Article

Crushing the Spirit: Unmasking the Impact of Workplace Bullying on Psychological Wellbeing among Portuguese Employees

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Abstract: The research objective of this study was to determine the prevalence of workplace bullying and to find out whether there is a relationship between workplace bullying and psychological wellbeing among employees in Portugal working in different sectors. A cross-sectional study and a survey were conducted with 205 employees to gather the data. The findings indicate that the prevalence of bullying ranges from 28.8% to 9.96% when applying different measurements. The results also revealed that, in the context of the possible influence of different forms of bullying on mental wellbeing, person-related bullying had the strongest effect on mental restlessness, sadness, impulsivity, and anxiety, while it showed the weakest effect on depression. In all cases, the presence of person-related bullying decreased the level of psychological wellbeing. The results of this study hold practical implications for organizations, as they emphasize the crucial role of managers in being aware of and implementing strategies to prevent workplace bullying. By prioritizing mental health among employees, managers may enhance their overall wellbeing and foster positive work relationships, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more productive work environment.

Keywords: workplace bullying; psychological wellbeing; employees

1. Introduction

Workplace bullying has emerged as a significant concern in contemporary work environments, affecting individuals across a wide range of industries and organizational settings. Defined as repeated and persistent aggressive behaviours directed towards an employee, workplace bullying encompasses a range of harmful actions such as verbal abuse, intimidation, social isolation, and sabotage (Einarsen et al. 2020). Such behaviours not only undermine the psychological wellbeing of the targeted individuals, but also have far-reaching consequences for organizational productivity, employee morale, and overall workplace climate (Nielsen et al. 2020).

Over the past few decades, research in the field of workplace bullying has gained momentum, shedding light on its prevalence, antecedents, and outcomes. While empirical studies have provided valuable insights into the nature and extent of workplace bullying, there remains a need for a comprehensive synthesis of the existing literature to fully comprehend the complex relationship between workplace bullying and mental wellbeing. The negative impact of workplace bullying on employees' mental health is well-documented (Nielsen et al. 2020). Victims of bullying often experience a range of adverse psychological outcomes, including increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and

reduced job satisfaction (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007; Niedhammer et al. 2009). Moreover, the effects of workplace bullying extend beyond the individual, as it may disrupt team dynamics, compromise organizational climate, and impede the achievement of strategic goals (Einarsen et al. 2017; Escartín et al. 2013).

Despite the growing body of research on workplace bullying, several gaps remain to be addressed. Firstly, there is a need for a comprehensive review that synthesizes the findings from diverse studies, thus allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in the relationship between workplace bullying and mental well-being. Furthermore, a deeper exploration of the underlying mechanisms and moderators that contribute to the mental health outcomes of bullying victims is warranted. Finally, the development of effective intervention strategies and preventive measures requires a thorough examination of organizational and contextual factors that either mitigate or exacerbate the effects of workplace bullying.

2. Workplace Bullying and Its Prevalence

The concept of workplace bullying was first introduced by Heinz Leymann in 1984. Leymann described it as a form of subtle aggression that occurs in the workplace. It involves the prolonged exposure of an employee to hostility from one or more individuals, leading to feelings of helplessness, fear of exclusion, and negative effects on their wellbeing (Leymann 1996). Workplace bullying is often associated with various forms of intimidation, insults, belittlement, and persistent harassment. Examples include assigning meaningless and challenging tasks, undermining trust and support, and spreading false rumours (Fox and Stallworth 2005). Another definition provided by Einarsen et al. (2020) states that workplace bullying involves harassment, offensive behaviour, social exclusion, or negative influence on an employee's work. To classify an activity as bullying, it must occur regularly (e.g., once a week) and be repeated over a period of time (e.g., for the past six months). Throughout this escalating process, the victim is subjected to constant negative actions and finds themselves in an inferior or subordinate position (Einarsen et al. 2020).

According to the previous definition, workplace bullying exhibits three key characteristics: undesirable behaviour, a repeated and regular nature, and a power imbalance. Firstly, bullying involves the victim being subjected to direct or indirect behaviour that is highly undesirable. This may range from subtle negative actions to deliberate attacks, such as withholding information crucial to the victim's work, repeatedly highlighting their mistakes, or placing them under excessive supervision. It is important to note that workplace bullying is not a one-time incident but rather a sustained and ongoing pattern of aggressive behaviour directed at one or more individuals (Einarsen et al. 1994). Secondly, bullying occurs repeatedly and over an extended period, typically lasting for six months or even a year (Einarsen et al. 1994). This aspect is significant as it reflects the long-term nature of the abusive behaviour. Research suggests that this extended timeframe is linked to the development of mental and psychosomatic disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder, which may be diagnosed after a minimum of six months (Leymann 1996). Lastly, a power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim is a defining characteristic of workplace bullying. This power asymmetry often stems from formal power structures within the organization and informal sources, such as personal connections. It results in the victim feeling helpless to resist, stop, or prevent the abuse.

Studies examining the prevalence of workplace bullying have revealed significant variations both between countries and within individual countries. These differences in estimated prevalence may be attributed to various factors, including the methodological, conceptual, organizational, and cultural variations inherent in different research studies. Methodological differences play a significant role, as researchers employ various non-uniform methods, target different groups of individuals, and vary the size of their research samples. Local factors also contribute to the variability, as specific characteristics of each country may influence the occurrence and perception of workplace bullying. Authors such as Moreno-Jiménez et al. (2008) emphasize that research conducted in different

national contexts is likely to yield distinct data. Knorz and Zapf (1996) further highlight the challenge of using the same questionnaires across countries with diverse national specifics. Additionally, the timing of the research may influence the reported prevalence rates, as studies may have been conducted at different time periods. However, it is still possible to compare selected results and establish connections between them.

The reported prevalence of workplace bullying varies across different countries and continents. Generally, the estimated percentage of bullying among employees ranges from 1% to 4% (Zapf and Gross 2001). However, specific figures differ significantly based on geographical location. For example, in Sweden, the prevalence is reported at 3.5% (Leymann 1996), while in Denmark, it ranges from 2% to 4% (Mikkelsen and Einarsen 2001). In Norway, the prevalence is estimated to be between 11% and 18% (Nielsen et al. 2009), while in Spain, it is as high as 18.9% (Carretero and Luciano 2013). In Ireland, the daily prevalence is 6% and occasional prevalence is 17% (O'Moore and Lynch 2007), whereas in the UK, it reaches 50% (Rayner 1997). Austria reports a prevalence of 7.8% (Niedl 1996), while in the USA, estimates range from 38% to 90% (Glendinning 2001). Turkey reports a prevalence of 56.2% (Akar et al. 2011), in Japan, it is 15% (Giorgi et al. 2013) and in the Czech Republic the prevalence is estimated to be 7.8% (Cakirpaloglu et al. 2017).

Therefore, the aim of this study to find out what the prevalence of workplace bullying among employees in Portugal is, when using different criteria.

3. Workplace Bullying and Psychological Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a multifaceted concept that encompasses both optimal experience and functioning. It involves both feeling good and functioning effectively (Ryan and Deci 2001). According to Diener (1984), psychological wellbeing encompasses an individual's overall life satisfaction and their ability to live a fulfilling life. Contemporary research on wellbeing has emerged from two main perspectives: the hedonic approach and the eudaimonic approach. The hedonic approach emphasizes happiness and defines wellbeing in terms of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. It is centred on the subjective experience of positive emotions and the absence of negative emotions as indicators of wellbeing.

On the other hand, the eudaimonic approach emphasizes meaning and self-realization (Ryan and Deci 2001). These two perspectives provide complementary insights into the understanding of wellbeing by highlighting different aspects of the human experience and functioning. When negative emotions persist and hinder one's ability to perform well at work or in one's personal life, they may detrimentally impact psychological wellbeing (Huppert 2009). Individuals with high levels of psychological wellbeing exhibit self-acceptance, positive interpersonal relationships, and the capacity to independently regulate their behaviour. Psychological wellbeing has relevance across various domains, including work, education, and interpersonal relationships (Chow 2007; Daniels and Harris 2000), all of which contribute to positive life outcomes.

In another way, workplace bullying is a form of mental maltreatment with systematic, deliberate, and repeated attacks on an individual and with enormous impact on the psychological wellbeing and the victim's mental health. This form of psycho-terror uses discriminating and degrading approaches, excessive criticism, ridicule, and minor or major intrigue, which the victim is unable to prevent by means of usual volitional mechanisms. The victim's mental balance is disrupted and this is reflected in work performance and might lead to serious personality integrity disorders in the mental area (depression, concentration disorders, self-doubt, anxiety, and even psychiatric syndromes with suicidal thoughts), psychosomatic area (cardiac and blood circulation disorders, astringent breathing, headache, neck pain, back pain, skin diseases, and diseases of the gastrointestinal tract), psychosocial area (inability to establish social relationships and ties, isolation, degradation of interpersonal relationships, distrust, disruption of private life, etc.) and, last but not least, in the economic area in the form of decreased work performance, increased morbidity, and associated high treatment costs (Cakirpaloglu et al. 2017; Mikkelsen and Einarsen 2001).

Workplace bullying also negatively affects job satisfaction and psychological wellbeing (Khan et al. 2021). In the dynamic interplay between bullying and its multiple negative effects in terms of psychological, psychosomatic, and socio-occupational complaints, subjective wellbeing appears to be an important mediating factor: higher wellbeing promotes job satisfaction and subjective resilience to negative influences in the workplace and vice versa. For this reason, the secondary objective of the present study is to investigate potential associations between different forms of workplace bullying and the psychological wellbeing of the individuals affected. The following Research Question 1 was formulated: What are the effects of different forms of bullying at the workplace on psychological wellbeing and mental state?

4. Methodology

4.1. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research study is to contribute to the existing knowledge about workplace bullying by examining its prevalence among employees in Portugal. Additionally, a secondary set of objectives is (a) to investigate potential associations between different forms of workplace bullying and the mental wellbeing of the individuals affected, and (b) to identify some psychopathological conditions that undermine the sense of personal wellbeing at the workplace.

4.2. Ethical Consideration

All participants were informed of the confidentiality of their answers and signed an online informed consent form prior to the completion of the questionnaire. No specific information enabling the identification of specific respondents was obtained as part of the online data collection. Ethical review and approval were not required for the study on participants in this survey, in accordance with local legislation and institutional requirements.

4.3. Research Sample

The present study is a cross-sectional survey among employees in the Portuguese general population and was carried out with a convenience sample (non-probabilistic). For inclusion in the study, the condition of having been employed for at least six months was established. All those who declared not working or working only part-time, having been unemployed for more than six months, as well as all those who declared being at home for health reasons or on parental leave for more than 6 months, were excluded. Data collection was performed electronically using Google forms, which met the methodological and research criteria of online research relevance (e.g., high degree of security, archiving, and encoding during data transfer, with access via a generated password, Gras et al. 2004), using the snowball technique (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Through a specific link, the survey was distributed using email to the local institutions of Portuguese employees working in the public, business, and non-profit sectors. In the first part of the questionnaire, participants were informed about the study and were given guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, after which they were given the option to participate or not. Only participants who declared their intention to participate voluntarily could access the questionnaire. Data collection was carried out with an invitation to start participating in the study, sent using email to working students at a university, with a request to collaborate and, subsequently, send the invitation to other working professionals. Data collection took place from February 2022 to July 2022.

A total of 205 questionnaire responses were collected. None of the questionnaires were excluded due to missing data. Thus, the final sample is made up of 205 participants (Table 1), mostly women (68.3%), aged between 18 and 67 years (the mean was 33.15, SD = 10.42). There is a predominance of professionals with a high school education level (47.8%); among the others, 27.3% have a bachelor's degree, 16.1% have a master's degree, and 8.8% completed primary school. In addition, 79 of the individuals are married, 107 are single, 18 are divorced, and 1 is widowed. Of the participating employees, 59.5% work

in the non-profit sector, 33.7% are employed in the public sector, and 6.8% work in the business sector. As for the hierarchical position they belong to, 27.2% of the respondents are subordinates and 28.8% hold a management position.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

	n	**%**
Sex		
Male	65	31.7
Woman	140	68.3
Marital status		
Single	107	52.2
Married	79	38.5
Divorced	18	8.8
Widowed	1	0.5
Highest completed level of education		
Elementary school	18	8.8
High school	98	47.8
Higher education—bachelor degree	56	27.3
Higher education—master degree	33	16.1
Sector in which are employed		
Public sector	69	33.7
Non-profit sector	122	59.5
Business sector	13	6.3
Missing	1	0.5
	Mean	SD
Age	33.15	10.42

Note: N = 205.

4.4. Measures

Data collection was performed through the methods outlined in this subsection.

4.4.1. Negative Acts Questionnaire—Revised (NAQ-R)

Data for this study were collected using the Negative Acts Questionnaire—Revised (NAQ-R). This was made to assess the prevalence and forms of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al. 2009). The NAQ-R consists of 23 items and may be administered individually or in groups. It offers a time-efficient way to measure two aspects of workplace bullying: behavioural and self-evaluation. The behavioural measurement criterion, encompassing items 1 to 22, focuses on various negative behaviours in the workplace without explicitly referring to bullying. Respondents rate the frequency of encountering such behaviours on a five-point Likert scale over the past six months. For example: (Q1) "Someone withholding information which affects your performance"; (Q5) "Spreading of gossip and rumours about you"; (Q11) "Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes".

Differentiating criteria may be categorized as loose or stringent. According to the loose criterion, an employee is considered bullied if they face at least one negative act per week for a continuous period of six months (Leymann 1996). On the other hand, the stringent criterion requires an employee to experience at least two negative acts per week for the same duration (Mikkelsen and Einarsen 2001). The application of these different criteria has a significant impact on the reported prevalence of workplace bullying. The 23rd item assesses self-evaluation, where participants describe their own experiences and perceptions as victims of workplace bullying, according to the theoretical definition provided. Research has shown that prevalence estimates based on self-evaluation tend to be lower than those based on behavioural measurement, possibly due to factors like personality traits, defence mechanisms, or a reluctance to perceive oneself as a helpless victim (Agervold 2007; Nielsen et al. 2010). To ensure content quality, the NAQ-R questionnaire was translated from English into Portuguese and back into English using the double-translation method. The translated

questionnaire was compared to identify and address any language or cultural differences, and approval was obtained from the authors of the questionnaire for its use in this research. The Portuguese version of the NAQ-R questionnaire demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.94$ for the 22 items, thus indicating its suitability for measuring workplace bullying even with a reduced number of items.

4.4.2. SUPOS 7

The SUPOS-7 test is used to measure changes in the current psychological state depending on influencing situational variables. It allows for the understanding and interpretation of the relationships between internal and external manifestations of an individual by classifying situational variables from the perspective of optimal (stimulating psychological development) and suboptimal (leading to maladaptive manifestations or psychological distress) factors. The method enables the assessment of the usual, long-term, and updated psychological state resulting from the influence of various situational factors. Supso-7 is the result of a factor analysis of operationally defined and pragmatically designed scales comprising 28 adjectives (Mikšík 2005). The Portuguese version of the SUPOS-7 questionnaire demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.86$ for the 28 items.

4.4.3. Sociodemographic Questionnaire

The sociodemographic questionnaire focused on sociodemographic data such as age, gender, length of employment, sector of employment, and highest completed level of education.

4.5. Data Processing and Evaluation

In the first stage, the data were transformed into an xls format compatible with MS Excel 2013, which easily handled the data exported from the electronic questionnaire. The research study was designed as a quantitative survey. Data collection was performed electronically using Google Forms, which met the methodological and research criteria of online research relevance (for example, a high degree of security, archiving and encoding during data transfer, the access via a generated password). During the second stage, the data were formally and logically checked. No missing values were detected. For the scales of the SUPSO-7 questionnaire, gender-specific weighted scores were first calculated according to the method manual. NAQ-R questionnaire values were adjusted for skewness using a log10 transformation. Further data processing was performed using the STATISTICA programme, version 13 (Statsoft, Inc. 2013). An analysis of results distribution confirmed normal data distribution; for this reason, a parametric statistical approach was selected, involving descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations. The impact of different forms of bullying on individual areas of mental wellbeing was analysed using a series of multiple linear regression analyses. Compliance with the conditions for the use of regression analysis was verified prior to data analysis. The tests were conducted at a 5% level of significance.

5. Results

The first part presents the basic findings concerning the numbers and proportions of bullying in the workplace of Portuguese employees working in a different sector. Considering the total number of 205 NAQ-R questionnaires, Table 2 includes two categories of workplace bullying prevalence—behavioural and self-evaluation estimates.

Table 2. Prevalence of workplace bullying among Portuguese employees, according to behavioural and self-evaluation estimates.

Total	Behavioural Estimate				Self-Evaluation Estimate	
	Loose Criterion		Stringent Criterion			
N	n	%	n	%	n	%
205	59	28.8	48	23.4	74	9.96

Note: loose criterion—at least one act once a week; stringent criterion—at least two acts once a week.

Other results relate to answering the research question. Primarily, this study investigated whether a direct negative experience of workplace bullying affects mental wellbeing and mental state among the employees.

From Table 3, it is evident that all three modalities of bullying (work-related bullying, person-related bullying, and physically intimidating bullying) are most likely contributing to increased feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression among the targeted employees, as well as an overall decline in mental wellbeing and productivity.

Table 3. Means, standard deviation, and Pearson correlations of total scales (n = 205).

	M	SD	Work Related Bullying	Person Related Bullying	Physically Intimidating Bullying
A—Activity	11.01	2.39	−0.36 *	−0.34 *	−0.25 *
O—Impulsivity	7.49	2.43	0.39 *	0.47 *	0.44 *
N—Mental restlessness	7.80	2.48	0.47 *	0.50 *	0.45 *
D—Depression	8.99	2.80	0.38 *	0.41 *	0.32 *
U—Anxiety	8.69	2.82	0.40 *	0.46 *	0.37 *
S—Sadness	7.77	2.76	0.41 *	0.50 *	0.43 *
P—Mental wellbeing	11.31	2.31	−0.40 *	−0.40 *	−0.34 *

Note: * $p < 0.01$.

The first factor, work-related bullying, shows significantly higher values in the mid-range correlation of the SUPSO questionnaire, particularly in relation to depression (r = 0.38), sadness (r = 0.41), and anxiety (r = 0.40). The deterioration of mental wellbeing associated with this factor of workplace bullying is also confirmed by negative correlation values on the mental wellbeing scale (r = −0.40) and productivity (r = −0.22). The second factor, person-related bullying, also exhibits significantly higher values in the mid-range correlation of the SUPSO questionnaire, particularly in relation to sadness (r = 0.50), anxiety (r = 0.46), and depression (r = 0.41). The decline in mental wellbeing associated with this factor of bullying is further confirmed by negative correlation values on the mental wellbeing scale (r = −0.41) and activity (r = −0.36).

In other words, bullying focused on the individual's personality is highly likely to cause feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression in the targeted victim. The third factor, physically intimidating bullying, exhibits significantly higher values in the low-range correlation of the SUPSO questionnaire, once again in relation to sadness (r = 0.43), depression (r = 0.41), and anxiety (r = 0.37). The deterioration of mental wellbeing associated with this factor of bullying is also confirmed by negative correlation values on the mental wellbeing scale (r = −0.34) and activity (r = −0.25). All forms of workplace bullying significantly decrease mental wellbeing (work-related bullying r = −0.40, person-related bullying r = −0.40, and physical-related bullying r = −0.34).

The results showed that, in the context of the possible influence of different forms of bullying on mental state, the effect of person-related bullying and work-related bullying may be observed (Table 4).

Table 4. Linear regression of different psychological states (DV) as a function of different forms of bullying (predictors).

DV/Predictors	F (df)	P	Adj. R^2	β	t	P
Depression (D)						
Work-related bullying	14.51 (3, 20)	*p* < 0.01	0.16	0.128	1.126	0.261
Person-related bullying				0.385	2.502	0.013
Physically intimidating bullying				−0.091	−0.744	0.457
Anxiety (U)						
Work-related bullying	18.56 (3, 20)	*p* < 0.01	0.20	0.076	0.683	0.494
Person-related bullying				0.465	3.099	0.002
Physically intimidating bullying				−0.077	−0.646	0.519
Sadness (S)						
Work-related bullying	22.65 (3, 20)	*p* < 0.01	0.24	−0.005	−0.054	0.956
Person-related bullying				0.476	3.250	0.001
Physically intimidating bullying				0.035	0.302	0.762
Mental Restless (N)						
Work-related bullying	24.65 (3, 20)	*p* < 0.01	0.25	0.180	1.679	0.094
Person-related bullying				0.289	1.997	0.047
Physically intimidating bullying				0.078	0.678	0.497
Impulsivity (O)						
Work-related bullying	20.44 (3, 20)	*p* < 0.01	0.22	0.010	0.091	0.926
Person-related bullying				0.342	2.302	0.022
Physically intimidating bullying				0.148	1.248	0.213
Active (A)						
Work-related bullying	11.49 (3, 20)	*p* < 0.01	0.13	−0.263	−2.270	0.024
Person-related bullying				−0.257	−1.644	0.101
Physically intimidating bullying				0.154	1.232	0.219
Mental wellbeing (P)						
Work-related bullying	14.82 (3, 20)	*p* < 0.01	0.16	−0.218	−1.916	0.056
Person-related bullying				−0.253	−1.652	0.099
Physically intimidating bullying				0.031	0.257	0.797

Person-related bullying had the strongest effect on mental restlessness (explaining 25% of its variance, *p* < 0.001), followed by the effect on sadness (24% of its explained variance, *p* < 0.001) and the effect on impulsivity (explaining 22% of its variance, *p* < 0.001).

Person-related bullying had the strongest effect on anxiety (explaining 20% of its variance, *p* < 0.001) and on depression, which explains just 16% of its variance (*p* = 0.013), and was thus adopted.

In all cases, the presence of person-related bullying decreased the level of psychological wellbeing. On the other hand, work-related bullying had the strongest effect on wellbeing (explaining 16% of its variance, *p* < 0.05) and activity (explaining 13% of its variance, *p* < 0.02) (see Table 4).

6. Discussion

The objective of the study was to examine the prevalence of workplace bullying among employees in Portugal and explore the association between various forms of workplace bullying and employees' psychological wellbeing. When examining empirical studies on workplace bullying, various approaches are evident (e.g., Agervold 2007; Cowie et al. 2002). Estimates of the prevalence of workplace bullying are inconsistent, as they depend on the criteria used to assess the phenomenon and the job position of the evaluator, among other factors. The primary aim of this research study was to determine the occurrence of workplace bullying among Portuguese employees. The Negative Acts Questionnaire, NAQ-R, a revised version of the instrument, was used for measurement, offering two approaches—behavioural and self-evaluation—which may be further classified as loose

(Leymann 1996) and stringent (Mikkelsen and Einarsen 2001) criteria. The prevalence of workplace bullying varies depending on the criterion used (loose or stringent), as well as the measurement approach (behavioural or self-evaluation).

The study found that the highest prevalence of bullying, at 28.8%, was associated with the loose behavioural measurement in a sample of 205 Portuguese employees. However, when applying the stringent criterion to the prevalence of workplace bullying using the behavioural measurement, the proportion of bullied individuals decreased to 23.4%, compared to the original estimate. According to the self-evaluation measurement, only 9.96% of the employees reported bullying. The prevalence values indicated in the present study might also have been decreased in the context of the self-evaluation approach, especially by non-acceptance of the image of a helpless and defenceless victim by the bullied employees, which is jointly suggested by Nielsen et al. (2010) or Agervold (2007). Similar findings were reported in foreign studies that utilized the same NAQ-R questionnaire. Nielsen et al. (2010) reported an average prevalence of workplace bullying of 12.0% in Scandinavian countries and 14.0% in other European countries. Giorgi et al. (2013) found 15.2% of bullied employees in Italy. These findings align with a study on the prevalence of workplace bullying in the Czech Republic, which reported prevalence rates of 19.8% (loose criterion) and 11.2% (stringent criterion) using the self-evaluation measurement (Cakirpaloglu et al. 2017).

Another objective of the study is to investigate potential associations and effect between different forms of workplace bullying and the mental wellbeing of the individuals affected. According to the correlation analyses, all three modalities of bullying (work-related bullying, person-related bullying, and physically intimidating bullying) are most likely contributing to increased feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression among the targeted employees, as well as an overall decline in mental wellbeing and productivity. The findings of a significant decrease in subjective wellbeing among bullying victims in Portugal align with findings from other studies (Lee and Brotheridge 2006; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al. 2009; Vartia 2001).

That workplace bullying threatens employee wellbeing has been empirically well documented. Previous studies have consistently highlighted workplace bullying as a significant concern impacting the safety, health, and overall wellbeing of employees. It has been recognized as a key predictor of declining health and wellbeing, with severe consequences for individuals in the workplace (Einarsen and Nielsen 2015; Verkuil et al. 2015; Vie et al. 2011). To identify the psychopathological conditions underlying the feeling of personal wellbeing, an analysis of the results by means of multiple regression analyses suggested that the person-related bullying had the strongest effect on mental restlessness. That implies that the person often experiences mental tensions but lacks outlets for their release. It manifests as mental and physical restlessness, irritability, dissatisfaction, impatience, and an inability to focus. According to a recent study conducted by Bari et al. (2023), the direct targeting of individuals through workplace bullying has been found to have significant effects on both the behaviour of playing dumb and engaging in evasive knowledge hiding, both directly and indirectly. However, the study also revealed that person-related bullying does not have a discernible impact on rationalized knowledge hiding. Additionally, the researchers discovered that the relationship between person-related bullying and the dimensions of knowledge hiding is mediated by rpcb, which stands for role perception of the bully. Somewhat weaker was the effect of person-related bullying on sadness, where the person is passively experiencing negative consequences of psychological burden, wherein the effects of mental strain are turned inward instead of being expressed through interactions with the environment. These experiences may be characterized as sad, lonely, oversensitive, and unhappy. Weaker but still significant was the effect on impulsivity, which involves spontaneous release of energetic tension and psychological strain based on emotional impulses when rational self-control and internal inhibitions are weakened. It is characterized by mood swings, difficulty in self-control, explosiveness, irritability, and unbridled aggression. As far as the effect on anxiety and depression is concerned, it leads to an inclination to depression, anxiety, feelings of unhappiness, irritability, absence of a sense of humour,

and a subjective feeling of failure. The associations mentioned have been independently confirmed in various studies, including the works of Lange et al. (2020) and Zanabazar et al. (2023). On the other hand, work-related bullying had the strongest effect on wellbeing and activity, which decreases the individual sense of satisfaction, self-confidence, good mood, and feelings of strength and energy.

The presence of despotic leadership in the workplace has been linked to adverse effects on employee wellbeing, as it fosters an environment conducive to bullying behaviours that ultimately diminish overall wellbeing. In this context, the role of emotional intelligence emerges as a significant factor that may moderate the effects of long-term workplace bullying on an employee's psychological wellbeing. The mediating role of emotions in the relationship between workplace bullying and wellbeing is supported by the findings of Islam et al. (2023), suggesting that individuals with high emotional intelligence are more likely to mitigate the negative association between bullying behaviour and employee wellbeing. Einarsen et al. (2009) also found that work-related bullying has detrimental effects on the level of psychological stress experienced by individuals. Consequently, this heightened stress level impacts relationships with colleagues, diminishes organizational commitment, and decreases overall satisfaction within the organization.

A substantial body of empirical research has consistently demonstrated that workplace bullying has negative consequences on psychological wellbeing and is linked to various challenges in psychological, social, and work-related domains. These findings have been supported by multiple studies conducted across different sectors and among diverse segments of the working population (Day et al. 2022; Hosseini et al. 2021; Ko et al. 2020).

7. Conclusions

The study strongly backs prior international research showing that workplace bullying harms targeted employees' wellbeing. It has vital implications for counselling, prevention, and intervention in workplace bullying, and for organizational psychology and human resources. To deepen our understanding, future research should explore both bullied individuals' traits and others involved in harassment. Investigating the interplay between personality and bullying in foreign research is a promising direction. Also, future studies should examine psycho-physiological changes in employees enduring prolonged bullying. It is crucial to systematically explore preventive measures for evidence-based counselling. Lastly, an important future inquiry would be investigating suicidal tendencies among bullying victims, so that potential long-term consequences may be determined.

8. Limitations

The use of online instruments for relevant data collection has some limitations, and thus needs to be considered in the interpretation of the results. This primarily relates to the motivation for participation in a research study on workplace bullying. Some limitations are also caused by the selection of the questionnaire instrument for researching such a complex and sensitive phenomenon as bullying in the workplace. Although the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) has satisfactory psychometric features, the method of questioning cannot discern the motivational, emotional, and other mental processes of the main actors of bullying. The results obtained through the NAQ-R questionnaire from various countries may be misleading in performing comparisons due to socio-cultural differences (e.g., Scandinavian countries, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, etc.).

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical review and approval were not required for the study on participants in this survey in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets are available on request from the corresponding author.

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