

**The Eye of the Beholder:  
Target and Witness Accounts of  
Adult Bullying at Work**

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Although scholarship increasingly points to workplace bullying as a communal rather than dyadic or psychological phenomenon (e.g., Hoel & Beale, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008), there has been little empirical work regarding its social, communal features. Most of what we know focuses on target perceptions, with only a few studies of witnesses (e.g., Jennifer, Cowie, & Anaiadou, 2003; Vartia, 2001) and even fewer comparisons between the perceptions of targeted and non-targeted workers (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). Certainly targets are most directly affected, but because the experience stigmatizes and casts them as suspect, target accounts are frequently viewed with suspicion (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Namie, 2007). What is more, there is reason to believe that, similar to other forms of workplace communication, bullying includes a number of actors who either directly participate in or indirectly support ongoing harassment (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002).

In spite of evidence that bullying is highly complex and involves organizational systems (Salin, 2003), social meanings (Neuman & Baron, 2003) and cultural discourses (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008), popularized accounts still frame it as individual and psychological. This is evident, for example, in the following AP column responding to a woman reporting persistent verbal abuse from a coworker. The Ph.D.-level workplace coach and author of *Secrets to Winning at Office Politics* advised:

... the real answer lies within yourself. You've given this woman way too much power over you, so you need to ... take that power back. I can guarantee that most people would not let this little tyrant dominate their existence so completely. But for some reason, you are allowing her to control you. (McIntyre, 2008, p. H2)

Such individualistically pejorative rhetoric portrays targets as psychologically weak—persons who simply “allow” abuse to happen to them. Unfortunately, such advice and the beliefs behind it are far too common. Individualistic rhetoric coupled with the predominant target-perspective of current research has led to thinking of bullying as a solely subjective experience. Empirical studies are needed to explore the communal character of the phenomenon, in particular the parties involved in bullying and the perceptions of affected but non-targeted organizational members. Multiple perspectives are important because “we typically think of an event as real if two or more people ... agree that they saw it happen” (Corman, 1995, p. 5).

In the current study we build on a relatively new but growing body of US scholarship to estimate the prevalence of witnessing and experiencing adult bullying, assess target responses to abuse, and examine organizational responses to reports of abuse. We extend research on the communal character of workplace bullying by exploring not only whom organizational members believe perpetrates abuse but also whom they perceive supports perpetrators. Regarding these bullying features, we compare witness and target perspectives to determine convergence or divergence and hopefully counter individualistic frames of workplace abuse. We begin by defining adult bullying, discussing the importance of attending to perceptions of abuse, and underscoring the value of examining multiple perspectives. This is followed by a review of the current research as it guides each of the study's hypotheses and research questions. We then outline methods, present key findings, and discuss implications. We end by recapping methodological strengths, exploring limitations, and proposing fruitful areas for future research.

#### Understanding Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is a constellation of hostile messages and abusive behaviors persistently targeted at one or more persons in work settings.<sup>1</sup> Rarely is it one kind of negative act or message; rather, bullying is patterned communication comprised by numerous hostile interactions and transactions (e.g., verbal abuse and public humiliation coupled with social

ostracism, work obstruction, and destructive gossip). It is more often than not escalatory, starting with occasional subtle, indirect insults or rude remarks and growing to more egregious, frequent types of humiliation, criticism, or verbal abuse (Adams & Crawford, 1992). Although persons outside the organization can bully organizational members (e.g., customers, patients), bullying research is concerned with aggression by organizational members targeted at other members.

*Persistence*—repetition and duration—is its defining feature. Bullying, as opposed to short-lived conflicts or one-time hostile incidents, occurs frequently (weekly, daily) and is prolonged (typically > 6 months). Persistence makes it particularly harmful and corrosive, wearing down targets' defenses, social support, and health. Workplace bullying is also associated with power disparity between perpetrators and targets, whether bullies are peers or supervisors. Power disparity can result from the relentless wearing down of bullying (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003); power difference can also be hierarchical (i.e., the bullying boss). Although recent research suggests that target and witness resistance is common (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006), despite such resistance affected workers typically report feeling unable to stop abuse once it has begun (Namie, 2003; Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty, & Freels, 2001).

The power disparity in bullying situations is further exacerbated by upper-management responses, or lack thereof, to complaints. Similar to whistleblowing or reporting sexual harassment, when targets speak out they can be stigmatized, subjected to escalated abuse, or socially ostracized (Rothschild & Miethe, 1999; Schneider, Fitzgerald, & Swan, 1997). Alternately, upper-managers may take no action, which is often as damaging as punitive responses, since *doing nothing is never really doing nothing*. When witnessing colleagues see these developments, they may feel preemptively silenced and unwilling to speak out; thus their voices are muted along with the power to be found in collective voices (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003a). The power issues surrounding workplace abuse are collective and implicate all involved—targets, bullies, witnesses, and upper-managers.

#### Perceptions of Workplace Bullying

Researchers often gather self-reports of communicative behavior and, as such, capture perceptions of that behavior. Admittedly, self-reports are limited by problems of recall, attribution error, and social desirability. Despite these issues, we believe that workers' perceptions of bullying are fundamentally important for at least five reasons. First, perceptions of abuse shape workers' sense of emotional and physiological health (Leymann, 1990), public and private conversations, identity work (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), and relationships with employers. Perceptions are the “stuff” of organizing and sensemaking, and the “bullying process is unequivocally tied in with the target's reaction to the behaviour” (Hoel & Beale, 2006, p. 242).

Second, perceptions of bullying, rather than researcher-generated operationalizations, are typically the incentives for organizational action. Indeed, organizational authorities most often directly deal with *perceived* bullying, rather than operationalizations or first-hand observations. When workers report their perceptions of abuse, organizational authorities investigate in order to substantiate or refute initial perceptions. When enough people have the same perception, organizations may even create formal anti-bullying policies and procedures. Third, it is only through perceptions of abuse that either researchers or organizational members can ascertain the dimensions of persistent workplace aggression (e.g., duration, perpetrators, supporters, responses, etc.). Without reported perceptions such dynamics are exceedingly difficult if not impossible to detect without direct observation.

Fourth, there is substantial intersection between measures based on perceptions and those based on operationalizations of bullying. Although the operational categorization method (OCM)

likely overestimates and self-labeling likely underestimates prevalence (Notelaers, Einarsen, Hans, & Vermunt, 2006), there is considerable overlap. The OCM presents respondents with an index of items measuring exposure to negative acts regardless of whether persons report feeling bullied. Self-labeling asks respondents to identify with a global definition of bullying. In the majority of cases those who self-label as *bullied* are also operationally-classified as *bullied* (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Notelaers et al., 2006; Salin, 2001). For example, in a Swedish study all who self-labeled were also classified as bullied using an OCM (Salin, 2001). In both a US and a Belgium study all but a very few who self-labeled were also identified operationally (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Notelaers et al., 2006).

Finally, the emotional responses to perceptions of abuse are important signaling devices for organizations (Waldron, 2000). When workers perceive that they or others are being bullied and feel hurt, fearful, or angry as a result, these emotions can serve as early warning signs pointing to potentially more widespread problems. Negative emotions typically symbolize the tip of the workplace aggression iceberg, indicating that more widespread hostile, abusive communication is submerged beneath the surface of organizational processes.

#### The Importance of Both Target and Witness Perceptions

A commonly-voiced criticism of bullying research is that it tends to focus solely on target perspectives (e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Namie, 2003; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). There is a small but steadily growing body of work, however, focusing on witnessing coworkers. There seems little doubt that watching one's peers being bullied at work would be harmful, and such is the case (Vartia, 2001). Witnesses report higher levels of stress and workplace negativity, and lower levels of job satisfaction and overall liking for their jobs, than non-exposed workers (Jennifer et al., 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Witnessing the chronic abuse of one's peers "takes its toll with the result that [coworkers'] capacity to work decreases and they become more prone to ill health" (Crawford, 2001, p. 26).

Witnesses also wait and see how organizational authorities respond to reports of abuse. Managerial responses—whether effective, absent, or ineffective—encourage witnesses to speak out or stay silent, engender support for or withheld support from targeted workers, and increase or decrease intentions to leave (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003a; Rayner et al., 2002). These issues underscore the ways that bullying is "shared" even when workers are not directly targeted.

Specific to our purposes are studies that compare target and witness perspectives. Some of these examine workers in the same groups, while others explore aggregated data from people in various workplaces. Coyne's work, for example, explores target-witness perspectives in teams. His research has found areas of convergence (targets "were nominated as preferred people to work with") (Coyne, Craig, & Smith-Lee Chong, 2004, p. 301) and divergence (targets felt bullied at higher rates than peers recognized) (Coyne, Chong, Seigne, & Randall, 2003). Rayner and colleagues (2002) suggest both similarities and differences in target and witness perspectives. Disagreement typically concerned the degree of harm rather than the presence or termination of bullying. That is, targets perceived the situation as worse than did witnesses, although both recognized its occurrence and cessation. Ashforth (1994) notes that many subordinates report the same supervisors as abusive, although individuals may have unique experiences these supervisors. S.E. Lewis (1999) and S. E. Lewis and Orford (2005) also observe a number of target-witness similarities regarding the more general features of bullying, potentially due to intersubjective sensemaking: Coworkers talk with one another to make sense of abusive interactions, which likely moves individual viewpoints toward convergence.

Other scholarship examines aggregated target and witness accounts from persons in different organizations, as does ours. From this point of view, there is also both agreement and disagreement. In Jennifer et al.'s (2003) extensive UK study, targets and witnesses (what she calls bullied/non-victims) both reported work overload, workplace negativity, and unwanted physical contact more often than unaffected workers. Moreover, workers in both groups expect organizational authorities to take action and stop abuse after someone reports it (D. Lewis, 2003), and even to recognize the evidence of abuse (e.g., turnover) and proactively intervene when it is unreported (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Targets and witnesses do have somewhat different expectations regarding the outcomes of interventions. Targets might seek an apology from the bully or visible punishment, while witnesses may simply want the bully removed (Tehrani, 2001). Although these studies suggest some areas of convergence and others of divergence, there has yet to be a systematic comparison of target-witness perceptions in the US workforce. We move now to explore the current bullying literature on features examined in the current study.

#### US Workplace Bullying Prevalence

Of central importance to examining any communication problem is determining how many people are affected. We have a clearer idea of exposure in international settings than in the US, as international scholarship began in the late 1970s (e.g., Adams & Crawford, 1992; Leymann, 1990) and US interest with few exceptions (e.g., Brodsky, 1976; Cox, 1991; Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994) has not fully emerged until more recently. However, current US research does suggest prevalence rates for persistent abuse. Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) found that about 10 percent of workers self-labeled as bullied in the past 6 months, and nearly 30 percent reported feeling bullied sometime in their careers. Workplace aggression studies suggest higher career rates of 42 (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000) and up to 56 percent (Neuman, 2004). Although meaningful in their own right, none draw on a representative US sample, a limitation taken up in this study. Thus, as the foundation to examine bullying features and make between-group comparisons, we first assess bullying prevalence—being a witness or target.

#### Perpetrators and Supporters

Identifying the perceived perpetrators is a typical feature of interest in bullying research. Targeted workers in the UK and EU most often identify higher ranked persons, while Scandinavian targets identify supervisors and peers at roughly equal rates (e.g., Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001; Rayner, 1997; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). In the US supervisory bullying is the most common type reported (Keashly et al., 1994; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003b; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Namie, 2000, 2003); however, this pattern is not found in all studies (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000; Keashly & Neuman, 2005). A Michigan study, for example, found that those bullied in the past year reported bosses and coworkers at equal rates, and those bullied further in the past most often cited bosses. If memorability, salience, and impact are influential, we might expect that bosses or higher ups would be more easily recalled even years later. The type of negative interaction may also account for difference. A study of incivility, for example, found that coworkers were most often reported (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Languhous, 2001).

Perpetrator gender is also of interest, and targets in international samples most often identify males (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Rayner, 1997; Zapf, 1999). US research is mixed regarding bully gender; what we know comes from noteworthy exploratory studies, but research using convenience and self-selected target samples. For instance, Namie's (2000) predominantly female self-selected sample reported that women were most often their abusers. Students in Keashly and colleagues' (1994) work reported men and women at approximately equal rates. The United States has no definitive work that identifies bully gender or position. We simply lack

generalizable findings from which to confidently estimate these features of bullying. Thus we cannot confidently hypothesize about either. And what we do know comes from target reports; we are unsure of onlookers have similar perceptions. Thus, we pose the following questions:

RQ1a: What are the identified gender and position of bullies?

RQ1b: Do target and witness perceptions differ?

Related issues that have received far less attention are whether bullying is the act of one or a number of persons, and from whom (or if) bullies find support. “The concept that single bullies victimise single targets clearly does exist in reality. But multiple targets with multiple perpetrators may also exist just as frequently” (Rayner et al., 2002, p. 82). There is evidence suggesting multiple bullies. Researchers examining gender report that men and women bully in dyads (a man and a woman), which suggests that bullying can include multiple perpetrators (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Zapf et al., 2003). Yet “studies have not asked whether targets [or witnesses] think people are deliberately working together in co-operation” (Rayner et al., 2002, p. 67). Undoubtedly multiple perpetrators makes resistance, reporting, and responding more difficult and risky. As importantly is from whom bullies appear to find support. We are particularly interested in perceived support for bullies, perceptions that we argue compound power disparity and underscore the collective and communal. We currently know little about workers’ perceptions, whether target or witness, regarding these communal features of bullying. Thus we pose the following questions:

RQ2a: Are bullies perceived as acting alone or in concert with others?

RQ2b: Do target and witness perceptions differ?

RQ3a: Who are bullies’ perceived supporters?

RQ3b: Do target and witness perceptions differ?

#### Target and Organizational Actions

Target actions that bring the issue to the attention of upper-management are crucial, as individual efforts to end abuse, such as confronting the bully, working harder, or conflict avoidance, rarely end abuse (Crawshaw, 2005; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Targets report taking a number of approaches to stop abuse. In some cases these include filing formal, written grievances or going to authorities outside the organization, such as attorneys. Far more commonly, however, they verbalize their concerns to internal authorities (Namie, 2003; Richman et al., 2001). Targets likely prefer informal tactics because of the backlash associated with whistleblowing (Rothschild & Miethe, 1999). As complaints move from internal to external or informal to formal, risks increase accordingly. In these situations we are unsure if witnesses have similar perceptions about target actions. Thus we pose a hypothesis and related question:

H1: When targets bring bullying to the attention of authorities, they will most often do so internally and informally.

RQ4: Do target and witness perceptions differ?

Reporting persistent mistreatment is necessary but not sufficient to stop it. Of central importance to ending bullying are organizational responses and interventions. Without intervention “workers are often left with the option of contesting bullies alone or of searching for other individual solutions, such as changing jobs (Hoel & Beale, 2006, p. 245). Targets typically report that organizational authorities take no action to stop abuse, ignore their complaints, or side with the perpetrators (Beale, 2001; Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Quine, 1999). That is, internal authorities are perceived to take no action or exacerbate abuse when it is reported.

We know far less about others’ perceptions of organizational responses, but their perceptions should not be taken lightly since onlookers are less likely to speak out if they witness

penalizing organizational responses to others' reports of abuse (S. E. Lewis & Orford, 2005). Even when management is concerned but remains silent, worker audiences likely read their silence as acquiescence, support for bullies, disregard for targets, or both (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). As with other features of bullying, we know little about how witnesses interpret organizational responses to reported abuse. Thus we pose the following hypothesis and research question:

H2: The most common organizational responses to reports of abuse will be to do nothing or exacerbate the situation.

RQ5: Do target and witness perceptions differ?

#### Methods

##### *Zogby Survey and Sampling*

Determining if differently affected workers' perceptions converge or diverge regarding collective features of bullying required a large enough sample to detect even small differences. To assess estimates for the prevalence of being bullied or witnessing others being bullied we needed a representative sample of US workers. To access this sample, The Workplace Bullying Institute ([workplacebullying.org](http://workplacebullying.org)) contracted with Zogby International<sup>2</sup>, a polling and public opinion research center. The population from which the study's sample was drawn included over 350,000 participants from every state in the United States. These were people who had agreed to participate in online surveys. Zogby drew a random sample from this panel that were then invited to participate in an online survey and asked to follow a link to a secure server hosting the survey. Results were weighted to reflect the target population, in this case adults nationwide.

##### *Sample*

The sample drawn was 7,740 adults; respondents were screened for age and only adults were included. Appendix A outlines sample demographics, which closely reflect the most current US census data (<http://www.census.gov/main/www/access.html>). The margin of error was +/- 1.1 percentage points. Margins of error were slightly higher in sub-groups, so slight weights were added to more accurately reflect the US working population. After screening for age, two other screens were used. The first was employment; those employed full or part-time, currently unemployed, or retired were allowed to continue. There was no other information about work history gathered. This screen eliminated self-employed (-855), student not working (-293), and other/not sure (-329) categories and resulted in 6,263 respondents completing the first part of the survey. The second screen was for persons who had experienced or witnessed bullying, which we globally defined. This ended the survey for those saying they had never witnessed or experienced bullying (-2802). The second screen left 3,461 persons who completed the remainder of the survey questions about bullying and its dimensions.

##### *Measures*

The online survey ran from 8/10/07 through 8/13/07; completion took approximately 13 minutes. In addition to demographic information, the survey inquired about bullying experiences: whether one had witnessed, experienced, or perpetrated bullying; primary harassers' position and gender; whether harassers acted alone or with others; harassers' supporters; actions taken by targets; and organizational responses to reported bullying. Survey responses resulted in categorical data for all questions. We adapted the questions from the Workplace Bullying Institute's (WBI) past research with thousands of targeted workers, as this organization has extensive experience with bullying in the United States (Namie, 2000, 2003). Our approach diverged somewhat from international research but responded closely to what is known about US workers.

*Prevalence.* Research typically employs two methods of determining bullying prevalence: (a) counting negative acts over a period of time with behavioral checklists and (b) participants' self-labeling as a target (e.g., Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Salin, 2001). We used the latter in this study by asking, "At work, have you experienced or witnessed any or all of the following types of *repeated, persistent* mistreatment: sabotage by others that prevented work from getting done, verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation, humiliation?" In concert with past research, we specifically omitted the term *workplace bullying* from the definition because

As is true with self-labeling in sexual harassment ... there are a number of reasons one might [avoid] identifying as a bullying target. Some targets may not perceive their treatment as bullying, while others may simply avoid self-labeling ... because being bullied connotes weakness or childishness. (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007, pp. 842-843)

Since we were interested in perceptions we underscored repetition and persistence (hallmark qualities of bullying) and coupled these with the most commonly associated negative communication types (Namie, 2003). Choices for self-labeling were (1) "Yes, I am experiencing it now or have in the last year." (2) "Yes, it has happened to me in my work life, but not now or in the last year." (3) "I've only witnessed it." (4) "I've been the perpetrator myself." (5) "I've never had it happen to me and never witnessed it."

*Perpetrators.* To determine the perpetrators' organizational position and sex, we asked, "What was the principal harasser's rank in relation to the target?" Answer choices were (1) "Harasser ranked higher (boss)," (2) "Target and harasser same rank (peer)," (3) "Harasser ranked lower (subordinate)," and (4) "Not sure." We used these as they are standard categories in bullying and aggression studies (e.g., Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Namie, 2003). We inquired about gender by asking, "What is the gender of the person primarily responsible for the mistreatment?"

*Perpetrators and supporters.* To determine if bullying was solely- or collectively-perpetrated we asked, "Did the harasser work alone or were there several people involved in the mistreatment?" Answer choices were (1) "Solo harasser," (2) "Several harassers," and (3) "Not sure." To determine direct or indirect support for bullying, we asked, "Who supported the harasser?" Answer choices included (1) "One or more senior managers, executives, or owners"; (2) "Harassers' peers"; (3) "Human resources (HR)"; (4) "Targets' peers"; (5) "No one"; and (6) "Not sure." Respondents chose all that applied. We adapted choices from WBI's past surveys (Namie, 2000, 2003) and qualitative US studies (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

*Target actions.* We inquired about organizationally-focused target responses by asking, "What action did the targeted person undertake to solve the problem?" Answer choices were (1) "Filed a formal complaint with HR, senior management, or owner"; (2) "Filed a formal discrimination complaint with a state or federal agency"; (3) "Filed a lawsuit in court"; (4) "Complained informally to employer/superior"; (5) "Took no action"; and (6) "Not sure." Respondents chose all that applied. Again, answer choices were adapted from WBI. We omitted actions such as "confronted abuser" and "quit job" because a goal of the study was to determine what actions targets took to bring bullying to the attention of organizational authorities.

*Organizational responses.* We focused primarily on responses to reported bullying, as upper-managers rarely observe this behavior. To determine workers' perceptions of organizational when targets brought the problem to authorities, we posed the question, "When the mistreatment was reported, what did the employer do?" Answer choices included (1) "Completely or partially resolved the problem in a way that helped the target," (2) "Did nothing," (3) "Worsened the problem for the target," and (4) "Not sure." We framed these responses in



terms of overall perceptions as workers—both targets and witnesses—typically know little about the specifics of behind-the-scenes employment investigations (Namie & Namie, 2004).

### Findings

#### *Prevalence*

Of those who completed the survey after the first screen ( $n = 6,263$ ), 791 (12.6%) reported being bullied during the last year and 24.2 percent ( $n = 1,515$ ) reported being bullied at other times in their career (total US workers bullied:  $n = 2,306$ , 36.8 %; data missing,  $n = 350$ , 5.6%). An additional 12.3 percent ( $n = 773$ ) witnessed bullying but were not directly targeted. As such, over 49 percent ( $n = 3,079$ ) of adults working in the US reported direct or indirect exposure to bullying. (Men [47.3% of sample, 43.3% of targets] and women [50.9% of sample, 56.7% of targets] reported being targeted at approximately equal rates [ $\chi^2(1) = 0.65, p > .50$ ]). The questionnaire also included the choice “I’ve been the perpetrator myself,” a category we excluded from analysis due to questionable reliability and validity—less than one half of one percent ( $n = 22$ , 0.35%) selected this response.

#### *Perpetrators*

Research Questions 1a and 1b asked, “What are the identified gender and position of bullies?” and “Do target and witness perceptions differ?” Respondents most often reported that abusers were persons higher-ranked than targets (see Table 1). Collectively respondents identified bully position in relation to target as *higher-ranked* ( $n = 2,234$ ; 72.5%), *peers* ( $n = 536$ , 17.4%), and *lower-ranked* ( $n = 262$ , 8.5%). One-way chi-square tests comparisons between target and witness reports produced non-significant deviations from equalized distributions (*higher-ranked*: targets:  $n = 1,683$ , 73.0%; witnesses:  $n = 551$ , 71.2%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.02, p > .50$ ; *peer*: targets:  $n = 394$ , 17.0%; witnesses:  $n = 142$ , 18.4%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.06, p > .50$ ; *lower-ranked*: targets:  $n = 199$ , 8.6%; witnesses:  $n = 63$ , 8.2%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.01, p > .50$ ).

Regarding gender, respondents significantly reported males at higher rates ( $n = 1,851$ , 60.1%) than females ( $n = 1,228$ , 39.9%), although effect size was small ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.08, p < .001, \phi = 0.202$ ). Witness and target reports differed significantly with witnesses reporting males at even higher rates than targets, again effect size was small (targets, male = 1,346, 58.4%; female = 960, 41.6%; witnesses, male = 505, 65.3%; female = 268, 34.7%;  $\chi^2(1) = 6.09, p < .05, \phi = 0.17$ ). We cross-tabulated gender and position and again found no significant differences between target and witness reports (*male bully* [*higher-ranked*, targets  $n = 983$ , 42.6%; witnesses  $n = 358$ , 46.3%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.06, p > .05$ ; *peer*, targets  $n = 217$ , 9.4%; witnesses  $n = 85$ , 11.0%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.02, p > .05$ ; *lower-ranked*, targets  $n = 129$ , 5.6%; witnesses  $n = 43$ , 5.6%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.14, p > .05$ ]; *female bully* [*higher-ranked*, targets  $n = 700$ , 30.4%; witnesses  $n = 193$ , 25.0%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.08, p > .05$ ; *peer*, targets  $n = 177$ , 7.7%; witnesses  $n = 57$ , 7.4%,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.44, p > .05$ ; *lower-ranked*, targets  $n = 70$ , 3.0%; witnesses  $n = 20$ , 2.6%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.05, p > .05$ ]).

Insert Table 1 About Here

#### *Perpetrators and Supporters*

Research Questions 2a and 2b asked, “Are bullies perceived as acting alone or in concert with others?” and “Do target and witness perceptions differ?” Respondents collectively reported in order of frequency *solo harassers* ( $n = 2,103$ , 68.3%), *multiple harassers* ( $n = 827$ , 26.9%), and *not sure* ( $n = 149$ , 4.8%) (see Table 2). Targets and witnesses reports converged in this regard, the majority believed bullies worked alone. One-way chi-square tests produced non-significant deviations from equalized distributions between group reports: *solo* (target,  $n = 1,515$ , 65.7%; witness,  $n = 588$ , 76.1%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.8, p > .05$ ); *several harassers* (target,  $n = 684$ , 29.7%;

witness,  $n = 143$ , 18.5%,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.6$ ,  $p > .05$ ); *not sure* (target,  $n = 107$ , 4.6%; witness,  $n = 42$ , 5.4%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.06$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Insert Table 2 About Here

Research Questions 3a and 3b asked, “Who are bullies’ perceived supporters?” and “Do target and witness perceptions differ?” Respondents chose all that applied resulting in 3,429 responses (targets = 2,689; witnesses = 740) suggesting that some perceived multiple sources of support for bullies. Collective reports identified bullies’ supporters in order of frequency as *senior managers/owners* ( $n = 1,077$ ; 31.4%); *no one* ( $n = 928$ , 27.1%); *harassers’ peers* ( $n = 822$ , 24.0%); *HR* ( $n = 348$ , 10.1%); *targets’ peers* ( $n = 254$ , 7.4%). Comparisons between groups found that witnesses more frequently reported that bullies had *no support* (i.e., *no one*) than did targets (target,  $n = 639$ , 23.8%; witness,  $n = 289$ , 39.1%,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\phi = 0.18$ ). In all other categories one-way chi-square produced non-significant deviations from equalized distributions (*senior managers* [target,  $n = 908$ , 33.8%; witness,  $n = 169$ , 22.8%,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.85$ ,  $p > .05$ ]; *harassers’ peers* [target,  $n = 669$ , 24.9%; witness,  $n = 153$ , 20.7%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.46$ ,  $p > .05$ ]; *HR* [target,  $n = 286$ , 10.6%; witness,  $n = 62$ , 8.4%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.21$ ,  $p > .05$ ]; *targets’ peers* [target,  $n = 187$ , 7.0%; witness,  $n = 67$ , 7.1%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.05$ ,  $p > .05$ ]).

We examined cross-tabulated data regarding the two previous research questions (*solo harassers* and *bullies’ perceived supporters*) to determine whether respondents believed that solo harassers had others’ support. Of those reporting a solo harasser ( $n = 2,103$ ), well over half said the harasser received support ( $n = 1,255$ , 59.7%; targets,  $n = 878$ , witnesses,  $n = 377$ ). In these cases, respondents perceived support to come from the following in order of frequency *senior-manager/owners* ( $n = 578$ , 46.1%); *harassers’ peers* ( $n = 378$ , 30.1%); *HR* ( $n = 177$ , 14.1%); and *targets’ peers* ( $n = 122$ , 9.7%). No significant differences were found between target and witness reports (*senior-manager/owners*: targets,  $n = 421$ , 47.9%; witnesses  $n = 157$ , 46.1%;  $\chi^2 = 0.44$ ,  $p > .05$ ; *harassers’ peers*: targets,  $n = 261$ , 29.7%; witnesses,  $n = 117$ , 31.0%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.03$ ,  $p > .05$ ; *HR*: targets,  $n = 125$ , 14.2%, witnesses,  $n = 52$ , 13.8%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.01$ ,  $p > .05$ ; *targets’ peers*: targets,  $n = 71$ , 8.1%, witnesses,  $n = 51$ , 13.5%;  $\chi^2(1) = 1.35$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Thus, even in the majority of cases reportedly perpetrated by a solo harasser respondents believed others enabled bullies.

#### Target Actions

Respondents indicated that in most cases ( $n = 1,749$ ; 57.2%) targets tried to bring the issue to the attention of authorities. Hypothesis 1 proposed that when targets brought bullying to the attention of authorities, they would most often do so internally and informally. Targeted workers’ action were reported in the following order of frequency: *informal, internal action* ( $n = 1,130$ ; 37%), *formal, internal action* ( $n = 432$ , 14.1%), and *formal, external action* (187, 6.1%). One-way chi-square test resulted in unequal distribution ( $\chi^2(2) = 26.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $V = 0.49$ ), providing support for  $H_1$  (see Table 3). The associated research question (RQ<sub>4</sub>) asked, “Do target and witness perceptions differ?” One-way chi-square test produced a significant deviation from equality for the *not sure* response (targets = 37, 1.6%, witnesses = 68, 8.7%,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.89$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\phi = .22$ ). Chi-square resulted in non-significant differences for all other action types. Listed in order of frequency these include *informal, internal* (targets = 916, 40.3%; witnesses = 214, 27.3%;  $\chi^2(1) = 2.49$ ,  $p > .05$ ); *formal, internal* (targets = 320, 14.1%; witnesses = 112, 14.3%,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.002$ ,  $p > .05$ ); *no action* (targets = 854, 37.6%, witnesses = 350, 44.6%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.60$ ,  $p > .05$ ); *formal, external* (targets = 147, 6.5%; witnesses = 40, 5.1%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.13$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Insert Table 3 Here

### *Organizational Responses*

Hypothesis 2 proposed that inertia or abuse exacerbation would be the most common responses to reported abuse. Overall, 1,523 respondents responded and said in order of frequency that organizational authorities *did nothing* ( $n = 664$ , 43.6%), *completely or partially resolved* bullying in a way that helped the target ( $n = 486$ , 31.9%), and *worsened the situation for targets* ( $n = 280$ , 18.4%). Thus we found only partial support for  $H_2$ . The second most commonly reported outcome, as opposed to worsening the situation, was completely or partially resolving the problem (see Table 4). The associated research question ( $RQ_5$ ) asked, “Do target and witness perceptions differ?” One-way chi-square tests produced non-significant deviations from equality in all organizational response categories: *did nothing* (targets = 540, 45.5%; witnesses = 114, 35.3%;  $\chi^2(1) = 1.29$ ,  $p > .05$ ); *resolved situation* (targets = 368, 31.0%; witnesses = 116, 35.9%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.36$ ,  $p > .05$ ); *worsened situation* (targets = 214, 18.0%; witnesses = 66, 20.4%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.15$ ,  $p > .05$ ); *not sure* (targets = 66, 5.6%; witnesses = 27, 8.4%;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.56$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Insert Table 4 About Here

### *Discussion and Implications*

The current study builds on a relatively new but growing body of US scholarship regarding prevalence of workplace abuse, perpetrators and their supporters, target responses, and organizational reactions to reported abuse. It also provides empirical evidence of the communal quality of bullying and harassment at work in a number of ways because bullying and other forms of harmful speech clearly involve and affect many beyond the target and bully (e.g., Leets & Giles, 1999; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003a; Zapf, 1999). Findings augment current target-perspective scholarship by comparing target and witness perspectives. We extend past work by exploring not only whom organizational members believe perpetrate abuse but also whom they perceive to support perpetrators—directly *and* indirectly. The study also examines organizational responses to reported bullying, responses that we argue further complicate power dynamics in these situations.

For nearly all features of bullying we found that witnesses and targets had similar perceptions. Although we did not enter the study hypothesizing no significant differences between groups (i.e., null hypothesis), for the great majority of variables we failed to reject the null. The central problem with the null is power and effect size, which implicates sample size. Because the sample in the current study was not only large enough to detect even small differences but also representative of the US working population, we believe this attenuates such problems. In what follows we discuss the central findings.

### *Prevalence*

Given the size and representativeness of the current sample and the similarity of findings to past research, we have considerable confidence in the results regarding bullying in the United States. Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) found that 9.4 percent of workers reported feeling bullied in the past six months, and we found that over the past 12 months 12.6 percent felt bullied. As such, we can be fairly confident that roughly one in ten US workers has recently experienced persistent psychological, emotional abuse at work. The finding that 37 percent of workers have been bullied sometime during their careers also coincides with past estimates of 30 (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007) and 42 percent (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000) over work histories.

The number of workers these figures represent is staggering. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (USDOL, 2007) 146 million persons were employed in the United States in July, 2007. Given the work-history exposure rate of 37 percent, an estimated 54 million US workers have been bullied at work. Witnessing the humiliation and degradation of others is also

traumatizing and exposes an additional 18 million workers to egregious injustice while they struggle to make a living. As such, bullying affects nearly half of US working adults—an estimated 71.5 million workers—epidemic proportions by any indicator.

#### *Perpetrator Position and Gender*

From both target and witness perspectives we can conclude that while not all bosses are bullies, nearly three-quarters of the perceived bullies in this study were supervisors. This is similar to some prior US research (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Namie, 2000, 2003) and British studies (e.g., Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Rayner, 1997), demonstrating that the bullying boss stereotype is very real. This is somewhat inconsistent with a US study of the Department of Veterans Affairs in which workers more often reported coworkers as aggressors (coworkers 47% v. supervisors 40%) (Keashly & Neuman, 2005) and an earlier Michigan study that found bosses and coworkers at equal rates (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000). However, the current finding parallels four other US studies reporting that supervisors were the most frequent bullies (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Namie, 2000, 2003). Witness reports in the current study substantiate the bullying-boss pattern. Given the shared pattern of both targets and witnesses and the study's sample size and representativeness, we believe these findings are generalizable to the US workforce. However, we comment here on potential reasons for the difference, reasons we believe are linked to sample variations and measurement differences.

The current study included workers in various organizational types (of which government is only one), while the VA study (Keashly & Neuman, 2005) predominantly examined the experiences of government employees (although employees working in a wide variety of functional VA areas). It appears then, the two studies are querying fundamentally different populations: public employees in a large US government division and employees in a broad range of different organizations (see Appendix A). Measurement tools also differed. We asked about perceptions of the “principal harasser's rank”—wording that asks respondents to identify the person whom they believed perpetrated persistent abuse. In the VA study, researchers used an operationalization approach and “identified the ‘primary source’ of aggression ... when a respondent identified a single actor as the source of 75 percent or more of the aggression” (Keashly & Neuman, 2005, p. 344). Since even small changes in wording or analysis can produce highly variable results, as does surveying different populations, we assume the differences regarding primary bullies' position are due to these two issues.

There is also some question as to whether the elapsed time since bullying occurred alters targets' identification of the primary perpetrator(s). At least one US study found that persons currently bullied (i.e., in the past year) and those bullied in the past (i.e., over work history) report different perpetrators (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000). In this study respondents bullied in the past year identified bosses and coworkers at equal rates, while those bullied further in the past most often identified bosses. Scandinavian research suggests that managerial abuse is more damaging than abuse from coworkers (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996), which likely makes it more memorable and may account for some differences. Despite this possibility, we did not find this kind of difference. Both recent- and past-bullied groups examined separately and collectively reported higher-ranking persons as principle harassers most often.

Targets and witnesses most often identified males as primary harassers, a finding similar to past UK and EU research (reviewed in, Zapf et al., 2003) as well as a number of US studies (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Namie, 2000, 2003). Researchers have proposed reasons for this bully-gender pattern.

Bullying, ... includes forms of direct aggression, such as shouting and humiliating somebody. There is substantial empirical evidence that this kind of aggression is much more typical for men than for women, who prefer forms of indirect aggression such as social exclusion or spreading rumours.... Moreover, supervisors play a dominant role in bullying.... Men are over-represented in supervisor positions. (Zapf et al., 2003, p. 113)

Although targets and witnesses most often reported men as primary harassers, witnesses reported males at significantly higher frequencies. This difference could be partially explained by a point embedded above. If female bullies prefer indirect forms of aggression witnesses might not perceive these communicative acts as bullying per se. In contrast, targeted workers who directly experience the mistreatment, whether direct or indirect, recognize it as such.

#### *Perpetrators and Supporters*

In nearly a third of the cases (n = 827) targets and witnesses said that bullying included multiple harassers. This draws attention to at least one of the communal features of bullying—it can occur as collective, mobbing-type communicative behavior. Collective bullying or mobbing underscores others' *direct, public* support for bullies. What is equally important but can make bullying even harder to describe is the *indirect* support for bullies targets and witnesses reported. Nearly 70 percent said that bullies were “solo” actors, reports that encourage the notion of bullies as pathological lone wolves. However, in over half of the solo bully cases, targets and witnesses said bullies received support from some corner of the organization, most often from upper-management. If we add the *multiple harassers* (n = 827) to the *solo harassers* who received support (1,255) we see that nearly three quarters of US bullying cases are concerted and collaborative. This underscores the argument that “bullying will only take place if a bully feels he or she has the blessing, support, at least, the implicit permission of superiors and other coworkers to behave in this manner” (Harvey et al., 2007, p. 119).

Most often targets and witnesses agreed that support came from upper-managers, a finding similar in past research linking certain leadership, management styles to increased risk of bullying (Brodsky, 1976; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008; Salin, 2003). For example, coercive-authoritarian management styles may directly support or encourage abusive supervision, while demeaning workers who become disadvantaged in aggressive peer-to-peer interactions. Laissez-faire management, on the other hand, is unlikely to respond at all and by failing to respond inadvertently provide support for bullying (Di Martino, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003). Although leadership theory generally characterizes laissez-faire leadership as either benign or simply ineffective, it can be particularly damaging in situations where action is needed (Hauge et al., 2007). Taken together, multiple harassers, solo harassers with indirect support, and perceived support from senior persons underscore the communal character of bullying communication at work.

#### *Target Actions*

Although the word *target* denotes something stationary, over 60 percent of targeted workers spoke out or were perceived to speak out against bullying. This is in keeping with research suggesting that targeted workers employ a number of strategies to try and end abuse (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Zapf & Gross, 2001). The most frequent reports are internal and informal, which points to their importance for managers. Workers who decide to talk to upper-managers recount considerable fear and apprehension (Beale, 2001). They make these reports understanding that doing so is risky. Managers need to recognize the essential value of informal reports, consider them the smoke of an as yet unseen fire, and respond accordingly. We

cannot overstate the importance of attending to informal reports to reduce the likelihood of escalation and related harm.

In nearly 40 percent of the cases targets reported taking or were perceived to take no action. Certainly taking visible action is mediated by perceptions of efficacy, and “employees’ expectations of *injustice* in work relationships restrict their behavioral responses to perceived mistreatment” (Harlos & Pinder, 1999, p. 117). Targets likely withhold action because they have witnessed past organizational responses and perceive that those responses have, at best, failed to change the situation, and at worst, exacerbated it (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Witness perceptions of target actions are central because coworkers can be key allies for targets, and the perception that targeted workers *do nothing* to help themselves likely alienates others, particularly given the US tendency to view bullying through an individualist, subjective lens.

Not surprisingly, the one of the few significant differences between target and witness perspectives was being unsure of target actions. Such uncertainty is likely due to targets masking their responses out of fear. However, hiding the issue can have the unintended consequence of impeding peer support, but peer support is crucial in bullying situations. Gaining support might be easier if others can name the phenomenon *bullying* and recognize that it is occurring (S. E. Lewis & Orford, 2005). On the other hand, target actions might be masked due to being uncertain (or certain) of the bullies’ supporters. In such cases, hiding one’s actions is most likely prudent. Of central importance for workgroups’ future interactions is how members perceive their employing organizations’ responses to reported bullying.

#### *Organizational Responses*

Both targets and witnesses had similar perspectives of organizational responses and in equal proportions reported organizational inertia, situation improvement, or condition deterioration. In nearly a third of the cases, respondents believed organizational actions made a positive difference—somewhat better than intimated by past research (Lutgen-Sandvik, Alberts, & Tracy, 2008; Namie, 2003; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Hopefully, this means that organizational members are learning to better recognize and deal with psychological harassment, which is likely due to increased US awareness fueled by, among other things, academic research and press coverage (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Regrettably, however, in over 70 percent of the cases respondents perceived that authorities either took no action or made the situations worse, perceptions pointing to organizational impotence or complicity. Unfortunately, when organizational members complain and nothing is done “a cultural belief can develop that bullies can get away with it” (Rayner et al., 2002, p. 96).

We can speculate, based on organization research and theory, why organizational authorities fail to act or workers perceive a failure to act. One reason is simply that negative sanctions against or investigations of aggressive workers are veiled to ensure privacy, assurances that US employment law mandates (Namie, 2007). Another is that upper-management may hold firmly to a classical chain-of-command perspective of communication, in which interfering with line supervisors’ decisions or actions feels almost heretical (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). And line supervisors, socialized in the same perspective, will likely cry foul if upper-management does interfere.

Some inertia is likely due to lack of knowledge about the bullying phenomenon: what it looks like, how to assess it, and what to do about it (Namie & Namie, 2004). Although US organizations provide training on sexual harassment and protected-group discrimination, adult bullying is not as well understood, is not illegal, and is in a state of denotative hesitancy (i.e., we have yet to agree upon language for labeling bullying) (Tracy et al., 2006). Another reason for

lack of intervention could be an aversion to conflict. Most supervisors dislike and avoid even the most pedestrian employee evaluations including negative feedback (K. W. Thomas, 1976; S. L. Thomas & Bretz, 1994), and, thus, dealing with aggressive workers could feel overwhelming.

Additionally, upper-management is unlikely to witness employee abuse. Especially in highly complex organizations (e.g., government divisions/departments, universities, multinational corporations), many “activities or practices can be more or less completely concealed from those in positions of higher authority .... [Since] ... surveillance is necessarily incomplete, the office can form a region where formally discouraged practices are carried on” (Giddens, 1987, p. 152). Thus, even in situations where organization’s upper echelons frown on or forbid employee abuse, their direct observation of such behavior is improbable.

#### *Perspective Convergence and Bullying Theory*

The findings in this study strengthen targeted workers’ perspectives that have framed much of bullying research to date. Despite critiques of target-only standpoints, in all but a few dimensions of US workers’ accounts, targets and witnesses reported similar patterns. Additionally, the current findings come from a large enough sample that we were able to detect even small differences between these two groups. And in the few variables for which there were significant differences (e.g., *bully gender*, *bullies’ support from senior management*, *unsure of target actions*), the effect sizes were small.

Perception convergence underscores the patterned and shared nature of bullying in the US and gives rise to a number of theoretical implications. First, convergence suggests that target perspectives of workplace bullying are reliable, valid indicators of the phenomenon and its features. Despite the stigmatization of victimizing experiences such as workplace bullying, sexual assault, or domestic violence, the abused persons likely have the best understanding of the phenomenon—that it is happening and whom is involved. As such, upper-managers and peers should believe targets unless there are *exceptionally* compelling reasons for not doing so.

Second, the notion that workplace bullying is an individual, psychological phenomenon is a myth. As is illustrated in the self-help article cited in our introduction, the language of individualism and the US discourse informing this language is deeply rooted and as deeply flawed. Individualism as a lens through which we perceive the world focuses our conclusions about much of social life, and work—how we talk about and think about work and interactions among people at work—is no exception. Despite this focus, commonalities between target-witness perspectives mark bullying as a *communal* phenomenon manifested by multiple harassers, support for harassers, organizational inaction, or authorities’ exacerbation of abuse.

Third, bullying involves numerous strata of discursive power beyond, although implicative of, hierarchical position or referent power. We are able to see from this study that power disparity in bullying situations is not only dyadic—bully-versus-target—but is layered. One stratum is the interpersonal level. Bullies often hold higher organizational positions than targets and can quite easily justify their actions as necessary supervision or surveillance. Targets on the other hand face “the mobilization of biases” (Giddens, 1984, p. 15) regarding victimization that unfortunately stigmatizes and casts their accounts as suspect. Peer bullies with informal, charismatic power typically might attract other coworkers into a clique of the very persons who would otherwise support targets. Another layer is the group level. Workgroup responses to bullying such as fear-induced silence, victim blaming, or siding with abusers forecloses the potential for collective resistance and engenders a feeling of being mobbed. A third stratum is organizational. Organizational responses compound power disparity because when those in fiduciary positions fail to intervene or support bullies, workers’ legitimate avenues

of redress are closed off. Of course this also exacerbates the feeling of being abused and increases perceived impotence. The stratified character of power disparity intensifies the perception that abuse is coming from all sides and there is nothing to do to stop it.

#### Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

A central strength of the current study is the representative nature of the sample. It is large enough for comfortably stating there is great similarity in how targets and witnesses see the bullying phenomenon's features. Although an online tool cannot use random sampling, we argue based on the sample demographics (see Appendix A) that it is one of the most representative samples to date in the study of this topic (see also Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006).

Another issue is that data come from witness and target aggregates rather than from witnesses and targets reporting on the same situation. The findings do little to flesh out the shared perspectives of workers when colleagues talk with one another and move toward perspective convergence (or divergence). Potentially when there is an opportunity for intersubjective sensemaking, target-witness perspectives converge even more than what we found. As Schaller notes (2001, p. 80), "It is not difficult to perceive a narrative discourse between employees ... where labeling of deviants and the moralising of bullying in the face of inadequate voice and representation becomes a norm." On the other hand, the perspectives of these two groups were remarkably similar, even without intersubjective sensemaking.

Additionally, survey responses to the bullying definition did not permit identification of those who had witnessed and were also bullied. Rather, if targeted workers also witnessed the abuse of others, this was subsumed in the target-only category. Future research might provide for more extensive categories to include target only, witness only, witness-target, and neither target nor witness. It is possible that there are differences between those who witness only and those who are witness-targets in terms of how they perceive bully supporters, targeted worker actions, or organizational responses.

Furthermore, we did not inquire about the actions non-bullied witnesses in bullying situations, an important avenue for future study of the bullying phenomenon as a collective experience. To date, research on witness responses is limited, although there are notable exceptions (Jennifer et al., 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Vartia, 2001). From this work we know that witness responses vary from being so terrified they remain silent to working collectively with targets toward organizational change. Despite such important pieces, the bullying literature on witness actions or motivations to act is scarce. It is likely that both witness actions and motivations are reciprocally affected by organizational cultures, workgroup norms, and past history.

We also used a somewhat different definition of bullying than in past research to determine self-labeling, which makes comparisons with studies using operational definitions somewhat problematic. Conversely, we believe that the self-perceived prevalence data are comparable to other data gathered by presenting respondents with a global definition of bullying and asking them to self-label (e.g., Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Salin, 2001). We argued earlier why perceptions of bullying are of central importance and believe our means of measuring it is particularly useful for applied work.

A final limitation is that getting input from the perspective of bullies is exceedingly difficult. "Finding and studying the bully is like trying to study black holes—we are often chasing scattered debris of complex data and shadows of the past" (Rayner & Cooper, 2003, p. 47). In the current study less than one percent reported abusing others, a highly questionable figure (Hauge et al., 2007). "It is possible that managers are not aware of their own behaviour"



(Rayner & Cooper, 2003, p. 61). Creatively designed research, however, could indirectly “get to” this perspective. For example, one might interview professionals called in to solve bullying.

The study does suggest another area for research. In a third of the cases bullying improved—how did this transpire? We are unsure what organizations did to stop abuse. Knowing how organizations resolved these problems would be particularly useful, especially for replicating such success stories. We also extrapolated reasons why organizations seem ineffective at dealing with workplace bullying, but more research is needed. Potentially there are organizational or legal barriers to taking action in these situations. Surveying or interviewing upper-managers who deal with bullying could provide important insight.

#### Conclusion

This study extends current US scholarship and builds upon the foundations of bullying research that international scholars have laid. It underscores the communal nature of bullying—implicating perpetrators, targets, witnesses, and organizational authorities—and emphasizes the importance of viewing the phenomenon as a systemic problem. Importantly for the study of workplace bullying is that target and witness reports converge on key points, a finding that bolsters target-perspective research.

Organizational inertia and ineffectiveness at dealing with bullying are fundamental problems, whatever the reasons. When left unattended, workplace bullying can “spread throughout the organization and can become the socially accepted means of interaction .... The bully therefore becomes the model of interactions with others, due to the lack of sanctions against the bullying activities observed by others in the organization” (Harvey et al., 2007, pp. 124-25). Doing nothing is not a neutral act when workers asks for help; when nothing is done, the organization becomes the bully's accomplice, whether deliberately or inadvertently.

The current study is suggestive of why bullying is so difficult to address. Organizations in which bullying occurs may have reinforcing sets of dynamics that help to perpetuate it. These include many of the issues already noted such as target perceptions and behavior, witness perceptions and behavior, organizational structures with embedded hierarchical power, and managerial responses and pressures. Certainly examining these power dynamics using a more critical perspective of power would be enlightening.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> The terms workplace bullying, mobbing, employee emotional abuse, persistent workplace aggression, and generalized non-sexual harassment are synonymous.

<sup>2</sup> “Zogby International is constantly searching, testing and measuring hypotheses and principles on polling and public opinion research. Working with a panel of psychologists, sociologists, computer experts, linguists, political scientists, economists, and mathematicians, we explore every nuance in language and test new methods in public opinion research. It is this investment in time and money for research and development that makes us a leader in the public opinion field.” retrieved 3/31/2008 from <http://www.zogby.com/about/index.cfm>

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# Appendix A: Sample Demographics

Variable		Frequency	Percent*
Age			
	18-29	1,543	20
	30-49	3,087	40
	50-64	1,775	23
	65+	1,312	17
	No response	22	--
Race/ethnicity			
	White	5,728	75
	Hispanic	764	10
	African American	840	11
	Asian/Pacific	153	2
	Other/mixed	153	2
	No response	103	--
Marital status			
	Married	4,615	61
	Single, never married	1,642	22
	Divorced/widowed/ separated	1,052	14
	Civil union/domestic partnership	284	4
	No response	147	--
Income			
	Less than \$25,000	468	7
	\$25,000-\$34,999	604	9
	\$35,000-\$49,999	967	14
	\$50,000-\$74,999	1,612	24
	\$75,000-\$99,999	1,208	18
	\$100,000 or more	1,848	28
	No response	1,034	--
Sex/gender			
	Male	3,664	48
	Female	3,938	52
	No response	138	--
Employment status			
	Works full time	3,925	51
	Part-time	483	6
	Self-employed	855	11
	Unemployed	360	5
	Retired	1,496	19
	Student not working	293	4
	Other employment/Not sure	329	4
Organization type			
	<i>(where mistreatment took place)</i>		
	Small for-profit	719	23.2
	Large for-profit	1,016	32.8
	Not for profit	350	11.3

Government	540	17.4
Education	412	13.3
Other/not sure	63	2.0

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\* Numbers have been rounded to the nearest percent and might not total 100.



Table 1

## Bully Position in Relation to Target and Gender: Target and Witness Comparisons

Position	Target (2306)		Witness (773)		Total (3079)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Higher ranked	1683	73.0	551	71.2	2234	72.5
Peer	394	17.0	142	18.4	536	17.4
Lower	199	8.6	63	8.2	262	8.5
Not sure	30	1.3	17	2.2	47	1.5
Gender						
Male	1346 <sub>a</sub>	58.4	505 <sub>a</sub>	65.3	1851 <sub>b</sub>	60.1
Female	960	41.6	268	34.7	1228 <sub>b</sub>	39.9
Gender and Position						
Male Higher Ranked	983	42.6	358	46.3	1341	43.6
Male Peer	217	9.4	85	11	302	9.8
Male Lower-ranked	129	5.6	43	5.6	172	5.6
Female Higher Ranked	700	30.4	193	25.0	893	29.0
Female Peer	177	7.7	57	7.4	234	7.6
Female Lower-ranked	70	3.0	20	2.6	90	2.9
Not sure of rank	30	1.3	17	2.2	47	1.5

Note: Means with different subscripts differ significantly from equality at  $p < .05$ ,  $\chi^2$ .

Table 2

## Perpetrator(s) and Supporters, Target and Witness Reports

Solo or Several	Targets (n = 2306)		Witness (n = 773)		Total (n = 3079)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Solo harasser	1515	65.7	588	76.1	2103	68.3
Several harassers	684	29.7	143	18.5	827	26.9
Not sure	107	4.6	42	5.4	149	4.8

  

Harassers' Supporters						
	Targets (n =2689)		Witness (n =740)		Total (n = 3429 )	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Senior managers	908	33.8	169	22.8	1077	31.4
No one	639 <sub>a</sub>	23.8	289 <sub>a</sub>	39.1	928	27.1
Harassers' peers	669	24.9	153	20.7	822	24.0
HR	286	10.6	62	8.4	348	10.1
Target's peers	187	7.0	67	7.1	254	7.4

  

Solo Harassers' Supporters						
	Targets (878)		Witness (377)		Total (1255)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Senior managers	421	47.9	157	46.1	578	46.1
Harassers' peers	261	29.7	117	31.0	378	30.1
HR	125	14.2	52	13.8	177	14.1
Targets' peers	71	8.1	51	13.5	122	9.7

Note: Means with different subscripts differ significantly from equality at  $p < .05$ ,  $\chi^2$ .

Table 3

## Target Actions, Witness and Target Reports

Action Type	Target (2274)		Witness (784)		Total (3058)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Informal, internal action</i>	916	40.3	214	27.3	1130	37.0
Complaint HR, senior management, owner						
<i>Formal, internal action</i>	320	14.1	112	14.3	432	14.1
Complaint HR, senior management, owner						
<i>Formal, external action</i>					187	6.1
Complaint state, federal agency	86	3.8	20	2.6		
Lawsuit	61	2.7	20	2.6		
<i>No action, formal or informal</i>	854	37.6	350	44.6	1204	39.4
<i>Not sure</i>	37 <sub>a</sub>	1.6	68 <sub>a</sub>	8.7	105	3.4

Note: Total represents number of responses; respondents chose all that applied. Means with different subscripts differ significantly from equality at  $p < .05$ ,  $\chi^2$ .

Table 4

## Organizational Responses When Reports Made

<i>Organizational Response</i>	T	%	W	%	Total	%
Did nothing	540	45.5	114	35.3	664	43.6
Resolved situation	368	31.0	116	35.9	486	31.9
Worsened situation	214	18.0	66	20.4	280	18.4
Not sure	66	5.6	27	8.4	93	6.1
Total responses	1188		323		1523	

Note: Percentage represents proportion of responses by group.