

# THE MODERATING ROLE OF ASSERTIVENESS AND SOCIAL ANXIETY IN WORKPLACE BULLYING: TWO EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Bernardo Moreno-Jiménez, Alfredo Rodríguez-Muñoz, Ynomig Moreno and Eva Garrosa  
*Autónoma University of Madrid*

*Research on workplace bullying has traditionally been focused on work-related stressors and contextual factors as antecedent conditions. However, the association between organizational factors and bullying is complex, and several personality characteristics and individual factors may act as moderators of this relationship (Einarsen, 2000). In order to explore it, two empirical studies were carried out to examine the moderating role of personality in the process of workplace bullying. In the first study the sample consisted of 120 Latin-American immigrants. In accordance with the initial hypothesis, the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed that assertiveness moderated the relationship between the organizational antecedent of inequity at work and bullying. The second study was carried out with 183 victims of bullying. The results showed that social anxiety and assertiveness moderated the relationship between bullying and its effects on health. Furthermore, gender differences were found in health complaints resulting from bullying.*

**Key words:** Workplace bullying, Personality variables, Moderator effect.

*Tradicionalmente, la investigación sobre el acoso psicológico se ha focalizado en los estresores laborales y los factores contextuales como factores antecedentes. Sin embargo, la asociación entre los antecedentes organizacionales y el acoso es compleja y son varias las características de personalidad y factores individuales que pueden actuar como moderadores de esta relación (Einarsen, 2000). Para contrastarlo, se llevaron a cabo dos estudios empíricos para examinar el papel moderador de la personalidad en el proceso del acoso psicológico en el trabajo. En el primer estudio la muestra estuvo formada por 120 inmigrantes latinoamericanos. De acuerdo con la hipótesis inicial, los resultados de los análisis de regresión múltiple jerárquica mostraron que la asertividad moderaba la relación entre el antecedente organizacional inequidad laboral y el acoso psicológico. El segundo estudio se realizó en 183 víctimas de acoso. Los resultados mostraron que la ansiedad social y la asertividad moderaban la relación entre el acoso y sus efectos sobre la salud. Además, se encontraron diferencias de género en las quejas de salud derivadas del acoso.*

**Palabras clave:** Acoso psicológico en el trabajo, Variables de personalidad, Efecto moderador.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the earliest studies on workplace bullying there has been heated debate about the causes of the phenomenon. Over recent decades numerous studies and theoretical analyses have appeared in the field of bullying, though in general the differences in theoretical approach can be summarized in terms of two complementary models: the organizational hypothesis and the personality hypothesis (Einarsen, 2000).

The assumptions of the first analytical perspective on workplace bullying situate organizational factors and deficiencies in the work environment as the principal

exploratory variables of mobbing (Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994; Leymann, 1996; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996). There is considerable support for this approach, given the large volume of data referring to organizational and psychosocial factors involved in the bullying process (for a review, see Hoel & Salin, 2003). From this perspective, Einarsen et al. (1994) found that role conflict, authoritarian leadership and lack of control or autonomy in relation to one's own job were significantly associated with bullying. Vartia (1996), in a study with Finnish workers, found that bullying victims described their job environment as stressful and with high work overload. Likewise, Agervold and Mikkelsen (2004) observed clear differences between departments, as regards number of bullying victims, in job demands and management styles. Other types of organizational factor that can facilitate the appearance of bullying are related to lack of information and intervention procedures in the organization for dealing

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Bernardo Moreno. Departamento de Psicología Biológica y Salud. Facultad de Psicología. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. 28049 Madrid. Spain. E-mail: [bernardo.moreno@uam.es](mailto:bernardo.moreno@uam.es)



with situations of mobbing (Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Garrosa & Morante, 2005a; Salin, 2004).

This psychosocial perspective was defended by Leymann, (1996), who considered personality factors as irrelevant to the study of bullying. Leymann was probably trying to minimize the role personal factors might have in the emergence and development of mobbing, with a view to defending the victims. However, studies by the Bergen research group, among others, clearly show that work context factors can only explain part of the phenomenon (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). From this perspective, bullying is understood not as a static phenomenon, but rather as a gradual scalar process in which the bullied person is faced with aggression of increasing intensity and frequency (Einarsen, 2000; Leymann, 1996), and in which coping strategies appear to be decisive. Thus, if bullying is conceived as a process, the work environment and individual factors may be playing different roles at different points in that process. Bullying takes place in an interactive social system, being a clearly transactional process. It has been shown that there are personal differences in the way victims experience and cope with bullying, as well as in the subsequent development of associated health problems (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Consequently, the theories underpinning the latest approaches stress the need to integrate personality variables in the study and analysis of the bullying process (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), though always with the precaution of not blaming the victim. The emphasis is not so much on causality as on vulnerability.

The personality hypothesis postulates an association between certain personal characteristics and workplace bullying. Some experts have tried to delimit the personality traits that characterize victims of bullying. In this regard, the latest studies have concluded that there appears to be no general personality profile of the victim that explains the emergence of bullying (Glaso, Matthiesen, Nielsen & Einarsen, 2007); rather, personality factors would account for certain personal differences in the process. Within this paradigm, one of the variables that has attracted most interest refers to the coping resources people develop in the face of bullying. Knorz and Zapf (1996) and Zapf and Gross (2001) compared the coping behaviours of victims who successfully overcame the bullying with those whose situation became worse. Victims who managed to deal with the problem were more likely to avoid behaviours potentially detrimental to them (such as absenteeism), and were more competent at recognizing behaviours and

situations that aggravated conflict. In this regard, Niedl (1995) points out that people are more likely to be the object of bullying if for any reason they are unable to defend themselves. Likewise, in a study in Norway (Einarsen et al., 1994), many bullying victims reported that their lack of coping resources and self-efficacy, together with low self-esteem, high social anxiety and lack of conflict management skills, contributed to exacerbate the problem.

One of the classic researches in this framework is a North American study with bullying victims who claimed compensation from their insurance companies. Gandolfo (1995) studied the personality profiles of 47 bullying victims by means of the MMPI-2 and compared them with those of people in a control group who also claimed compensation but had not suffered workplace bullying. It was found that the group of bullying victims presented more psychological and emotional alterations, with high scores in depression and tendency for somatization. These findings were later replicated by Matthiesen and Einarsen (2001), who concluded that certain personality variables constitute vulnerability factors in the bullying process, even though there is considerable heterogeneity among personality profiles. In another work, Zapf (1999a) explored the reasons people gave as to why they thought they had become the victims of bullying. Thirty-seven percent of the sample said that individual factors were involved in the bullying process. Indeed, both bullies and victims frequently state that personality characteristics constitute important factors in explaining why certain people suffer bullying (Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen & Hellesøy, 1994).

Although the personality by itself has no predictive capacity in the appearance of bullying, it does appear to influence the interpretation of harassment behaviours and the way people react to them (Einarsen, 2000). Various studies have shown that bullying is strongly associated with different physical and psychological problems (Hoel, Faragher & Cooper, 2004; Høgh, Henriksson & Burr, 2005; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996), and that different personality variables moderate (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002a; Nielsen, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2006) or mediate (Hansen, Høgh, Persson, Karlson, Garde & Orbaek, 2006) this relationship.

From this transactional perspective, the aim of the present research is to analyze the moderating role of certain personality variables in the process of workplace bullying by means of two empirical studies.



## STUDY 1

### Objectives and hypotheses

The goal of this first study was to analyze whether assertiveness moderates the relationship between workplace inequity and bullying. The following hypotheses were proposed:

*H1: Assertiveness is a factor that will attenuate the relationship between workplace inequity and bullying. In situations of workplace inequity those people with high levels of assertiveness will obtain lower scores in bullying.*

*H2: Social anxiety is will be a vulnerability factor in the relationship between workplace inequity and bullying. In situations of workplace inequity those people with high levels of social anxiety will obtain higher scores in bullying.*

## METHOD

### Participants and procedure

The study sample was made up of 120 Latin-American immigrant workers, all resident in the Autonomous Region of Madrid (Spain). Of these, 53.3% were men. Mean age was around 33.3 years (s.d. = 4.69) and average work experience was 4.99 years (s.d. = 3.01). As regards educational level, more than half had been educated to primary or secondary level (66.7%). A total of 32.5% of the workers were unskilled or semi-skilled; 35.8% had no contract and worked a mean of 48 hours a week (s.d. = 9.6). As far as nationality was concerned, Ecuadorians accounted for the highest percentage (33%), followed by Colombians (17.5%) and Peruvians (11.7%). Access to the sample was obtained through various immigrants' associations in the city of Madrid. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews, during which participants filled out the assessment questionnaire. Participation in the study was voluntary, and subject to prior informed consent. Approximately 1 in 10 of those approached declined to participate in the study.

### Instruments

– As a measure of bullying we used a modified version of the Workplace Bullying Questionnaire (*Cuestionario de Acoso Psicológico en el Trabajo*, CAPT) (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2005a), adapted for the immigrant population. In the present research the questionnaire has two sections. The first of these includes behaviours typically found in bullying, and the respondent must indicate the degree to which he or she has experienced such behaviours (e.g., “My

workmates exclude me from their get-togethers and meetings”; “I have been the object of offensive comments or behaviours in relation to my religious beliefs”), with five response alternatives on a scale of 0 (“Never”) to 4 (“Continually”). This first section is also designed to gather information on duration and frequency of the bullying. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.95.

The second part of the questionnaire refers to aspects of the organization that can act as antecedents of the appearance of bullying. Specifically, this factor refers to aspects related to the ability to participate in decision-making and to equity in criteria on promotion (e.g., “The organization has means offers employees the possibility of making suggestions or registering complaints”; inverse item). This factor is made up of 7 items with a response format ranging from 0 (“Never”) to 4 (“Continually”). Higher scores indicate less equity in the workplace. The reliability coefficient was 0.91.

- We used a shortened, 6-item version of the *Rathus Assertiveness Schedule* (Rathus, 1973) for the assessment of assertiveness (e.g., “I have avoided asking questions for fear of looking stupid”). The response range for these items is from 1 (“Totally Agree; highly characteristic of me”) to 4 (“Totally Disagree; highly uncharacteristic of me”). High scores indicate high assertiveness. In the present study the reliability of the scale was 0.87.
- Social anxiety was assessed by means of the *Social Avoidance and Distress Scale* (SAD; Watson & Friend, 1969). We used a shortened, 6-item version (e.g., “Being introduced to strangers makes me afraid and uneasy”). Response options ranged from (1) “Completely False” to (4) “Completely True”. High scores indicate higher levels of social anxiety. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the questionnaire in the present study was 0.98.

## RESULTS

An initial Pearson bivariate correlation analysis revealed that bullying was associated positively and significantly with workplace inequity ( $r = 0.75$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and social anxiety ( $r = 0.33$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and negatively with assertiveness ( $r = -0.44$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

A stepwise hierarchical multiple regression equation was used to determine the main and interaction effects of workplace inequity and assertiveness in the prediction of bullying. At all times we followed the recommended procedures for the analysis of moderation (Aiken &



West, 1991; Cohen & Cohen, 1983). In order to minimize the effects of multicollinearity, we carried out all the regression analyses with the standardized independent variables (Aiken & West, 1991; Kleinbaum, Kupper & Muller, 1988). According to Kleinbaum, Kupper and Mueller (1988) and Ryan, (1997), variance inflation factor (VIF) values over 10 and tolerance indices under 0.10 may indicate the presence of multicollinearity. The results of the regression analyses indicated no collinearity between the study variables. The independent variables were introduced in the regression equation in three successive steps. First, we introduced different socio-demographic variables to control their possible effects. Second, we introduced the variables of workplace inequity, assertiveness and social anxiety, in order to observe their main effects. Finally, we introduced the interaction between the two independent variables (Workplace

Inequity x Assertiveness; Workplace Inequity x Social Anxiety). As dependent variable we used a global bullying score.

The results of the regression analysis indicate that workplace inequity and its interaction with assertiveness significantly predict bullying [ $F(4,108) = 23.94$ ;  $p < .001$ ], explaining 62.2% of the total variance. Specifically, the workplace inequity variable is the only one that presents a main effect ( $\beta = .73$ ;  $p < .001$ ). As regards the interaction effects, the results show that the assertiveness variable moderates the relationships between workplace inequity and bullying ( $\beta = -.19$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Inclusion of the interaction in the final step led to significance [ $(F(8,110) = 8.24$ ;  $p < .01$ )] and added 3.5% of variance. To ease the interpretation of these results the interaction has been represented graphically according to the standard procedure (Aiken & West, 1991). As Figure 1 shows, the influence of influence of workplace inequity on bullying was attenuated when Assertiveness levels were high.

## STUDY 2

### Objectives and hypotheses

The second study explored the role of diverse personality variables (assertiveness, social anxiety and locus of control) in the effects of workplace bullying. Likewise, within the study of personal differences in bullying, we set out to explore the role of gender in the consequences mentioned. The following hypotheses were formulated:

*H3: Social anxiety and external locus of control will be vulnerability factors in the relationship between bullying and its consequences. In bullying situations those who present high levels of social anxiety and external locus of control will have more negatively affected health.*

*H4: Assertiveness will be a protector variable in the relationship between bullying and its consequences. Specifically, in bullying situations those who present high levels of assertiveness will have less negatively affected health.*

*H5: The consequences of bullying will be greater in women than in men.*

## METHOD

### Participants and procedure

This research was carried out with people who had requested help from some association or support group for victims of bullying or mobbing. According to a definition of bullying, all considered themselves victims

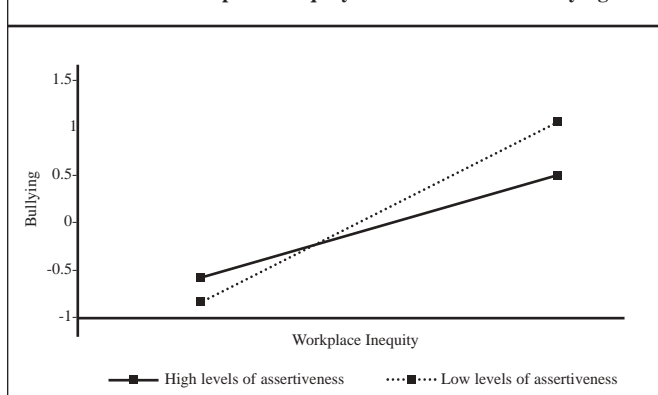
**Table 1**  
Hierarchical regression analysis<sup>a</sup>

Variables	Bullying	
	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$
Step 1	.098	
Gender		.044
Type of contract		.018
Work experience		.012
Nationality		.090
Step 2	.516	
Workplace Inequity		.730***
Assertiveness		-.089
Social Anxiety		.050
Step 3	.035	
Workplace Inequity x Assertiveness		-.192**
Workplace Inequity x Social Anxiety		.065
R <sup>2</sup>	.649	
R <sup>2</sup> corrected	.622	

<sup>a</sup> Standardized regression coefficients of the final model

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

**Figure 1**  
Interaction Workplace Inequity X Assertiveness in Bullying





of mobbing and fulfilled the temporal criteria taken into account to conceive a situation as one of bullying (Einarsen, 2000; Leymann, 1992). The sample was made up of 183 people, 46.4% of whom were women, with a mean age of 39.58 years (s.d. = 7.85) and mean work experience of 15.17 years (s.d. = 9.07). Commonest educational level (49.2%) was to age 16, whilst 41.5% had higher education. Another interesting item of data is that 45.9% of participants reported being unemployed as a direct consequence of the bullying, while 54.1% reported having been involved in the bullying situation for over two years. All the subjects in this group had been exposed to systematic bullying strategies. Access to the sample of bullying victims was obtained via 15 anti-bullying associations and support groups from 10 different autonomous regions in Spain. The study was explained to a representative of each association by telephone, and he or she was given instructions on how to fill out the questionnaire. A total of 350 questionnaires were sent out, of which 202 (57.7%) were returned completed. Nineteen participants who did not fulfil the criteria mentioned above were discarded. Participation was voluntary and subject to informed consent.

### Instruments

- Workplace Bullying Questionnaire (WBQ, Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2005a). We used 13 items on behaviours typical in bullying situations, for which respondents must indicate the degree to which they have experienced such behaviours, with five response alternatives on a scale of 0 (“Never”) to 4 (“Continually”). The scale rates the factors of social isolation, disparagement and extreme demands. In the present study we used the global bullying index, which has a reliability index of 0.96.
- Assertiveness was assessed through a shortened, 6-item version of the *Rathus Assertiveness Schedule* (Rathus, 1973). The response range of the items is from 1 (“Totally Agree; highly characteristic of me”) to 4 (“Totally Disagree; highly uncharacteristic of me”). Higher scores indicate greater assertiveness. In the present study the scale showed a reliability index of 0.79.
- Social anxiety was assessed by means of a shortened, 6-item version of the *Social Avoidance and Distress Scale* (Watson & Friend, 1969). Response options ranged from (1) “Completely False” to (4) “Completely True”. Higher scores indicate greater social anxiety. The scale showed a reliability index of 0.88.
- Levenson’s Locus of Control Questionnaire (1981). In the present study we used the “powerful others” subscale (e.g., “*My life is controlled above all by people with power*”), made up of 8 items, with a response range from Totally Disagree (1) to Totally Agree (6). A high score indicates that the respondent thinks others, those with power, affect his or her life outcomes. Cronbach’s alpha value was 0.85.
- Goldberg’s General Health Questionnaire, in its 28-item version (GHQ-28; Goldberg & Hillier, 1979). This instrument is designed to detect psychological problems, and is made up of 4 subscales, each with 7 items, representing the dimensions of somatic symptoms (e.g., “*Have you suffered from headaches?*”), anxiety and insomnia (e.g., “*Have you had difficulty sleeping right through the night?*”), social dysfunction (e.g., “*Do you feel you are fulfilling a useful role in life?*”) and serious depression (e.g., “*Have you ever thought that you were a worthless person?*”). As Lobo and Muñoz (1996) point out, the subscales of the questionnaire are not totally independent from one another, and do not necessarily correspond to psychiatric diagnoses. In this study we used a Likert-type scoring system from 0 to 3, higher scores indicating poorer health. Reliability of the four dimensions was as follows: 0.86 for Somatic Symptoms, 0.86 for Anxiety and Insomnia, 0.82 for Social Dysfunction and 0.92 for Depression.

### RESULTS

First of all we carried out a Pearson bivariate correlation analysis. The analyses indicate that workplace bullying is mostly strongly related to worsened health. It is found to be associated positively and significantly with Goldberg’s dimensions, especially depression ( $r = 0.50$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and social dysfunction ( $r = 0.47$ ;  $p < .001$ ). As far as personality variables are concerned, symptomatology is found to be associated significantly with the three dimensions, especially with assertiveness, which presents strong correlations with depression ( $r = -0.34$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and with anxiety and insomnia ( $r = -0.31$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Likewise, bullying is related positively to social anxiety ( $r = 0.18$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and locus of control ( $r = 0.27$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and negatively to assertiveness ( $r = -0.32$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

In order to analyze the role of personality in the effects of bullying we carried out diverse hierarchical multiple regression analyses to determine the main and interaction effects of bullying and of personality variables (Assertiveness, Social Anxiety and Locus of



Control) on each of Goldberg's dimensions (Somatic Symptoms, Anxiety and Insomnia, Social Dysfunction and Depression). First of all we introduced different sociodemographic variables (Gender, Type of Contract and Work Experience) to control their possible influence, since previous research indicates their relevance in the bullying process (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2005a; Salin, 2003). In the second step we introduced the global bullying score and the three personality variables (Assertiveness, Social Anxiety and Locus of Control). Finally, in the third step we introduced the interactions between the independent variables (bullying x assertiveness, bullying x social anxiety and bullying x locus of control). As in the case of the previous regression analyses, we followed the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991), and found that the VIF values and tolerance indices were within the recommended range.

As can be seen in Table 2, the main effects of bullying and the personality variables follow the expected pattern. Gender and bullying significantly predicted somatic symptomatology [ $F(7,171) = 5.57$ ;  $p < .001$ ], explaining more than 20% of its total variance. The bullying variable emerges as the most significant in the prediction of somatic symptoms ( $\beta = .44$ ;  $p < .001$ ), explaining 22% of total variance of the criterion variable. Likewise, gender presents a significant

association with somatic symptomatology ( $\beta = .18$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

As regards the Anxiety and Insomnia variable, the prediction model continues to include the two factors mentioned [ $F(5,170) = 7.66$ ;  $p < .001$ ]. Jointly, these two variables explain 29% of its total variance. Bullying is once again the variable with the strongest relationship to anxiety and insomnia ( $\beta = .46$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

The Social Dysfunction variable is predicted by gender, bullying, social anxiety and its interaction with bullying [ $F(5,172) = 9.24$ ;  $p < .001$ ]. The variable that most influences it is once again bullying ( $\beta = .38$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The same pattern emerges in Depression [ $F(8,171) = 10.41$ ;  $p < .001$ ], where the variables mentioned above explain over 36% of its variance.

With regard to interaction effects, the results show that they only appear in social dysfunction and depression. The analyses indicate that social anxiety, in addition to having a main effect ( $\beta = .18$ ;  $p < .05$ ), moderates the relationship between bullying and social dysfunction ( $p < .05$ ). Figure 2 shows how the relationship between bullying and social dysfunction is accentuated in the presence of high levels of social anxiety. Likewise, social anxiety moderates the relationship between bullying and depression ( $p < .05$ , Figure 4), following the mentioned pattern. For its part, assertiveness is seen to play a moderating role in the relationship between

**Table 2**  
**Hierarchical regression analysis<sup>a</sup>**

Variables	Somatic Symptoms		Anxiety and Insomnia		Social Dysfunction		Depression	
	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$
Step 1	.020		.040		.058		.098	
Gender		.183*		.159*		.181*		.148*
Type of contract		.003		-.066		.002		-.044
Work experience		.096		-.007		.006		.093
Step 2	.225		.276		.297		.291	
Bullying		.447***		.466***		.387***		.357***
Assertiveness		-.028		-.015		-.098		-.080
Social Anxiety		.021		.056		.189*		.154
Locus of control		.062		.107		.048		.136
Step 3	.024		.021		.026		.019	
Bullying x Assertiveness		-.035		-.045		-.196*		-.146
Bullying x Social Anxiety		.077		.067		.208*		.213*
Bullying x Locus of control		.079		.124		.064		.038
R <sup>2</sup>	.269		.337		.380		.408	
R <sup>2</sup> corrected	.221		.293		.339		.369	

<sup>a</sup> Standardized regression coefficients of the final model

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



bullying and social dysfunction ( $p < .05$ , Figure 3). In Figure 3 it can be seen how the relationship between bullying and social dysfunction is attenuated in the presence of high levels of assertiveness.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main goal of the present study was to analyze the moderating role of certain personal variables in the workplace bullying process. The results of the two studies appear to confirm that assertiveness and social anxiety affect the process of mobbing.

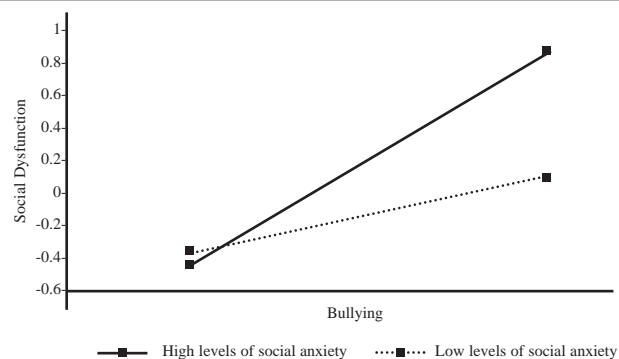
From the first study it emerges that assertiveness attenuates the relationship between workplace inequity and bullying, and this confirms the first hypothesis. These results corroborate the findings of previous research, which indicated that some people with poorer social skills are more vulnerable to situations of bullying (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). In this regard, exploring the personality variables that determine a differential response to bullying helps us to better understand the factors that allow people to resist in conditions of harassment, and to better identify the personal characteristics of those who cannot deal adequately with this situation. However, the analysis of bullying from personality models should not confuse influence with responsibility or blame, nor with the assumption of prior psychopathologies. As Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Garrosa and Morante (2005b) point out, it is necessary to avoid certain biases that some excessively individualist or clinical approaches may involve on ignoring psychosocial influences.

As pointed out in the introduction to this article, organizational antecedents are the variables that present the strongest relationship to the aetiology of bullying. The results of the first study show the strong association between workplace inequity and bullying. These findings are in accordance with those of some theoretical analysis that have highlighted the importance of inequity in the workplace as an antecedent factor of mobbing (Piñuel, 2003). Furthermore, the results of this study coincide with those of Coyne, Seigne and Randall (2000), who found that bullying victims, compared to a control group, tended to be less assertive and to present higher levels of neuroticism and anxiety. Likewise, our data appear to support those of Zapf (1999b), in which victims defined themselves as less assertive than their co-workers. A similar result emerged from the work of O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire and Smith (1998), who found, through interviews with victims of bullying, that only a third of them had faced up to the bully directly. In a study from

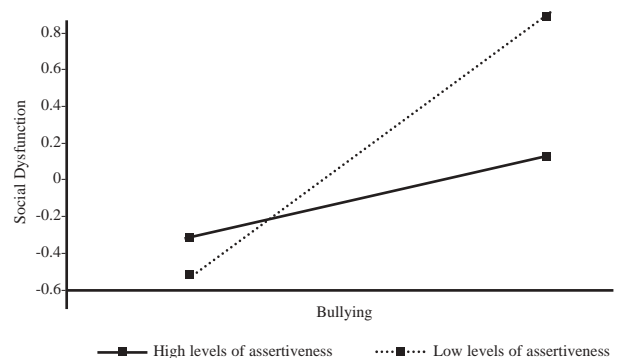
that same year, Rayner (1998) found that just 45% of bullying victims had decided to confront their bully. The results of the second study confirm, at least partially, the second and third hypotheses, with personality emerging as a moderator of the effects of bullying.

In this context, various studies have shown how bullying represents a health risk (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002b; Vartia, 1996; Zapf et al., 1996). In the present

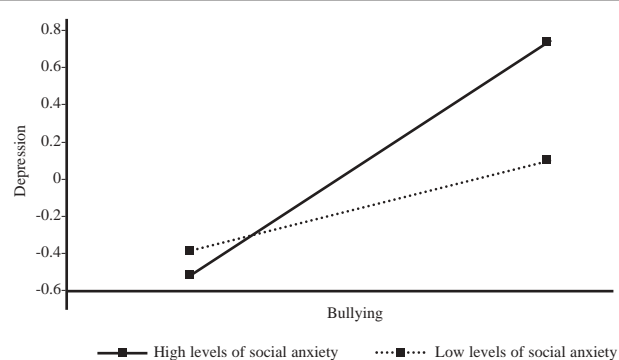
**Figure 2**  
Interaction Bullying X Social Anxiety in Social Dysfunction



**Figure 3**  
Interaction Bullying X Social Anxiety in Social Dysfunction



**Figure 4**  
Interaction Bullying X Social Anxiety in Depression





study bullying was found to be strongly related to different indicators of poor health, this relationship being moderated by social anxiety and assertiveness in social dysfunction and depression. The data concur with those of previous research. A recent study by Nielsen et al. (2006) showed how the personality variable "sense of coherence" moderated the relationship between bullying and post-traumatic stress. The importance of cognitive aspects in the effects of workplace bullying has been pointed out previously (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002b; Rodríguez-Muñoz, Moreno-Jiménez, Morante & Rodríguez-Carvajal, 2006). In a similar line, bullying victims have been described as cognitively inflexible, and with an unrealistic view of their own social skills and resources (Brodsky, 1976). Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2002a), in a sample of 433 Danish workers, found that self-efficacy moderated the relationship between bullying and mental health, while Soares (2004) highlights the relevance of social support for buffering the impact of mobbing and the subsequent development of post-traumatic symptoms.

Apart from the role of assertiveness, the results of our study showed that social anxiety moderates the relationship between bullying and associated symptomatology. Similarly, Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen and Hellesøy (1996) found that social anxiety moderated the relationship between bullying and different measures of psychological and somatic health. In relation to this finding, previous studies have shown that bullying victims have poor self-image, in addition to a tendency for high anxiety in social situations (Einarsen et al., 1994). Furthermore, among bullying victims research has found personality profiles related to evasive and negatory coping styles (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Mathiesen & Einarsen, 2001). Likewise, Zapf and Gross (2001) observed that victims of bullying more frequently used passive and evasive coping strategies. Nevertheless, the area is a complex one, far less simple and intuitive than it might initially appear. Niedl (1996) points out that bullying victims do not use typical *fight and flight* coping strategies, but rather much more complex ones. These results indicate, moreover, the relevance and heterogeneity of the way bullying is experienced and the way victims cope with it.

Although authors as prestigious as Leymann (1996) have criticized this analytical perspective, since in some cases it is the very situation of bullying that elicits the variable in question, an interaction does clearly exist between the situation and the person who

experiences it. The bullying process occurs not in the abstract, but rather in specific people, and their personal organization would appear to be relevant. Such relevance of personal and coping variables in the bullying process, indeed, permits an active approach. The person can use active resources for intervening in and dealing with the situation—that is, victims are not condemned to live through it in a passive way—and this opens up complementary perspectives. Thus, in addition to the organizational approach of prevention and intervention there exists another, of preparation/support and training; the two undoubtedly complement one another.

Moreover, various studies have stressed the importance of gender in the mobbing process (Björkqvist, Österman & Lagerspetz, 1994; Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Garrosa, Morante & Rodríguez, 2005c; Salin, 2003), with results suggesting that the effects of bullying tend to be greater in women. A German study found that women victims suffered from higher levels of anxiety and had more psychosomatic problems (Zapf et al., 1996). Other studies have obtained similar results (Niedl, 1996). Such results appear to indicate, in support of our final hypothesis, that men and women do not respond in the same way to situations of bullying.

Finally, there are a series of limitations that should be taken into account. The personality hypothesis has been insufficiently researched, and when it has been explored, as in the present study, it has been with cross-sectional designs. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions in causal terms, suggesting the need to consider longitudinal methods. A further limitation derives from the fact that in both studies the data were obtained via self-report measures, so that the relationships between study variables may be biased by common method variance. Even so, in this regard it has been pointed out that the error variance is unlikely to invalidate the results (Crampton & Wagner, 1994; Lindell & Whitney, 2001). Moreover, although the main effects could be influenced by common method variance, the interaction effects cannot simply be attributed to the influence of the method (Aiken & West, 1991).

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