

# Personality Profiles Among Targets and Nontargets of Workplace Bullying

Karina Lind, Lars Glasø, Ståle Pallesen, and Ståle Einarsen

Department of Psychosocial Psychology, University of Bergen

**Abstract.** This study investigated personality profiles among targets and nontargets of workplace bullying. Personality was assessed by the NEO-FFI, which measures the main dimensions in accordance with the five-factor model of personality: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness. A total of 435 health care employees participated in the study, in which 42 targets of bullying were identified. A logistic regression analysis revealed significant differences between targets and nontargets of workplace bullying on just two of the Big Five dimensions, with targets scoring higher on Conscientiousness and lower on Agreeableness. Further, a cluster analysis showed no subclusters in the target sample regarding personality. The authors, therefore, consider the differences to be minimal. Hence, personality patterns do not easily differentiate targets of workplace bullying from nontargets. One-sided explanations of the bullying phenomenon, such as personality, are, therefore, likely to be inappropriate.

**Keywords:** workplace bullying, personality, five-factor model of personality

During the last two decades, the concept of workplace bullying has increasingly drawn attention from both researchers and practitioners (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). Differing concepts have been used describing the phenomenon, such as mobbing (Leymann, 1996), bullying (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996), victimization (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997) emotional abuse (Keashly, 1998), and psychological terror (Leymann, 1990). However, they all refer to the systematic mistreatment of a subordinate by other organization members, causing severe harm to the target. "Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, the interaction or process has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over an extended period of time (e.g., at least 6 months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts." (Einarsen et al., 2003, p. 15). Forsyth (2006, p. 261) presents an alternative definition: "Bullying is a form of coercive interpersonal influence. It involves deliberately inflicting injury or discomfort on another person repeatedly through physical contact, verbal abuse, exclusion, or other negative acts."

Reviewing empirical findings of workplace bullying, Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, and Vartia (2003) concluded that 5–10% of the workforce in Europe is exposed to some kind of bullying at work. Bullying may affect the organization in numerous ways: employees taking time off work, higher turnover, poorer work performance and productivity, low efficiency, and reduction of motivation and satisfaction among employees (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002). For the individual, also, consequences of bullying are many and

detrimental, such as lowered well-being and job satisfaction, as well as a number of stress symptoms including low self-esteem, sleep problems, anxiety, concentration difficulties, chronic fatigue, anger, depression, and various somatic problems (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). These serious consequences seen among targets led Leymann and Gustafsson (1996) to suggest that symptoms of bullying may fit the diagnostic criteria of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a notion that was supported in a study by Nielsen, Matthiesen, and Einarsen (2005). Some targets of bullying even pay the ultimate price by taking their own lives (Leymann, 1996).

Research on the causes of bullying at work has mainly addressed two issues: the role of psychosocial work-environment factors and the role of the personality of the targets (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000). The work environment hypothesis suggests that a generally stressful psychosocial work-environment causes bullying. This hypothesis has gained support in research showing that both targets and bystanders describe their working situation as strained and competitive (Vartia, 1996), are dissatisfied with leadership (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994), and describe a poorly organized work-environment where roles and command structures are unclear (Leymann, 1996). Still, no one has been able to establish the exact causal mechanisms by which work-environment factors cause bullying, or for that matter, if bullying causes a poor work-environment (Ager-vold & Mikkelsen, 2004).

A common lay opinion about the causes of bullying is the suspicion that specific characteristics within an individual predispose him or her to being bullied (Coyne et al., 2000). Explaining exposure to bullying from an individual perspective is controversial because one might easily be accused of blaming the target (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003).

Leymann (1990, 1996) has claimed that before the onset of exposure to bullying, there are no personality differences between those who later become targets and nontargets of bullying. He argues that observations of any differences between targets and nontargets must be seen as a consequence of being exposed to bullying, and not as an explanation of the causes of such exposure.

Nevertheless, some data indicate that there might exist differences between targets and nontargets of bullying even before the onset of bullying. A number of studies relating to bullying in schools have documented that targets of bullying tend to be less extroverted and more neurotic than control samples (Byrne, 1994; Mynard & Joseph, 1997; Slee & Rigby, 1993), and that submissiveness and sensitivity might lead to becoming a target of school bullying (Olweus, 2003; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993). Randall (1997, 2001) has suggested that these traits can also emerge within adult targets that may be prone to being bullied. Brodsky (1976) reported that targets of bullying are conscientious, literal-minded, and unsophisticated with difficulties adjusting to the situation. O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire, and Smith (1998a) examined 30 Irish targets of workplace bullying and a control group by means of Cattell's 16 PF personality profiles. The targets tended to be less emotionally stable and less dominant as well as more anxious, apprehensive, and sensitive, than the control group. In Norway, Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen, and Hellesøy (1994) showed that targets of bullying had lower self-esteem and higher scores on social anxiety and neuroticism than nontargets. Furthermore, in a study of 60 targets and 60 nontargets of bullying in Ireland, significant differences between the two groups emerged; targets tended to be less independent and extroverted, less stable and more contentious than nontargets (Coyne et al., 2000). It has, therefore, been suggested that personality trait is a predictor of who, in an organization, is most likely to be bullied, in addition to offering an explanation as to why these individuals become targets. Based on the above results, we hypothesized that the target sample of the present study would differ from the nontargets on the Big Five dimensions. We expect the targets to score higher on the Neuroticism and Conscientiousness dimensions, and lower on the Extroversion dimension.

However, recent research indicates that targets of bullying are not a homogeneous group when it comes to personality. Rather, they seem to divide into subgroups with different profiles. In a study examining conflict styles and psychosocial well-being of targets of workplace bullying, Zapf (1999) identified three clusters within the target sample that scored significantly different from each other on unassertiveness/avoidance. Administering the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999) to 72 targets of bullying and to a contrast group of 72 matched nontargets, Glasø, Matthiesen, Nielsen, and Einarsen (2007) found that the target sample consisted of two clusters. The major cluster (64% of the targets) did not differ from nontargets as far as personality was concerned. However, a small cluster of targets was found to be less extroverted, less agreeable, less conscientious, and less open to experience but more emotionally unstable than

targets in the major cluster and the contrast group. Moreover, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2001) found in a study among 85 former and current targets, that some had an elevated personality profile on the MMPI-2, which is a personality test measuring psychiatric disturbance along several dimensions (Havik, 1993). The targets could be divided into three distinct subgroups with different personalities: serious affect, disappointed and depressed, and "common." In the latter group, no particular personality and mental problems existed, questioning the existence of a general target profile. Coyne, Chong, Seigne, and Randall (2003) also concluded that targets are not a homogeneous group, as they differ in terms of personality and perceptions of the negative aspects of the working environment, in which the latter may be moderated by the target's personality. This leads to our second hypothesis: There would exist subgroups among the target sample in our study regarding personality.

In sum, research is pointing in different directions regarding the personality of targets of workplace bullying. Some studies conclude that personality differences between targets and nontargets exist (e.g., Brodsky, 1976; Coyne et al., 2000; Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen, & Hellesøy, 1994), while others question such conclusions (Leymann, 1996) or claim that there is no general target-personality profile (see Glasø et al., 2007). Hence, there is still a strong need for further research on this topic.

## Method

### Procedure

The management of 12 nursing homes in Bergen were contacted and asked whether the researchers could distribute a survey among the employees. In all, seven nursing homes gave permission to conduct the survey. The reasons for refusal were that the management recently had conducted a similar survey or planned to do so in the near future. The data were collected from a sample of 496 nursing-home employees. Clients in these units have severe health problems with most residents having a life expectancy of less than 3 years. A total of 1022 questionnaires were distributed with a response rate of 48.5%. Questionnaires were distributed to the participants at their worksite. Participation in the study was voluntary and the study was anonymous as no data that could be traced to any participant in particular were collected. The study was introduced as an investigation of factors associated with job satisfaction.

### Sample

The sample was predominantly female (89%), married (68%), with children (74%), having 5 or fewer years of unit tenure (59%). The mean age of the sample was 41.8 ( $SD = 12.4$ ). A total of 71% worked half time or more (71%) and

69% had no leadership responsibilities (69%). The majority of the sample worked both day and night shifts (60%), and were in nursing roles (75%).

## Instruments

### Bullying

Exposure to bullying in the workplace was investigated by means of a standard question. Before answering the question, the respondents were presented with a definition of bullying: "Bullying takes place when one or more persons systematically and over time feel that they have been subjected to negative treatment on the part of one or more persons, in a situation in which the person(s) exposed to the treatment have difficulty in defending themselves against them. It is not bullying when two equal strong opponents are in conflict with each other" (Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen, & Hellesøy, 1994). According to this definition the respondents were asked to mark their responses on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = *no, never*, 2 = *yes, occasionally*, 3 = *yes, now and then*, 4 = *yes, on a weekly basis*, and 5 = *yes, on a daily basis*.

### Personality

Personality (Neuroticism, Extroversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) was measured by the official Norwegian translation (Martinsen, Nordvik, & Østbø, 2005) of the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), developed by Costa and McCrae (1992). Respondents indicated their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Each of the five dimensions are measured by 12 items, thus, the NEO-FFI comprises, in all, 60 items. For the Neuroticism subscale, a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .82 was obtained. An example of an item is "I feel inferior to others." The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the Extroversion subscale was .70. An example of an item is "I like to have a lot of people around me." Openness to new experiences had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .62 with "I am intrigued by the patterns I find in art and nature" as an example item. Agreeableness obtained a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .65. An example of an item is "I try to be courteous to everyone I meet." The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the Conscientiousness subscale was .71. An example of an item is "I keep my belongings clean and neat." The authors recognize that two of the obtained  $\alpha$  coefficients on the subscales of the NEO-FFI are, regrettably, within the lower range.

## Statistics

The data were coded and processed using the statistics package SPSS (Version 14.0). Bivariate relationships between variables measured by interval scales were calculated

by Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. Bivariate relationships between a variable measured by an interval scale and a variable measured by a dichotomous nominal scale were calculated by point-biserial correlation coefficients. In order to investigate whether the personality dimensions based upon the five-factor model were related to status as target or nontarget a logistic regression analysis (both crude and adjusted) was conducted where status (0 = nontarget, 1 = target) comprised the criterion variable (cut-off was set at 2 = *yes, occasionally*, meaning that the respondents reporting 2, 3, 4, and 5 were considered targets of bullying in this study) and where the five personality dimensions comprised the predictor variables. When the 95% confidence interval for the Odds ratio do not include 1.00, the predictor is significantly related to the criterion variable. Finally, a two-step cluster analysis was conducted based upon target status (target or nontarget) and scores on the five personality dimensions. The number of clusters to be formed was based upon the Schwarz Bayesian criterion. Analysis of variance was performed in order to investigate whether significant differences existed between the clusters on the different personality dimensions. Significant results were followed up by post hoc analyses (least significant difference test).

## Results

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, sample size, and bivariate correlation coefficients among the variables in the study. Seven of the 10 correlation coefficients between the personality variables were significantly different from zero ( $p < .01$ ). Neuroticism was negatively correlated with Extraversion and Conscientiousness. Extraversion was positively correlated with Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, and Conscientiousness was also positively correlated with Agreeableness. There were no significant correlations between the NEO-FFI dimensions and exposure to bullying. In all, 42 targets of bullying were identified (answering "2" to "5" on the question about bullying). The logistic regression analysis significantly differentiated targets from nontargets on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (see Table 2). Low scores on Agreeableness and high scores on Conscientiousness significantly predicted the probability of being a target in the adjusted analysis. However, for exploratory reasons we also conducted the logistic regression analysis with more stringent demands to our cut-off by including only targets of bullying that answered "3" to "5" on the question about bullying. Results from this analysis revealed no significant differences between targets and nontargets of bullying on any of the big-five personality traits. In the cluster analysis no subclusters were revealed in the sample of targets.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for the personality dimensions ( $N = 496$ )

Personality dimensions	Mean	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Neuroticism	17.96	5.87	474	–					
2. Extraversion	30.13	4.14	474	–.36**					
3. Openness	25.28	4.97	473	–.09	.17**				
4. Agreeableness	33.71	3.96	476	–.28**	.31**	–.01			
5. Conscientiousness	34.53	4.58	475	–.33**	.46**	–.01	.33**		
6. Exposure to bullying			441	.02	.06	.05	–.05	.09	–

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . Seven of the 10 correlation coefficients between the personality variables were significantly different from zero ( $p < .01$ ). Neuroticism was negatively correlated with Extraversion and Conscientiousness. Extraversion was positively correlated with Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, and Conscientiousness was also positively correlated with Agreeableness. There were no significant correlations between the NEO-FFI dimensions and exposure to bullying.

Table 2. Summary of logistic regression analysis predicting target status (0 = nontarget, 1 = target)

Predictor	Crude		Adjusted <sup>1</sup>	
	Odds ratio	95% CI	Odds ratio	95% CI
Neuroticism	1.02	0.97–1.08	1.04	0.98–1.11
Extroversion	1.07	0.99–1.16	1.05	0.95–1.15
Openness	1.02	0.96–1.09	1.02	0.95–1.09
Agreeableness	0.95	0.97–1.03	0.90	0.82–0.99
Conscientiousness	1.10	1.03–1.18	1.13	1.04–1.23

The logistic regression analysis significantly differentiated targets from nontargets on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Low scores on Agreeableness and high scores on Conscientiousness significantly predicted the probability of being a target in the adjusted analysis.

<sup>1</sup>adjusted for all the other predictor variables.

## Discussion

The results from the logistic regression analysis showed that high scores on Conscientiousness and low scores on Agreeableness predicted status as target of workplace bullying. When targets tend to be highly conscientious, it means that they are organized, self-disciplined, hardworking, conventional, moralistic, and rule-bound (Pervin, Cervone, & Oliver, 2005). Coyne et al. (2000) found the same result in their study from Ireland. Individuals who are highly conscientious may get bullied because their work colleagues consider them annoyingly patronizing as a result of their rigid and often perfectionistic style (Pervin et al., 2005). However, the results are mixed, as other studies have reported no significant difference on the Conscientiousness scale between targets and nontargets (Coyne et al., 2003), or even the opposite (Glasø et al., 2007).

In addition to high scores on Conscientiousness, low scores on Agreeableness also predicted target status. Low scores on the Agreeableness dimension indicate that an individual is cynical, rude, suspicious, uncooperative, ruthless, irritable, and manipulative (Pervin et al., 2005). Thus, an individual with this trait will typically be provocative and often be involved in conflicts. One explanation to why a low score on the Agreeableness dimension predicted status as a target may be that individuals who are less agree-

able irritate co-workers who are potential perpetrators (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Again, the picture is not that clear as Coyne et al. (2000) found that targets of bullying score higher on Agreeableness than nontargets.

With several studies indicating that there is a difference between targets and nontargets on the Neuroticism dimension, it was surprising that we did not find support for this in the logistic regression analysis. It is reasonable to expect that targets of bullying experience negative stress; that they have a negative attitude toward the workplace situation; and that they are anxious, neurotic, worried, insecure, self-critical, and easily upset. However, Neuroticism is perhaps not as predictive as first believed. For instance, when work environment and climate were controlled for in Vartia's (1996) study, the strong relationship between Neuroticism and exposure to bullying was reduced, which can be seen as weakening the notion of the "neurotic target." Also, there were no significant differences between the targets and nontargets in our sample on the Extroversion and Openness dimensions.

In sum, our regression analysis showed that the targets of bullying scored differently than the nontargets on two of the Big Five personality dimensions, thus, this study adds to a mixed picture regarding the role of personality in bullying scenarios.

A possible explanation for the divergent results between the various studies may be incomparable samples. For instance, the sample from the study conducted by Coyne et al. (2000) included a wide variety of white and blue-collar employees, representing different professions and trades, and with an equal distribution of the sexes. Our sample, on the other hand, consisted of targets working in nursing homes, which does not represent an equal distribution of employees across profession and trade, and with almost 90% of them being females. Another explanation could be that stressful factors in the work environment in our study, e.g., dealing with seriously ill patients, death, and being understaffed, provoke conflicts and aggression that may lead to bullying behavior. If so, they may be bullied as a result of a particularly stressful work-environment, and not because of their personality. However, because of different methodological designs and use of different statistical analyses, it is hard to make comparisons between studies in this field.



Another question concerning the target samples relates to the fact that many targets no longer work. It is quite common for targets of workplace bullying to be on sick leave or receiving disability benefits, because they cannot cope with the situation anymore. Research clearly indicates that there is a relationship between exposure to bullying and symptoms of lowered wellbeing and psychological and somatic health problems (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). Many of the targets that have participated in previous research may have experienced such problems. For example, Zapf (1999) recruited the targets of bullying by means of newspaper articles on bullying, local broadcasting, bullying self-help groups, and by the help of a German organization called "Society against Psycho-social Stress and Mobbing GPSM." Thus, this sample consisted of severe bullying cases. In the study by Matthiesen and Einarsen (2001), it is also likely that they examined quite severe bullying cases, considering that the targets were members of two Norwegian support associations for targets of bullying at work. In their sample, a minority of the targets were still working (38%), with 16% on sick leave and more than a quarter receiving a disability pension. Nielsen and Einarsen (in press) have shown that targets of bullying in representative studies do differ from targets in such convenience samples. Our sample consisted of targets that are still working and who are quite representative for females working in such occupations. With Leymann's argument in mind, that the personality of targets of bullying may change as a result of the exposure, one may wonder whether the targets in our sample had not yet reached the stage where workplace bullying had affected their personality. This may explain why we found minimal differences between targets and nontargets. However, until longitudinal studies are conducted, this question concerning the direction of cause and effect remains unanswered.

The data from the cluster analysis showed that there existed no subgroups within the target sample. This was a surprising finding considering studies indicating that targets of bullying could be divided into several different clusters with different personality profiles (Coyne et al., 2003; Glasø et al., 2007; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001; Zapf, 1999). Perhaps we did not find different subgroups among the targets because our sample of targets was homogeneous, as they all worked in nursing homes and primarily were comprised of women. Alternatively this finding may be the result of the small sample size.

In sum, it was difficult to identify targets of workplace bullying based on personality profiles. Accordingly, it is important to investigate other potential antecedents of bullying. For example, a meta-analysis of potential causes of workplace harassment has shown that characteristics of the work environment may strongly contribute to workplace harassment. In contrast to the work environment antecedents, it was found that personality characteristics (dispositional and demographic characteristics) seemed to have little effect on whether an employee was harassed or not (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Further, a number of factors at

the level of the organization may give rise to bullying behavior, and act as antecedents, such as organizational changes (Skogstad, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007), role ambiguity (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994), poor and negative social climate (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Ashforth, 1994; Vartia, 1996), leadership behavior (O'Moore et al., 1998b), lack of control (Vartia, 1996), and workload (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994). Other individual traits and characteristics, not investigated in this study, may also be antecedents that could contribute to the occurrence of workplace bullying, such as being in a salient outsider position, being low on social competence and self-assertiveness as well as overachievement (Zapf et al., 2003), and having particular physical characteristics (Janssen, Craig, Boyce, & Pickett, 2004). Additionally, the social-interaction perspective offers another explanation, arguing that bullying may derive from a wide variety of social factors that provoke workplace aggression, e.g., the norm of reciprocity and injustice perceptions (Neumann & Baron, 2003). In addition to studies on personality as a potential antecedent of bullying, these findings support the notion that there are potentially multiple causes of bullying. Accordingly, one-sided explanations concerning the antecedents are likely to be inappropriate.

It is, however, important to note certain limitations of the current study. First, caution is needed when interpreting self-report data, with common-method variance as a possible problem (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Second, the fact that our study used cross-sectional data makes it impossible to draw strong conclusions concerning the causal relationship between bullying and personality. Finally, the use of a homogeneous sample means that the results from this study are not representative of the general working population.

## Conclusion

Taken together, the result shows that personality patterns in general do not easily differentiate targets of workplace bullying from nontargets (See also Glasø et al., 2007). The result contrasts with some of the previously conducted research (e.g., Coyne et al., 2000; Coyne et al., 2003; Zapf, 1999). However, those studies have often used samples with targets not currently employed, while the present study used a community sample of employees in fulltime employment, and this may be one of the reasons for the contrasting findings.

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#### About the authors

Karina Lind has a masters degree in philosophy in work and organizational psychology from the University of Bergen, Norway, and presently works as an HR consultant for the Norwegian oil and gas company StatoilHydro.

Lars Glasø, Ph.D., is Associate Professor at the University of Bergen. His research interests are in the areas of leadership and emotions, leadership development, consultancy, and workplace bullying.

Ståle Einarsen is Professor of Work and Organizational Psychology at the University of Bergen, Norway. His research interests are issues related to leadership, bullying/harassment, and creativity.

Ståle Pallesen is Professor of Psychology at the University of Bergen. His main research interests are related to sleep and clinical psychology in general.

#### Karina Lind

StatoilHydro ASA, Natural Gas  
Vassbotnen 23, Forus  
4033 Stavanger  
Norway  
Tel. +47 477 12040  
Fax. +47 519 98680  
E-mail karili@statoilhydro.com