insight into how ethnicity, social support, and leadership quality interact to shape workplace bullying experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, Gardner et al. (2013). Their findings revealed a nuanced picture of both exposure and response. When participants were asked to self-identify as bullied, only 3.9 percent reported frequent bullying; however, when behavioural criteria were applied using the NAQ-R, 17.8 percent met the threshold for exposure. This discrepancy underscores

that prevalence estimates depend strongly on measurement method and interpretive framing, aligning with the thesis's argument that bullying is communicatively constructed rather than objectively fixed.

The same study found that Pacific Island, Māori, and Asian/Indian respondents reported higher exposure to negative acts compared with New Zealand Europeans (Pākehā), yet these groups also exhibited lower reported psychological strain. Gardner et al. (2013) attributed this finding to the buffering role of social and supervisory support, suggesting that cohesive workplace relationships and collectivist cultural orientations may protect against strain even in high-exposure environment (see O'Driscoll et al., 2011).

Taken together, these cultural and institutional layers suggest that bullying in Aotearoa New Zealand is not simply a transplanted Western phenomenon. It is mediated by local values, relational norms, and regulatory legacies. Consequently, any intervention or empirical design addressing bullying in this context must be sensitive to these intersecting cultural and institutional dimensions (Blackwood et al., 2018).

While this thesis acknowledges the distinctive cultural and institutional context of Aotearoa New Zealand, it does not set out to undertake a comparative or culture-specific analysis. Culture is therefore treated as a broad contextual frame rather than an explicit variable of study. References to Māori, Pacific, and Pākehā values serve to situate workplace bullying within the local social fabric and highlight how cultural norms may influence perception and communication, rather than to make claims about cultural difference as an explanatory mechanism. In this way, the thesis recognises Aotearoa New Zealand's unique bicultural and multicultural environment as shaping the meanings and boundaries of bullying, without presuming to generalise across or between cultural groups.

2.5 Measurement and Methodological Issues

The complexity of measuring workplace bullying remains a central methodological challenge. Two primary approaches dominate the field: self-labelling and behavioural checklists (experience-based methods). In the self-labelling approach, respondents are asked whether they consider themselves bullied or harassed, often after being provided a definition. Such measures are sensitive to cognitive framing, social desirability bias, and cultural norms of tolerance (Way et al., 2013). As a result, self-labelling often yields more conservative prevalence estimates. In contrast, behavioural checklists (e.g. the *Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised*, NAQ-R) list a specific set of negative behaviours (e.g. being ignored, being given tasks below competence) and request frequency ratings, without using the term *bullying*. This approach often captures a range of exposure but risks over-inclusion of mild or

ambiguous negative acts (Bentley et al., 2009a, 2009b; Nielsen et al., 2010, 2011, 2022).¹ Some research also highlights that reliance on self-report surveys may obscure interactional context and communicative intent – highlighting a need to combine quantitative frequency data with qualitative interpretation to capture the relational dynamics that underpin bullying episodes (Cullinane et al. 2019; Nielsen et al., 2010).

The NAQ-R stands out as the most common behavioural instrument. Originally developed in Norway, its items are typically grouped into work-related, interpersonal, and physically intimidating behaviours (Notelaers et al., 2018, 2019). While the NAQ-R offers advantages in reliability and comparability, critics highlight its limitations regarding cross-cultural validity, ceiling and floor effects (e.g. unreliability in scales at either end of the scale), and insensitivity to power dynamics or contextual meaning of certain acts (e.g. directive criticism vs. harassment) (D'Cruz et al., 2018; Nielsen et al., 2011; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

Longitudinal designs are valuable because they can more convincingly support causal inferences, such as whether bullying precedes mental health deterioration (e.g. Ågotnes et al., 2023; Glambek et al., 2014). Some prospective studies – for example, the *Take it or leave it* five-year study - have operationalised bullying as repeated negative acts coupled with difficulty in defence, finding that baseline bullying predicts later turnover and psychological distress (Glambek et al., 2014). However, such longitudinal approaches remain comparatively rare due to cost, attrition, and the challenges of maintaining consistent measurement over time.

Beyond design limitations, methodological challenges include recall bias, common-method variance, non-response bias - since targets may have left the organisation or declined to participate. A further limitation concerns the lack of standardised timeframes across studies, complicating comparisons. Moreover, cross-national research also encounters problems of translation, cultural variation in norms about confrontation, and differences in power distance. From a communicative perspective, measurement also struggles to capture *interpretive contestation* and the negotiation of meaning around perceived behaviours. They further caution that imported instruments may not fully capture the cultural specificities of relational conflict in Aotearoa New Zealand, echoing calls for locally validated tools sensitive to egalitarian and collectivist values (Cullinane et al., 2019; Feather, 1994; Houkamau & Sibley, 2019). Addressing these limitations requires qualitative or mixed methods approaches capable of exploring how participants label, resist, or normalise behaviours and negative acts. To address these weaknesses, this thesis adopts a combined strategy: a modified behavioural checklist supported by qualitative interviews designed to capture meaning-making processes through which bullying is understood and enacted - recognising measurement as itself a communicative act.

¹ This difference has also been observed in Aotearoa New Zealand data, where self-reported identification produces lower prevalence than behaviour-based instruments (Bentley et al., 2009a; Cullinane et al., 2019).

2.6 Consequences Revisited: Beyond the Individual

While much of the literature emphasises individual-level psychological outcomes (Leach et al., 2017), workplace bullying also exerts harmful effects across teams, organisations, and society. At the team level, bullying erodes trust, undermines psychological safety, and fragments cooperation. Witnesses and bystanders may also both experience vicarious distress or moral injury; recent meta-analyses demonstrate that witnessing bullying is associated with elevated stress, lowered well-being, and reduced job satisfaction (Ilies et al., 2011; Law et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2017; Nielsen et al., 2010; Nielsen et al., 2023; Reknes et al., 2016).

Within organisations, bullying contributes to absenteeism, presenteeism, turnover intention, and actual turnover. Evidence from meta-analyses report moderate to strong associations between bullying and these organisational outcomes (Hoel et al., 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Sansone & Sansone, 2015). As more employees reduce effort, working while unwell or disengaged, overall productivity declines. A culture in which bullying becomes normalised may discourage innovation, erode psychological contracts, and deter high-performing employees. The cumulative organisational impact is a deterioration of climate, diminished morale, and reduced collective efficacy (Ilies et al., 2011). Cullinane et al. (2019) also observe a potential contagion of bullying - how negative interactional norms diffuse through teams, amplifying stress and diminishing trust (Baillien & De Witte, 2009; Keashly & Neuman, 2010). But the phenomenon of co-worker relationships with bullying are not necessarily straightforward: from one facet Fox and Stallworth (2010, p. 927) observe that “co-worker social support interacted with... bullying, but, contrary to expectations, showed a reverse buffering effect”, whereas from another facet, Rao and Tootell (2024) observe that in some bullying recipients who had a mentor might actually feel [more] aggrieved because of the lack of expected protection or advocacy. But a third facet that may meaningfully coalesce these variants was offered by Lewis (2003 p. 97):

work colleagues are central to the social construction of bullying at work. The existence of policies and procedures to deal with bullying is clearly important but their importance comes much later in the construction process. Policies could become pointless pieces of rhetoric until the connection between those who personally experience bullying and their social construction of its meaning is made.

At societal levels, these cumulative effects translate into healthcare burdens, economic costs, and reduced workforce capacity. Targets of bullying frequently require mental health or medical support services, contribute to increased medical leave, and may sometimes exit the labour force prematurely. In Aotearoa New Zealand - where public services already under strain from some skilled labour shortages - the loss of experienced professionals and heightened turnover exacerbate systemic pressures. The wider social cost includes

diminished social cohesion and increased inequality when bullying disproportionately affects marginalised or precarious workers.

Consequently, bullying should be theorised not merely as an interpersonal pathology, but as a multilevel phenomenon with ripple effects across structural, cultural, and economic systems. The communicative processes through which bullying is narrated, contested, silenced, or institutionalised mediate the translation from individual harm to collective and systemic dysfunction.

2.7 Lacunae - Gaps in the Definitional Literature

Despite burgeoning scholarship, significant gaps remain in how workplace bullying is conceptualised, measured, and understood - especially in culturally diverse contexts.

Definitional ambiguity continues to plague the field of study. While repetition, power imbalance, and harm are common criteria, operationalising thresholds of frequency and duration remains contested (e.g. weekly × 6 months). Some definitions incorporate intent, others reject it, and the boundary between bullying, conflict, and incivility also remain blurred (Bentley et al., 2010; Cortina et al., 2001; Hershcovis, 2011; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). This ambiguity impedes theoretical coherence and limits cross-study comparability and theory-building.

Methodological weaknesses are equally pervasive. Heavy reliance on cross-sectional survey methods constrains causal claims. Self-report instruments risk common-method bias, response framing effects, and under-reporting. The widely used NAQ-R, while empirically powerful, lacks sensitivity to power asymmetries or cultural nuance. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies remain scarce, restricting the capacity to trace bullying trajectories or capture and integrate meaning-making *in situ*.

Cultural and contextual gaps are particularly salient within the Aotearoa New Zealand context. Few studies explore how Māori or Pacific worldviews shape conceptions of respect, reciprocity, and hierarchy in relation to bullying. There is limited scholarship of how collective notions of relationality -such as *whakapapa* (genealogical interconnectedness), and communal accountability may mediate recognition, reporting, or resistance of workplace bullying. Internationally, the literature remains dominated by Western, high-income, settings; non-Western perspectives on relational harm or group norms are still underrepresented (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). It is important to note that this thesis does not examine “culture” as a discrete construct or engage in detailed cross-cultural comparison. Rather, culture is approached as a broad contextual theme that frames how communicative behaviours and relational dynamics are interpreted within Aotearoa New Zealand workplaces. The emphasis is on how meaning is co-constructed in local organisational settings, where diverse cultural norms intersect, rather than on delineating

cultural differences themselves. This orientation enables the study to remain attuned to the influence of Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural environment while keeping the analytical focus on communication processes and workplace interactions.

Finally, many studies treat bullying as a dyadic encounter (perpetrator → target/ victim/ recipient), neglecting the network, bystander, and cultural dynamics through which bullying is sustained or contested. The communicative processes - how stories are told, silenced, or normalised - are rarely theorised. The role of discourse, narrative framing, and institutional talk in legitimating or resisting bullying remains under-developed.

These lacunae drive the empirical agenda of this thesis: it seeks to operationalise a culturally sensitive, communication-centred framework; to integrate quantitative and qualitative measurement; and to trace how bullying is constituted, contested, and resisted in relational, institutional, and cultural interaction.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the definitional, methodological, and contextual dimensions of workplace bullying. It has highlighted the contested nature of definitions, the variability of prevalence estimates, and the consequences for individuals, organisations, and society. Particular attention was given to the Aotearoa New Zealand context, where elevated prevalence, cultural tensions, and institutional legacies shape the recognition and management of bullying. In synthesising these debates, Chapter 2 establishes the need to move beyond behavioural taxonomies toward an interpretive, communication-centred understanding of bullying.

The review also identified key gaps: definitional ambiguity, methodological weaknesses, and underexplored cultural dynamics. These lacunae motivate the empirical programme of this thesis, which adopts a communication-centred lens to examine bullying as a contested and relational phenomenon. The propositions and measures emerging from this chapter inform the methodological choices detailed in the following chapter (Chapter 3).

Chapter 3: Literature Review - Disciplinary Perspectives on Workplace Bullying

3.1 Introduction

Workplace bullying has been examined through multiple disciplinary lenses, each offering distinctive insights but also generating tensions. Psychology, as noted earlier tends to foreground individual traits, coping, and mental health outcomes; sociology and industrial relations emphasise structural inequalities, cultural norms, and power dynamics; management and organisational studies focus on leadership, systems, and culture; while communication highlights discourse, interaction, and meaning-making processes (Densky, 2019). Each of these perspectives brings conceptual and methodological strengths, yet none fully captures the phenomenon's complexity in isolation. As a result, workplace bullying research risks fragmentation, with findings that explain only parts of a broader puzzle (Branch, 2019; Samnani & Singh, 2012). This chapter explores these disciplinary approaches in turn, showing how their contributions and limitations point to the need for integrative, multi-level analysis. The communication-centred synthesis developed later in this thesis requires positioning bullying not only as a set of behaviours with psychological impacts, but also as a socially constructed and interactionally negotiated phenomenon embedded in organisational and societal contexts (Tracy et al., 2006). A multidisciplinary approach, therefore, is necessary to account for the interplay of individual, organisational, and cultural dynamics, and to move beyond siloed understandings of this pervasive issue.

3.2 Psychological Approaches

The psychological discipline has been foundational in establishing workplace bullying as a legitimate field of inquiry, with its focus on individual-level experiences, outcomes, and coping responses (see Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Research coming from the psychological discipline base has been instrumental in developing reliable measurement instruments, such as the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), and in demonstrating the links between exposure to bullying and a range of affective, cognitive, and physiological outcomes (Einarsen et al., 2009; Bond et al., 2010). Psychological studies consistently show that bullying often occurs within settings which are stressful or socially ill-defined (Hauge et al., 2007, 2009, 2011), and the experience of being bullied is associated with anxiety, depression, burnout, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Densky, 2019; Ilies et al., 2011; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002b; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). The strength of this tradition lies in its measurement sophistication and its ability to highlight, often through longitudinal designs, the causal relationship between bullying and individual strain (Ågotnes et al., 2023; Nielsen et al., 2020b; Notelaers et al., 2012). Furthermore, counselling psychology has

developed practical interventions that support resilience, coping strategies, and post-trauma recovery (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

However, the psychological focus on individual variables also brings limitations. Bullying is frequently analysed through the lens of personality traits (e.g., neuroticism, low self-esteem), coping styles, psychological resources, or in assumed deficits in emotional intelligence (Agrell et al., 2024; Ariza-Montes et al., 2016; Law et al., 2011; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002a; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Sears & Humiston, 2015). This can lead to “pathologising” both the perpetrators and the targets by framing bullying as a personal weakness and susceptibility rather than examining contextual and structural drivers (Branch, 2019). Similarly, interventions that emphasise resilience or emotional intelligence risk normalising the abnormal and placing the burden of adaptation on individuals rather than organisations (Hutchinson et al., 2010; Sears & Humiston, 2015). Intent has also been a contested dimension in psychological research: while many studies seek to distinguish intentional hostility from miscommunication or poor management, others argue that subjective perception of harm is more important (Einarsen et al., 2011b; Ilies et al., 2011; Law et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2017; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002b).

Psychology’s epistemological orientation generally favours positivist approaches, with quantitative survey-based designs dominating the field. Influential figures including Ståle Einarsen, Helge Hoel, and Dieter Zapf, have shaped global measurement standards and theoretical models through their extensive work on the causes, measurement, and outcomes of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009, 2011a, 2020; Ilies et al., 2011; Zapf, 1999). Yet, critics note these models often present bullying as context-free and fail to account for organisational power relations or contested interpretations (Demsky, 2019; Salin, 2003). While psychological approaches have demonstrated the severity of individual harms and advanced measurement sophistication, their explanatory limits highlight the necessity of complementing and integrating them with broader organisational and communicative perspectives disciplinary insights. This is an integration pursued in this present thesis.

3.3 Sociological and Industrial Relations Approaches

Where psychology tends to emphasise the individual-level antecedents and consequences of workplace bullying, sociological and industrial and employment relations approaches tend to situate bullying within broader structures of power, inequality, and labour relations. From this perspective, bullying is not merely a manifestation of individual pathologies, but rather an expression of systemic and structural conditions contextualised by workplace organisations and wider society structures (Hodgins et al., 2020; Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001).

The communication-centred framework developed within this thesis is also consistent with sociological accounts of workplace harm that emphasise organisational meaning-making,

power relations, and contested interpretations. Sociological perspectives suggest that workplace experiences acquire significance through interaction and social negotiation rather than through behaviours alone. Consequently, the process by which particular acts come to be defined as bullying warrants scholarly attention in its own right.

Incorporating workplace ill-treatment scholarship extends the explanatory scope of the present thesis. Whereas organisational psychology has traditionally focused on identifying negative acts and their consequences, sociological approaches foreground the organisational conditions under which certain behaviours become normalised, resisted, legitimised, or reinterpreted. Such perspectives therefore strengthen the thesis argument that workplace bullying is simultaneously behavioural, relational, communicative, and socially situated.

Importantly, this broader framing should not be interpreted as replacing psychological explanations. Instead, the present thesis adopts an integrative position in which communication processes operate within wider organisational and social contexts. In doing so, the thesis seeks to contribute to an emerging body of work recognising that understanding workplace bullying requires attention not only to what happens, but also to how those experiences are constructed and understood by organisational actors.

Communication does not occur in a social vacuum. Organisational norms influence not only how workplace interactions are enacted but also whose communication styles are recognised as legitimate and whose behaviours are subject to greater scrutiny. Employees from marginalised groups may experience organisational communication differently as a consequence of historical inequities, implicit bias, exclusionary practices, or differing expectations regarding authority, directness, emotional expression, and workplace relationships.

A communication-centred approach to workplace bullying therefore provides opportunities to examine how experiences of marginalisation intersect with organisational meaning-making processes. Questions concerning who has the power to define workplace experiences, whose interpretations become dominant, and how organisational actors respond to claims of harm represent important extensions of the present thesis.

While the empirical studies reported in this thesis did not directly examine these issues, acknowledging their potential significance broadens the explanatory scope of communication-centred approaches to workplace bullying and highlights the need for future research attentive to diversity, inclusion, and social justice concerns.

Whilst psychological approaches to workplace bullying often place emphasis on individual-level antecedents (such as trait verbal aggression, coping style, or personal vulnerability) and the consequences for individual targets, sociological and industrial/employment relations frameworks shift the analytic lens outward. From these perspectives, bullying is not simply the result of individual pathologies, but rather a symptom of structural, relational and institutional conditions: it reflects how power is organised, contested and reproduced within the workplace and across wider labour markets (Hodgins et al., 2020; Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001). For example, sociologists conceptualise bullying as a relational

phenomenon embedded in organisational hierarchies, gendered and racialised power relations, and cultural norms that legitimate managerial prerogative (McCarthy et al., 1995; McCord et al., 2018; Salin, 2003). Through such a lens, bullying may be viewed as a tactic that supports managerial control (for instance in precarious or casualised contexts), as an outcome of competitive work environments, or as the result of structural inequities rather than just the personal failings of perpetrators or victims (Blackwood et al., 2018).

Industrial and employment relations scholars extend this structural viewpoint by locating bullying in the labour process and the changing institutional context of work. Drawing on labour process theory (Braverman, 1974) and newer critiques of managerialism, bullying can be interpreted as a mechanism of control under conditions of intensification, insecurity and fragmentation of employment (Akella, 2016). From a neo-Weberian perspective, further, the bureaucratic rationalisation of organisations and institutionalised hierarchies provide opportunities for mistreatment of lower-status workers (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). In turn, structural shifts such as declining union density, casualisation, competitive performance regimes, and weakened collective voice create fertile ground for bullying behaviours by reducing collective protections and increasing individual vulnerability (Bentley et al., 2009a; Hodder & Krupp, 2017). In contexts such as Aotearoa New Zealand, for instance, the legislative reforms of the Employment Contracts Act 1991 arguably weakened collective bargaining and strengthened individualised employment relations, making bullying behaviors more difficult to contest. Such structural and institutional frames add depth to the understanding of bullying by showing it as embedded in broader socio-economic systems rather than purely intra-psychic phenomena.

Sociologists often conceptualise bullying as a relational phenomenon shaped by organisational hierarchies, gendered and racialised power dynamics, and the cultural norms that legitimise managerial prerogatives (McCarthy, et al., 1995; Salin, 2003). For example, labour process theory, grounded in Braverman's (1974) critique of managerial control, positions bullying as a mechanism through which managers reinforce authority in the context of precarious or casualised work (see Akella, 2016). Similarly, neo-Weberian perspectives highlight the role of bureaucratic rationality and institutionalised hierarchies in enabling workplace mistreatment (Hoel & Cooper, 2000).

Cultural frames also play a critical role in sociological analyses. As outlined in Section 2.4, in Aotearoa New Zealand, the "tall poppy syndrome" - where individuals who achieve are resented or undermined - has been identified as a cultural dynamic that can normalise subtle forms of bullying (Feather, 1994; Kirkwood, 2007). Conversely, Māori and Pacific values such as *manaakitanga* (care, generosity, respect), *whakapapa* (interconnectedness), *fa'aaloalo* (respect), and *alofa* (compassion) emphasise relational obligations and collective wellbeing, which can sit in tension with hierarchical and competitive workplace arrangements (Houkamau & Sibley, 2019). These tensions reveal how cultural schemas both constrain and reproduce bullying dynamics.

Industrial relations and employment relations scholars have also emphasised institutional factors such as declining union density, casualisation, and neoliberal restructuring of labour markets as key contributors to bullying prevalence (Bentley et al., 2009a; Hodder & Krupp, 2017). In New Zealand, the Employment Contracts Act 1991 drastically reduced collective bargaining power, arguably fostering more individualised employment relations in which bullying behaviours are harder to contest. Later reforms under the Employment Relations Act 2000 reinstated collective rights, but workplace bullying has remained persistent, raising questions about whether existing legal and institutional frameworks are adequate to address it (Gardner et al., 2013).

Methodologically, sociologists and industrial/ employment relations scholars often adopt qualitative and ethnographic approaches, using interviews, case studies, and discourse analysis to examine how power relations manifest in lived experience (McCarthy et al., 1995). Influential scholars in this domain include Einarsen and colleagues (Einarsen et al., 2011a), whose cross-disciplinary work has informed sociological understandings, and Liefhoghe and Mackenzie Davey (2001), who argue for viewing bullying as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than an objective pathology. These approaches provide a vital counterbalance to psychological individualisation, emphasising how bullying is embedded in broader social and economic structures.

3.4 Management and Organisational Studies

Management and organisational studies approaches conceptualise workplace bullying primarily through the lens of organisational culture, leadership, job design, and human resource systems. Rather than focusing exclusively on individuals or societal structures, this disciplinary tradition foregrounds how organisational climates and managerial practices create conditions in which bullying can emerge and persist and be managed (Acosta-Fernández et al., 2015; Barling & Frone, 2018; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Zapf, 1999; Zapf & Gross, 2001). The notion of a dysfunctional organisational culture is particularly prominent, with research linking bullying to climates characterised by high competition, poor communication, and low trust (Baillien et al., 2011a; Einarsen et al., 2007; 2017; 2018; Hoel & Beale, 2006; Ilies et al., 2011). From this perspective, bullying is both an outcome of flawed organisational processes and systems and is a symptom of deeper cultural, leadership or structural failings.

Leadership is a recurring theme in this literature. Studies highlight that destructive leadership styles - including authoritarian, laissez-faire, and abusive supervision - are strongly correlated with bullying prevalence (Acosta-Fernández et al., 2015; Ågotnes et al., 2023; Barling & Frone, 2018; Ilies et al., 2011; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Nielsen, 2013; Nielsen, et al., 2020a; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). For instance, Ågotnes et al. (2023, p. 44) highlighted that “laissez-faire leadership exacerbated, while transformational leadership

attenuated, the indirect relationship between role ambiguity and exposure to bullying behaviours through role conflicts”. Relatedly, supportive leadership and fair, transparent management practices are seen as protective factors (Hogh et al., 2011; Ilies et al., 2011; Skogstad et al., 2007). Organisational behaviour studies tend to emphasise role stressors - such as ambiguity, conflict, and overload - as antecedents to bullying, drawing on job demands-resources frameworks to illustrate how strained environments exacerbate interpersonal aggression (Baillien et al., 2011b; Ilies et al., 2011). Whereas other studies also highlight the “more employees identified with their group, the less likely they were victims of bullying” (Escartín et al., 2012, 182).

Aotearoa New Zealand survey data also indicate that bullying prevalence varies systematically by organisational size and sector, with higher rates reported in medium and large organisations and in the public sector (Bentley et al., 2009a, 2009b; Cullinane et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2013). These findings highlight that structural factors, rather than solely interpersonal ones, shape exposure to bullying behaviour.

Within organisational development (OD), bullying is often approached through intervention and prevention programmes, such as training, mediation, and policy implementation (Caponecchia et al., 2020; Salin, 2008; Nielsen et al., 2020a). While these approaches can provide practical tools for managers, they have been criticised for treating bullying as a matter of individual conflict resolution rather than addressing systemic power imbalances (see Lewis, 2006; Lewis & Rayner 2003). For example, “zero tolerance” policies may symbolically commit organisations to prevention but are often undermined by inconsistent enforcement or managerial reluctance to challenge high-performing or highly skilled/placed perpetrators (Catley et al., 2013; Einarsen et al., 2018).

A key strength of this disciplinary approach is its attention to organisational systems, including HR practices, reporting structures, and performance management, which are often overlooked in analyses offered by psychology and sociology disciplines. Influential scholars such as Hoel and Salin (2003), Einarsen et al. (2007; 2018), Nielsen et al. (2020a) and Salin (2008) have shaped the management-oriented research agenda by framing bullying as a product of both micro-level interactions and macro-level organisational design. However, critics argue that managerialist perspectives risk instrumentalising the problem - framing bullying primarily as a cost to productivity or a reputational risk rather than a profound harm to workers (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Fatima et al., 2021; Hoel et al., 2020).

Methodologically, management and organisational studies research often employ large-scale surveys, cross-sectional designs, and case studies. These approaches provide valuable insights into organisational factors that foster or inhibit bullying but often underplay subjective meaning-making processes and the contested nature of bullying as a phenomenon (Lewis, 2006; Nielsen et al., 2020a). In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, Bentley et al. (2012) emphasised the importance of organisational culture in explaining persistently high prevalence rates, suggesting that systemic weaknesses in leadership and HR

practices are as critical as broader societal or psychological factors. By examining bullying through organisational systems and cultural climates, this disciplinary lens complements psychological and sociological approaches while underscoring the communicative and relational mechanisms through which organisational environments sustain harmful behaviours.

3.5 Communication and Organisational Communication Approaches

Communication and organisational communication approaches reconceptualise workplace bullying not simply as an individual pathology or structural inevitability, but as a communicative and interactional process. Bullying is understood as emerging through discourse, voice, silence, and interactional patterns, with meaning constructed and contested by participants (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009; Tracy et al., 2006). Beck (2018, ix) observing that “even vile, negative comments [associated with bullying] constitute “communication””.

This perspective challenges essentialist definitions of bullying and foregrounds the role of language, symbols, and communicative practices in constituting ‘what counts’ as bullying behaviours (Goodboy et al., 2022). Unlike psychology’s emphasis on traits or sociology’s focus on structures, communication studies centre on the micro-level processes of talk, narrative, and framing through which bullying is perceived and becomes visible, negotiated, and resisted (Cowan, 2011; Marlow et al., 2021). As West and Beck (2018, xi) observe, “communication scholarship pertaining to bullying spans theoretical, meta-theoretical, and heuristic traditions”, situating bullying within relational and discursive processes rather than discrete acts and emphasising meaning-making and message exchange as central to how harm is produced and understood.

A central contribution of communication research is its recognition of the contested and interpretive nature of bullying. Tracy et al. (2006) argue bullying is often “disputed” because actors interpret the same acts differently, depending on their communicative framing. Meaning is constituted through talk, framing, and interpretation - rather than through objective behaviours alone (Tracy et al., 2006). For example, a manager’s directive may be experienced by a subordinate as abusive, yet it may be regarded by others as legitimate performance management. This focus on multiple perspectives underscores how bullying is not a fixed reality but an ongoing negotiation of meaning within organisational discourse (Gilin Oore et al., 2015). Discursive analyses reveal targets, perpetrators, and bystanders construct accounts of bullying in ways that align with broader organisational narratives of professionalism, competence, or resilience (Keashly, 2021) or productivity, efficiency and effectiveness (Creasy & Carnes, 2017) or reproducing organisational power structures (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

The discipline has also highlighted the importance of *silence* and *voice* in bullying processes. Employees frequently remain silent due to fear of retaliation or perceptions of futility - a phenomenon linked to organisational cultures that discourage dissent (Goodboy et al., 2022; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009; Morrison, 2014). Conversely, acts of voice - such as complaints, storytelling, or whistleblowing can disrupt organisational silence and reframe bullying as a collective issue (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009). Communication research therefore attends to the relational and discursive dynamics and conditions under which employees can express concerns and dissent rather than feel they must remain silent (Hutchinson & Jackson, 2015).

Trait-based approaches within communication studies further enrich understanding of bullying. Constructs such as *argumentativeness* (a predisposition to engage in constructive disagreement) and *verbal aggressiveness* (a tendency to attack others' self-concepts) are directly linked to bullying interactions (Avtgis & Rancer, 2008; Combs & Luhrmann, 2007; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Martin & Anderson, 1996). Argumentativeness is typically associated with healthier conflict management, whereas verbal aggression overlaps significantly with bullying behaviours by escalating disagreement into negative interpersonal comments (Avtgis & Rancer, 2008). Related traits - such as communication apprehension, assertiveness, and responsiveness - shape both the likelihood of bullying behaviours and how individuals cope with them (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). These perspectives are vital in explaining why some employees perceive and report bullying differently from others exposed to the same workplace environment.

Organisational communication research also draws attention to the interactional patterns through which bullying is sustained. Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) describes how repetitive negative acts escalate into patterned interactions that undermine the target's capacity to respond (also see Goodboy et al., 2022). This framing highlights that bullying is not merely a series of isolated events and acts but an ongoing communicative cycle involving perpetrators, targets, and witnesses or bystanders. Relatedly, researchers have shown how gossip, exclusion, and rumour function as communicative tools of bullying, reinforcing group boundaries and marginalising individuals (Kassing et al., 2012). In this sense, communication research extends organisational studies' focus on organisational climate and culture by identifying the interactional mechanisms that reproduce harmful workplace dynamics.

Another distinctive contribution of the communication discipline is its emphasis on *dissent* and *conflict styles*. Kassing's (1997, 2011) research on organisational dissent demonstrates how employees express disagreement through upward, latent, or displaced dissent channels. Kassing's work may offer insight into how these dissent patterns and channels influence whether bullying concerns are acknowledged or suppressed. And relatedly Hastings and Payne (2013) highlight that while dissent is most often theorised as a face-to-face interaction, recent research has highlighted how communication channels themselves shape dissent expression, particularly when email is used to document, distance, or escalate disagreement. Garner (2016b) extends Kassing's foundational model by examining how

dissent messages are perceived across hierarchical levels and over time and through symbolism. Garner (2016b, p. 431) observed:

Most [dissent] research focuses on the dissent conversation itself and factors that influence such conversations, yet the ways in which managers and peers reflect on and recount dissent after dissent conversations may have dramatic implications for future dissent.

Similarly, Scott (2007) extends dissent insights into communicative acts that may be characterised as bullying by linking communication control systems to identity management, showing how organisational logics can reframe legitimate voice as insubordination. Taken together the dissent literature highlights that if managerial and coworker interpretations of the same communicative event diverge, then this is a dynamic highly relevant to misattributions of bullying.

Relatedly, Oetzel's (1998) conflict style framework, later expanded with Ting-Toomey (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003), has also been applied to bullying, illustrating how avoiding, obliging, or dominating styles interact with aggressive communication traits to shape bullying encounters. Together, these frameworks situate bullying within broader communication repertoires, linking everyday interaction patterns to systemic outcomes.

Methodologically, communication scholars often employ qualitative approaches such as narrative analysis, ethnography, and discourse analysis, enabling them to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of bullying and the interpretive struggles over meaning (Tracy et al., 2006). This contrasts with psychology's reliance on surveys and scales, or the organisational studies and management disciplines' focus on policy and climate, providing a richer understanding of contested definitions and interpretation and interpersonal ambiguities. At the same time, researchers in the communication discipline have increasingly utilised mixed methods, incorporating survey measures of argumentativeness, verbal aggression, and conflict styles to complement qualitative insights (Avtgis & Rancer, 2008; Kassing et al., 2012).

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, communication perspectives are particularly valuable given cultural complexities and contested workplace norms. For example, the interplay between *tall -poppy* dynamics and Māori and Pacific communicative values suggests that acts perceived as "bullying" may be differently framed depending on cultural lenses (Houkamau & Sibley, 2019). A communication-centred approach allows for the exploration of these cultural nuances by foregrounding meaning-making and interpretation rather than assuming universality.

Despite its strengths, communication research on bullying faces limitations. Its focus on subjectivity and interpretation can be critiqued for lacking generalisability or policy traction (Keashly, 2021). Moreover, while trait-based studies advance predictive models, they may risk reverting to the individualistic tendencies of psychology. Nevertheless, the discipline's

recognition of ambiguity, contestation, and discourse provides indispensable insights for synthesising disciplinary perspectives. By foregrounding meaning-making and interactional processes, communication research ensures that workplace bullying is understood not only as a psychological strain, structural inequality, or managerial challenge, but also as a fundamentally communicative phenomenon.

3.6 Lacunae - Gaps in the Discipline Literature

While each disciplinary lens has generated valuable insights, several gaps and tensions remain. Psychological approaches emphasise individual impacts but often underplay contextual and organisational dynamics. Sociological and industrial relations perspectives foreground structural power and institutional arrangements but may overlook individual agency. Management and organisational studies place the stress on systems and leadership, and control or technical remediation. Communication scholarship, meanwhile, has illuminated the contested meanings and interpretive struggles through which bullying is constructed and maintained, but it lacks large-scale measurement tools capable of demonstrating prevalence or causal pathways.

Many of these disciplines risk reducing bullying to managerial fixability; and communication scholars reveal contested meanings but lack large-scale measurement tools. Enduring tensions arise between intent and impact, structure and agency, and behaviour versus perception (Branch, 2019). Psychological and managerial models tend to privilege observable acts and intentions, whereas sociological and communication perspectives prioritise interpretation, relational meaning, and context. Moreover, cultural diversity remains under-examined, with Western frameworks continuing to dominate theoretical and empirical discourse.

Addressing these gaps requires a synthesis that bridges epistemological divides and integrates micro-, meso-, and macro-level analyses. This thesis responds to this need by advancing a communication-centred framework that situates bullying at the intersection of individual, organisational, and cultural processes. The thesis also highlights the necessity of a multidisciplinary synthesis that integrates individual, organisational, and communicative perspectives. It seeks to bridge these divides by advancing a communication-centred framework that accounts for structural, organisational, and interpersonal dynamics simultaneously.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed disciplinary perspectives on workplace bullying, highlighting their respective contributions and limitations. Psychological, sociological, management, and communication approaches each illuminate different facets of the phenomenon, yet none

alone provides a sufficient account. A communication-centred synthesis that integrates these perspectives is necessary to capture bullying's complexity, particularly in the culturally distinctive context of Aotearoa New Zealand. These insights inform the empirical strategy of this thesis, which seeks to address definitional, methodological, and cultural gaps by examining workplace bullying as a communicative, contested, and multi-level phenomenon. The propositions and measures derived from this synthesis guide the design of the empirical programme that follows.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological foundations and research design guiding the thesis. The study is situated within a social constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, foregrounding the ways in which workplace bullying is communicatively constructed, perceived, and contested in organisational settings. Given that bullying is a phenomenon deeply entangled with issues of communication, perception, power, and culture, the thesis adopts a multi-method approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative strategies across three standalone, but interconnected articles.

The first article employed a qualitative thematic analysis of narrative accounts provided by managers in Aotearoa New Zealand organisations, examining how “disputed acts” of bullying were interpreted in practice. The second article utilises a cross-sectional survey of employees to examine relationships between organisational dissent and bullying perceptions. The third article draws on survey data to test a trait-state framework linking communication traits, conflict styles, and bullying perceptions.

This chapter proceeds by outlining the philosophical stance underpinning the research, it details the multi-method design, sampling, measures, analytic strategies, and ethical considerations. It concludes with an account of the integration of methodological choices across the thesis. Together, these elements form a coherent design logic that balances depth and breadth, exploratory and explanatory aims, and qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry.

4.2 Philosophical Stance

The research is situated within an interpretivist social constructivist paradigm, which assumes reality is co-constructed through communication and interaction, discourse, and perception (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within this orientation, workplace bullying is not treated as a fixed or objective phenomenon, but as one whose meaning emerges in- and through-communication practices, institutional settings, and cultural frames. Ontologically, this stance recognises that “bullying” is socially produced and contextually bound, while epistemologically it privileges interpretive methods that uncover how meaning is negotiated by participants (Schwandt, 1998). The thesis also acknowledges the enduring tensions identified by Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) four paradigms of social theory. While bullying research often falls within the functionalist paradigm (e.g., measuring prevalence, outcomes, and predictors), this thesis adopts an interpretive orientation while also drawing on insights from the radical humanist and radical structuralist paradigms, which foreground issues of

power, inequality, and cultural contestation. By situating bullying as a contested terrain - shaped by structural constraints and also through individual perceptions and interpretations - the research is able to interrogate its complexity across levels of analysis.

A mixed-method design follows naturally from this philosophical stance. Qualitative approaches capture the nuanced, contested meanings of bullying, while quantitative approaches test hypothesised relationships among variables and allow for generalisation across larger samples (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This pluralism reflects a commitment to methodological complementarity rather than hierarchy.

As a researcher, I am positioned as both an organisational communication scholar and a practitioner within Aotearoa New Zealand's tertiary sector. This positionality informs the thesis in two ways: *first*, by shaping sensitivity to the discursive, communicative, and cultural dimensions of workplace bullying; and *second*, by requiring reflexivity about the interpretive lens I bring to data analysis. This stance recognises that no study of bullying is neutral, and that research itself is implicated in shaping the meanings and interventions constructed around the phenomenon (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018; Caponecchia et al., 2020).

4.3 Research Design

The thesis follows a **multi**-method, three-study design, with each article addressing a specific gap identified in the literature review.

- *Article One* employed a qualitative thematic analysis of manager narratives to examine how “disputed acts” of bullying are interpreted.
- *Article Two* utilised a cross-sectional survey of New Zealand employees to test the relationship between organisational dissent and bullying perceptions.
- *Article Three* employed a survey-based design to test a trait-state framework linking communication traits, conflict styles, and bullying perceptions.

The design logic thus progresses from exploratory (qualitative) to explanatory (quantitative) approaches, creating a cumulative sequence. This balances depth and nuance with breadth and generalisability, while acknowledging trade-offs in inference (statistical prediction vs interpretive transferability). Each article stands independently as a publishable contribution, but together they form a coherent investigation of workplace bullying as a communication-centred, socially contested phenomenon.

4.4 Sampling and Participants

Article One analysed 316 anonymous, open-ended written narrative accounts provided by managers (and supervisors) employed in Aotearoa New Zealand organisations. Ethical

approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee; participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were recruited using a randomised panel recruited by the Qualtrics service through professional associations and industry networks. The panel was managed to get coverage across sectors and regions. Screening questions confirmed each participant's managerial status and additional demographic information was captured about participant age, sector, job level, and employment status, to describe the sample and assess heterogeneity. The resulting group of participants reflected a broad cross-section of industries and job levels, with full-time employment dominant.

Participants for the quantitative studies were recruited through Qualtrics Panels. It is important to clarify that the term *randomised panel* in this context does not refer to probability-based random sampling from the broader New Zealand workforce. Rather, Qualtrics maintains a large pool of individuals who have voluntarily opted to participate in survey research. Potential respondents who met the study eligibility criteria were identified within this panel and invitations were distributed through Qualtrics' sampling procedures. While participants may be randomly selected from among eligible panel members, the panel itself remains a non-probability sample.

The demographic profile collected in this research was intentionally limited to variables directly relevant to the central research questions and to maintaining consistency across the three constituent studies. Characteristics such as disability, ethnicity, sexuality, and other protected identities were therefore not incorporated into the survey instruments. This omission should not be interpreted as suggesting that these characteristics are unimportant in understanding workplace bullying. On the contrary, a substantial body of research demonstrates that experiences of bullying may intersect with discrimination and marginalisation. The absence of these variables limits the ability of the present research to examine those relationships directly and highlights an important avenue for future investigation.

Consequently, the samples reported in this thesis should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all New Zealand workers. Instead, they provide access to a diverse cross-section of employed adults that would otherwise be difficult to recruit efficiently. Qualtrics panels have been widely used within organisational and communication research and offer advantages including rapid recruitment, demographic diversity, fraud detection mechanisms, and the ability to apply screening criteria consistently. Nevertheless, the limitations associated with non-probability sampling, including the potential for self-selection bias and restricted generalisability, should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings presented in this thesis.

The text-only, open-ended format of the instrument was purposive: it was intended to minimise social desirability biases, to encourage candid reflection, and elicit unprompted managerial definitions of bullying and "disputed acts" thereby aligning the sampling strategy with the study aim of examining how managers *themselves* construct and differentiate bullying from other practices.

Article Two utilised data from 505 employees across a range of industries in New Zealand, recruited using Qualtrics online panels to ensure diversity in gender, sector, and age. *Article Three* used the responses provided by 420 employees, recruited via Qualtrics, with screening to ensure participants were employed at least part-time and had a direct manager or supervisor. These criteria ensured relevance to bullying contexts.

4.5 Measures and Instruments

Bullying was analysed and measured in the articles using the Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised (NAQ-R, per Einarsen et al., 2009) in Articles Two and Three. *Organisational dissent* was measured using Kassing’s (2000a) Organisational Dissent Scale, which includes articulated, latent, and displaced dissent. *Conflict management styles* were measured using Rahim’s (1983) Conflict Styles instrument, assessing integrating, compromising, obliging, avoiding, and dominating styles. *Communication traits* were measured using Infante and Rancer’s (1982) Argumentativeness Scale and Infante and Wigley’s (1986) Verbal Aggressiveness Scale. Demographic variables included age, gender, ethnicity, sector, and tenure. (All measures in appendix 2).

In addition to demographic questions, participants completed two open-ended questions designed to explore managerial understandings of workplace bullying and their interpretations of contested workplace interactions. The first question asked:

“How would you define workplace bullying?”

The second question asked:

“Can you describe a situation where others identified a workplace interaction as bullying, but you would describe it differently?”

The inclusion of these questions reflected the exploratory nature of the first study and aligned with the broader aim of examining workplace bullying as a communicative and interpretive phenomenon. The first question elicited managers’ conceptualisations of workplace bullying, while the second sought examples of disputed or contested acts that participants believed had been incorrectly labelled as bullying. Together, these responses provided the qualitative dataset underpinning the thematic analysis reported in *Article One* and enabled the exploration of workplace bullying as an interpretive and communicative phenomenon.

Taken together, these three articles were designed to work in concert, each examining the phenomenon of workplace bullying from a distinct but complementary angle. By integrating behavioural, communicative, and relational measures, the programme of research aimed to develop a multifaceted understanding of how bullying emerges, is interpreted, and is sustained in organisational contexts. As illustrated above, the studies employed well-validated instruments chosen for their conceptual fit with the research questions.

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- Workplace Bullying was measured using the *Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised* (NAQ-R, per Einarsen et al., 2009), which operationalises bullying as exposure to repeated negative acts such as exclusion, ridicule, and undermining. The NAQ-R is widely used internationally, allowing for comparison, while its behavioural checklist format avoids forcing respondents into contested definitional debates.
 - **Organisational Dissent** was measured using Kassing’s (2000a) *Organisational Dissent Scale*, which distinguishes between articulated (upward), latent (horizontal), and displaced (external) forms of dissent. This instrument aligns with the thesis’s communication-centred lens, capturing how employees voice opposition or critique.
 - Conflict Styles were measured using Rahim’s (1983) *Organisational Conflict Inventory–II*, assessing integrating, compromising, obliging, avoiding, and dominating approaches. This measure links directly to the interpretive focus on interactional meaning-making in conflictual contexts.
 - **Communication Traits** were measured using Infante and Rancer’s (1982) *Argumentativeness Scale* and Infante and Wigley’s (1986) *Verbal Aggressiveness Scale*. These traits capture predispositions toward constructive and destructive communicative behaviour, respectively, and have been widely validated in organisational communication research.

Demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, tenure, sector) were also collected to allow for contextual analysis. Collectively, these instruments provided both breadth and conceptual alignment with the research aims.

4.6 Analysis

Article One used thematic analysis per Braun and Clarke (2006). Manager narratives were coded inductively to identify themes relating to ambiguity between bullying and legitimate management. *Article Two* employed regression analyses to test whether dissent forms predicted bullying perceptions. *Article Three* employed SEM to test the hypothesised trait-state model. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was undertaken to examine the latent structure of the measure within the present sample. The decision to employ EFA reflected the exploratory aims of this stage of the analysis, particularly given the ongoing debate regarding the dimensionality and cross-cultural applicability of workplace bullying measures. Unlike Principal Components Analysis (PCA), which is primarily concerned with data reduction and the summarisation of observed variance, EFA seeks to identify underlying latent constructs that account for shared variance among observed indicators. In the context of the present thesis, the intention was not merely to reduce the number of items but rather to explore the extent to which the underlying structure of the construct was reflected within the New Zealand sample. Accordingly, EFA represented the more theoretically appropriate analytic approach.

4.7 Ethics

All studies were approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (appendix1). Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, with participants assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. In *Article One*, participants provided narrative accounts through survey responses; Articles Two and Three involved online surveys with explicit consent checkboxes before proceeding.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, several risk mitigation strategies were implemented. Participants were provided with referral information for Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) and national counselling hotlines in case of distress. The research team remained alert to the potential for disclosures of severe bullying or harm, with protocols in place to provide additional support resources. Risks of reputational harm to organisations were minimised by not identifying workplaces, industries, or associations in reporting. Data security protocols followed institutional requirements: data were stored in encrypted, password-protected files on secure servers and will be retained for seven years before deletion. Researcher positionality was also acknowledged as a potential influence, with reflexive practices employed to monitor bias and interpretation. These ethical considerations ensured that participants' rights, wellbeing, and dignity were prioritised throughout the project.

4.8 Integration

Despite the distinct methods used across the three articles, the thesis is unified by a shared methodological spine. The interpretivist, social constructivist orientation frames each study, ensuring that workplace bullying is consistently treated as a communicative, contested phenomenon. The cumulative logic - from qualitative exploration of managerial narratives, to quantitative testing of dissent and bullying, to SEM modelling of trait-state dynamics - provides coherence across the thesis while enabling diverse methodological contributions. The convergence of findings across multiple studies employing different methodological approaches provides some reassurance regarding the robustness of the overarching conclusions, despite the non-probability nature of the survey samples.

This integration operates on two levels. First, it reflects a communication-centred theoretical lens, foregrounding how bullying is constituted through discourse, dissent, and interaction. Second, it demonstrates methodological pluralism, showing how qualitative and quantitative approaches can be combined to capture complexity, address gaps, and build cumulative insight. Each study thus contributes uniquely while remaining comparable and consistent, enabling interpretation of the three articles as a coherent body of research.

Chapter 5: Article One

Tootell, B., Croucher, S., Cullinane, J., & Ashwell, D. (2025). Exploring disputed acts of bullying: A study of manager perceptions in New Zealand exploring disputed acts of bullying in New Zealand. *Journal of Management & Organization*.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2025.10022>

5.1 Introduction

Article One – Tootell et al. (2025) investigates how managers in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret “disputed acts” of workplace bullying. Aligning with the interpretivist and social constructivist stance outlined in Section 4.2, the study treats bullying as a contested phenomenon whose meaning emerges through interaction and perception. Drawing on 316 open-ended narrative responses collected via online surveys (Section 4.4), the article employs thematic analysis (Section 4.6) to identify patterns in how managers distinguish between legitimate managerial behaviours and actions perceived as bullying. The study’s focus on ambiguity, intent, and contextual interpretation directly addresses the gaps identified in the literature review (Sections 2.2, 2.7) and establishes foundational propositions for the subsequent quantitative studies. In doing so, it exemplifies the exploratory phase of the thesis’ multi-method design (Section 4.3) and foregrounds the communicative processes central to understanding bullying in Aotearoa New Zealand.

5.2 Statement of Contribution

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION DOCTORATE WITH PUBLICATIONS/MANUSCRIPTS

We, the student and the student's main supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the student's contribution as indicated below in the Statement of Originality.

Student name:	Beth Tootell
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Name and title of main supervisor:	Doug Ashwell
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In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Chapter Five
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Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:¹

I as the student was responsible for the conceptualisation, data collection, formal analysis, methodology and writing both the original draft and editing. All three supervisors were involved in setting milestones, tracking progress, ensuring the quality of the deliverables, adherence to ethics and shaping the projects direction and evolution. They also provided significant feedback and editing on the written article.

Please select one of the following three options:

☒	The manuscript/published work is published or in press Please provide the full reference of the research output. Tootell, B., Croucher, S., Cullinane, J., & Ashwell, D. (2025). Exploring disputed acts of bullying: A study of manager perceptions in New Zealand exploring disputed acts of bullying in New Zealand. Journal of Management & Organization. https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2025.10022
☐	The manuscript is currently under review for publication Please provide the name of the journal:

☐	It is intended that the manuscript will be published, but it has not yet been submitted to a journal		
Student's signature:		Main supervisor's signature:	

5.3 Published Article

=== Start of Article ===

Journal of Management & Organization (2025), page 1 of 16
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring disputed acts of bullying: A study of manager perceptions in New Zealand exploring disputed acts of bullying in New Zealand

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is a persistent issue despite extensive research, with most studies focusing on targets rather than managerial perspectives. This study explores how New Zealand managers conceptualize work- place bullying, shedding light on cultural and organizational influences. While bullying affects roughly one in 10 New Zealand workers, definitions remain inconsistent, complicating prevention and response efforts. This research investigates whether managers distinguish bullying from other forms of conflict and aggression, and how their views align with regulatory definitions such as those from WorkSafe New Zealand. A randomized Qualtrics panel of 316 managers completed an anonymous online survey, including open- ended questions. Responses were analysed using six-phase thematic analysis, enabling candid reflection and rich insights into bullying behaviours, impacts, and organizational dynamics. The findings highlight the importance of understanding bullying within its communication context and suggest that clearer, less stigmatized definitions may support more effective reporting and intervention by managers.

Keywords: bullying; conflict; organizational communication; workplace communication; thematic analysis

Introduction

Workplace bullying is characterized by repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed toward an employee or group, creating a risk to health and safety. While there are no universally accepted definitions, scholars such as Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2020) emphasize its persistence and power imbalance. WorkSafe New Zealand (2017) defines workplace bullying as repeated behaviour that is directed at an individual or group and creates a health and safety risk. In contrast, negative workplace interactions such as assertive communication, strong leadership, or performance management, a formal organizational process involving setting expectations, monitoring progress, and providing feedback to ensure that employees meet their goals and contribute effectively to the organization (Aguinis, 2013) may be perceived as bullying but do not meet the definitional criteria. The 2011 article by Lutgen–Sandvik and Tracy, titled ‘Answering Five Key Questions About Workplace Bullying: How Communication Scholarship Provides Thought Leadership for Transforming Abuse at Work’, has been influential in the field of workplace bullying research. They, alongside more recent researchers (D’Cruz, Noronha, & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2018; Harlos, 2017; Lempp, Blackwood, & Gordon, 2020), have explored the complex dynamics of power and subjectivity in workplace bullying, emphasizing the importance of contextual understanding. These definitions, however, are shaped by interpersonal communication and power dynamics, and behaviours may be interpreted differently based on context, intent, and perception.

Bullying in the workplace is a counterproductive behaviour often perpetrated by people in positions of authority (bosses/managers, supervisors, executives, and sometimes peers) against those with less power. It is mostly non-physical, passive, and an indirect form of aggression. Within organizational communication, workplace bullying refers to the negative, harmful, and sometimes hostile and aggressive communication present in organizations (Cowan, Clayton, & Bochantin, 2021).

Problematic workplace behaviour falls on a continuum with incivility on one end, and harassment on the other (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). For example, if a co-worker unwittingly says insensitive things to just about everybody, they may have poor social skills, but they likely don’t intend to upset someone. Some authors suggest incivility is in fact more insidious because it occurs in day-to-day interactions. As these types of behaviours are part of most workplaces it makes incivility difficult to categorize and create policies to prevent and combat. Similarly, humorous exchanges can be intentional bullying, or just an attempt at humour. Researchers have recognized humour to have the ability to obscure perpetrator intentions, making it difficult

for victims to subjectively perceive jokes as harmless or hostile, bullying behaviour (Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011). Tone, pitch, and facial expressions can shift the interpretive frame of a message, as outlined in Gumperz's (1982) concept of contextualization cues, and are central to Infante's (1987) idea that aggression is perceived, not merely enacted. One form of behaviour, which has been reported to be both humorous and aggressive in relation to bullying behaviour, is teasing or banter (Dyner, 2008; Khosropour & Walsh, 2001; Kowalski, 2000). The fine line between pro-social teasing and anti-social verbal bullying behaviour has been acknowledged within the bullying literature (Kruger, Gordon, & Kuban, 2006; Mills & Carwile, 2009). Hurtful teasing or hurtful cyber-teasing are deliberate verbal aggression intended to cause distress to the victim (Infante, 1987; Madlock & Westerman, 2011; Merkin, 2009; Warm, 1997). General teasing can be defined as 'the juxtaposition of two potentially contradictory acts: (a) a challenge to one or more of the target's goals and (b) play' (Mills & Babrow, 2003, p. 278). Similarly, banter has been described as a playful interaction between individuals that serves to improve the relationship, which can involve innocuous aggression (Dyner, 2008). The contrast between challenge and play can create an ambiguous social interaction and requires non-verbal social cues, such as tone, the vocal quality or attitude expressed through voice modulation, which influences the emotional and interpretive framing of a message (Gumperz, 1982) and facial gestures (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991), to contextualize the interaction and display hurtful or benign intention.

Workplace bullying therefore seems to have become a ubiquitous part of organizational life, with recent studies indicating that approximately 30% of employees experience bullying at some point in their careers (WorkSafe New Zealand, 2017).

Workplace bullying in New Zealand has been a significant concern, with studies indicating its prevalence across various sectors. (Catley, 2022; Haar, 2023; New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2022). The 2018 Workplace Bullying and Harassment Survey revealed that bullying is more common in hierarchical organizations and sectors such as healthcare, education, and public service. New Zealand's legal framework, including WorkSafe guidelines and the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, outlines employer responsibilities in preventing and addressing bullying. However, gaps remain in how managers interpret and enforce these definitions in practice.

The fundamental aim of this research is to deepen our understanding of the bullying concept rather than to necessarily predict and control dysfunctional behaviours at work.

New Zealand is a challenging environment for examining workplace bullying due to its unique cultural diversity, varying definitions of bullying across organizations, and the integration of both broad central government policy definitions and academic definitions. New Zealand addresses both bullying and harassment under employment legislation, as key considerations in providing and maintaining a safe and healthy workplace under workplace safety (Bentley et al., 2021; Blackwood, Bentley, & Catley, 2018; Catley et al., 2013). The concept of bullying itself is also both poorly understood and differently defined depending on whether organizations take a broad central government policy definition or an academic definition.

However, questions arise where bullying is reaching the touted epidemic proportions in New Zealand, or is there a misplaced public perception, something fed in part by increased attention to the problem? Further, considering the 'Me-Too' culture, are we seeing an increase in the reporting of behaviours that have existed at similar levels for some time, rather than seeing a spike in actual behaviours themselves? When examining bullying from a communicative approach in the New Zealand context, questions arise that when answered may help disentangle the conceptual morass that surrounds bullying.

Key questions are raised by the research, what is bullying; and how is it communicated, and manifested? As the research seeks to understand bullying as a communicative construct, occurring between managers and subordinates, we need to consider related communication constructs that help clarify the interaction and communicative act as it occurs.

Infante's (1987) work on argumentativeness and verbal aggression provides a lens to examine how bullying perceptions may be shaped by communication behaviours. Infante argued that verbal aggression could be assessed from a source, receiver, message, or legal perspective, influencing how managers distinguish between constructive conflict and bullying. This study integrates Infante's framework to analyse how managers interpret workplace interactions. To further interrogate how communication behaviours contribute to perceived bullying, Infante's (1987) theory of verbal aggression and argumentativeness provides a useful analytical lens.

Verbal aggression

Verbal aggression is a common component of workplace bullying. (Goodboy, Martin, Mills, & Clark-Gordon, 2022; Plimmer, Nguyen, Teo, & Tuckey, 2022; Tootell et al., 2023). Verbal aggression can be a primary means through which workplace bullying occurs. Verbal aggression specifically refers to the use of aggressive or hostile language to demean, criticize, threaten, or hurt someone, Infante and Wigley (1986, p. 61) defined aggressive behaviour in interpersonal communication as 'a joint product of the individual's aggressive traits and the way the person perceives the aggressive inhibitors and disinhibitors in the given situation'. In the workplace context, verbal aggression involves using words, tone, or

gestures to assert power and control over others, often causing distress and discomfort. These can include yelling, name-calling, insults, derogatory remarks, offensive language, and other forms of harmful verbal communication. Bullies may use harsh language, insults, and demeaning comments to belittle their targets, erode their self-esteem, and maintain control over them. However, workplace bullying can also extend beyond verbal interactions to include non-verbal actions and behaviours, such as sabotage, areolation, and undermining work tasks.

Verbal aggression can be a tool or tactic employed within a broader pattern of workplace bullying (Quinn, Waheduzzaman, & Djurkovic, 2024). While not all instances of verbal aggression qualify as workplace bullying, it becomes a significant concern when it is part of a systematic and ongoing campaign to degrade and harm a person or group within the professional setting. It's important for organizations to address both verbal aggression and broader patterns of workplace bullying through policies, training, and supportive interventions to create a healthy and respectful work environment.

Organizational communication and bullying

Organizational communication research may be beneficial for developing better understanding and potential for addressing workplace bullying because of its capacity to profile the complexity of workplace bullying (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Organizational communication scholars joined the academic conversation about workplace bullying in the early 2000s (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Organizational communication research shows that bullying is a complex multilevel issue occurring not only inside organizations but also one that is inextricably interconnected with larger social systems of meaning (i.e., discourses) and institutional policies.

Organizational communication researchers conceptualize bullying as a systemic issue that, to a great degree, develops from organizational practice and policy. As Keashly (2001) notes, organizational representatives rarely doubt or deny that bullies act the way recipients describe. Nonetheless, even when senior managers accept the veracity of recipient's reports, most of their responses typically fail to end the behaviours. In only a third of cases do manager responses result in improving the recipient's situations (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Organizational communication research provides considerable insight into the ways individuals make sense of workplace bullying through the field's complex understanding of voice, particularly whose voice are privileged in research (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Mumby & Stohl, 1996).

Communication research also provides a distinctive contribution by exploring the narrative form of worker responses to perceived bullying. However, labelling an individual's behaviours as bullying or harassment could be difficult because the meanings and

interpretations given to communicative behaviour vary from one person to another. The same phrase, gesture, laughter, or touch might be interpreted differently by various recipients who will assess that phrase, etc., by considering previous interactions with the other. Therefore, the same kind of message can be received as a spontaneous, harmless joke by one person and as a repeated, painful insult by another. Similarly, the ability of an individual to defend themselves might be estimated from the verbal and non-verbal messages they send, and they must also be interpreted considering the previous knowledge gained of the sender and the relationship they have with the alleged bully.

Disputed acts of bullying

Recognizing communicative acts may be interpreted differently by different actors, this research examines whether some acts described as bullying are indeed something else. Despite New Zealand having a legal definition of bullying, it is difficult for managers to identify it empirically due to varying interpretations of behaviours and the subjective nature of perceived intent and impact.

In communication theory, noise refers to any interference that distorts or disrupts the transmission or interpretation of a message between sender and receiver. This interference can be physical, psycho-logical, semantic, or physiological in nature (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2018). Misinterpretation occurs when a message is received and understood differently from the sender's intended meaning. While noise may contribute to a misinterpretation (e.g., due to unclear wording or distraction), the key distinction is that misinterpretation centres on cognitive decoding errors, not necessarily interference. For example, a listener may misinterpret a sarcastic remark as sincere due to contextual ambiguity – even in the absence of noise. Microaggressions, by contrast, are subtle, often unintentional, verbal or non-verbal slights or insults directed at marginalized groups, often based on race, gender, or other identities. Unlike noise or misinterpretation, microaggressions are socially embedded and reflect systemic bias or power dynamics. From a constructivist perspective, both mis-interpretation and noise highlight how communicative meaning is co-created, negotiated, and often unstable. While a microaggression can be misinterpreted or obscured by noise, its defining feature is that it conveys implicit prejudice, whether it is consciously delivered.

Psychological noise refers to the internal distractions or biases within an individual's mind that affect their ability to comprehend or engage with a message (Tazelaar, Van Lange, & Ouwerkerk, 2004). The types of noise are highly subjective and can vary significantly based on cultural background, age, and upbringing. Psychological noise can also be influenced by individual differences such as personality traits, cognitive biases, emotional states, and psychological disorders (Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Tazelaar, 2002). For example, someone

with high levels of anxiety may be more prone to interpreting neutral statements as threatening, resulting in psychological noise that hinders effective communication.

Psychological noise and verbal aggression can interact in several ways, exacerbating the negative effects of both. Psychological noise can interfere with the accurate interpretation of verbal messages, leading to a misinterpretation of the intentions or tone of verbal communication or the perception of statements as aggressive or hostile. The interaction between psychological noise and verbal aggression underscores the importance of fostering a supportive and respectful communication environment, where clear and empathetic communication practices are encouraged.

Therefore, key elements of the definition of bullying are open to perception and interpretation. These ambiguous acts – such as dissent or managerial prerogative – challenge binary definitions of bullying and require a communication-centred approach to decipher meaning and intention. This study attempts to uncover several acts that could be interpreted in various ways, which may or may not be considered bullying: (1) acts identified ‘by others’ as bullying but not by respondents, such as work- place deviance, voluntary behaviour that violates organizational norms and threatens the well-being of the organization or its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995); (2) managerial prerogative, where managerial prerogative is the recognized authority and discretion of managers to make decisions regarding work direction, discipline, and performance within organizational and legal limits (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016) that may be perceived as bullying; (3) work that is beyond a colleague’s competence (tasks that are too challenging but not unreasonable workloads); (4) misplaced humour that is inappropriate in tone, timing, or target, which may unintentionally offend or be perceived as hostile (Holmes, 2000); and other counter-productive workplace behaviours, such as dissent, the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices, policies, or decisions (Kassing, 1998).

The most common self-report method, the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), developed by Einarsen et al. (2020), measures the frequency of various negative acts experienced by individuals. However, it has yielded little to no published validity evidence in the New Zealand context. A pilot study conducted by the primary researcher provided weak validity results, suggesting New Zealand respondents may understand bullying differently from respondents from other contexts, or it may be conceived of inconsistently within New Zealand. In addition, previous empirical research by Tootell et al., (2023) found New Zealanders perceive bullying and dissent as highly related concepts. Individuals who score high on organizational dissent are perceived as high on bullying (Tootell et al., 2023).

Research is divided on how bullying is defined within a workplace context. As reports of workplace bullying are on the rise, particularly in the New Zealand context, managers are increasingly having to address and manage these issues effectively. It is therefore imperative to examine their understanding of precisely what constitutes bullying. Thus, the research question is: RQ: How is bullying understood by managers in New Zealand workplaces?

This study adopts a communication-centred lens to explore how New Zealand managers interpret and distinguish workplace bullying from other forms of workplace conflict. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, the research emphasizes the socially constructed nature of bullying perceptions, recognizing that meaning is shaped through language, context, and interpersonal dynamics. Rather than proposing a new communication model, the study applies established theories from interpersonal and organizational communication – including Infante’s (1987) framework on verbal aggression and argumentativeness, as well as concepts such as noise (Adler et al., 2018) and organizational dissent (Kassing, 1998) – to examine how contested communicative acts are interpreted by managers. The aim is to uncover definitional inconsistencies and surface the communicative ambiguities that lead certain managerial behaviours to be viewed as bullying by some, but not by others. This approach positions bullying not merely as an objective behaviour, but as a meaning-making process embedded in communicative exchanges shaped by tone, context, and power. By synthesizing interpersonal communication theories such as Infante’s (1987), dissent theory (Kassing, 1998), and organizational communication insights the study offers a nuanced framework for interpreting contested workplace interactions.

Methods

Procedure

Responses were collected from 316 New Zealand managers. Participants were recruited using a randomized panel through the Qualtrics service. To ensure the integrity and reliability of the data collected through the online survey, multiple quality control measures were implemented. Data quality was safeguarded using Qualtrics’ built-in fraud detection tools, screening for duplicate responses, and enforcing minimum engagement time thresholds to filter out inattentive or automated submissions. Although online surveys inherently carry some risk of fraudulent or low-quality responses (Ballard & Montgomery, 2017), research indicates that when appropriate validation techniques are applied, online data collection can yield data comparable in reliability to traditional survey methods (Teitcher et al., 2015).

The data were collected through anonymous, online open-ended survey responses consisting solely of text. This method was chosen to encourage candid and uninhibited participation, reducing social desirability bias and allowing respondents to express their experiences and perceptions freely. While the lack of face-to-face interaction limits opportunities for probing or clarification, the textual data provide rich qualitative insights directly from participants’ own words. The online format also enabled a broad and diverse sample, enhancing the relevance and generalizability of the findings within the study context. Whilst it may be seen as a limitation that participants were not provided with a

standardized definition of workplace bullying, potentially influencing their interpretations, this was an intentional decision by the researchers, as we seek to construct how participants independently perceive bullying.

All respondents were asked open-ended questions, as well as demographic questions. This was part of a larger study, with several quantitative responses sought, the results of which are reported here (Tootell et al 2023). Responses were anonymous. The questionnaire was distributed by Qualtrics to a randomized panel of working individuals in New Zealand, specifically targeting managers. Supervisors were included in the definition of managers. The sample included participants from various industries, ensuring a diverse representation. The research questions guiding this study were: (1) How do managers in New Zealand define workplace bullying? (2) How do these definitions compare to legal and academic definitions? (3) What factors influence managers' perceptions of bullying? The survey took approximately 10–15 min to complete.

Open-ended questions and data analysis

Participants were asked two open-ended questions that assessed their understanding/perception of bullying in the workplace. The open-ended questions were designed to (1) understand how respondents understood or described bullying and (2) ask respondents to reflect on an incident where others described it as bullying but which they would have described as something else.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative data. Initial intercoder reliability was 89%. This analysis followed the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), which provides a theoretically flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) across the dataset. The analysis was informed by an interpretivist paradigm, recognizing that meaning is socially constructed and contextually situated. While the analysis was inductive in nature, it was also sensitized by existing theoretical literature on workplace bullying and managerial sense-making, which informed the coding framework and interpretation of themes. In particular, we drew on conceptual understandings of bullying as contested, relational, and embedded within organizational power dynamics.

Initial familiarization with the data involved multiple readings of participant responses, followed by systematic coding and theme development. Codes were iteratively refined and grouped into broader themes that captured recurring patterns and conceptual insights relevant to the research questions. To ensure the rigour and credibility of the thematic analysis, intercoder reliability was established through a systematic process in which two researchers independently coded a subset of the data. Coding consistency was assessed through iterative comparison and discussion of discrepancies, following best practices in qualitative research (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Agreement was reached through consensus,

strengthening the dependability of the coding framework and enhancing the transparency of the analytical process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Consent for the research was obtained from the University Ethics Committee. Any possible harm to participants through the elicitation of experiences were addressed through the design of the questionnaire, for example the focus on opinions means that general discussion around the extent of the problem could occur without participants having to share personal experiences. Participants were asked to expand on experiences of reported bullying behaviours, rather than personal experiences.

Findings

Three key themes were identified in the analysis. Before presenting these themes, it is helpful to contextualize the demographic profile of the participants and the qualitative richness of their contributions. An analysis of participant demographics (N = 316) revealed a broad cross-section of employees across sectors and organizational levels. The most common age reported was 37, with industries represented including construction, healthcare, education, and retail. Respondents held a range of job titles, with mid-level roles being most common, and tenure in organizations typically ranged from three to eight years. Most participants were employed full-time (approximately 75%) and all identified as New Zealand citizens or residents. Excluding Q71 – a yes/no question – from the open-ended dataset, 99.4% of participants provided at least one open-ended response, with word counts ranging from brief remarks to extended narratives of over 2,300 words. The median response length was 156 words. Those providing the most detailed responses were often aged between 35 and 56, working in managerial positions, particularly within the healthcare sector. Qualitative themes emerging from these responses included personal experiences of bullying, perceptions of toxic leadership, feelings of isolation, and dissatisfaction with how human resources or senior leaders addressed conflict. These findings demonstrate the depth and emotional intensity conveyed in the open-ended data, reinforcing the importance of narrative insight alongside quantitative analysis in organizational studies.

First, ‘how’ communication was delivered was a key deciding factor in whether respondents would define an incident as bullying. Second, the respondents did not have the same clarity of what bullying was when compared with what organizations may have in their policies. Third, any non-productive communication behaviours, which fails to contribute to constructive, respectful, or goal-oriented workplace interactions, potentially including sarcasm, passive-aggression, or unresponsiveness (Keashly, 2001), could be misconstrued as bullying. Respondents were asked to reflect on instances of events where they observed a situation where others identified the situation as a bullying event that they would describe differently. Of the 313 respondents, 31 identified they had experienced this, and a further four were unsure. Additionally, 138 respondents could identify situations that could have

multiple meanings, indicating a broader issue of contested meanings in workplace interactions. Whilst the nature of the sample meant only 10% of respondents identified a 'disputed event'; this sufficiently enables the researchers to highlight some issues worthy of further analysis. There was little consistency in how the respondents defined the event, if not defining it as bullying.

Delivery of communication

Managers frequently described bullying in terms of verbal behaviours, including both direct aggression and more subtle communication tactics. Some respondents referenced cyber-bullying but provided limited discussion on how it manifests in their workplaces. Future research should investigate the prevalence and impact of cyber-bullying in New Zealand workplaces, particularly in the post-pandemic era. Several respondents identified the delivery of the communication, for example, shouting, sarcasm, tone of voice, humour, as the reason for the disputed act being considered bullying. Respondent 280, a 48-year-old male, mid-level manager stated: 'One employee did some mistake of what he's being doing. A foreman yell on him and talk sarcastically direct to the person who did mis- takes.' Similarly, Respondent 41, a 55-year-old female mid-level manager, observed that 'Long story short, I apparently have tone in my voice and tone is bullying.' Respondent 23, a 48-year-old male business partner, gave the example of 'A joke which virtually no one will ever remember 10 min. later.' Respondent 251, a 63-year-old female senior manager stated, 'The person was speaking too loudly, and the other person got offended.' The tone of correction was also identified as an issue for why an event might have been construed as bullying, with respondents suggesting that being advised of mistakes at work was wrongly construed as bullying. There was common agreement that corrective behaviours or comments that were critical of colleagues or employees' work might be construed as bullying. Respondent 290, a female, mid-level manager gave an example of feedback being misinterpreted as bullying. She said, 'They couldn't differentiate between receiving constructive feedback and bullying. Some new kid was using the forklift and weren't using it right and mocking people when we were trying to assist him when he needed help.' Respondent 183, 60-year-old male mid-level corrections officer also discussed how feedback is seen as bullying. He said, 'Generally when someone is brought to task on their mistakes, and they think they are being bullied when a senior officer holds them accountable.' Respondent 221, a 57-year-old female mid-level manager, gave another example of when staff perceive correcting mistakes as bullying, 'Being told by another worker what to do for their job.' Respondent 130, a 62-year-old female upper-level manager recounted the following case in which she was accused of bullying for suggesting improvements, 'I have been described as a bully when I make suggestions on improving a court reporter's skills to the team leader who I thought would be the appropriate person to make the suggestion to, but she calls it bullying.'

Unclear definitions of bullying

A key finding was the lack of consensus on what constitutes workplace bullying. Many managers conflated bullying with other forms of workplace conflict, such as performance management, assertive leadership, and interpersonal disagreements. Notably, a subset of responses aligned with WorkSafe New Zealand's definition, while others reflected broader interpretations, including any form of strong communication or perceived incivility.

A common theme that emerged was how participants perceived different opinions, and even imagined slights other co-workers might often construe as bullying. For example, Respondent 304, a 30-year-old female mid-level manager stated, 'Everyone has differing opinions and levels that they consider bullying or harassment.' Respondent 47, a 44-year-old female mid-level manager in education, reflected on an example from outside the workplace in how she sees people defining 'bullying'. She said:

I often see parents complaining on Facebook about their child being bullied and often I think of it as normal childhood friendship/relationships, part of growing up - such as a child being called a name, and parents now overreact and think of it as bullying.

Adding to the notion of imagined slights, Respondent 299, a 55-year-old female upper-level manager in health care, suggested that in her workplace, 'One co-worker is always imagining other people are doing and saying things against her.' When asked to define bullying, the respondents identified more than 100 different behaviours. Some of these examples include Respondent 4, a 28-year-old male, lower-level manager who suggested the following might be considered bullying: 'Siding with some employees against you.' Respondent 11, a 70-year-old male upper-level manager, gave the example of:

Being asked to work on my days off and when I say I have made other arrangements to go somewhere on that day, a staff member says a comment like 'Such as?' in front of management. I controlled my anger and ignored their remark, but it still rankles me to think about it.

Respondent 127, a 38-year-old female mid-level manager, simply defined bullying as: 'excessive monitoring'.

Four key notions of 'bullying' appeared. Belittling was the most identified, followed by physical abuse and verbal abuse, intimidation, and then 'criticism'. As criticisms are so open to interpretation, this may present challenges for managers exercising legitimate managerial control.

Non-constructive communication

Two respondents suggested the claim of bullying could have been used to deflect attention from themselves. Respondent 220, a 58-year-old male, upper-level manager noted: 'The person who claimed to have been bullied were a bully themselves who were seeking to push a personal grievance settlement.' Humour was also sometimes identified as a non-constructive and bullying form of communication. Respondent 39, a 34-year-old, male, lower-level manager, said people's use of humour is often used to hide bullying. He said people often use inappropriate or 'mocking words' when they bully others and think it is funny.

Finally, respondents were asked to identify how disputed acts of bullying might be perceived differently, regardless of whether they had personally witnessed or experienced an act that was identified at the time as bullying. Whilst 175 of the 313 respondents could not identify potential disputed acts of bullying, the remaining 138 respondents could identify situations that could have multiple meanings. Several key themes emerged from analysing these responses. Some of these are still considered bullying under the New Zealand definition. For example, eight respondents identified abuse, three assault, two racism, threatening behaviour and verbal abuse; and five each for intimidation and harassment. The alternative explanations that do not reflect current definitions of bullying include rudeness, bluntness, loudness, joking, teasing and 'smartarse' behaviour.

Discussion

The research findings underscore critical areas essential for understanding bullying within the New Zealand context, which have theoretical and practical implications. Notably, managers who had been accused of bullying often had different views on the meanings of bullying compared to those who had not been accused. This highlights the subjective nature of bullying perceptions and the influence of personal experiences. Managers' definitions of bullying often diverge from the legal definition and other definitions in the literature. For example, while the law defines bullying as repeated and unreasonable behaviour, managers may perceive it as any negative interaction, regardless of frequency or reasonableness. Although the study included a large sample, some themes were only supported by a small number of participants. For instance, only four managers explicitly discussed retaliation or organizational tolerance of bullying. These inconsistencies highlight the need for further research into managerial perceptions and the contextual factors shaping them. These themes are important however as they highlighted avenues that need further explicit exploration by researchers as our understanding of communication and bullying advances.

Theoretical implications

Theoretically, findings challenge the conventional view of bullying as intentional, proposing a nuanced understanding of intent and interpretation. Intent and interpretation are crucial when discussing bullying. If bullying is seen as an intentional action, it cannot be considered noise. However, if a message is interpreted differently than intended, as often seen in these research responses, it can be understood as noise. Noise can be both physiological and psychological, it is the interpretation that differs. West and Turner (2022) focused on the issues of sender and receiver and noise, and the research suggests perhaps we should look to recode some acts of bullying as noise? The exploration of noise in communication, influenced by cultural diversity and individual communication styles, supports recoding some acts of bullying as noise. It needs to be acknowledged by managers and workers alike that how information is communicated is critical. New Zealand workplaces are diverse, in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity amongst other factors. The research suggests workers may not necessarily come to the workplace with the skills to either moderate their own communication style or to interpret messages without noise in the form of their own opinions and experiences regarding tone. Keashly and Neuman (2004) argue that minor changes in daily interactions can lead to substantial transformation.

This study highlights that allegations of bullying can sometimes be a means of expressing dissent. Additionally, instances of bullying may arise from the inability to communicate dissent in healthy and appropriate ways. Bullying is connected to larger systems of meaning, including organizational culture, power dynamics, and societal norms. Understanding these connections is crucial for developing effective interventions. Both bullying and dissent are forms of communication that involve expressing disagreement and challenging norms (Tootell et al., 2023). It is therefore not surprising that where dissent is unable to be easily or healthily expressed, more destructive forms of change communication, such as bullying, may become more prevalent. Tootell et al., (2023) found that New Zealand workers who engaged in more articulated and latent dissent were more likely to perceive workplace bullying. The results of the current study add a further dimension to our understanding of the link between workplace bullying and dissent in the New Zealand workplace, by examining how managers perceive this relationship. Future research should continue to explore the link in other cultural contexts.

Practical implications

Practically, if managers and organizations can acknowledge the complexities in this space, then there is a myriad of relatively simple and low-cost interventions that can be put in place to work to reduce disharmony, and feelings of bullying and inappropriate interactions in the workplace. For example, an act as simple as a course on cross-cultural communication could inform a worker how messages are differently influenced by the cultural norms and backgrounds that workers bring with them to the workplace. A critical takeaway from this study is that managers may require additional training to distinguish between legitimate

workplace conflicts and bullying. Infante's framework suggests that verbal aggression is often misinterpreted when context and intent are not considered. Cross-cultural training and education on WorkSafe's definitions could help managers make more informed decisions.

Communication research suggests that some people are innately more verbally aggressive (Beatty & McCroskey, 1997; Camara & Orbe, 2010), perceiving verbal aggression as more justified (Martin, Anderson, & Horvath, 1996) and less damaging to targets than people with low verbal aggressiveness do (Hample & Anagondahalli, 2015; Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992). This helps explain why perpetrators appear to lack empathy (Crawshaw, 2005). Rancer and Avtgis (2006) suggest that if people are verbally aggressive because they lack the skill to develop or generate effective arguments, training can serve as an ameliorative, enhancing skills and curbing verbal aggressiveness. Thus, acceptable standards of behaviour could be set by, and communicated in, a code of conduct, providing tangible boundaries and 'rules of engagement' for staff on an ongoing basis.

Another critical issue raised from this study is that respondents did not have the same clarity of what bullying was, compared to what organizations may have in their policies. Setting acceptable standards of behaviour through a code of conduct can establish clear boundaries and rules of engagement. The study advocates for clear definitions of bullying, harassment, and incivility, enabling organizations to manage these disruptive behaviours appropriately. For example, findings indicate that issues of tone could easily be considered verbal aggression, and it is only through further clarity that these can be resolved. Thus, the importance of organizational policies and procedures are highlighted, emphasizing the need for clear definitions and pathways for interventions. Findings support promoting a better understanding of what constitutes bullying and what does not, fostering positive workplace interactions, and preventing retaliatory behaviours. Academia has a responsibility, alongside organizations and managers, to clearly express and define for their workers what bullying is and is not. Workplace bullying, harassment, and general incivility can all manifest similarly (Chen et al., 2019; Johnson, 2015). Although all these behaviours are undesirable workplace behaviours, managers recognize that they need to be managed differently. It's important to understand the differences between workplace bullying, incivility, and harassment, all of which fall under the category of disruptive behaviours, and how to manage each. This is not to ignore issues that are identified that do not meet the current WorkSafe New Zealand (2017) definition of bullying, but rather to allow for more appropriate interventions. Again, communication skills are likely to be key in improving these interactions. Where behaviours are identified as unprofessional, or merely non-productive, providing workers and managers with the tools to better express themselves, with less opportunity for noise on the part of the decoder, should lead to more positive workplace interactions. Prior research suggests that simply understanding workplace bullying helps leaders and members adopt new attitudes, respond more quickly to reported abuse, and counter bullying in constructive ways (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009).

Further, organizations need to have robust systems in place for reporting and addressing bullying with clear definitions, and clear pathways of interventions. This may help address the unreported and unrecognized acts of bullying identified in the research; alongside also identifying other unproductive workplace behaviours and finally, recognizing the retaliatory behaviour where the accusations of bullying are utilized to stifle reasonable workplace disagreement and legitimate managerial prerogative. Organizational policies and procedures are also complicit in why bullying is poorly understood. Ambiguous policy wording can silence abused workers (Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004) and make it nearly impossible for human resource management to respond effectively (Cowan, 2009), or alternatively when the activity does not meet the threshold for bullying, still leave the unproductive or unprofessional behaviours unaddressed and unresolved.

Finally, any non-productive communication behaviours, such as unprofessional or inconsiderate interactions, could be misconstrued as bullying. This issue is heightened, as explained earlier, by cultural diversity and individual communication styles. Our study emphasizes the significance of communication skills in diverse workplaces. Acknowledging the diverse backgrounds and communication styles of workers, managers, and organizations, findings suggest that simple, low-cost interventions, such as cross-cultural communication courses, can mitigate misunderstandings, including those, for example, mistakenly perceived as verbal aggression.

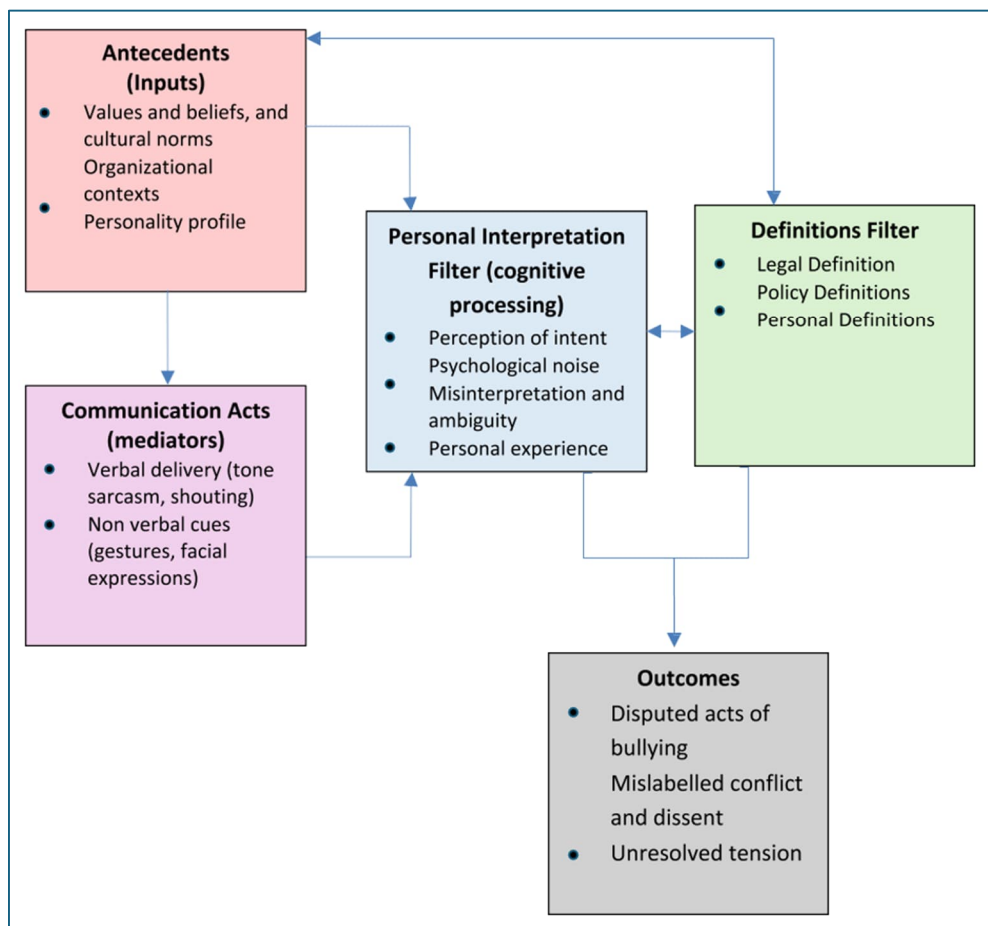
Limitations and conclusion

There are three limitations to this study. First, the research provides only a snapshot rather than extensive insight and therefore cannot be generalized. Regarding transferability, the self-selected nature of respondents and the specific context in which the survey was conducted may limit the extent to which findings can be generalized to other populations or settings. However, detailed descriptions of the context and participant responses allow readers to assess applicability to their own environments. Second, as a retrospective study, participants were required to recall their experiences managing bullying, which may lead to inaccurate accounts. Finally, this study's reliance on anonymous, text-only online responses introduces certain limitations. The absence of interactive dialogue restricts the ability to explore or clarify responses in depth, potentially leading to less nuanced data. This can affect the credibility of the findings, as the depth and context typically gained through interviews or focus groups are absent.

To mitigate this, rigorous thematic analysis procedures were applied, including independent dual coding and consensus discussions, enhancing the trustworthiness of the interpretations. Additionally, without demographic or contextual follow-up, some interpretative detail may be lost. However, the anonymity likely promoted honest disclosure of sensitive topics like bullying, and the textual data still captured authentic, participant-

driven perspectives. These strengths support the validity and value of the findings despite the inherent constraints of the data collection method.

[Article One] Figure 1. Communication-centered model of how individuals interpret potential acts of workplace bullying.



Overall, while the data collection method imposes certain constraints, these limitations are balanced by methodological rigor and the richness of firsthand textual accounts, supporting the study's contribution to understanding workplace bullying perceptions, allowing for the 'voice of participants' to be heard, which is a strength of this study. Future studies could employ interviews or focus groups to explore managerial perceptions in greater detail. In terms of dependability, the consistent application of Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis framework and Tracy's (2019) qualitative rigor guidelines supports the stability of the analytic process. Maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and iterative theme refinement further strengthens the reliability of the findings. Finally, confirmability was addressed by using multiple coders to reduce subjective bias and by negotiating disagreements to reach a consensus. While the anonymous, text-only nature of the data

prevents follow-up validation with participants (member checking), transparency in coding and theme development promotes objectivity and accountability in the analysis.

The New Zealand context is peculiar and not necessarily transferable, but an understanding of the organizational communication culture is instructive, and it may be worth considering if on this basis quantitative tools can be transferred across cultures without retesting – NAQ-R results. Whilst organizations have very clearly recognized the need to have systems in place to recognize and address bullying, the research undertaken with 316 New Zealand workers suggests much work is still to be done on clearly understanding what bullying is and isn't. Behaviours that are unproductive or unprofessional still require management intervention, those interventions may be differently chosen and applied than if they are characterized as bullying. Further, the stigma attached with either reporting a colleague as a bully, or indeed being personally identified as a bully, may stop individuals from seeking skills and training because of communication challenges. Individuals may be more willing to engage with behaviour modification when those behaviours are more neutrally represented. Finally, the reverse is also true, some workers still identify serious acts, which are easily identifiable as bullying regardless of the definitional schema utilized, such as verbal aggression, as 'not bullying'. Gaining clarity around precisely what constitutes workplace bullying would also deliver greater prominence, greater reporting, and therefore managerial action, when addressing such bullying incidences.

If we wish to address inappropriate workplace behaviours in a practical and meaningful way, we need to have the best possible insight into both its antecedents and its outcomes. If we restrict the measurement of bullying to perceived and self-reported prevalence without understanding the communication context, we risk characterizing the behaviour solely as individual aberrant behaviour. The communication context includes the broader organizational environment, cultural norms, and interpersonal dynamics that influence how bullying is perceived and enacted. At the level at which bullying is currently reported in New Zealand, behaviour outside the area is in fact normalized, so it may be time to consider other explanations (Cullinane, Croucher, Tootell, & Ashwell, 2019).

This research is firmly rooted in a constructivist paradigm, whereby the key process of data collection is narrative rather than deterministic. The purpose of this research is to create meaning-based models and understandings of bullying in the workplace context. Further, this research takes a social epistemological approach and acknowledges that knowledge is contextual and time bound.

This study highlights the complexity of workplace bullying perceptions among managers in New Zealand. Findings suggest a need for clearer definitions, enhanced training, and a broader discussion on cyber-bullying. Future research should expand on these areas, incorporating diverse methodologies to capture the full scope of managerial perspectives.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare none.

=== End of Article ===

5.4 Additional Clarifications

Article One was published within the constraints of journal length and scope, and not all of the data collected could be reported within the published manuscript. In particular, the wording of the open-ended survey questions was not reproduced in full within the published manuscript. It is therefore useful to clarify their role within the broader thesis.

Participants were asked two open-ended questions:

1. *“How would you define workplace bullying?”*
2. *“Can you describe a situation where others identified a workplace interaction as bullying, but you would describe it differently?”*

The first question was intended to capture the range of meanings managers attached to the concept of workplace bullying and to explore the extent to which these understandings aligned with organisational and regulatory definitions. The second question sought examples of what this thesis terms “disputed acts” - situations in which participants believed behaviours had been labelled as bullying despite alternative interpretations being available.

These questions generated rich narrative data that enabled examination of workplace bullying as an interpretive and communicative process. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, responses were coded inductively and subsequently refined through iterative discussion among the research team. The resulting themes provided insight not only into how managers defined bullying but also into the communicative mechanisms through which workplace behaviours came to be understood, contested, or dismissed as bullying. The distinction between defining bullying and interpreting disputed acts became an important foundation for the subsequent studies reported in this thesis, which further examined the relationship between communication processes and bullying perceptions.

Alignment of Themes with Research Questions

As *Article One* has subsequently been published, the structure of the findings section necessarily reflects the conventions and editorial requirements of the journal. It is therefore useful to clarify the relationship between the themes presented in the published manuscript and the research questions that guided the study. This additional commentary is intended to enhance and strengthen the connection between the findings and the overarching aims of the thesis.

Research Question One:

How do managers define workplace bullying?

Responses to the first open-ended question highlighted considerable consistency in managers' broad conceptualisations of workplace bullying. Participants frequently referred to repeated negative behaviours, power imbalances, intimidation, exclusion, and the detrimental impact of behaviours on recipients. At the same time, managers also emphasised communication processes, particularly the manner in which interactions were conducted. The theme of delivery matters emerged strongly within these definitions, with participants distinguishing between constructive performance management and communication perceived as hostile, humiliating, or disrespectful.

This finding contributes to the thesis argument that workplace bullying cannot be understood solely through the presence or absence of particular behaviours, but also through the communicative context in which those behaviours occur.

Research Question Two:

How do managers interpret situations that others identify as bullying?

The second open-ended question generated accounts of situations in which participants believed workplace interactions had been incorrectly labelled as bullying. Three broad patterns were evident.

First, managers frequently described situations involving performance management, disciplinary action, or difficult conversations, which they believed had been interpreted by others as bullying despite being viewed by the manager as legitimate managerial responsibilities. Second, respondents referred to communication style and delivery, noting that directness, emotional expression, humour, or frustration were sometimes experienced differently by different organisational actors. Third, participants described examples of counterproductive interpersonal behaviours, including incivility, conflict, and poor communication practices, which they perceived as problematic but conceptually distinct from workplace bullying. Together, these findings suggest that managers often engage in interpretive work when attempting to distinguish bullying from adjacent organisational phenomena.

Research Question Three:

What do these interpretations reveal about workplace bullying as a communicative phenomenon?

Across the dataset, the most striking finding was the extent to which workplace bullying appeared to function as an interpretive construct. Participants frequently acknowledged that the same behaviour could be experienced and understood differently depending on factors such as intent, relational history, power dynamics, communication style, and organisational context.

These findings support the broader thesis proposition that workplace bullying is not merely behavioural but communicative in nature. That is, while behaviours themselves may be observable, the meanings attached to those behaviours are actively negotiated within organisational relationships.

5.5 Clarification of Thematic Prevalence and Use of Illustrative Quotations

The thematic analysis reported in *Article One* prioritised conceptual richness and interpretive insight rather than quantification. As not all aspects of the analysis could be fully elaborated within the published manuscript, additional commentary regarding the relative prominence of themes would strengthen the presentation of the findings.

The theme concerning the importance of how behaviours were communicated, including tone, delivery, and interpersonal style, emerged consistently throughout the dataset and was evident across a substantial proportion of responses. Similarly, accounts describing the distinction between legitimate managerial action and perceived bullying were common within the disputed act narratives. References to counterproductive communication behaviours that participants regarded as inappropriate but not necessarily bullying occurred less frequently but nonetheless represented a meaningful component of the data.

It is also important to acknowledge that some participant quotations reflected multiple themes simultaneously. For example, a manager describing a difficult performance conversation might simultaneously refer to issues of delivery, managerial legitimacy, and differing interpretations of workplace behaviour. In the published article, quotations were selected to illustrate the breadth and complexity of participants' experiences. Consequently, the alignment between individual quotations and discrete themes may not always have appeared straightforward.

The present clarification therefore recognises that thematic boundaries within qualitative data are rarely absolute. Rather than representing mutually exclusive categories, the themes identified in Study One should be understood as overlapping interpretive lenses through which managers made sense of contested workplace interactions. This complexity reinforces one of the central arguments of the thesis: that workplace bullying is frequently characterised by ambiguity and communicative negotiation rather than by universally agreed understandings of particular behaviours.

5.6 Link to Next Article

Article One contributes several key insights to the overarching thesis. *First*, it demonstrates that definitional ambiguity in respect to workplace bullying is not merely an abstract, theoretical or academic problem but a lived concern and an organisational reality. The thematic analysis of manager narratives revealed that negative acts which were essentially the same were interpreted in divergent ways - with some managers construing behaviours as legitimate managerial oversight, while others labelled them as bullying. This underscores the contested nature of bullying and validates the thesis' focus on perception and meaning-making (Sections 2.2 and 4.2). Communication scholars have similarly observed that acts that might be construed as bullying must be understood as a negotiated interaction including considering the message, context and the nuance of the channel (Hastings & Payne, 2013) rather than a fixed behavioural category (Tye-Williams, 2019). These findings set up the empirical examination of dissent and conflict processes that follows in *Article Two*.

Second, the study clarifies the role of organisational cultural and other organisational dynamics shape the interpretations of bullying in Aotearoa New Zealand. Manager account narratives reflected the tension between egalitarian traditions, Māori and Pacific relational values, and hierarchical organisational structures. Such findings confirm that interpretations of behaviour are mediated not only by individual predispositions but also by local cultural norms, workplace hierarchies, and sector-specific expectations, reinforcing the relevance of context emphasised in Sections 2.4 and 4.4.

Third, the article demonstrates that managers frequently employ justifying strategies when disputing or contesting claims of bullying, often emphasising intent, organisational necessity, or procedural legitimacy. This illustrates how communicative framing preserves managerial prerogatives while simultaneously shaping the boundaries of acceptable workplace behaviour.

Collectively, these contributions establish a foundation for the thesis' subsequent quantitative analyses. By revealing the interpretive complexity of bullying at the managerial level, the study informs the hypotheses and model testing in Chapter 6, where employee perceptions, dissent, and communication traits are examined. In doing so, *Article One* bridges qualitative exploration with the explanatory and predictive phases of the multi-method design (Section 4.3), demonstrating the cumulative logic of the thesis.

Chapter 6: Article Two

Tootell, B., Croucher, S. M., Cullinane, J., Kelly, S., & Ashwell, D. (2023). The overlap between workplace bullying and organizational dissent in New Zealand. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 34(5), 961–984. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCM-03-2023-0037>

6.1 Introduction

Article Two – Tootell et al. (2023) examines how different forms of organisational dissent - articulated, latent, and displaced - relate to employees' perceptions of workplace bullying in Aotearoa New Zealand. Building on the exploratory findings from *Article One* (Section 4.3), *Article Two* advances the thesis from qualitative narrative insight to a quantitative explanatory phase, employing a cross-sectional survey of 505 employees across diverse sectors (Section 4.4). Using validated measures including the NAQ-R for bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009) and Kassing's Organisational Dissent Scale (1997, 1998, 2000a, 2000b) (Section 4.5), regression analyses were conducted to test the relationships between dissent expression and bullying perceptions (Section 4.6). Grounded in the thesis' social constructivist and interpretivist orientation the study focuses on perceived rather than objective bullying, thereby linking employee interpretations to prior insights regarding ambiguity and contested meaning (Sections 2.2, 2.7, 4.2).

This empirical focus reflects wider calls within communication scholarship to integrate bullying research with conflict-process theories, where dissent, power and meaning-making are treated as co-constitutive rather than separate analytical domains (Tye-Williams, 2019). *Article Two* therefore tests empirically the communicative mechanisms proposed in the preceding qualitative analysis, providing an explanatory bridge between interpretive insights and model development in the next chapter.

6.2 Statement of Contribution

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION DOCTORATE WITH PUBLICATIONS/MANUSCRIPTS

We, the student and the student's main supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the student's contribution as indicated below in the Statement of Originality.

Student name:	Beth Tootell
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Name and title of main supervisor:	Doug Ashwell
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In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Chapter Five
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Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:¹

I as the student was responsible for the conceptualisation, data collection, formal analysis, methodology and writing both the original draft and editing. All three supervisors were involved in setting milestones, tracking progress, ensuring the quality of the deliverables, adherence to ethics and shaping the projects direction and evolution. They also provided significant feedback and editing on the written article.

Please select one of the following three options:

☒	The manuscript/published work is published or in press Please provide the full reference of the research output: Tootell, B., Croucher, S. M., Cullinane, J., Kelly, S., & Ashwell, D. (2023). The overlap between workplace bullying and organizational dissent in New Zealand. <i>International Journal of Conflict Management</i> , 34(5), 961–984. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-03-2023-0037
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☐	The manuscript is currently under review for publication Please provide the name of the journal:
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☐	It is intended that the manuscript will be published, but it has not yet been submitted to a journal		
Student's signature:		Main supervisor's signature:	

6.3 Published Article

=== Start of Article ===

The overlap between workplace bullying and organizational dissent in New Zealand

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the extent to which organizational dissent predicts perception of workplace bullying. As previous studies have reported inconsistent and sometimes contradictory results regarding the interaction between the reporting of bullying and demographic variables, these variables are examined in the New Zealand context. Organizational communication research provides considerable insight into the ways individuals make sense of and resist workplace bullying through juxtaposition with the concepts of dissent and intragroup conflict.

Design/methodology/approach – A nationally representative sample of managers in New Zealand ($n = 239$) was conducted. Surveys included demographic questions and the following measures: Organizational Dissent Scale and Negative Acts Questionnaire Revised Scale.

Findings – Key results and indications for further research are highlighted by the third model in this study. First, workers who reported they engaged in either articulated dissent or latent dissent were more likely to perceive workplace bullying. Second, workers who are more likely to express contrary opinions in the workplace are more likely to recognize, acknowledge and tolerate less positive interactions in the workplace such as bullying.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to analyze dissent and bullying in the New Zealand context. Second, this research raises the question of whether there is a conflation of work-related bullying behaviors and bad leadership styles

that may not be targeted (e.g. authoritative leadership and micromanaging). Finally, communication research provides a distinctive contribution by exploring the narrative form of worker responses to perceived bullying. In this manuscript, the authors examine potential predictors on the perception of workplace bullying in the context of New Zealand, particularly focus on the relationship between dissent and the perception of workplace bullying.

Keywords Dissent, Bullying, Organizational communication, Conflict, Decision-making
Paper type Research paper

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Understanding organizational decision-making and the influence of conflict on decision-making is critical in the increasingly multinational workforce. Organizational decisions are rarely unilateral and often made in groups, and during this process, conflict is often inevitable (Kellermans et al., 2011). One form of organizational conflict that has received intense attention is workplace bullying. Workplace bullying is often defined as a situation where a person feels they have repeatedly, or severely, experienced negative actions or acts of omission from one or more people (Einarsen et al., 1994). As groups strive to make decisions, and in some cases as they strive for strategic consensus, dissent is a common communicative tool for groups to avoid groupthink and to promote open and diverse thinking (Kassing, 1997).

Organizational dissent is defined as the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions concerning organizational policies and practices (Kassing, 1998). While researchers have demonstrated the benefits of dissenting, research has also shown the act of dissent can be perceived by its audience as a form of conflict (Croucher et al., 2020, 2022; Zeng, 2018). Researchers have found individuals who dissent are likely to experience bullying for their dissent, often as a form of retaliation (Osborne, 2009; Petrina et al., 2015). Martin et al. (2015) also found students who are bullied by their instructors are more likely to communicate expressive and vengeful dissent in response. Jamieson et al. (2014), on the other hand, stated dissenters may be perceived as workplace bullies as they are challenging others' thinking, face and decision-making. Thus, this study builds from this line of work and examines the extent to which organizational dissent, as a form of communication, predicts perception of workplace bullying. Further, as previous studies have reported inconsistent

and sometimes contradictory results regarding the interaction between the reporting of bullying and demographic variables, these variables are examined in the New Zealand context. This is an important question to address as research shows bullying is a complex multilevel issue. As Keashly (2001) notes, organizational representatives rarely doubt or deny that bullies act the way targets describe. Nonetheless, even when senior managers accept the veracity of target reports, the majority of their responses typically fail to end the behaviors. A study suggests that in only a third of cases, such responses result in improving the target's situations (Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Organizational communication research provides considerable insight into the ways individuals make sense of and resist workplace bullying through juxtaposition with the concepts of dissent and intragroup conflict.

The following sections will review organizational dissent; workplace bullying; intragroup conflict as an explanatory framework linking dissent and workplace bullying. Prior researchers have shown how an individual's tendency to express disagreement of contradictory opinions (dissent) is positively related to the perception that a workplace fosters a climate of free argumentation (workplace freedom of speech) (Croucher et al., 2017). It is therefore theorized that a negative relationship may exist with a workplace that allows disordered argumentation, such as bullying.

Organizational dissent

Dissent is embedded in our institutions; governments, schools, leisure activities and workplaces, occurring in both domestic and international settings (Kassing, 2011). "It is a fact of modern life" (Kassing, 2011, p. 16), serving as "the antidote for conformity" (Kassing, 2011, p. 17). Dissent is regarded as "a moral obligation, a political right, an enlightened management practice, a minor inconvenience, or a punishable violation of loyalty" (Sprague and Ruud, 1988, p. 190). Zaini et al. (2017) described how lack of dissent in organizations is linked with groupthink, such as with the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the 1986 Challenger explosion and the 2003 Columbia explosion.

There are three types of dissent: articulated, latent and displaced (Kassing, 1998). Articulated dissent involves expressing dissent openly to members of an organization who effectively influence organizational decision-making. These members include supervisors, management and/or corporate officers. Latent dissent is people expressing their dissent to colleagues, such as co-workers, or other people within an organization who have little or no official power to directly change matters in the organization. Members tend to do this when they perceive they have no other route to effectively communicate their opinions. Displaced dissent is dissenting outside the organization, to people such as friends and family. This is perceived differently from whistleblowers who seek out political or media outlets to express their opinions (Kassing, 1997).

When workers feel apart from their organizations, they may decide either to keep silent or express disagreement, endure unpleasant experiences, change the status quo or vent their emotions (Kassing, 1997). Organizational dissent is a particularly important form of workplace communication, beneficial for organizations and workers. Constructive dissent provides organizations opportunities for improvement and innovation (Croucher et al., 2018; Graham, 1986), because workers can give valuable feedback regarding organizational inefficiency, worker discontent, unethical practices and other organizational aspects (Garner, 2016a).

Organizational dissent is an important form of communication. For the employee, the ability to voice disagreement and/or dissatisfaction is positively linked to outcomes such as perceptions of procedural justice (Avery and Quiñones, 2002) and job satisfaction (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2011). Whereas for the organization, dissent is identified as leading to increased worker performance (Ng and Feldman, 2012), better problem-solving (De Dreu and West, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2009; Schulz-Hardt et al., 2006) and better decision-making (Hegstrom, 1990; Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Organizational dissent is usually conceptualized as a subset of the worker voice literature, which Hirschman (1974) viewed as one response to dissatisfaction in organizations. Kassing (2002) defined dissent as “a particular form of worker voice that involves the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices and policies” (p. 189). Similarly, Sprague and Ruud (1988) examined “talk that expresses disagreement with authority” (p. 171). This separates dissent from more covert forms of resistance such as working to rule. As these definitions indicate, issues that trigger dissent are typically procedurally oriented, while other forms of organizational communication, like complaints are deemed more linked to issues surrounding management practices.

Much like individuals engaged with bullying, people who dissent are often perceived as “troublemakers” and consequently often retaliated against, and so a major theme of this field is an acknowledgement that workers who fear more for their job safety may choose not to dissent but to withdraw their voices altogether (Croucher et al., 2014). It may therefore be useful to examine whether the likelihood of organizational dissent increases or decreases as individuals fear they will be perceived as a bully for dissenting.

Further, as a general trend, news media and less institutionalized online spaces increasingly enable individuals, including workers, to actively voice dissent publicly (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018). This trend, identified as employee anonymous online dissent (EAOD), is a growing issue in online environments. EAOD requires researchers to consider multiple parties and communication patterns. Among those whose communication and interaction contribute to EAOD, Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018) identify four key actors: dissenting workers, online outlet administrators, audiences and targeted organizations and these remain central to the overall process. As dissent can be viewed as a disagreeable/disputed act, it is possible individuals on the receiving side of a dissent message may perceive such

messages as bullying. In particular, in organizational cultures that might not promote open communication, or in organizations in which bullying has been prevalent, disagreement/dissent might be perceived differently.

Bullying

There is no universally accepted definition of workplace bullying. With differing schools of thought on key aspects, the characteristics of the definition that tend to be agreed upon include that it is: “harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks” (Einarsen, 2003, p. 15.) Workplace bullying is often defined as a situation where a person feels they have repeatedly or severely experienced actions or acts of omission from one or more people (Einarsen et al., 1994). While such situations may include overt threats or hostile acts, the definition also identifies more subtle behaviors such as altering a person’s tasks, and removing or withholding resources, criticizing, cynicism, social isolation, unwelcome comments on a person’s private life, verbal aggression and spreading rumors about the person (Rayner and Cooper, 2006). Acts of omission associated with bullying frequently center around social exclusion, ignoring colleagues, withholding information and/or praise and failing to highlight opportunities for involvement or advancement (Bentley et al., 2010; Rayner and Cooper, 2006).

In the literature, the perception of bullying and the experience of bullying are two distinct concepts that are often examined separately. In the literature, the perception of bullying and the experience of bullying are two distinct concepts that are often examined separately. Research on the experience of bullying investigates the prevalence, forms and consequences of bullying. It examines the impact of bullying on the individual’s mental health, self-esteem, academic performance, relationships and overall well-being. While the perception of bullying focuses on the interpretation and recognition of bullying behaviors, the experience of bullying examines the direct effects and consequences of being bullied. Both aspects are important for understanding the complex dynamics of bullying and developing interventions to address it effectively.

There have been increases in incidents of bullying, or at the least, in the reporting of bullying in recent times (Bentley et al., 2012). Bullying, and particularly workplace bullying, is now recognized as a serious “psychosocial hazard,” which has deleterious economic, social and individual and health impacts (Bentley et al., 2012; Copeland and Wolke, 2013). There has been a recent move to clarify for young people the differences between bullying and other behaviors, still inappropriate but less damaging behaviors, such as teasing, meanness and bluntness (Whitson, 2012). This appears on the surface at least to be similar to the debate in the management sphere about the relationship between incivility and bullying, whereby all behaviors are unacceptable and need to be remedied, however the strategies to eliminate are different. Often the distinction is made on the basis of target, for example a rude, mean

or uncivil worker behaves that way to all workplace counterparts, regardless of level and relationship; whilst bullying is targeted to an individual or group (Thompson and George, 2016). While there may be some overlap or grey areas between these concepts, they are not interchangeable. Bullying involves repeated aggression with a power imbalance, harassment involves persistent unwanted behavior, incivility refers to violating social norms with disrespectful behavior, and rudeness is impolite and disrespectful conduct. It is important to address and prevent all forms of negative behavior to foster a respectful and inclusive environment (Chaudhary et al., 2022; Moon et al., 2018).

Individuals who experience bullying are reported to experience more work related stress (Vartia, 2001) mental illness, depression, helplessness, anxiety disorders; post-traumatic stress disorder; suicide ideation; and psychosomatic complaints (Kivimäki et al., 2003; Meek, 2004; Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002b; Moayed et al., 2006). Research has also identified potentially significant impacts of experiencing bullying on worker's physical health, including musculoskeletal complaints, heightened risk of cardiovascular disease, headaches, nausea, ulcers, sleeplessness, skin rashes, high blood pressure (Carter et al., 2013; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). The recipients of bullying also exhibit workplace dysfunctions including self-doubt, low mood/self-confidence, emotional control loss, low self-esteem and relatively more negative emotions (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002b; Moayed et al., 2006; O'Driscoll et al., 2011; Vartia, 2001). Bullying has also been shown to adversely impact organizational performance, including diminished individual job performance and morale; and increases in absenteeism, increased work-related stress and increased medically certified sick leave, worker turnover, decreased job satisfaction and productivity issues (Bentley et al., 2012; Carter et al., 2013; Kivimäki et al., 2000; Vartia, 2001).

Despite well-established literature on the negative outcomes of bullying (Bowling and Beehr, 2006; Chan et al., 2008; Hershcovis and Barling, 2010; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018; Willness et al., 2007), we know very little about who experiences bullying in the workplace. The results of a meta-analysis by McCord et al. (2018) revealed that while women and minorities were found to perceive more workplace bullying than men and White people, respectively, these differences were small. This may suggest the commonly held assumption that bullying disproportionately affects women and minorities may be overstated.

Focusing on tenure as a predictor of bullying, Beckmann et al. (2013) found 65% of respondents who reported some, regular or frequent bullying were within the junior faculty ranks of instructor or assistant professor in the clinical and tenure tracks. An additional 21% of those who reported being bullied were associate professors. Senior faculty were reported to be the bullies in 60% of reported incidents. These findings corroborate the findings of Simpson and Cohen (2004), who investigated bullying in higher education and found the initiator was someone in a higher or managerial position in 80% of cases of reported bullying. These findings are also consistent with the findings of Leymann (1996) and Einarsen

and Skogstad (1996), where the workplace victim is of a lower organizational position than those who are the perpetrators of the bullying.

Some studies have examined the role of a bullied person's demographic characteristics. One possibility is that demographics could influence the danger ratio (Björkqvist et al., 1994b). That is, judgments of the potential costs and benefits of harassing could be influenced by a bullied person's demographics because certain demographic groups (e.g. women or those with low tenure) would tend to be "safer" targets. Research has found women are more likely to become the targets of workplace harassment than men are (Björkqvist et al., 1994a; Cortina et al., 2001), but other researchers have found no sex differences (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996). In addition, the relationship between victim age and bullying seems to differ greatly across studies (Hoel et al., 1999; Rayner and Hoel, 1997). Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy (2012) have argued organizational communication research is vital for understanding and addressing workplace bullying, especially given the impacts on employee well-being and organizational productivity.

Intragroup conflict, dissent and bullying

As dissent can be viewed as an act of conflict (Croucher et al., 2020, 2022), it is possible individuals on the receiving side of a dissent message may perceive such messages as bullying. In particular, in organizational cultures that might not promote open communication, or in organizations in which bullying has been prevalent, disagreement/dissent might be perceived differently.

De Dreu and Gelfand (2008) defined intragroup conflict as perceived incompatibility or difference among group members. Research has identified three subtypes of intragroup conflict: relationship, process and task conflicts. Each subtype of intragroup conflict has disagreements among group members; however, each subtype differs in the target or emphasis of the conflict. Relationship conflict is a disagreement over personal issues, such as values. Process conflict is over logistics, such as how a group makes decisions. Task conflict is disagreement over the outcomes or content of decisions, what a group decides. Researchers have shown that task conflict is positively related to group performance and innovation (De Dreu, 2006; De Dreu and West, 2001). Recognizing the positive influence of task conflict, many organizations have developed methods to promote such conflict, such as assigning dissenters to enhance task conflict and in turn improve decision outcomes (Jamieson et al., 2014). While dissent can improve the decision-making process, decision-making itself can be a stressful conflict process. This conflict process involves agents and targets. When individuals receive feedback, particularly in the form of dissent, they can either accept or reject it. Processing this feedback can negatively affect a person's sense of belonging, self-esteem, identity, overall psychological well-being and can be seen as generally threatening (Williams, 2009). When receiving negative feedback, which can be seen as rejection,

individuals may also perceive it as hostile, exclusionary, judgmental and as limiting ability to complete job tasks (Jamieson et al., 2014). Such feelings are similar to some of those experienced by individuals who claim to be bullied. While individuals who dissent may experience bullying (Osborne, 2009; Petrina et al., 2015), those same individuals may also be perceived as workplace bullies for questioning organizational decision-making and members (Jamieson et al., 2014). Task conflict in the form of organizational dissent is a critical form of organizational communication. Dissent, like bullying is not without the influence of the receivers of communication, as highlighted by Garner (2013). Research demonstrates this form of communication is linked with perceptions of workplace bullying. Thus, the following research question is put forth to clarify the extent to which dissent predicts workplace bullying:

RQ1. To what extent does organizational dissent predict perception of workplace bullying?

New Zealand business context

Examining the New Zealand context when looking at bullying allows for a deeper understanding of the issue within a specific cultural and societal framework. Different countries have varying social, legal and organizational norms, which can influence the prevalence, perception and response to workplace bullying. By considering the New Zealand context, we can identify unique factors that contribute to bullying and explore potential differences compared to other countries.

New Zealand has a relatively small population, and its business environment is largely made up of companies with fewer than 20 employees – 97% of enterprises and 28% of the total New Zealand workforce (Ministry of Business and Innovation and Employment (MBIE, 2018)). Hierarchies within companies – big and small – are often quite compressed. New Zealand's economy is regarded as developed and is ranked as being an economy that is internationally competitive (see, IMD's World Competitiveness Yearbook). A significant number of those employed by larger businesses are employed by the public sector, with the public sector employing around 436,700 people in 2021, 18.9% of New Zealand's total workforce (2,313,400), as measured by Stats NZ's Business Demography data (2021).

Specifically, in the New Zealand context, some notable differences include: Legislation, New Zealand has specific legislation addressing workplace bullying called the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. This law requires employers to provide a safe work environment, including addressing bullying and harassment; Organizational Policies, New Zealand has specific legislation addressing workplace bullying called the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. This law requires employers to provide a safe work environment, including addressing bullying and harassment; and Cultural values, New Zealand has a cultural emphasis on equality, inclusivity and fairness, which may influence attitudes toward workplace bullying. The "Tall

Poppy Syndrome” can also impact workplace dynamics, where individuals who stand out or excel may be targeted.

Method

After ethical approval, a nationally representative sample survey of managers in New Zealand was collected in 2021. The survey, which took 10–15 min to complete, was conducted by Qualtrics, a data collection agency [1]. No incentives were offered. Participants included 239 full-time managers. Participants completed the Organizational Dissent Scale (Kassing, 2000b), the NAQ-R Negative Acts Questionnaire Revised Scale (Einarsen et al., 2009) and a series of demographic questions. [Article Two] Table 1 includes demographic information [2]. Industries were grouped into three main sectors. Primary industries are those responsible for producing raw materials, such as farming; secondary industries are those involved in manufacturing or construction and tertiary industries are those generally involved in the service sector. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on both measures following criteria set by Byrne (2016) to determine fit when using the AMOS maximum likelihood parameter estimation algorithm. See [Article 2] Table 2 for means, standard deviations and alphas for study variables.

Organizational dissent scale

Kassing’s (2000b) 18-item Organizational Dissent Scale measures how individuals express contradictory opinions and disagreements about organizational policies, practices or operations. The scale assesses three types of dissent: articulated, displaced and latent dissent. For this study, displaced dissent was excluded as the study focused on dissent within an organization. Items are measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. A sample item is “I join in when other employees complain about organizational changes” [3].

[Article 2] Table 1. Demographic information

Variable	n	M	SD
Age		39.51	12.26
Sex			
Male	91		
Female	148		
Organizational tenure		1.77	1.11
Number of direct reports		1	0.83
<i>Industry</i>			
Primary	5		
Secondary	52		
Tertiary	181		

Source: Authors' own work

Following the criteria set by Hu and Bentler (1999), items 3, 6, 12, 13 and 16, were dropped as they did not meet the factor loading threshold: $\chi^2(26) = 59.16, p < 0.001$.

NAQ-R Negative Acts Questionnaire Revised scale

One of the most widely used instruments for assessing bullying is the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) (Einarsen et al., 2009). The NAQ-R contains a response set on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) never to (5) daily. A sample item is “Had information withheld that affected your performance.” Einarsen et al.’s (2009) measurement development work with the NAQ-R found that it had similarly good fit statistics as a unidimensional, two-dimensional or three-dimensional measure. Though the chi-square value of the three-dimensional measure was best, that difference in fit can be explained by the fact that the three-dimensional measure had the highest degrees of freedom (c.f., Kline, 2016).

The most common self-report method NAQ-R has yielded little to no published validity evidence in the New Zealand (NZ) context, and a pilot study conducted by the researcher provided weak CFA results, suggesting NZ may understand bullying differently from the rest of the world and/or inconsistently within NZ. Therefore, to identify the best measure fit for this data, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was run using a direct oblimin rotation. As seen in [Article 2] Table 3, EFA revealed that all items loaded greater than 0.32 on a single factor, while two items also loaded above 0.32 in a second factor. This indicated that the measure was behaving uni-dimensionally, with a couple of potentially problematic items that need to be removed (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2000). The next step in preparing the measure for hypothesis testing was to confirm the unidimensional factor structure and screen for problematic items, as implied in the EFA, through CFA.

A unidimensional measurement model CFA was run using the AMOS maximum likelihood parameter estimation algorithm. Recommended standards of fit for a measurement model using this algorithm are goodness of fit (GFI) ≥ 0.90 , comparative fit index (CFI) ≥ 0.90 , standard root mean residual (SRMR) ≤ 0.08 and root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) ≤ 0.10 (Byrne, 2016). The observed fit statistics were: GFI ≈ 0.76 , CFI ≈ 0.86 , SRMR ≈ 0.06 and RMSEA ≈ 0.11 with $\chi^2(209) = 976.03$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, the measure did indeed contain weak or otherwise problematic items that needed to be removed.

Examination of the regression weights showed multiple weak items loading below 0.70 as shown in [Article Two] Table 4 (c.f., Kline, 2016). Items were removed sequentially reviewing the regression weights as well as the standard residual error matrix to prioritize removing items which caused a statistically significant amount of residual error on other items. The finalized measure, shown in the Appendix, retained 13 items with fit statistics as follows: GFI ≈ 0.90 , CFI ≈ 0.95 , SRMR ≈ 0.03 and RMSEA ≈ 0.09 with $\chi^2(65) = 225.89$, $p < 0.001$.

[Article Two] Table 2. Means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients and correlations

Variable	M	SD	α	ν	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Bullying perception	1.69	0.83	0.83	0.95			
(2) Articulated dissent	3.06	0.52	0.81	0.80	0.25**		
(3) Latent dissent	3.22	0.75	0.80	0.80	0.23**	0.24**	
Note: ** $p < 0.001$							

Source: Authors' own work

[Article Two] Table 3. Exploratory factor analysis component matrix for NAQ-R and reliability upon removal

Variable	1	2	a	v
NAQ-R1	0.62	0.00	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R2	0.75	-0.17	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R3	0.64	0.32	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R4	0.69	0.24	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R5	0.82	-0.24	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R6	0.74	0.09	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R7	0.82	-0.22	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R8	0.82	-0.12	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R9	0.83	-0.26	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R10	0.82	-0.23	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R11	0.79	0.07	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R12	0.82	-0.11	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R13	0.81	-0.06	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R14	0.69	0.27	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R15	0.81	-0.17	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R16	0.65	0.50	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R17	0.79	-0.17	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R18	0.71	0.31	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R19	0.69	0.27	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R20	0.81	-0.15	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R21	0.62	0.54	0.96	0.96
NAQ-R22	0.76	-0.26	0.96	0.96

Source: Authors' own work

[Article Two] Table 4. CFA regression weights for NAQ-R

Variable	b
NAQ-R1	0.59
NAQ-R2	0.74
NAQ-R3	0.60
NAQ-R4	0.66
NAQ-R5	0.83
NAQ-R6	0.72
NAQ-R7	0.83
NAQ-R8	0.82
NAQ-R9	0.84
NAQ-R10	0.83
NAQ-R11	0.78
NAQ-R12	0.82
NAQ-R13	0.80
NAQ-R14	0.66
NAQ-R15	0.82
NAQ-R16	0.61
NAQ-R17	0.78
NAQ-R18	0.68
NAQ-R19	0.66
NAQ-R20	0.80
NAQ-R21	0.57
NAQ-R22	0.76

Source: Authors' own work

Demographic variables and perception of workplace bullying

While there have been studies examining the association between demographic variables and workplace bullying, the findings have been inconsistent and often vary across different contexts and populations (Farley et al., 2023; Islam and Chaudhary, 2022). Research has indicated gender plays a role in workplace bullying, with some studies suggesting women are more likely to be targets of bullying than men (Björkqvist et al., 1994a; Cortina et al., 2001). However, other studies have found no significant gender differences in the perception of workplace bullying (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996). The variation in findings may be due to cultural and organizational factors that influence how bullying is perceived and reported. Age can influence the perception of workplace bullying, as younger employees may be more vulnerable due to their limited work experience and hierarchical position. However, the relationship between age and workplace bullying perception is not

straightforward. Some studies have found older employees may be more likely to experience workplace bullying, while others have reported no significant age differences. Limited research has been conducted on the relationship between ethnicity and workplace bullying perception. Cultural factors and norms within different ethnic groups can influence how individuals perceive and respond to bullying behaviors. However, more research is needed to understand the specific dynamics between ethnicity and the perception of workplace bullying (Chaudhary and Islam, 2022). Job position or hierarchical status within an organization can affect the perception of workplace bullying (Foster et al., 2004). Lower-ranking employees may be more likely to perceive certain behaviors as bullying due to power imbalances, whereas higher-ranking employees may have a different perspective on what constitutes bullying. However, the relationship between job position and bullying perception can be influenced by organizational culture and context. It is important to note the limited relationship between demographic variables and the perception of workplace bullying does not imply that these variables are irrelevant. Rather, it highlights the complexity of the issue and the need for more comprehensive research that considers various contextual factors and individual experiences.

Organizational dissent scale

Results

To answer the research question, a hierarchical regression was constructed. In model 1, sex and age were entered. The interaction between sex and age was also added to explore the extent to which individuals (men and women) differ in their perception of workplace bullying as they age. Previous studies have reported inconsistent and sometimes contradictory results regarding the interaction between the reporting of bullying and demographic variables. For example, Quine (2002), Ariza-Montes et al. (2015) and Niedhammer et al. (2007) all reported women are more likely to be bullied than men, while Lipscomb et al. (2015) and Carter et al. (2013) reported a higher risk for men. Further, a number of studies show no relationship between sex and bullying (Askew et al., 2012; Quine, 1999). Similarly, research shows contradictory results in terms of age and prevalence of bullying. Research from Quine (1999) and Lipscomb et al. (2015) show workers younger than 44 years of age are more likely to report being bullied; however, Varhama and Björkqvist (2004) showed a higher prevalence in older workers, and Ariza-Montes et al. (2013) show no association between age and workplace bullying. In model 1, age and sex predicted 14% ($R^2 = 0.14$) of perception of workplace bullying.

In model 2, organizational factors linked with bullying were entered: organizational level, tenure, number of organizational reports and industry. Industry was coded by dividing all firms between primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. Horan et al. (2021) argue that the industrial context is a valuable and under-addressed research consideration. For the

purposes of this research this broadest industry categorization has been used as the initial contextual frame. Prior research has occurred in a range of organizations. In New Zealand, as in much of the developed world, the secondary sector represents about 70% of all business, and on this basis, secondary served as the reference group. Research on the links between level, tenure and number of reports and reporting of bullying is divided. Researchers have shown no statistically significant links between organizational tenure and perceptions and reporting of bullying (Blackstock et al., 2015; Djurkovic et al., 2008). In terms of organizational level, Ortega et al. (2008) showed individuals with higher organizational status are less likely to report or perceive bullying. Research on bullying has previously been examined in various industries including hospitality, fishing, nursing and education. Model 2 predicted 20% of perception of workplace bullying and was a significant improvement over model 1 ($R^2_{\frac{1}{4}} 0.20$; $DF_{\frac{1}{4}} 3.68$, $p < 0.001$).

In model 3, organizational dissent (latent and articulated) was entered. Research linking organizational dissent and bullying has shown those who dissent may experience bullying and also be perceived as workplace bullies (Jamieson et al., 2014; Osborne, 2009; Petrina et al., 2015). Model 3 predicted 27% of perception of workplace bullying and was a significant improvement over model 2 ($R^2_{\frac{1}{4}} 0.27$; $DF_{\frac{1}{4}} 9.48$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, model 3 was retained for final analysis. Regression results are presented in [Article Two] Table 5. As model 3 in [Article Two] Table 5 depicts, there are multiple main effects predicting perception of workplace bullying. Age has a negative effect ($b_{\frac{1}{4}} -0.50$) on perception of workplace bullying. Sex also has a significant effect, with men ($b_{\frac{1}{4}} -0.73$) reporting lower levels of perceived bullying; however, as men age they report higher levels of perceived bullying ($b_{\frac{1}{4}} 0.69$) than women. Individuals working in the primary ($b_{\frac{1}{4}} -0.13$) and tertiary ($b_{\frac{1}{4}} -0.12$) sectors both report lower perceived levels of workplace bullying than those in the secondary industry. Individuals holding lower level job titles perceived less workplace bullying ($b_{\frac{1}{4}} -0.14$). Articulated ($b_{\frac{1}{4}} 0.18$) and latent dissent ($b_{\frac{1}{4}} 0.15$) both positively affect perception of workplace bullying.

[Article Two] Table 5. Regression model for perception of workplace bullying

Regressor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	3.02	4.20	2.63
Age	-0.48**	-0.57**	-0.50**
Male	-0.69**	-0.76**	-0.73**
Male*Age	0.65**	0.71**	0.69**
Org tenure		0.15*	0.10
Direct reports		0.02	0.04
Primary industry		-0.14*	-0.13*
Tertiary industry		-0.13*	-0.12*
Org level		-0.10	-0.14*
Articulated dissent			0.18**
Latent dissent			0.15**
F	12.33**	7.19**	8.09**
DF	3.68**	9.48**	DF
R2	0.14	0.20	0.27
R2adj	0.13	0.18	0.23

Notes: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.001

Source: Authors' own work

Discussion

Several key results and indications for further investigations are highlighted by the third model in this study. Firstly, workers who reported they engaged in either articulated dissent or latent dissent were more likely to perceive workplace bullying. The explanation for the is likely twofold. First, research (Jamieson et al., 2014; Osborne, 2009; Petrina et al., 2015) suggests individuals who voice their opinions are more likely to be targets in the workplace for other negative interactions. Second, workers who are more likely to express contrary opinions in the workplace, are perhaps more likely to recognize, acknowledge and tolerate less positive interactions in the workplace such as bullying.

Previous studies regarding age have been inconsistent. This research in the NZ context found there was a relationship between age and perceptions of bullying. This relationship may be present for several reasons, but a key contextual difference from previous studies is the collection of data post the #metoo and associated social movements. Since the #metoo movement, there has been a perceptible generational shift, whereby unacceptable social behaviors such as harassment and bullying are receiving more attention and media and seen as less acceptable in workplaces and the broader community. This raises the question if the increased exposure sensitizes younger members of the workforce to be more likely to

perceive “bullying” than their older counterparts? Related to this is an increasing amount of attention paid to bullying in the NZ specific context, both in workplaces (see health and safety legislation) and schools (see Ministry of Education, Bullying Free NZ, etc.), which may make younger workers more likely to recognize or perceive acts of bullying. The final supposition with regards to the decreasing likelihood of older workers to perceive an act as bullying, may be related to experience in the workplace. A more experienced worker may perceive a direct and uncomfortable workplace interaction as constructive criticism more readily than a less experienced worker.

Analysis of sex in this study raises some interesting questions. Previous studies have often struggled to find any sex differences (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996), while others have found women are more likely to be the targets of workplace harassment (Björkqvist et al., 1994a; Cortina et al., 2001), and this study has found men (specifically older men) are more likely in this sample to perceive bullying. One hypothesis is that perhaps as relationships develop with colleagues and mentees, older more senior workers (of which the preponderance are still male statistically in the NZ workforce) become more aware of the workplace experiences that others have, even if they have not personally experienced bullying. Further, we need to examine the effect of the interaction with workplace seniority with these older males – is the key influence their sex/gender or position which may be highly correlated? As people become more senior in the organization do they have a better overview of the multitudes of organizational experiences, while in tandem lose the avenues for upwards or lateral dissent as they become more isolated in their senior positions? There are a range of questions that are raised by this finding and as such this finding warrants future research. Further, more nuanced exploration of gender and non-binary gender differences need to be researched and understood, moving away from a pure focus on biological sex.

Finally, the industry findings in this research are consistent with earlier research which identified that bullying was more commonly reported in the services and manufacturing sectors. In contrast, our examination of job roles, yielded some contrasting findings from prior research. Research examining the nursing profession for example, Foster et al. (2004) reported that junior staff tend to perceive higher levels of bullying than those in senior levels. Contrastingly, this research found that individuals holding lower-level job titles were less likely to perceive workplace bullying. One possible explanation is more junior employees see non-physical “bullying” interactions as legitimate managerial prerogative? A second key factor to consider is the considerable effort and attention paid to the recognition and management of bullying in large organizations that means that in the organizations that are large enough to have a “junior” job titles, that considerable work has been done to mitigate and manage the exposure to and effects of bullying. In smaller organizations, where more workers are more likely to hold more responsible and senior job titles, may be where the next push for bullying education and awareness is required in the NZ context.

Theoretical implications

Organizational communication scholars joined the academic conversation about workplace bullying in the early 2000s (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Organizational communication research shows bullying is a complex multilevel issue occurring not only inside organizations but also one that is inextricably interconnected with larger social systems of meaning (i.e. discourses) and institutional policies. Organizational communication researchers conceptualize bullying as a systemic issue that, to a great degree, develops from organizational practice and policy. As Keashly (2001) notes, organizational representatives rarely doubt or deny that bullies act the way targets describe. Nonetheless, even when senior managers accept the veracity of target reports, the majority of their responses typically fail to end the behaviors. A study suggests that in only a third of cases, such responses result in improving the target's situations (Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Organizational communication research provides considerable insight into the ways individuals make sense of and resist workplace bullying through the field's complex understanding of voice, particularly whose voice is privileged in research (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Mumby and Stohl, 1996).

The results of this study, which are corollary in nature, help us understand the theoretical underpinnings of dissent and bullying. As for dissent, the results of this study show dissent is positively related to perception of workplace bullying. NZ workplaces are considered to be more egalitarian and communication within such workplaces to be more reticent (Nolan, 2007). Thus, it is possible dissent within such workplaces is more likely to be perceived as a form of conflict and/or challenging communication. Therefore, future research should explore the extent to which organizational members perceive dissenting messages as conflict messages. Similarly, perception of bullying, which has been extensively studied in the NZ context (see for example, Bentley et al., 2012; Blackwood et al., 2017; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2013; Gardner et al., 2016; O'Driscoll et al., 2011), has shown a high prevalence of bullying in the NZ workforce. It is possible that when NZ workers or organizational members are confronted with challenging or conflict containing messages they equate such messages with bullying. Future research should explore these potential links.

This research raises some interesting intersections with the bullying and the verbal aggression literature that warrant further future investigation. Infante and Wigley (1986) defined verbal aggressiveness as "a personality trait that predisposes persons to attack the self-concepts of other people instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication" (p. 60). Some popular definitions have previously suggested bullying is repeated physical or verbal aggression (National Centre Against Bullying, Bullying No Way Australia, LetsdefeatBullying.com, etc.) and thus some isolated incidents of verbal aggression may not meet the threshold of bullying. Second, verbal dissent expressed in an assertive manner, might be misconstrued to be aggressive. More qualitative work is required

to further unpack the complexities at play here. Kassing and Avtgis (1999) began to examine the relationship between organizational dissent and aggressive communication, and this investigation now needs to expand to include the bullying perspective.

Methodological implications

As noted in the method section, the existing scale had been adjusted for fit. There are two potential explanations for the need to adjust this scale, but further research is required to further investigate this issue. First, the simplest explanation is the scale needs to adjust with changing societal usage of words. It is reasonable to assume that the meaning of words composing items over time will change over time, and that the scale needs to be adjusted to reflect that, or despite NZ using the language of the original scale, English, that the usage and nuance of English in NZ may differ from other English speaking countries, and therefore, the scale may have needed the validation that is usually undertaken when translating scales into other languages. Second, this research raises the question of whether there is a conflation of work-related bullying behaviors and bad leadership styles that may not be targeted (e.g. authoritative leadership and micromanaging).

Practical Implications

The findings of this study also provide some clear practical implications. First, while dissent is useful in understanding and rectifying issues that arise in workplaces, managers need to encourage dissent carefully, as this research would suggest there is some risk to the dissenter having a higher chance of being perceived as a bully. Second, managers need to understand effectively and be skilled in how to use communication skills in organizational settings. Communication research also provides a distinctive contribution by exploring the narrative form of worker responses to perceived bullying. However, labeling an individual's behaviors as bullying or harassment could be difficult because the meanings and interpretations given to communication behavior vary from one person to another. The same phrase, gesture, laughter or touch might be interpreted quite differently by various recipients who will assess that phrase, etc. in light of previous interactions with him/her. Therefore, the same kind of message can be received as a spontaneous, harmless joke by one person and as a repeated, painful insult by another. Similarly, the ability of an individual to defend themselves might be estimated from the verbal and nonverbal messages they send, and they must also be interpreted in the light of the previous knowledge gained of the sender and the relationship that he or she has with the alleged bully.

Limitations

As with all studies, there are some limitations. The survey asked respondents self-reported perceptions, and as such, there are dangers that their answers are influenced by feelings of social desirability and may not accurately reflect the reality of experiences. Second, unlike previous bullying studies, which have focused on specific industries such as health (Blackwood et al., 2017; Foster et al., 2004), hospitality (Bentley et al., 2009b; O'Driscoll et al., 2011) and education (Bentley et al., 2009c) this research looked at general staff. This has advantages in assessing the broad experiences of bullying and dissent in the New Zealand business context; however, it does mean the results may not be able to be generalized to a specific industry level.

This study has advanced our understanding of the relationship between organizational dissent and the perception of workplace bullying in the New Zealand context. Results revealed a positive relationship between dissent and perception of workplace bullying. Research should continue to explore these relationships and examine how organizational members conceptualize workplace bullying and dissent. In addition, research should investigate the depths to which such forms of communication are seen as conflict within organizational settings.

Notes

1. As with previously published research, Qualtrics panels have been found to be similar in make-up, validity and reliability to face-to-face panels (Croucher et al., 2020). Qualtrics contacts participants it has in participant pools via various data collection companies.
2. Sex was a categorical variable of male, female or other. No participants chose the category other, so analysis was carried out the male/female binary.
3. Sample items for articulated/upward dissent are "I do not question management" and "I'm hesitant to question workplace policies." Sample items for Latent/lateral dissent are: "I share my criticism of this organization openly" and "I do not criticize my organization in front of other employees."

=== End of Article ===

6.4 Additional Clarifications

A clear distinction should be drawn between exploratory factor analysis from PCA. While both techniques are frequently used in organisational research, they address different

analytic objectives. PCA is fundamentally a data reduction technique, whereas exploratory factor analysis seeks to identify latent constructs that account for patterns of covariance among observed variables. The use of EFA within the present thesis reflected an interest in understanding the underlying structure of the construct within the New Zealand context rather than simply reducing the number of variables under consideration. Given the conceptual focus of the thesis and the exploratory nature of this aspect of the analysis, EFA was considered the most appropriate methodological choice.

The findings reported in *Article Two* demonstrate that individuals reporting higher levels of particular communication orientations, including forms of organisational dissent, also reported differing experiences of workplace bullying. However, these associations should be interpreted cautiously.

Specifically, the present study does not provide evidence that employees who engage in dissent are necessarily perceived by others as bullies, nor does it establish a causal relationship between dissent behaviours and subsequent experiences of workplace bullying. Rather, the findings indicate that communication processes associated with disagreement, challenge, and organisational voice may coexist with experiences of workplace bullying in ways that warrant further investigation.

One interpretation consistent with the broader communication-centred framework advanced throughout this thesis is that organisational actors draw upon differing communicative norms when making sense of workplace interactions. Consequently, behaviours associated with dissent may be experienced, interpreted, or labelled differently depending upon relational histories, power dynamics, organisational culture, and the perspectives of those involved. While this interpretation remains theoretically plausible, the present study was not designed to directly test these mechanisms.

Accordingly, the contribution of Study Two lies not in establishing causal pathways between dissent and workplace bullying, but in demonstrating that communication variables traditionally examined within separate literatures may be meaningfully related. The findings therefore support continued exploration of workplace bullying as a phenomenon situated within broader organisational communication systems.

6.5 Link to Next article

Article Two contributes to the thesis in three principal ways. *First*, it quantifies the conceptual overlap between dissent and perceived bullying, providing empirical evidence that employee voice and expression of disagreement are often intertwined with perceptions of negative acts. *Second*, the study demonstrates contextual and cultural influences on perceptions, highlighting how organisational hierarchies, sector norms, and Aotearoa New Zealand's specific egalitarian traditions shape whether dissent is interpreted as bullying or legitimate feedback. *Third*, the findings bring to the foreground the relevance of communication behaviours and organisational processes, showing that employees'

reporting, framing, and responsiveness to conflict are central to understanding perceived bullying.

Collectively, these contributions bridge between the exploratory insights of *Article One* and the trait-state model tested in *Article Three*, establishing a conceptual and empirical foundation for analysing how individual communication traits and conflict management styles influence bullying perceptions. The study thus advances the thesis' cumulative, multi-method design (Section 4.3), moving from thematic understanding to explanatory modelling of contested workplace experiences.

Chapter 7: Article Three

Tootell, B., Croucher, S. M., Cullinane, J., & Ashwell, D. (2026? Under review). *Perceived workplace bullying and communication styles: An integrative trait-state analysis* [Manuscript under review for publication in Evidence-based HRM ISSN: 2049-398].

7.1 Introduction

Building on the preceding analysis of workplace bullying and organisational dissent (Sections 6.1–6.3), *Article Three* explores the predictive influence of communication traits and conflict management styles in shaping employees' perceptions of bullying. While the previous articles examined descriptive patterns and conceptual overlaps between dissent and bullying, this study extends the thesis by applying an integrative trait-state framework (Spielberger, 1972; Steyer et al., 1999), situating enduring communication traits - such as argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness - alongside situational expressions of dissent and conflict-handling strategies. This approach reflects calls within communication scholarship for multi-level models capable of linking dispositional traits to interactional dynamics, rather than treating bullying as a solely behavioural or psychological construct (Spitzberg, 2019). The analysis in *Article Three* provides insight into which specific communication behaviours exacerbate or mitigate the perception of bullying, advancing the understanding of bullying as both a relational and interpretive phenomenon.

Using a survey of New Zealand employees, *Article Three* empirically tests the associations between trait-level predispositions, state-level responses, and NAQ-R bullying perceptions, thereby offering predictive power beyond mere description. This work not only contributes theoretically to communication and organisational studies by operationalising a trait-state lens but also has practical relevance, informing interventions aimed at reducing perceived bullying through targeted communication and conflict management strategies.

It is important to distinguish between the empirical model tested within this study and the broader theoretical position advanced throughout the thesis. Within the quantitative analyses reported in this chapter, perceptions of workplace bullying function as the dependent variable. Communication traits, including argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, together with communication states reflected in conflict styles and organisational dissent, serve as explanatory variables. At the level of the broader thesis, however, workplace bullying is conceptualised as the interpretive phenomenon requiring explanation. In this sense, the present study seeks to identify communication processes

associated with workplace bullying perceptions while simultaneously contributing to the overarching argument that bullying is communicatively enacted and socially interpreted.

7.2 Statement of Contribution

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION

DOCTORATE WITH PUBLICATIONS/MANUSCRIPTS

We, the student and the student's main supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the student's contribution as indicated below in the Statement of Originality.

Student name:	Beth Tootell
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Name and title of main supervisor:	Doug Ashwell
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In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Chapter Seven
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Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:

I as the student was responsible for the conceptualisation, data collection, formal analysis, methodology and writing both the original draft and editing. All three supervisors were involved in setting milestones, tracking progress, ensuring the quality of the deliverables, adherence to ethics and shaping the projects direction and evolution. They also provided significant feedback and editing on the written article.

Please select one of the following three options:

☐	The manuscript/published work is published or in press Please provide the full reference of the research output:
☒	The manuscript is currently under review for publication Please provide the name of the journal: Tootell, B., Croucher, S. M., Cullinane, J., & Ashwell, D. (2026? Under review). Perceived workplace bullying and communication styles: An integrative trait–state analysis [Manuscript under review for publication in Evidence-based HRM ISSN: 2049-398].

☐	It is intended that the manuscript will be published, but it has not yet been submitted to a journal		
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7.3 Submitted Article

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Perceived Workplace Bullying and Communication Styles: An Integrative Trait-State Analysis

Abstract

Workplace bullying significantly disrupts organisational dynamics, influencing communication patterns, team cohesion, and overall culture. This study investigates how communication behaviours - including argumentativeness, verbal aggression, dissent, and conflict styles - predict perceptions of workplace bullying. Drawing on the integrative trait-state framework (Spielberger, 1972; Steyer et al., 1999), the study conceptualises argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness as enduring traits, while dissent and conflict styles are examined as situational states. A survey of 220 New Zealand employees employed five validated instruments: the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), the Argumentativeness and Verbal Aggressiveness Scales, the Organisational Dissent Scale, and Oetzel's Conflict Style Instrument. Correlation and hierarchical regression analyses revealed that verbal aggression and lateral dissent positively predicted bullying perceptions, while articulated dissent and conflict avoidance were negatively associated. Other conflict styles, such as dominating and obliging, showed limited predictive power. These findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how specific communication patterns influence the recognition and experience of bullying in the workplace. The study highlights the importance of fostering constructive dissent and assertive communication while curbing aggressive tendencies through targeted interventions and conflict management strategies.

Introduction

Workplace bullying has emerged as a pervasive issue within organisational settings, significantly affecting both individual employees and broader workplace dynamics. Defined as repeated, hostile behavior directed at an individual that undermines their dignity and professional integrity, workplace bullying is not merely a psychological construct; it carries tangible repercussions that ripple through communication styles, team cohesion, and overall organisational culture (Einarsen et al., 2011a). In an era where effective communication is pivotal for organisational success, understanding the nuanced relationship between workplace bullying and communication styles warrants critical examination. This study focuses on how employees perceive communication behaviours - such as dissent,

argumentativeness, and verbal aggression - in the context of workplace bullying. As bullying is often assessed not solely by intent but by its perceived impact, this research emphasizes subjective interpretation. Understanding these perceptions is vital in differentiating assertive conflict from bullying behaviour. To explore this, the study draws on an integrative approach that considers both communication traits (such as argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness) and situational behaviours (like dissent and conflict management styles), in line with the state-trait framework (Spielberger, 1972; Steyer et al., 1999).

The relevance of this issue is underscored by the growing body of literature that links workplace bullying behaviors - such as verbal abuse, social exclusion, and undermining tactics - with shifts in communication patterns among employees. Research indicates that victims of bullying often experience a decline in assertiveness and an increase in avoidance behaviors, which can lead to diminished clarity and effectiveness in workplace communications (Kobayashi, 2025). This degradation in communication not only affects the individuals directly targeted but can have far-reaching effects on team dynamics, collaboration, and the decision-making process, thereby impacting organisational performance (Kivimäki et al., 2003).

Moreover, effective communication is recognized as a foundational component of healthy workplace relationships, facilitating trust, engagement, and collective problem-solving (Robinson, 2016). However, the presence of workplace bullying can create a communication climate characterized by fear and mistrust, where team members may withhold information, avoid conflict, or disengage from collaborative efforts. This toxic communication environment can undermine morale and diminish organisational effectiveness, as employees may become increasingly reluctant to engage in open dialogue, share ideas, or provide constructive feedback (Keashly & Nowell, 2002).

Furthermore, understanding the correlation between bullying and altered communication styles is crucial for addressing its broader implications on employee well-being. Literature suggests that the psychological toll of workplace bullying can result in higher levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout among employees, subsequently influencing how they communicate with colleagues and superiors (Nielsen et al., 2009). This cycle of negative communication reinforces the isolating nature of bullying, further exacerbating emotional distress and disconnection within teams.

The significance of this relationship extends into the realm of organisational culture, where communication styles are not merely individual preferences but reflect broader systemic issues. Organisations characterized by a culture of bullying may inadvertently foster atmospheres where aggressive communication is normalized, further perpetuating a cycle of dysfunction and disengagement. Addressing workplace bullying through the lens of communication provides organisations with an opportunity to reshape their cultural narratives, enhance employee support systems, and implement proactive measures that prioritize psychological safety and open, respectful dialogue (Baillien & De Witte, 2009).

Understanding interpersonal behaviour requires an integrative approach that accounts for both state-level situational behaviours and enduring communication traits. This framework informs our examination of workplace bullying as a perceived phenomenon, influenced by individual predispositions as well as communication contexts.

[Article Three] Table 1: Classification of Communication Constructs as Traits and States

Construct	Classification	Rationale
Argumentativeness	Trait	Enduring tendency to engage in and enjoy arguments.
Verbal Aggression	Trait	Stable predisposition to attack another individual's self-concept.
Organisational Dissent	State	Situational expression of disagreement within an organization.
Conflict Management Styles	State	Behavioural strategies used to navigate disagreement in specific situations.

Literature Review

Workplace bullying has garnered increasing attention in scholarly research due to its profound implications on organisational health and individual well-being. Einarsen et al. (2020) provide a comprehensive definition of workplace bullying, delineating it as repeated, unreasonable actions aimed at an individual or group that can lead to an environment of intimidation, humiliation, and psychological harm. Such behaviors may encompass verbal aggression, social isolation, and the systematic undermining of a colleague's work performance. The varied manifestations of workplace bullying pose a challenge for researchers and practitioners alike, as they necessitate a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which such behaviors arise and the contextual factors that influence their perception.

The NAQ-R as a Perception-Based Measure of Workplace Bullying

A central premise of this study is that workplace bullying must be understood as a perceptual phenomenon. While many definitions of bullying emphasise behavioural criteria - such as repetition, power imbalance, and intent to harm - there is increasing recognition

that target perceptions are fundamental to the experience of bullying (Einarsen, et al., 2020). The Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised (NAQ-R) aligns with this perspective by capturing the frequency of perceived negative acts rather than explicitly labelling experiences as “bullying.” In doing so, it functions as a perception measure, foregrounding the employee’s subjective interpretation of workplace interactions.

Although the NAQ-R includes items describing specific behaviours (e.g., being ignored, ridiculed, or undermined), it does not ask whether respondents identify as having been bullied. This distinction is crucial. By focusing on how frequently employees perceive these acts occurring, the NAQ-R allows for a context-sensitive and nuanced assessment of workplace mistreatment. What one employee interprets as a microaggression or exclusionary behaviour, another may dismiss as routine oversight or interpersonal friction. The NAQ-R accommodates this variation, offering insight into how individuals construct meaning from recurring social cues in their environment.

This perceptual focus is especially relevant in studies examining the intersection of bullying and communication styles. Communication is inherently interpretive and situational; traits such as verbal aggressiveness or conflict avoidance may be perceived differently depending on organisational norms and interpersonal histories. The NAQ-R’s design enables researchers to explore how individual traits (e.g., communication style) and state-level experiences (e.g., exposure to negative acts) jointly influence perceptions of bullying. As such, it complements integrative trait-state frameworks by offering a subjective window into workplace climate.

Furthermore, research shows that perceptions of bullying - not simply the presence of objectively “bullying” behaviours - are robust predictors of psychological and organisational outcomes, including stress, burnout, job dissatisfaction, and turnover intentions (Nielsen, et al., 2010). This reinforces the argument that perception measures like the NAQ-R are not only theoretically appropriate, but also practically essential for identifying harmful workplace dynamics before they escalate to formal complaints or visible dysfunction.

The NAQ-R offers a valid and widely used tool for capturing perceived workplace bullying. Its emphasis on employee interpretation is especially valuable when examining how communication styles may interact with social context to shape bullying perceptions - making it a suitable and theoretically consistent instrument for the current study’s integrative trait-state analysis.

One trait that may lead to perceptions of bullying behavior is argumentativeness. Argumentativeness, defined as a person’s relatively stable tendency to engage in and enjoy arguments and debates, is one of the most extensively studied concepts in communication. This trait predisposes individuals to advocate for positions on controversial issues and verbally challenge the positions of others (Infante & Rancer, 1982). This trait has been linked to various communication constructs, including verbal aggression (Infante et al., 2009; Croucher et al., 2021), organisational dissent (Croucher et al., 2009), communication

apprehension (Howe & Cionea, 2021), conflict (Notelaers et al. 2018), and romantic attachment (Weger, 2006). The extensive literature on argumentativeness highlights its importance as a critical area of research (Rancer & Avtgis, 2014).

It is generally seen as a constructive form of communication that contributes to the exchange of ideas and problem-solving. However, when argumentativeness escalates or is perceived negatively, it may contribute to a hostile work environment. While argumentativeness itself is not inherently harmful, its manifestation in a workplace where power dynamics are skewed can lead to perceptions of bullying. Employees who frequently engage in arguments may be seen as confrontational, especially if their argumentative style is aggressive rather than assertive. Assertiveness involves expressing one's thoughts and feelings openly and respectfully. While generally positive, it can be misinterpreted as bullying if the recipient feels overwhelmed or unable to assert themselves in response (Rogers & Farson, 1987). Aggressive communication involves expressing oneself in a forceful and often disrespectful manner. It can include shouting, interrupting, and using intimidating body language. Even if the intention is to convey urgency or importance, it is often perceived as bullying due to its confrontational nature (Infante & Wigley, 1986).

This perception can contribute to labelling such interactions as bullying, particularly if directed toward subordinates or peers who feel unable to defend themselves (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). Infante and Rancer's (1982) Argumentativeness Scale provides insight into how employees engage in and enjoy arguments. Argumentativeness is often seen as a positive trait, as it reflects a willingness to defend one's position and engage in reasoned debate. However, high levels of argumentativeness can blur the lines between constructive dialogue and aggressive behavior, potentially leading to misunderstandings about what constitutes bullying. For instance, a highly argumentative individual might perceive intense debate as a normal part of workplace interaction, while others might view the same behavior as harassing or bullying, particularly if the argumentativeness is perceived as dominating or relentless. The Argumentativeness Scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982) has been widely used to explore how individuals engage in controversial discussions. Despite its traditionally constructive framing, argumentativeness can escalate conflict when expressed in ways that overlap with interpersonal aggression. Notelaers et al. (2018) demonstrate that behaviours associated with assertive disagreement may become indistinguishable from hostility when power, intent, or repetition are introduced, blurring the boundary between conflict and bullying. In this study, we return to this established instrument to examine whether higher levels of argumentative engagement are associated with the perception of bullying in workplace interactions.

Verbal aggression is characterized by the use of words to cause psychological pain, including insults, threats, and harsh criticism (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Unlike argumentativeness, verbal aggression is inherently destructive and can have severe consequences for workplace relationships. Verbal aggressiveness is the tendency to attack another individual's self-

concept (Infante & Wigley, 1986). This trait has been linked to argumentativeness (Hamilton & Mineo, 2002; Infante & Rancer, 1993) and self-perception (Pozos-Radillo et al., 2016). Verbal aggressiveness differs across nations (Atvgis & Rancer, 2008; Croucher, 2013, Sanders, et al., 1992) Verbal aggression is a direct form of bullying and is often used to establish dominance, control, and instil fear. The presence of verbal aggression in the workplace is a clear indicator of bullying, as it creates an environment of intimidation and hostility. Victims of verbal aggression may experience decreased morale, increased stress, and a decline in job performance, contributing to a toxic work culture (Einarsen et al., 2011a; 2011b).

The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale, developed by Infante and Wigley, (1986) measures the tendency to attack others' self-concepts rather than their positions on issues. High verbal aggressiveness is associated with negative communication behaviours, such as insults and personal attacks, which can easily be perceived as bullying. Infante and Wigley (1986) defined verbal aggressiveness as attacking the self-concept of the other in order to inflict psychological pain. Verbally aggressive communication is characterized by deliberate words or actions meant to harm the receiver (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). For example, bullying, teasing, ridiculing, verbal name-calling, or using profanity and personal attacks on appearance or performance (Infante, 1987). This scale is particularly relevant in understanding how communication styles contribute to the manifestation of bullying. In a workplace where verbal aggressiveness is prevalent, what might be intended as spirited debate or criticism can be perceived as bullying, especially by individuals with lower tolerance for aggressive communication. This misalignment in communication expectations can lead to disputes over whether certain behaviours constitute bullying.

Organisational dissent refers to the expression of disagreement with policies, practices, or leadership within an organisation (Kassing, 2000b). Dissent can be articulated openly to supervisors, expressed laterally among colleagues, or displaced outside the organisation. While often considered a form of constructive voice, dissent can also be perceived negatively - particularly in hierarchical or conflict-averse environments - where it may be seen as disloyal, confrontational, or insubordinate (Croucher et al., 2009).

Research indicates that the manner of dissent expression shapes its reception. Articulated dissent has been linked to improved problem-solving and innovation (Kassing, 2005), while lateral dissent may circulate unresolved grievances and increase interpersonal tensions. In some contexts, especially where organisational norms discourage disagreement, dissent may be labelled as insubordination or even bullying. Tootell et al. (2025) found that dissenters may be disproportionately labelled as aggressive, particularly when their feedback challenges existing power structures. These dynamics suggest that dissent, while essential for organisational learning, can blur into conflict - depending on style, audience, and context.

Conflict styles describe the strategies individuals use to navigate disagreement and interpersonal tension. Oetzel's (1998) model identifies five primary styles: avoiding, obliging,

compromising, dominating, and integrating. Each style has implications for how individuals manage conflict and how their behaviours are perceived by others. For instance, those who adopt a **dominating style** may be viewed as assertive - or alternatively, as aggressive or bullying - especially in environments where power imbalances exist (Baillien et al., 2014).

Conversely, the avoiding and obliging styles may reduce confrontation but risk enabling bullying behaviour by failing to challenge inappropriate conduct. Individuals who use the avoiding style may protect themselves from direct conflict but may also inadvertently validate the bully's behaviour. Integrating and compromising styles are generally associated with more collaborative, respectful interactions, potentially mitigating the risk of bullying perceptions.

These findings align with studies by Hamre et al. (2023) and Leon-Perez et al. (2015), who argue that conflict styles not only reflect personality traits but also serve as behavioural indicators of whether a workplace interaction is escalated, diffused, or reinterpreted as bullying.

Prior research has suggested that communication traits such as argumentativeness and verbal aggression may not only affect interpersonal dynamics but also predict perceptions of bullying, particularly in conflict-prone environments (Infante et al., 2009). While argumentativeness is often constructive, its intensity or delivery can escalate perceptions of hostility. Similarly, verbal aggression - by its nature - has been identified as a strong predictor of bullying perceptions due to its personal and damaging nature. These patterns underscore the importance of considering individual communication propensities when exploring how bullying is recognised and interpreted in workplace settings.

While argumentativeness and verbal aggression have been studied extensively in the context of conflict and communication, their relationship with workplace bullying has not been thoroughly explored. Existing research tends to treat bullying as a broader construct that includes both verbal and non-verbal forms of aggression, yet little attention has been paid to how argumentative or verbally aggressive communication styles influence the perception or prevalence of bullying.

Given the distinct difference between constructive argumentativeness and destructive verbal aggression, this research seeks to investigate how individuals who frequently engage in these communication styles perceive bullying. For instance, do highly argumentative individuals view behaviours typically considered bullying - such as verbal criticism or direct confrontation - as less harmful because they prioritize debate and discourse? (Hamre et al, 2023; Leon-Perez et al., 2015). Alternatively, are those who engage in verbal aggression more likely to normalize or justify bullying behaviours because of their tendency to attack others on a personal level?

Understanding how individuals perceive and respond to workplace bullying requires an integrative approach that considers both enduring traits and situational behaviours. Scholars

have argued that interpersonal communication is best examined through a multi-level framework that integrates psychological predispositions (traits) and contextualised behaviours (states) (Burgoon, 1995; Steyer et al., 1999). In this study, communication traits such as argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are considered relatively stable individual differences that influence how people initiate and interpret conflict. In contrast, organisational dissent and conflict management styles reflect more situational and behavioural responses within specific workplace contexts. By adopting this integrative lens, the current research seeks to uncover how the interaction of traits and states shapes the perception of workplace bullying. This framework acknowledges that what is perceived as bullying may be influenced not only by the nature of the behaviour itself but also by the communicator's orientation to conflict and their broader communicative disposition. Given this integrative understanding, the current study addresses the following research question:

RQ1: To what extent is perceived workplace bullying associated with:

- a) Organisational dissent?
- b) Argumentativeness?
- c) Verbal aggression?
- d) Conflict management styles?

Method

This study focuses on how employees perceive communication behaviours - such as dissent, argumentativeness, and verbal aggression - in the context of workplace bullying. Each construct is operationalized through validated measurement instruments: Workplace bullying: NAQ-R, Dissent: Organisational Dissent Scale, Argumentativeness: Argumentativeness Scale, Verbal aggression: Verbal Aggressiveness Scale and Conflict styles: Oetzel's Conflict Style Instrument.

Participants

The study recruited 220 employees from an open call on social media. Participants were filtered to be over 18, and in paid employment in New Zealand, but otherwise randomly self-selected to take part in the study. While this approach allowed for a diverse range of participants, it is important to acknowledge the potential for self-selection bias, where individuals with stronger opinions or experiences regarding workplace bullying may have been more inclined to participate. Consequently, the generalisability of these findings to the broader New Zealand employee population should be considered with this limitation in mind. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents provided informed consent. Participants were invited to complete an online survey containing all five instruments. The

survey was administered via a secure online platform, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

Instruments

A number of previously validated scales were used in this study.

Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R).

The NAQ-R is a 22-item instrument designed to measure exposure to workplace bullying and harassment. Respondents rate the frequency of specific negative behaviors experienced over the past six months on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Daily). A sample item is “Someone withholding information which affects your performance.” The NAQ-R has demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha typically around 0.90.

Argumentativeness Scale.

The Argumentativeness Scale consists of 20 items that assess an individual's tendency to engage in and enjoy arguments. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). A sample item is, “I enjoy a good argument over a controversial issue.” The scale has shown good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values generally around 0.85.

Organisational Dissent Scale.

This scale measures how employees express dissent within their organisation. It includes 18 items divided into three dimensions: articulated dissent, latent dissent, and displaced dissent. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). As sample item is “I express my disagreement with organisational practices to my supervisor.” The overall scale has reported Cronbach's alpha values around 0.86.

Verbal Aggressiveness Scale.

The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale is a 20-item measure that assesses an individual's tendency to attack others verbally. Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Almost Never True, 5 = Almost Always True). A sample item is “When individuals are very stubborn, I use insults to soften their stubbornness.” This scale has shown good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values typically around 0.82.

Conflict Style Instrument.

The Conflict Style Instrument, developed by Oetzel, includes 30 items that categorize respondents' conflict resolution styles into five types: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always). A sample item is "I try to find a middle ground when dealing with conflict." The instrument has demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values for the different styles ranging from 0.70 to 0.85.

Data Analysis

Data from the completed surveys were analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were computed for each scale to summarize the general trends and patterns. Reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha) were conducted to assess the internal consistency of each scale, with expected values as follows: NAQ-R ($\alpha \approx 0.90$), Argumentativeness Scale ($\alpha \approx 0.85$), Organisational Dissent Scale ($\alpha \approx 0.86$), Verbal Aggressiveness Scale ($\alpha \approx 0.82$), and Conflict Style Instrument ($\alpha \approx 0.70-0.85$). Correlational analyses were performed to explore the relationships between the different scales. Regression analyses were used to identify predictors of workplace bullying, communication styles, and conflict resolution preferences. Hierarchical regression analysis was used to examine the unique and cumulative predictive contributions of each communication trait and conflict style variable on workplace bullying perceptions. Variables were entered in theoretically informed blocks to assess the incremental explanatory power of each group. Specifically, verbal aggression was entered in the first step as it is conceptually considered an inherently destructive communication trait with a strong hypothesized direct link to bullying. Articulated and lateral dissent were then added, followed by conflict styles, to explore how these more situational communication behaviours contribute beyond the established trait-level predictors, reflecting a progression from stable individual dispositions to more dynamic interactional patterns.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's ethics committee. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Results

The analysis revealed significant correlations between workplace bullying and communication styles. Verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness emerged as strong

predictors of bullying, with verbal aggressiveness showing the most substantial impact. Conflict styles such as avoiding and dominating also influenced bullying experiences. Regression analyses highlighted the role of demographic factors in moderating these relationships, emphasizing the importance of context in understanding workplace dynamics.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics indicate variability in workplace bullying and communication styles within the sample. The mean score for workplace bullying was 2.05 (SD = 0.93), while argumentativeness (ARG) had a mean of 0.45 (SD = 0.27), and verbal aggression had a mean of 1.70 (SD = 0.49). Additional descriptive statistics for conflict styles were also examined: dominating (M = 4.68, SD = 1.24), avoiding (M = 3.56, SD = 1.35), obliging (M = 2.67, SD = 0.87), and compromising (M = 2.48, SD = 0.94).

[Article Three] Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables (N = 184)

Variable	M	SD
Workplace Bullying	2.05	0.93
Argumentativeness (ARG)	0.45	0.27
Verbal Aggression	1.70	0.49
Articulated Dissent	3.15	0.92
Lateral Dissent	2.76	0.91
Dominating	4.68	1.24
Avoiding	3.56	1.35
Obliging	2.67	0.87
Compromising	2.48	0.94

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analyses revealed significant relationships between workplace bullying and several communication and conflict style variables. Specifically, bullying showed a significant positive correlation with verbal aggression ($r = .163, p = .030$), suggesting that individuals who engage in higher levels of verbal aggression are more likely to experience bullying. A

negative correlation was also observed between bullying and the avoiding conflict style ($r = -.177, p = .016$), indicating that individuals who tend to avoid conflict may report lower levels of bullying. Additionally, bullying was positively associated with lateral dissent ($r = .198, p = .007$) and negatively associated with **articulated dissent** ($r = -.335, p < .001$). No significant correlations were found between bullying and the dominating, obliging, compromising, or integrating conflict styles.

[Article Three] Table 3 Correlations Between Bullying, Communication Styles, and Conflict Styles

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Bullying	-									
2. Argumentativeness	.018	-								
3. Verbal Aggression	.163*	.273**	-							
4. Articulated Dissent	-.335**	.092	-.071	-						
5. Lateral Dissent	.198**	.032	.104	.177*	-					
6. Dominating Style	-.003	.084	.176*	-.025	.059	-				
7. Avoiding Style	-.177*	-.042	.011	-.143	-.024	.038	-			
8. Obliging Style	-.124	.061	-.006	1.08	-.040	-.008	.140	-		
9. Compromising Style	-.095	.074	.021	.128	.020	-.025	.110	.178*	-	
10. Integrating Style	-.104	.043	.067	.182*	.001	.029	.089	.172*	.355**	-
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed)										

Regression Analysis

A series of regression analyses was conducted to examine the influence of communication and conflict style variables on workplace bullying. In the first model, verbal aggression emerged as a significant predictor of bullying, $B = 0.312$, $SE = 0.142$, $\beta = .163$, $p = .030$, accounting for 2.7% of the variance in bullying ($R^2 = .027$). This finding aligns with existing literature highlighting the link between aggressive communication and perceptions of bullying.

In the second model, articulated dissent was added and demonstrated a significant negative relationship with bullying, $B = -0.337$, $SE = 0.070$, $\beta = -.335$, $p < .001$. The inclusion of this variable improved the model substantially, increasing the explained variance to 11.2% ($R^2 = .112$, $\Delta R^2 = .085$). This suggests that individuals who express concerns constructively may experience lower levels of bullying.

The third model introduced lateral dissent, which was also a significant predictor, $B = 0.202$, $SE = 0.074$, $\beta = .198$, $p = .007$, and explained an additional 3.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .039$). This indicates that horizontal expressions of disagreement are positively associated with experiences of bullying.

Subsequent models tested the predictive value of additional conflict styles. The avoiding style was a significant negative predictor ($B = -0.177$, $p = .016$), accounting for 3.1% of the variance. However, obliging ($B = -0.132$, $p = .094$) and dominating ($B = -0.002$, $p = .966$) styles did not emerge as significant predictors. Notably, no conflict style beyond articulated dissent and avoiding demonstrated meaningful predictive power in the context of bullying.

Together, these findings suggest that verbal aggression and dissent behaviours - both constructive and lateral - are key communication variables associated with workplace bullying. Conflict avoidance may play a modest protective role, while other styles such as obliging and dominating appear less influential within this sample. It is important to acknowledge, however, that while our models identified significant predictors, they account for a relatively modest proportion of the variance in perceived bullying (e.g., up to 11.2% in Model 2). This suggests that other critical factors not assessed in this study likely contribute significantly to the overall experience and perception of workplace bullying. These unmeasured variables could include broader organisational climate and culture, the specific leadership styles encountered by employees, the prevailing norms around psychological safety within teams, or individual personality traits beyond those examined here. Future research should consider incorporating these additional contextual and individual elements to provide a more comprehensive understanding of bullying dynamics.

[Article Three] Table 4 Hierarchical Regression Predicting Workplace Bullying

Step	Predictor	B	SE B	β	R ²	ΔR^2	F	p
1	Verbal Aggression	0.312	0.142	.163	.027	-	4.80	.030
2	Articulated Dissent	-0.337	0.070	-.335	.112	.085	23.03	<.001
3	Lateral Dissent	0.202	0.074	.198	.039	-	7.43	.007
4	Avoiding Style	-0.177	-	-	.031	-	5.87	.016
5	Obliging Style	-0.132	0.078	-.124	.015	-	2.84	.094
6	Dominating Style	-0.002	0.055	-.003	.000	-	0.00	.966

Interpretation

The findings underscore the significant role of verbal aggression in workplace bullying, reinforcing the importance of addressing verbally aggressive communication in organisational settings. Additionally, the avoiding conflict style was negatively associated with bullying, suggesting it may function as a modest protective factor. Articulated dissent also showed a strong negative association with bullying, while lateral dissent was positively associated, indicating that different forms of employee voice may play distinct roles in bullying dynamics. Although the models account for only a modest proportion of the variance in bullying, they highlight the relevance of specific communication behaviours and conflict management styles. Other individual or organisational factors not assessed in the current analysis may also contribute to bullying outcomes.

Discussion

This study investigated how individual communication traits (argumentativeness, verbal aggression), expressions of dissent, and conflict management styles shape employees' perceptions of workplace bullying. Using a trait-state framework, the findings highlight that perceptions of bullying are not solely shaped by objective behaviours but are deeply influenced by individual dispositions and situational communication patterns. Specifically, our results show how the stable individual tendencies toward verbal aggression, a communication trait, significantly predict perceived bullying. Simultaneously, the more fluid and context-dependent expressions of dissent and chosen conflict styles, representing state-like responses, also play a crucial role in shaping these perceptions. This section discusses

the key findings in light of existing literature and offers implications for theory, practice, and future research.

Perceptions of Bullying and the NAQ-R

The findings affirm the utility of the NAQ-R as a perception-based measure of workplace bullying. Consistent with Einarsen et al. (2020), variation in NAQ-R scores across communication styles supports the view that bullying is inherently subjective. The association between perceived negative acts and traits such as verbal aggression and dissent styles underscores the importance of interpreting bullying not just as a behaviour, but as an interpersonal experience shaped by communication dynamics. These results reinforce the NAQ-R's appropriateness for capturing subtle but meaningful workplace mistreatment.

Argumentativeness and Perceived Bullying

Contrary to expectations, argumentativeness did not significantly predict perceptions of workplace bullying. While argumentativeness has been widely linked to conflict and assertiveness (Infante & Rancer, 1982), the lack of a significant relationship suggests that it may not inherently provoke perceptions of hostility or mistreatment. This finding raises important questions about whether argumentative individuals normalize conflict or are less likely to interpret forceful exchanges as bullying. It also suggests that the distinction between assertiveness and aggression is not only behavioural but perceptual - what one party views as engaged debate, another may interpret as verbal attack, depending on context and predisposition.

As anticipated, verbal aggressiveness emerged as a significant predictor of workplace bullying. Respondents who scored higher on verbal aggression also reported higher perceptions of bullying, aligning with previous research (Infante & Wigley, 1986; Croucher, 2013) that positions this trait as inherently destructive. Samnani and Singh (2016) argue that verbal aggression often stems from poor communication competence, where individuals lacking emotional regulation resort to derogation, sarcasm, or threats. This aligns with the current study's findings, suggesting that such behaviours not only reflect aggressive tendencies but also contribute to cycles of communication breakdown and perceived mistreatment. These dynamics underscore the importance of building communication competence in workplace teams - not simply to avoid legal risk, but to maintain a climate of psychological safety.

The data revealed a nuanced relationship between dissent and bullying perceptions. Articulated dissent was strongly and negatively associated with bullying, suggesting that open and respectful expressions of disagreement may serve as a buffer against mistreatment. This highlights the critical role of transparent and direct communication

channels in fostering a psychologically safe workplace and mitigating the perception of bullying. In contrast, lateral dissent was positively associated with bullying, indicating that indirect expressions of disagreement - particularly among peers - may be more likely to foster interpersonal strain or misinterpretation. This suggests that when employees resort to discussing grievances horizontally rather than through formal, articulated channels, it can inadvertently contribute to a climate where bullying is more readily perceived and sustained. These findings support prior work (Kassing, 2005; Tootell et al., 2025) suggesting that the mode and direction of dissent significantly influence how it is perceived. Organisations that encourage upward communication may therefore be better positioned to reduce bullying perceptions and increase psychological safety.

Among conflict styles, only avoidance significantly predicted bullying, and notably, this association was negative. This challenges common assumptions (Baillien & De Witte, 2009) that avoidance enables bullying; in this study, it appeared to offer a protective effect. One possible explanation is that avoidance can function as a self-protective mechanism in conflict-prone environments, helping individuals steer clear of aggression. Other styles - including dominating, obliging, and compromising - did not significantly predict bullying, suggesting that their influence may be more context-dependent than previously assumed. The lack of a relationship between the dominating style and bullying was especially surprising and may reflect cultural or organisational norms that interpret assertiveness as acceptable or even desirable.

This study provides several insights that challenge prevailing assumptions. For example, the finding that avoidance may serve as a protective mechanism rather than a facilitator of bullying contrasts with Baillien and De Witte (2009) and is consistent with Kobayashi's (2025) evidence that communication behaviours under stress are not merely a function of personal style, but are contingent on the level of psychological safety and the power relations embedded in the workgroup. In Kobayashi's cluster-randomised intervention, increases in psychological safety preceded greater consultation and a reduction in bullying, demonstrating that communicative engagement depends on whether employees feel able to speak without interpersonal risk rather than on individual preference alone. This underscores how situational factors, like perceived safety in the workplace, can alter the typical interpretation of a conflict style (a state) in relation to bullying perceptions. Moreover, verbal aggression's clear predictive power supports previous claims (Rai & Agarwal, 2016) that bullying often begins as a breakdown in respectful communication and escalates through repeated cycles of aggressive interaction. This emphasizes the enduring influence of a communication trait like verbal aggression on the consistent perception of bullying.

The study also supports Samnani and Singh's (2016) warning that vague or ambiguous communication practices can contribute to misinterpretation and escalation. Misaligned expectations about what constitutes acceptable dissent or assertiveness may feed into

accusations of bullying, especially in organisations with weak feedback systems. This reinforces the need to consider not only behaviours but the interpretive frameworks employees use to decode them.

This study reinforces the value of a trait-state theoretical lens in understanding bullying perceptions. Communication traits (e.g., verbal aggression) and situational behaviours (e.g., dissent, conflict style) jointly shape interpersonal experiences. Consistent with this view, Kobayashi's (2025) findings demonstrate that bullying does not arise solely from individual predispositions but from the interaction between personal coping tendencies, perceived psychological safety, and the wider organisational climate. The intervention showed that when teams developed shared norms of safe, open communication, both intimidation by superiors and bullying conditions declined, indicating that behavioural expression is contingent on context-specific appraisals of safety rather than fixed personality alone.

Practically, these findings echo concerns raised by Blando et al. (2014), who found that many anti-bullying interventions fail due to inadequate communication training and organisational readiness. Addressing bullying effectively requires not just policy but practice: building employees' skills in assertive yet respectful communication, active listening, and conflict resolution. Organisations must also recognise the risks of ambiguous communication climates - where dissent is discouraged, and aggression is misread as leadership.

The findings of this study support a growing consensus that workplace bullying is not only a behavioural issue but a relational and communicative phenomenon (Rayner et al., 2002; Einarsen et al., 2018). When employees experience bullying, they often withdraw from dialogue, and this in turn reshapes team dynamics and silences other voices. As Creasy and Carnes (2017) note, this has downstream consequences: teams exposed to bullying tend to exhibit lower cohesion, reduced creativity, and diminished project success. These outcomes underscore the urgency of shifting workplace communication norms toward openness, respect, and clarity. Building on these insights, the following section provides a comprehensive conclusion that synthesizes the study's contributions and outlines key implications for future research and practice.

Conclusion

In synthesizing the literature with this research, it becomes apparent that addressing workplace bullying necessitates a multidimensional approach that includes redefining and promoting effective communication styles. Research highlights that interventions designed to foster healthier communication practices not only assist victims but also challenge bullies

to reflect on their communication choices (Keashly & Nowell, 2002). Furthermore, initiatives that enhance emotional intelligence among employees may mitigate the adverse effects of bullying by equipping individuals with the skills necessary to navigate high-stress interactions.

Through the lens of organisational communication theories, it becomes apparent that addressing workplace bullying is not merely a matter of promoting a healthy work environment but also a strategic necessity to ensure effective team learning and successful project outcomes. The intricate interplay between bullying and communication styles as highlighted by Creasy and Carnes (2017) suggests leaders within organisations must actively work to create an atmosphere where constructive communication is championed, thereby mitigating the adverse effects of bullying and fostering a more innovative culture. Specifically, promoting channels for articulated dissent while discouraging unchecked lateral dissent can be a powerful strategy in preventing the perception and escalation of bullying behaviours. The implications extend towards developing interventions that not only address the symptoms of bullying but also prioritize the cultivation of supportive communication practices essential for team success. Workplace bullying is often intricately related to the communication styles employed by individuals within organisational contexts. Notably, conflict management styles can serve as key precursors influencing the emergence and perpetuation of bullying behavior. Baillien and De Witte (2009) describe the connection between specific communication styles and the escalation of workplace bullying, emphasizing that inadequacies in conflict resolution can significantly contribute to a hostile work environment.

Research has indicated organisations with prevalent bullying behaviours tend to exhibit poor communication climates. This, in turn, adversely affects organisational culture by breeding cynicism among employees. High levels of unchecked workplace bullying have been shown to correlate with decreased job satisfaction, increased turnover rates, and diminished productivity (Rai & Agarwal, 2016). Hence, an understanding of communication styles in the context of workplace bullying is imperative for organisational leaders aiming to mitigate such adverse impacts.

In recognizing these patterns, it becomes imperative for organisations to develop clearer communication strategies as both preventative and responsive measures against workplace bullying. We recommend implementing training programs that focus on enhancing emotional intelligence and fostering assertiveness among employees. Such initiatives can equip individuals with the skills necessary to navigate challenging interactions, thereby promoting a culture where constructive feedback and open dialogue flourish. Additionally,

the adoption of conflict resolution frameworks that emphasize collaborative problem-solving could mitigate the adverse effects of bullying behavior on communication.

Furthermore, this study identifies several potential areas for further research. Investigating the long-term effects of workplace bullying on communication styles across various industries would provide a broader understanding of the implications of this phenomenon. Longitudinal studies could offer insights into how communication patterns evolve over time in response to bullying, particularly in different organisational contexts. Exploring the role of leadership in shaping communication norms within teams could also unveil critical aspects of organisational culture that either perpetuate or combat bullying behaviours.

Moreover, the need for nuanced examinations of specific communication styles - such as assertive versus passive communication - within the context of workplace bullying presents another avenue for exploration. Analysing how these styles are affected by, and in turn affect, the experiences of bullying could yield valuable insights into mechanisms for fostering resilience among employees. In conclusion, the interplay between workplace bullying and communication styles is multifaceted and complex. By refining communication practices and understanding their relationship to bullying, organisations can cultivate healthier work environments and ultimately enhance overall employee well-being and productivity. Addressing these issues holistically will facilitate deeper engagement with the topic and open pathways for significant advancements in both academic research and practical applications.

7.4 Reflection and Clarifications

Article Three makes three key contributions to the overarching thesis. *First*, it offers a distinctive integrative contribution by linking enduring / well-established communication traits with situational workplace behaviours, addressing the interaction between enduring predispositions and context-specific responses. *Second*, it operationalises the trait-state framework within the bullying literature, pairing relatively stable dispositions and traits-- argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness - with situational communication states, such as dissent expression and conflict-handling strategies. This operationalisation allows for a nuanced examination of how enduring and situational factors jointly shape employees' perceptions of bullying, highlighting the interpretive and relational nature of these experiences. *Third*, *Article Three* empirically tests this model, identifying the communication behaviours and conflict styles which significantly predict NAQ-R bullying perceptions. Findings clarify that articulated dissent may buffer against bullying perceptions, lateral dissent may heighten them, and verbal aggression consistently predicts elevated risk factor

(perceptions of bullying), while other conflict styles show context-dependent effects. Collectively, these contributions deepen the thesis by illustrating the dynamic interplay between individual communication traits, situational behaviours, and perceived workplace mistreatment, providing both theoretical insight and actionable implications for organisational practice. By evidencing the predictive power of communicative dispositions / traits and interaction styles, this article sets the stage for subsequent investigation of intervention strategies and organisational mechanisms to mitigate bullying in New Zealand workplaces.

A distinction should be drawn between the theoretical framing of the thesis and the statistical structure of the quantitative model reported in Study Three. Empirically, perceptions of workplace bullying were specified as the dependent variable, with communication traits and communication states functioning as predictors. This analytic approach enabled examination of whether particular communication orientations were associated with increased reports of workplace bullying.

Theoretically, however, the thesis adopts a broader communication-centred perspective in which workplace bullying constitutes the interpretive phenomenon of interest. The distinction is therefore one of analytic level rather than conceptual inconsistency. Whereas the statistical model treats bullying perceptions as an outcome variable, the thesis as a whole seeks to understand how communicative processes shape the construction, experience, and interpretation of workplace bullying. Recognising this distinction strengthens the coherence of the thesis and clarifies the contribution of Study Three within the overall programme of research.

A further distinction should be drawn between verbal aggressiveness as conceptualised within communication scholarship and workplace bullying as understood within organisational research. Infante's verbal aggressiveness construct refers to a relatively stable communication orientation characterised by a tendency to attack another person's self-concept during interpersonal disagreement. As such, the construct captures destructive communication tendencies rather than workplace bullying itself.

The present thesis does not argue that verbal aggressiveness and workplace bullying are synonymous constructs. Rather, Study Three explored whether communication traits traditionally examined within communication research might be associated with perceptions of workplace bullying. The findings suggest that verbal aggressiveness may represent one communication process relevant to understanding how harmful workplace interactions are enacted and experienced. However, workplace bullying remains a broader organisational phenomenon encompassing relational, contextual, and power-related dimensions that extend beyond any single communication construct.

Accordingly, verbal aggressiveness should be understood as a potentially informative explanatory variable within communication-centred models of workplace bullying rather than as a substitute measure for workplace bullying itself.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesises the findings from the three articles presented in this thesis, highlighting their collective theoretical and practical contributions. The preceding studies have explored workplace bullying through complementary lenses: managerial sense-making processes, the overlap with organisational dissent, and the influence of communication traits and conflict management styles. By integrating these perspectives, this chapter develops a cohesive understanding of workplace bullying as a communicative phenomenon. Additionally, it also reflects on the methodological approaches employed, the theoretical frameworks applied, and the practical implications for organisational practice. This discussion also revisits the definitional and disciplinary gaps identified in Sections 2.7 and 3.6, demonstrating how the research presented in this thesis addresses these limitations and advances the broader literature and body of knowledge on workplace bullying.

8.2 Reframing Bullying as Communicative

The central claim of this thesis is that workplace bullying is best understood as a communicatively constituted label applied to contested interactions, rather than a static list of behaviours. The findings of this thesis offer an opportunity to extend existing communication theory by reframing workplace bullying not simply as a behavioural problem but as an interpretive process grounded in communication, sensemaking, and organisational meaning systems. While workplace bullying research has historically emphasised frequency, intent, and power imbalance, this thesis provides empirical grounding for a communicative paradigm shift that positions bullying as a relational accomplishment emerging from interaction, attribution, and discourse. This perspective bridges longstanding gaps between psychological, sociological, and communication-centred models by demonstrating how communicative dynamics shape the recognition, negotiation, and escalation of perceived harm. The thesis extends attributional and meaning-making theories by showing that interpretations of bullying hinge not on the behaviour alone but on how interactional cues - tone, narrative framing, dissent direction, and relational history - are interpreted through communicative schemas.

The findings from *Article One* underscore the importance of sense-making processes in the identification and labelling of bullying incidents. As one manager observed, “*What one person calls bullying, another calls managing firmly*”, while another reflected that “*Intent makes the difference between feedback and humiliation*”. Such accounts reveal that the same behaviours - corrective feedback, humour, or assertive direction - were differently classified depending on tone, relational history, and perceived legitimacy. Many participants

employed justificatory strategies invoking organisational necessity or managerial prerogative to defend their conduct. These findings illustrate that the classification of behaviour as bullying is mediated through communicative framing rather than objective content. Employees' interpretations of workplace interactions, shaped by their prior experiences, organisational context, and organisational climate and influenced by their communication experiences, play a crucial role in whether behaviours are perceived as bullying.

Article Two demonstrates the overlap between organisational dissent and bullying, suggesting that expressions of disagreement or dissent can be construed as bullying, especially in settings and environments where power dynamics and communication norms are not conducive to open dialogue. Quantitative analysis confirmed that *“lateral dissent was significantly correlated with higher NAQ-R bullying scores, whereas upward dissent was negatively associated”*, suggesting that peer-level disagreement is more likely to be interpreted as hostility in hierarchically sensitive or low-trust environments. Participants in sectors with strong egalitarian or relational values described situations in which *“speaking up felt risky because it could be read as disrespect rather than contribution”*. These results underscore how interpretive outcomes are shaped by hierarchy, communication norms, and procedural fairness. The thesis also offers a theoretical extension to organisational dissent literature by demonstrating that dissent is not merely an expression of disagreement but a communicative process that shapes perceptions of harm. Classical dissent theory conceptualises dissent as either upward, lateral, or displaced (Kassing, 1997) but has been less attentive to how dissent interacts with relational risk, power asymmetry, and communicative style to influence whether behaviours are labelled as bullying. The results of *Article Two* provide empirical evidence that dissent and bullying share interpretive terrains: dissent is more likely to be labelled as bullying when expressed laterally or when organisational climates create ambiguity about voice legitimacy. This theoretical expansion reframes dissent as a meaning-making resource that can either de-escalate or escalate interpersonal strain depending on communicative context. Crucially, the thesis demonstrates that dissent can function both as an antecedent to and a consequence of bullying perceptions. This contributes to a more cyclical and systems-based theoretical model in which dissent is not a static construct but part of a feedback loop that shapes organisational sensemaking and relational dynamics.

Article Three extends this insight by demonstrating how individual communication traits and conflict-management styles influence such perceptions. Statistical modelling showed that *“verbal aggressiveness remained a significant positive predictor of perceived bullying”*, whereas *“argumentativeness and articulated dissent predicted lower bullying perceptions”*. Participants displaying high verbal aggressiveness described exchanges that *“spiralled quickly into personal territory”*, while those with stronger argumentativeness reported using evidence and rationale to sustain disagreement without relational harm. Conflict-handling

styles produced context-dependent effects, reinforcing that the relational and stylistic qualities of communication influence whether interactions escalate or are resolved constructively. A further theoretical contribution is the integration of trait-state communication models into the study of workplace bullying. Existing bullying literature rarely incorporates stable communication traits - such as verbal aggressiveness or argumentativeness - despite their conceptual proximity to behavioural escalation and interpersonal conflict. *Article Three* provides evidence that these traits interact with situational communication behaviours (dissent style, conflict style) to shape interpretive outcomes. This represents a theoretical advancement by demonstrating that bullying perceptions are mediated by trait-level predispositions, revealing that communication styles can amplify or buffer the likelihood of negative attributions; and providing a multi-level communication model that links individual tendencies with organisational discourse and interactional framing. This trait-state integration strengthens the field's understanding of how communication behaviours evolve across contexts and offers a "nested" conceptualisation in which bullying perceptions emerge from interactions between individual predispositions, communicative behaviours, and organisational climates

Collectively, these findings suggest bullying should not be viewed as a checklist of negative dysfunctional acts, but as a complex, context-dependent construct emerging from meaning-making in communicative practices and interactions. The definitional criteria outlined in Chapter 2 - repetition, intent, and power imbalance - are interpreted through these communicative practices. The persistence of ambiguity, even in organisations with formal anti-bullying policies (as revealed in *Article One*), indicates that definitional precision alone cannot prevent misinterpretation or conflict escalation. The thesis contributes theoretically by positioning bullying as an emergent communicative phenomenon - the cumulative product of relational, organisational, and communicative processes. This reorientation challenges deficit models that locate bullying primarily in the behaviours of "perpetrators" or the vulnerabilities of "targets". Instead, the thesis argues that bullying perceptions arise from the interplay between discourse, relational history, organisational norms, and communication styles. This extends communication theory by emphasising the co-construction of meaning between actors, highlighting how social norms and discursive practices shape perceptions of harm, illustrating how communicative misalignment transforms dissent into perceived aggression, and foregrounding interpretation as central to understanding negative workplace interactions. In this way, the thesis positions communication - rather than behaviour alone - as the locus of theoretical development in bullying research.

Therefore, organisational policies addressing workplace bullying through codification of prohibited acts must also leave pace for the understanding of the meaning-creation processes. This approach also infers a need to shift towards addressing workplace bullying

through communicative interventions that promote clarity, empathy, and constructive dialogue and dissent, thereby reducing the likelihood of mislabelling and fostering healthier workplace environments.

8.3 Dissent, Overlap, and Organisational Voice

The research findings indicate organisational dissent and voice can be misread as bullying when power relations, communication norms, or conflict histories predispose to negative attributions. *Article Two* reveals that expressions of dissent, particularly *lateral dissent*, are significantly more likely to correlate with higher bullying scores compared to *upward dissent*. As one participant observed, “*When you question a colleague’s idea too often, you’re seen as undermining, not contributing*”. This interpretation is often amplified in hierarchical organisations or those with a culture that discourages open communication. *Upward dissent* directed at managers was less likely to be interpreted as bullying in organisations that encouraged clear channels for feedback. The overlap between dissent and bullying perceptions is influenced by factors such as leadership style, organisational climate, and the presence of procedural fairness mechanisms. These findings demonstrate that dissent is not inherently problematic; rather, its interpretation depends on the relational and cultural context in which it occurs.

Article One offered nuance to this picture by showing how managers frequently framed disagreement through justificatory narratives that emphasised intent and organisational necessity. Several commented that “*firm conversations are part of leadership*”, reflecting a communicative environment where managerial authority can easily be conflated with interpersonal aggression. Such interpretations reveal how organisational hierarchies and cultural expectations - particularly in contexts valuing harmony or egalitarianism - can amplify the risk that dissent, or corrective communication will be framed as dysfunctional.

Article Three then further underscores the communicative roots of this dynamic. Employees high in verbal aggressiveness were more likely to perceive and be perceived as engaging in bullying, while those high in argumentativeness or articulated dissent experienced fewer negative attributions. This pattern highlights that both the expression and the reception of dissent hinge on communication skill, tone, and context. Leadership style and organisational climate, therefore, act as key moderators of whether voice is recognised as constructive challenge or misread as personal attack.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that the health of organisational voice systems depends not merely on formal policies but on the communicative culture that sustains them. When dissent is legitimised as a form of engagement rather than defiance, both targets and managers are protected: the former from misattributed hostility, and the latter from unexamined accusations. Creating such climates transforms dissent from a potential flashpoint into a vital mechanism for organisational learning and ethical resilience. To

mitigate the risk of mislabelling dissent as bullying, organisations should implement voice systems that encourage and institutionalise open and honest communication channels that make voiced disagreement safe. Providing employees with safe channels to express concerns, coupled with training in constructive dialogue and conflict resolution, may help distinguish between genuine dissent and behaviours that may be perceived as bullying. Additionally, fostering an organisational culture that values diverse perspectives and promotes procedural fairness may reduce the likelihood of negative attributions and enhance the effectiveness of organisational voice mechanisms.

8.4 Communication Styles and Bullying Perceptions

The findings from *Article Three* highlight the pivotal role of communication traits (predispositions) and conflict-management styles in shaping whether workplace encounters are perceived as bullying. Within the trait- state model a high verbal aggressiveness (trait) emerged as a significant positive predictor of perceived bullying. Individuals with high verbal aggressiveness are more likely to perceive interactions as bullying, regardless of the behaviour exhibited. Conversely, the high argumentativeness (trait) did not significantly predict bullying perceptions in this sample. Individuals with high argumentativeness tend to engage in more constructive conflict resolution, reducing the likelihood of labelling interactions as bullying. The study also reveals that certain conflict-handling styles, such as problem-solving and reason-giving, attenuate perceptions of bullying, while others, like avoidance or competition, may exacerbate them.

The state side of the model showed similarly patterned effects. Articulated dissent was strongly and negatively associated with bullying perceptions, indicating a buffering effect when disagreement is voiced openly and respectfully; by contrast, lateral dissent (peer-to-peer) was positively associated with bullying scores. Among conflict styles, avoidance was a negative predictor (a modest protective association in this dataset), while dominating and obliging did not show meaningful predictive power. These results underscore that interpretive outcomes turn on delivery and dialogic space as much as on the act itself - indeed, *“even if the intention is to convey urgency or importance, it is often perceived as bullying due to its confrontational nature”*.

Taken together, the trait - state interplay suggests specific combinations that elevate or attenuate perceived harm: high verbal aggressiveness coupled with lateral dissent and non-dialogic responses increases the likelihood that interactions are read as bullying; by contrast, articulated dissent paired with problem-solving and reason-giving (integrating, perspective-taking) tends to reduce such attributions. Methodologically, this implies that measurement should incorporate communicative style alongside behavioural frequency. Instruments like the NAQ-R remain valuable as perception measures, but the inclusion of style indicators

(e.g., verbal aggressiveness, dissent direction, conflict style) would better capture the interpretive mechanisms that translate negative acts into bullying perceptions.

These insights suggest interventions aimed at reducing workplace bullying should focus on enhancing employees' communication competencies prioritising style adaptation and meta-communication. Training programmes that develop skills in assertiveness, active listening, constructive feedback and explicit *reason-giving* may help individuals navigate conflicts more effectively and reduce the likelihood of interpreting interactions as bullying.

Additionally, promoting a culture that values open communication, and mutual respect can create an environment where diverse communication styles are recognised and accommodated, further mitigating the risk of bullying perceptions. Leaders should model articulated dissent channels and clarify expectations about challenge and feedback, thereby shifting disagreement from lateral circulation to constructive, upward voice. Reducing perceived bullying requires more than codifying against prohibited acts; it depends on cultivating communicative competencies and climates in which disagreement can be expressed, heard, and resolved without tipping into harm.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has synthesised the findings from the three constituent articles, to present a comprehensive understanding of workplace bullying as a communicative phenomenon. By reframing bullying through the lens of communication, the research highlights the importance of sense-making processes, the potential for misinterpretation of dissent, and the influence of communication styles on bullying perceptions. Across the studies, bullying emerged not as a fixed set of behaviours but as a dynamic process of meaning-making shaped by context, interaction, and perception. The synthesis confirms that individual perceptions of bullying are mediated by communicative framing and organisational climate. *Article One* illustrated how intent, tone, and relational history shaped managerial interpretations of similar acts; *Article Two* demonstrated that dissent, particularly when expressed laterally, could be misread as hostility in low-trust or hierarchical settings; and *Article Three* showed that communication traits and conflict-handling styles, such as verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness, materially affect whether interactions are perceived as bullying. An additional implication of these findings concerns the distinction between communication traits and workplace bullying as a construct. Although verbal aggressiveness emerged as relevant within the communication-centred framework advanced in this thesis, the results should not be interpreted as suggesting that verbally aggressive individuals are necessarily workplace bullies. Rather, communication traits may shape the ways in which workplace interactions are enacted, interpreted, and experienced. Maintaining this distinction strengthens the conceptual clarity of the present thesis and highlights the value of integrating, rather than conflating, insights from communication and workplace

The implications for theory and practice underscore the need for policies and interventions that address the communicative aspects of bullying, promoting environments where open dialogue and constructive conflict resolution are the norms. The following chapter will discuss the conclusions drawn from this research and outline recommendations for future studies in this area.

Chapter 9: Conclusion and Contributions

9.1 Introduction

Building on the discussion in Chapter 8, this chapter presents the overarching conclusions and contributions of the thesis. It synthesises the theoretical, methodological, and practical insights emerging from the three articles, highlighting the ways in which this research advances understanding of workplace bullying as a communicatively constituted phenomenon. The chapter is structured into three main sections: *first*, the integrative theoretical contributions that connect bullying research with organisational communication and conflict theory; *second*, the policy and practice implications for organisations seeking to manage bullying and dissent effectively; and *third*, the limitations of the research and directions for future study. Collectively, these sections aim to demonstrate the significance of this thesis for both scholarship and practice in the Aotearoa New Zealand context and beyond.

9.2 Integrative Theoretical Contributions

This thesis makes a substantive contribution to the theoretical understanding of workplace bullying by reframing it as a communicatively constituted label rather than a fixed set of negative acts. By integrating insights from organisational communication, conflict theory, and sense-making perspectives, the thesis provides a framework that highlights how bullying labels emerge from interactional meaning-making processes. Central to this framework is the recognition that “bullying” is not inherent to particular behaviours but rather, arises when behaviours are interpreted through personal predispositions and is filtered by the lenses of power, organisational culture, and communicative norms.

A further theoretical contribution of this thesis lies in extending and refining the organisational dissent literature by evidencing the complex, bidirectional relationship between dissent and perceptions of bullying. While prior scholarship has noted that dissent may be suppressed in hostile climates (Garner, 2013) and that labelling behaviour as bullying may be used strategically to close down disagreement (Akella, 2016; Ferris et al., 2007), this thesis situates dissent not merely as a contextual correlate but as a communicative practice that actively shapes how bullying is interpreted. Across the empirical studies, dissent emerges as both a potential antecedent to, and a product of, contested meaning-making: constructive upward dissent may mitigate the likelihood that conflict is experienced as bullying, whereas indirect or displaced forms of dissent appear to coexist with heightened perceptions of bullying. This pattern refines existing theory by demonstrating that dissent cannot be understood solely as a protective or expressive mechanism; rather, it forms part

of the interpretive circuitry through which individuals make sense of negative acts and assign labels such as “bullying”, “conflict”, or “legitimate management”.

The findings also contribute to theoretical debates on the communicative boundary between dissent and bullying. *Article One* shows that managers often encounter “disputed acts” where disagreement, pushback, or challenge becomes difficult to distinguish from alleged mistreatment. Interviewees frequently traced breakdowns in communication to ambiguity: employees who attempted indirect dissent often believed they were signalling discomfort or disagreement, while managers interpreted these signals as resistance, negativity, or interpersonal aggression. In several cases, participants described situations where dissent initially functioned as an attempt to restore clarity - only to later be retroactively reframed as bullying once relationships had deteriorated. These accounts offer empirical support for the argument that dissent forms part of the interpretive circuitry through which negative acts are labelled and understood. This sensemaking work highlights that the threshold between dissent and bullying is not objectively fixed but negotiated through communicative attribution: whether a behaviour is constructed as voice or as aggression depends on relational history, organisational norms, and the communicative framing used by both parties.

Article Two extends this insight by demonstrating quantitatively that dissent behaviours occupy a conceptual space that overlaps with perceptions of bullying, further evidencing that both constructs share underlying communicative processes concerning power, legitimacy, and the acceptability of challenge. By empirically demonstrating that dissent can simultaneously be a form of constructive contribution and be misinterpreted as hostility, the thesis advances existing models by clarifying the conditions under which dissent becomes vulnerable to reframing as bullying. Dissent scores, particularly for displaced and lateral dissent, showed strong associations with NAQ-R bullying scores, suggesting that employees who avoid upward, constructive channels of voice are also more likely to interpret workplace behaviours as bullying. While this association does not imply causation, it evidences a shared perceptual space in which uncertainty, lack of voice safety, and relational strain contribute both to reluctance to dissent openly and to greater sensitivity to perceived hostility. These findings reaffirm that dissent cannot be understood solely as a protective or expressive mechanism; it is an integral component of the meaning-making processes through which individuals evaluate interpersonal intent and organisational legitimacy.

The findings also contribute to theoretical debates concerning the communicative boundary between dissent and bullying. The qualitative data in *Article One* show that the threshold between dissent and bullying is negotiated through communicative attribution, shaped by relational history, power dynamics, and organisational norms. In practice, whether an act is interpreted as legitimate voice or inappropriate aggression depends heavily on framing. Managers who framed employee disagreement as “engaged challenge” were far less likely to report experiences of feeling attacked or undermined, whereas those who framed the same

behaviours as “pushback”, “negativity”, or “personal criticism” were more likely to describe dissent interactions as bullying.

Article Two extends this insight by quantifying conceptual and perceptual overlap. The patterns indicate that dissent behaviours occupy a conceptual space that intersects with perceptions of bullying, especially when dissent is indirect or lateral. This overlap evidences shared underlying communicative processes relating to power, legitimacy, and challenge acceptability. In contexts where upward voice is unsafe, employees tend to express dissent laterally or indirectly; managers, in turn, are more likely to interpret these behaviours as indicative of hostility or subversion. Thus, the empirical data substantiate a model in which dissent and bullying become mutually influential categories under conditions of relational ambiguity or misaligned meaning-making.

A further theoretical contribution is that the thesis integrates dissent into a broader trait - state framework of communicative behaviour. *Article Three* demonstrates that individual predispositions – especially verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness – interact with dissent styles to shape how workplace interactions are experienced and evaluated. This finding adds conceptual breadth to existing dissent theory, which has tended to emphasise organisational structures over individual communicative traits. The thesis shows that dissent is not merely a behavioural response to organisational constraints but a process mediated by stable communication styles which influence how disagreement is expressed, how forcefully challenges are framed, and how others interpret these acts. In this way, dissent becomes situated within a predictive model of communicative behaviour, expanding its conceptualisation beyond static typologies and offering a more dynamic understanding of its role in workplace meaning-making.

The inclusion of workplace ill-treatment perspectives further strengthens the contribution of the present thesis. In many respects, the findings reported throughout this thesis support sociological observations that workplace experiences are frequently characterised by ambiguity, competing interpretations, and contested meanings. The communication-centred approach advanced here complements this body of scholarship by identifying some of the communicative mechanisms through which workplace behaviours become interpreted, challenged, or legitimised. Rather than representing competing explanatory frameworks, communication-centred and workplace ill-treatment perspectives appear mutually reinforcing in their recognition that workplace bullying cannot be understood solely through reference to observable behaviours divorced from their organisational contexts.

Together, these insights offer a theoretical reorientation: dissent and bullying should be conceptualised not as distinct categories but as communicatively intertwined phenomena whose boundaries are produced through interaction. This model emphasises the co-production of meaning between speakers and recipients: dissent becomes constructive or destructive not by inherent characteristics, but through interactional framing, relational history, and individual communication styles. The model also highlights the vulnerability of dissent to reframing within organisational power dynamics. For instance, employees with

lower organisational power reported higher rates of having their dissent characterised as “aggressive” or “unprofessional”, regardless of intent. In contrast, those with higher power were more able to have their challenges framed as legitimate voice rather than bullying.

Together, these insights provide a theoretical reorientation: dissent and bullying are not discrete categories but communicatively intertwined phenomena whose boundaries are produced, negotiated, and contested through interaction. By showing how dissent practices influence the likelihood of interpreting conflict as bullying, how managerial sensemaking shapes whether dissent is legitimised or delegitimised, and how communicative traits structure the expression and evaluation of dissent, the thesis advances dissent theory in three ways. First, it reframes dissent as an interpretive rather than solely behavioural construct. Second, it highlights dissent’s susceptibility to reframing within organisational power dynamics. Third, it positions dissent within an integrated communicative model that accounts for individual predispositions, situational cues, and organisational context. In doing so, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced theoretical understanding of dissent that foregrounds its relational and communicative foundations.

Methodologically, the research demonstrates how instruments like the NAQ-R intersect with communicative constructs such as organisational dissent and conflict-handling styles and individual traits (argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness). *Article One’s* sense-making analysis illustrates how employees’ interpretations of the same behaviours vary and are contingent on prior experiences, expectations, and contextual cues (e.g. attributions, tone, and relational history). *Article Two* demonstrates dissent can mimic, or be mistaken for, bullying depending on the communicative context, including direction (lateral vs upward) and climate (trust, hierarchy). Highlighting the need to consider relational histories and hierarchical dynamics when interpreting this phenomenon. *Article Three’s* exploration of communication traits - such as verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness - and conflict styles clarifies how these individual predispositions modulate perceptions of harm, revealing a pattern whereby interactions are either amplified or mitigated as perceived bullying, depending on both trait and situational factors. Together, these findings indicate measures like the NAQ-R have their strongest explanatory value when embedded within a broader understanding of communicative context and individual style.

Empirically, this thesis foregrounds these insights within the Aotearoa New Zealand workplace context, providing culturally grounded evidence that workplace bullying perceptions are influenced by local organisational norms, power structures, and communication expectations. In doing so, it addresses a notable gap in the literature, which is heavily weighted towards North American and European contexts. By situating the analysis within Aotearoa New Zealand, the research highlights how culturally specific interpretations of conflict, authority, and dissent shape the perception and labelling of workplace bullying, reinforcing the importance of contextually sensitive theorisation.

Theoretically, the thesis also contributes to ongoing definitional debates by demonstrating that the criteria traditionally used to define bullying - repetition, intent, and power imbalance - must also be interpreted through communicative practices. Repetition alone does not inherently constitute bullying; rather, it is the repeated pattern of interactional meaning-making, perceived intent, and relational power dynamics that constitutes the label. This reframing allows for the development of some predictive modelling in which bullying labels are *emergent phenomena* arising from patterned interactions, mediated by individual communication styles, organisational context, and institutional logic. Such a model provides a roadmap for future theory building, including the potential integration of computational or network-based analyses of workplace interactions, longitudinal assessment of conflict escalation, and cross-cultural validation of bullying perceptions.

In sum, the theoretical contributions of this thesis lie in providing a nuanced, interactional framework for understanding bullying that bridges disciplinary divides, aligns measurement with communicative processes, and situates empirical evidence within a culturally specific context. By reconceptualising bullying as a communicative label, this research not only clarifies definitional ambiguity but also offers a foundation for both methodological refinement and theoretical expansion in the field of workplace bullying research.

9.3 Policy and Practice Contributions

The thesis also offers practical guidance for organisations seeking to address workplace bullying and promote healthy communication. One key implication is that policy frameworks must distinguish contested performance management or constructive dissent from actual workplace bullying. Traditional anti-bullying policies often focus on negative behaviours, yet this research demonstrates that it is the interpretation of these behaviours through communicative and contextual lenses that determines whether they are experienced as workplace bullying. Consequently, organisations should adopt policies that emphasise meaning-making processes, including clear dialogue protocols, triage pathways for conflict escalation, and culturally responsive procedures that consider local norms and organisational culture.

Training is another critical area of practical contribution. The findings suggest that interventions should go beyond awareness raising to equip employees and managers with skills in dissent handling, conflict de-escalation, and communication style adaptation. For example, recognising how verbal aggressiveness may be perceived differently across hierarchical levels or cultural contexts allows targeted coaching in both self-regulation and in interpretation of others' behaviour. Similarly, promoting meta-communication - explicit discussion about communication expectations - may reduce mislabelling of dissent as bullying and enhance procedural fairness.

Procedural recommendations include the development of structured dialogue systems, which provide clear channels for raising concerns while protecting employees from retaliatory reactions. These systems might usefully include facilitated conversations, mediations, or neutral triage teams that evaluate contested interactions, ensuring that performance management is not conflated with bullying. By embedding these practices within organisational routines, organisations can promote transparency, accountability, and fairness, reducing the negative consequences of mislabelling and creating a culture that supports both employee voice and managerial authority.

The research also highlights the importance of context-sensitive approaches. Hierarchical structures, organisational climate, and cultural norms all shape and influence how interactions are perceived. Policies and practices that integrate cultural responsiveness - recognising how local communication patterns, institutional logic, and relational norms shape perceptions - can improve the efficacy of bullying interventions. For Aotearoa New Zealand workplaces, this includes consideration of multi-ethnic communication styles and values (including Māori and Pasifika in particular), ensuring interventions are inclusive and effective across diverse teams.

Overall, the policy and practice contributions of this thesis lie in its emphasis on communication as the locus of bullying perceptions. By shifting organisational focus from behaviour catalogues to meaning-making, the research provides actionable recommendations for policy development, training, and conflict management, supporting workplaces that are both safe and communicatively competent.

9.4 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this research has several limitations that warrant explicit consideration. *First*, all three articles rely on cross-sectional designs, meaning causality cannot be established. While this aligns with the constructivist epistemology underpinning the thesis, longitudinal or experimental studies could further clarify the temporal sequencing and causative pathways of bullying perceptions. *Second*, the research is geographically bounded within Aotearoa New Zealand. While this allows for culturally specific insights, and examines a setting with high reported workplace bullying, generalisability to other national or cultural contexts is limited, and future research should explore cross-cultural validation of these findings.

Third, reliance on self-reported perceptions introduces potential interpretive biases. Respondents' accounts are necessarily filtered through their own experiences, traits, and situational contexts, which may result in over- or underestimation of bullying behaviours. Future research could integrate multi-source data, such as peer or supervisor assessments, observational records, or network analyses, to triangulate findings and enhance reliability. *Fourth*, while culturally grounded measurement instruments are critical for explanatory

value, this thesis did not develop new instruments specifically tailored to Aotearoa New Zealand's diverse workforce. Further work is needed to create and validate contextually and culturally sensitive scales that capture the nuances of communication and conflict interpretation.

The thesis intentionally focused on communication processes associated with workplace bullying perceptions rather than differential exposure across demographic groups. Consequently, variables relating to disability, ethnicity, sexuality, and other aspects of identity were not included within the empirical studies reported. While this decision reflected the specific aims of the research programme, it also represents an important opportunity for future investigation.

Future research would benefit from examining the extent to which communicative norms, organisational responses, and experiences of workplace bullying vary across diverse populations. Such work may provide valuable insights into the ways in which marginalisation influences whose workplace experiences are recognised, whose communication practices are legitimised, and how organisations respond to claims of harm. Integrating communication-centred perspectives with scholarship concerning discrimination and inclusion therefore represents a promising avenue for extending the present programme of research.

Building on these limitations, future research priorities include longitudinal studies that examine the evolution of bullying perceptions over time, comparative cross-cultural investigations to assess the influence of institutional and cultural logic, and multi-method approaches that integrate behavioural, perceptual, and network-level data. Additionally, research examining the interaction of communication traits, organisational context, and formal policies in predicting bullying perceptions would extend the theoretical framework proposed here and support the design of more effective interventions.

In conclusion, while this research has boundaries in methodology, context, and measurement, it provides a foundation for ongoing scholarship and practical innovation in understanding and addressing workplace bullying as a communicatively constituted phenomenon.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Ethics approvals

4000020729 Dissent or Bullying via Computer Mediated Communication: An Analysis of New Zealand Business Communication

Approved Ethics Applications					
Status	Workflow State	Primary Investigator	Application Title	Template Category	Application ID
Approved	Complete_LR	Mrs Beth Tootell	Dissent or Bullying via Computer Mediated Communication	Human Ethics	4000020729



18/03/2019

Dear: Mrs Beth Tootell

Re: Low Risk Notification - 4000020729 - Dissent or Bullying via Computer Mediated Communication: An Analysis of New Zealand Business Communication

Thank you for submitting a low risk notification for your research/teaching/evaluation.

This email is to acknowledge receipt of the low risk notification and to inform you that the details of your project have been recorded in our database for inclusion in the annual reports to the Health Research Council Ethics Committee (HRCEC) and the Massey University Research Committee (URC).

You may proceed with your research, though it is advisable to provide a couple of weeks before commencing, as all low risk notifications are checked for completeness and clarity by a Research Ethics Advisor. You may be contacted if your application is incomplete and/or further clarification is required.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis.

If a sponsoring organisation, funding authority (e.g., the Health Research Council) or a journal require evidence of ethical approval from a Human Ethics Committee (with an approval number), you need to complete a full Massey University Human Ethics application to be reviewed and approved by one of our Human Ethics Committees. Applications must be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of the research.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Research Ethics Office, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Please include the following statement on all public documents (e.g., information sheet, consent form) related to your project:

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Massey University Human Ethics by email: humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

I wish you all the best in your research, teaching or evaluation activities and appreciate your thoughtful consideration of ethics principles and practices.

Ngā mihi nui,

Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

Research Ethics, Graduate Research School and Ethics
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz; animalethics@massey.ac.nz
www.massey.ac.nz/research/ethics

From: humanethics@massey.ac.nz <humanethics@massey.ac.nz>

Sent: Monday, 18 March 2019 2:52 pm

To: Tootell, Beth <B.L.Tootell@massey.ac.nz>; Croucher, Stephen <S.Croucher@massey.ac.nz>; Bentley, Tim <T.A.Bentley@massey.ac.nz>; Ashwell, Doug <D.Ashwell@massey.ac.nz>; Cullinane, Jo <J.Cullinane@massey.ac.nz>

Cc: Human Ethics <gmhumeth@massey.ac.nz>

Subject: Human Ethics Notification - 4000020729

HoU Review Group

Prof Tim Bentley

Ethics Notification Number: 4000020729

Title: Dissent or Bullying via Computer Mediated Communication: An Analysis of New Zealand Business Communication

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as Low Risk.

Your project has been recorded in our system which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz. "

Please note that if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish require evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again answering yes to the publication question to provide more information to go before one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

You are reminded that staff researchers and supervisors are fully responsible for ensuring that the information in the low risk notification has met the requirements and guidelines for submission of a low risk notification.

If you wish to print an official copy of this letter, please login to the RIMS system, and under the Reporting section, View Reports you will find a link to run the LR Report.

Yours sincerely

Professor Craig Johnson

Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Ethics Application

Application ID :	4000020729
Application Title :	Dissent or Bullying via Computer Mediated Communication: An Analysis of New Zealand Business Communication
Date of Submission :	18/03/2019
Primary Investigator :	Mrs Beth Tootell (Applicant)
Other Personnel :	Prof Stephen Croucher (Supervisor) Dr Doug Ashwell (Co-Applicant) A/Pro Jo Cullinane (Co-Applicant)

1. Risk Assessment

Project Detail

Human Ethics Application Risk Assessment Form

Does your research fall within the scope of the Code? The scope includes:

- a. All research involving either the participation of human or where the research impacts on individuals, groups or communities. This includes consultancies, contract research, staff research and supervised student research.
 - b. Any teaching which involves the participation of students for the demonstration of procedures or phenomena that have a potential for harm.
 - c. Any evaluation of university services, organisational practices or teaching programmes where information of a personal nature may be collected, where participants may be identified, or where the performance of staff may be commented on. This does not include routine organisational quality improvement activities, e.g. academic programme evaluations or service delivery projects but does include activities which have a research component and may lead to publications.
- **NB: Where research involves a Massey staff researcher using their own students as participants please refer to the [Decision Chart](#) in Section 2 of the Code.**

Applicant Information- PEER REVIEW

Prior to submitting your application for approval, there is an option for you to have your application peer reviewed. (This could be a supervisor if you are a student, or a colleague in the case of academic research). The process is as follows:

- Click on the Action Tab
- Click on the 'Send for peer review' action
- Follow the instructions given.

Note: This process will send an email to your peer reviewer which contains a pdf of the application. The peer reviewer comments by email outside of the RIMS process.

This **IS NOT** part of the approval process.

Following comment (if any) from your peer reviewer, you must **STILL** submit the final application through the action tab.

1 Project Title

Please limit this to a maximum of 25 words*

Dissent or Bullying via Computer Mediated Communication: An Analysis of New Zealand Business Communication

2 Recruitment / Data collection start date.

This date must be in the future.

Data collection /recruitment cannot begin until notification of submission has been received.*

19/03/2019

3 Projected end of project date.*

17/06/2019

4 Project Type *

- ☐ Academic Staff Research
- ☐ General Staff Research
- ☒ Postgraduate Student Research
- ☐ Undergraduate Student Research
- ☐ Evaluation
- ☐ Teaching
- ☐ Other

5 Project Summary

Please outline in no more than 2000 characters in lay language*

Organizational dissent is an important form of workplace communication, because employees can give valuable feedback regarding organizational inefficiency, unethical practices, and others organizational aspects. Dissent provides organizations opportunities for improvement and innovation. However, many organizations penalize employees for expressing dissent. Dissent has been shown to be culturally bound, with different national and employment cultures responding to dissent in different ways. In the New Zealand context, dissent is often associated with bullying and to be an unconstructive form of communication. In this mixed-method analysis we explore the following questions:

1. What are the differences between dissent and bullying in the New Zealand corporate context?
2. How do employees conceptualize triggering events of dissent and bullying in the New Zealand corporate context?
3. What are the consequences of supervisors and subordinates understanding the relationship between dissent and bullying in the New Zealand corporate context?

6 Describe the peer review process that has been used to discuss and analyse the ethical issues present in this project.

(maximum of 4000 characters)*

The project outline, and the survey instrument have been robustly discussed by the four project authors, and the survey has been sent to external reviewers for feedback.

7 List the ethical issues considered and explain how each has been addressed

(maximum of 2000 characters)*

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1. Anonymity. The participants are asked to reflect on workplace incidents, that may raise concerns regarding anonymity. The survey is designed to be completely random, and no connections can be made between respondents and organisations. Further, any identifying characteristics will be carefully vetted in the reporting process to ensure anonymity is retained.

- 8 **With whom did you peer review your research?**
(maximum of 2000 characters)*

Dr. Stephanie Kelly (North Carolina A&T University) and Cheng Zeng (North Dakota State University).

Applicant

- 1 Applicant Department*

School of Management

- 2 Ethics Category Hidden*

Human

Campus of Chief Applicant

(or Campus of Supervisor for Student)*

- ☐ Manawatu
☒ Wellington
☐ Albany

- 3 Personnel

You can add any additional team members here. Click on 'More criteria' below to access the advanced search function.

1	Surname	Tootell
	Given Name	Beth
	Full Name	Mrs Beth Tootell
	Position	Applicant
	Primary?	Yes
	Work Number	
	Email Address	B.L.Tootell@massey.ac.nz
	Department	School of Management
	College	Massey Business School
2	Surname	Croucher
	Given Name	Stephen
	Full Name	Prof Stephen Croucher
	Position	Supervisor
	Primary?	No
	Work Number	
	Email Address	S.Croucher@massey.ac.nz
	Department	School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing
	College	Massey Business School
3	Surname	Ashwell
	Given Name	Douglas
	Full Name	Dr Doug Ashwell
	Position	Co-Applicant
	Primary?	No
	Work Number	
	Email Address	D.Ashwell@massey.ac.nz
	Department	School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing
	College	Massey Business School
4	Surname	Cullinane
	Given Name	Joanna
	Full Name	A/Pro Jo Cullinane
	Position	Co-Applicant
	Primary?	No
	Work Number	
	Email Address	J.Cullinane@massey.ac.nz
	Department	PVC's Office - Massey Business School
	College	Massey Business School

Please add name of co researchers if unable to locate above

This question is not answered.

Risk Assessment

1 **Is Health and Disability Ethics Committee review required for this study?***

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

[Link to Standard Operating Procedures for HDECs](#)

[Link to HDEC scope of review form](#)

2 **Does your research include:**

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-
- a **Situations where the researcher may be at risk of harm***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- b **Use of a questionnaire or interview, whether or not it is anonymous, which might reasonably be expected to cause discomfort, embarrassment or psychological or spiritual harm to the participants. ***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- c **Processes that are potentially disadvantageous to a person or group, such as the collection of information which may expose a person / group to discrimination.***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- d **Collection of information of illegal behavior(s) gained during the research which could place the participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, professional or personal relationships.***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- e **Collection of blood, body fluid, tissue samples or other samples.***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- f **Any form of exercise regime, or deprivation. (e.g. sleep or dietary)***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- g **Any form of physical examination (e.g. physical, radiation, ultrasound).***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- h **The administration of any form of drug, medicine (other than in the course of standard medical procedure), or placebo. ***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- i **Physical pain, beyond mild discomfort.***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- j **Any Massey University teaching which involves the participation of Massey University students for a demonstration of procedures or phenomena which have potential for harm.***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- k **Participants whose identities are known to the researcher giving oral consent rather than written consent, other than for cultural reasons. ***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- l **Participants who are unable to give informed consent.***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- m **Research on your own students / pupils. For Massey Staff - refer to the Decision Chart in section 2 of the Code. [Code of Ethical Conduct - Decision Chart](#)***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- n **The participation of children (seven (7) years old or younger).***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- o **The participation of children under sixteen (16) years old where active parental consent is not being sought.***
☒ No
☐ Yes
- p **Participants who are in a dependant situation, such as nursing home or prison, or patients highly dependent on medical care.***
☒ No
☐ Yes

q **Participants who are vulnerable.***

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

r **The use of previously collected identifiable personal information or research data for which there was no explicit consent for this research.***

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

s **The use of previously collected biological samples for which there was no explicit consent for this research.***

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

t **Any evaluation of organisational services or practices where information of a personal nature may be collected and where participants or the organisation may be identified.***

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

u **Deception of the participants, including concealment or covert observations.***

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

v **Conflict of interest situation for the researcher.**

[Code of Ethical Conduct- Special Relationships](#)

*e.g. Is the project funded or supported in any way that might result in a conflict of interest, do any of the researchers have a financial interest in the outcome, or is there a professional or other relationship between the researcher and the participants? **

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

w **Payments or other financial inducements (other than reasonable reimbursement of travel expenses or time) to participants.***

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

x **A requirement by an outside organisation (e.g. a funding organisation or a journal in which you wish to publish) for Massey University Human Ethics Committee approval.***

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

y **I wish to submit a full application for Training / Education purposes***

- ☒ No
☐ Yes

2. Sign off

Applicant Sign Off

To submit this application please select the check box below, then using the Actions Tab click on the Submit action.

As Chief Applicant;

- I have read the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluation involving Human Participants.
- I understand my obligations and the rights of the participants.
- My Head of Unit knows that I am undertaking this research. (for academic staff research)
- I understand that Low Risk Notifications are audited by the Ethics Office and that breaches in complying with Low Risk conditions will be followed up.
- I agree to undertake the research as set out in the Code.

Are there any co-researchers?*

- ☐ No
☒ Yes

- I have confirmed that all co-researchers have read the Code and I have obtained their approval for the content of this application.

- The information in this application is to the very best of my knowledge accurate and not misleading.

*

☒ I have read and understood the above statements

4000029088 Bullying, Dissent and Conflict



28/05/2024

Dear: Mrs Beth Tootell

Re: Low Risk Notification - 4000029088 - Bullying, Dissent and Conflict

Thank you for submitting a low risk notification for your research/teaching/evaluation.

This email is to acknowledge receipt of the low risk notification and to inform you that the details of your project have been recorded in our database for inclusion in the annual reports to the Health Research Council Ethics Committee (HRCEC) and the Massey University Research Committee (URC).

You may proceed with your research, though it is advisable to provide a couple of weeks before commencing, as all low risk notifications are checked for completeness and clarity by a Research Ethics Advisor. You may be contacted if your application is incomplete and/or further clarification is required.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis.

If a sponsoring organisation, funding authority (e.g., the Health Research Council) or a journal require evidence of ethical approval from a Human Ethics Committee (with an approval number), you need to complete a full Massey University Human Ethics application to be reviewed and approved by one of our Human Ethics Committees. Applications must be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of the research.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Research Ethics Office, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Please include the following statement on all public documents (e.g., information sheet, consent form) related to your project:

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Massey University Human Ethics by email: humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

I wish you all the best in your research, teaching or evaluation activities and appreciate your thoughtful consideration of ethics principles and practices.

Ngā mihi nui,

Professor Tracy Riley
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Chair's Committee

Research Ethics, Graduate Research School and Ethics
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz; animalethics@massey.ac.nz
www.massey.ac.nz/research/ethics

Appendix 2 Survey instruments

Table 1 Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised by author (Tootell et al 2024)

Item	Statement
1	Spreading gossip about you.
2	Being ignored or excluded.
3	Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger.
4	Intimidating behaviour such as finger pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking your way.
5	Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job.
6	Repeated reminders of errors or mistakes.
7	Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction upon seeing you approach.
8	Repeated criticism with respect to your work and effort.
9	Practical jokes carried out by people that you do not get along with.
10	Having allegations made against you.
11	Excessive monitoring of your work.
12	Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm.
13	Threats of violence or physical or actual abuse.

Table 2 Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised (Einarsen et al., 2009)

Items:

Work-related bullying

1. Someone withholding information which affects your performance
2. Being ordered to do work below your level of competence
3. Having your opinions ignored
4. Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines
5. Excessive monitoring of your work
6. Pressure not to claim something to which by right you are entitled (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expenses)
7. Being exposed to an unmanageable workload

Person-related bullying

8. Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work
9. Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks
10. Spreading of gossip and rumors about you
11. Being ignored or excluded
12. Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person, attitudes or your private life
13. Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job
14. Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes
15. Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach

-
16. Persistent criticism of your errors or mistakes
 17. Practical jokes carried out by people you don't get along with
 18. Having allegations made against you
 19. Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm

Physically intimidating bullying

20. Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger
21. Intimidating behaviors such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking your way
22. Threats of violence or physical abuse or actual abuse

Response Options:

Never
Now and then
Monthly
Weekly
Daily

Scoring Procedures

The response to all items are averaged.

Original Citation

Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., & Notelaers, G. (2009). Measuring exposure to bullying and harassment at work: Validity, factor structure and psychometric properties of the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised. *Work & Stress*, 23(1), 24-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678370902815673>

Table 3 Argumentativeness Scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982)

Item	Statement
1	I challenge the reasoning of others.
2	I challenge other people's factual statements.
3	I challenge people's unwarranted claims.
4	I tell others why they are wrong.
5	I question people's ideas.
6	I ask others to justify their opinions.
7	I ask others for proof of what they say.
8	Others need to offer evidence to convince me.
9	I dispute the reasoning of others.
10	While arguing, I point out when people are inconsistent.
11	I ask others to explain their reasoning.
12	I tell others to back-up their claims.
13	I show others the errors in their arguments.
14	I refute ideas that are not well supported.
15	I test the ideas offered by others.
16	I offer counterpoints to others' ideas.
17	I challenge others to prove their positions.
18	I mull over novel ideas others present.
19	I look closely at others' reasoning.
20	People need to bolster what they say.

Table 4 Organizational Dissent Scale (Kassing, 1998)

Item	Statement
1	I am hesitant to raise some questions or contradictory opinions in my organisation.
2	I complain about things in my organisation with other employees.
3	I do not question management.
4	I'm hesitant to question workplace policies.
5	I share my criticism of this organisation openly.
6	I make certain everyone knows when I'm unhappy with work policies.
7	I don't tell my supervisor when I disagree with workplace decisions.
8	I bring my criticism about organisational changes that aren't working to my supervisor or someone in management.
9	I let other employees know how I feel about the way things are done around here.
10	I make suggestions to management or my supervisor about correcting inefficiency in my organisation.
11	I do not express my disagreement to management.
12	I tell management when I believe employees are being treated unfairly.
13	I speak freely to my co-workers about troubling workplace issues.

Table 5 Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986)

Item	Statement
1	I am extremely careful to avoid attacking individuals' intelligence when I attack their ideas.
2	When individuals are very stubborn, I use insults to soften the stubbornness.
3	I try very hard to avoid having other people feel bad about themselves when I try to influence them.
4	When people refuse to do a task I know is important, without good reason, I tell them they are unreasonable.
5	When others do things I regard as stupid, I try to be extremely gentle with them.
6	When people behave in ways that are in very poor taste, I insult them to shock them into proper behavior.
7	I try to make people feel good about themselves even when their ideas are stupid.
8	When individuals criticize my shortcomings, I take it in good humor and do not try to get back at them.
9	When individuals insult me, I get a lot of pleasure out of really telling them off.
10	When I dislike individuals greatly, I try not to show it in what I say or in how I say it.
11	I like poking fun at people who do things which are very stupid in order to stimulate their intelligence.
12	When I try to influence people, I make a great effort not to offend them.
13	When people do things which are mean or cruel, I attack their character in order to help correct their behavior.
14	I refuse to participate in arguments when they involve personal attacks.
15	When I am not able to refute others' positions, I try to make them feel defensive in order to weaken their positions.

Table 6 Conflict Style Instrument (Oetzel, 1998)

Item	Statement
1	I would try to investigate the issue with the other members to find a solution acceptable to us.
2	I would attempt to avoid being 'put on the spot' and try to keep my conflict to myself.
3	I would use my influence to get my ideas accepted.
4	I would try to satisfy the needs of the other members.
5	I would try to find a middle course to resolve the disagreement.
6	I would try to integrate my ideas with the other members to come up with a decision jointly.
7	I would accommodate the wishes of the other members.
8	I would use my authority to make a decision in my favor.
9	I would avoid open discussion of my differences.
10	I would try to work with the other members to find solutions to a problem which would satisfy us.
11	I would try to stay away from the disagreement with the other members.
12	I would propose a middle ground for breaking the deadlock.
13	I would give in to the wishes of the other members.

14	I would exchange accurate information with the other members to solve the problem together.
15	I would use my expertise to make a decision in my favor.
16	I would try to bring all of our concerns out in the open so that the issues could be resolved in the best possible way.
17	I would try to avoid the encounter with the group members.
18	I would negotiate with the other members so that a compromise can be reached.
19	I would allow concessions to the other members.
20	I would try to keep my disagreement to myself in order to avoid hard feelings.
21	I would be firm in pursuing my side of the issue.
22	I would collaborate with the other members to come up with decisions acceptable to us.
23	I would go along with the suggestions of the other members.
24	I would try to avoid unpleasant exchanges with the other members.
25	I would use 'give and take' so that a compromise could be made.