

Uniwersytet SWPS

Instytut Psychologii

Piotr Stapiński

**Psychologiczne uwarunkowania wewnątrzorganizacyjne pojawiania się mobbingu  
a bycie poddawany mobbingowi**

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dr hab. Małgorzata Gamian-Wilk, prof. Uniwersytetu SWPS

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## Streszczenie

Na niniejszą rozprawę składa się seria dwu opublikowanych artykułów. Artykuły przedstawiają wyniki dwu badań podłużnych na temat uwarunkowań mobbingu w miejscu pracy. Artykuły stanowią tematyczną serię wskazującą na mediatory i moderatory związku między stresorami w pracy a byciem poddawany mobbingowi. Oba artykuły zostały opublikowane w międzynarodowych czasopismach z listy JCR – *Cogent Business & Management* (IF = 3.0) oraz *International Journal of Conflict Management* (IF = 3.3).

Seria przeprowadzonych badań podłużnych miała na celu wyjaśnienie zależności między poszczególnymi czynnikami organizacyjnymi przyczyniającymi się do doświadczania mobbingu w pracy. Podjęty w rozprawie projekt koncentruje się na zależności między jednym z organizacyjnych predyktorów mobbingu w pracy, czyli niejasnością obowiązków, zadań, sprzecznością poleceń (*role stress*, Beehr, 1995; Rizzo i in., 1970) a byciem poddawany mobbingowi. Wybrano ten organizacyjny czynnik ryzyka ze względu na udokumentowany silny związek między niejasnością obowiązków, zadań, sprzecznością poleceń a byciem poddawany mobbingowi (Harlos i Holmvall, 2021). Wspólnym celem obu artykułów było określenie mechanizmu leżącego u podstaw związku między niejasnością zadań, sprzecznością poleceń a doświadczaniem mobbingu, czyli zbadanie kiedy i dlaczego niejasność zadań i poleceń prowadzi do doświadczenia mobbingu w organizacji. Przeprowadzona seria badań pozwoliła określić mediatory oraz moderatory w relacji między niejasnością wykonywanych zadań, sprzecznych poleceń a byciem poddawany mobbingowi.

W celu wyjaśnienia złożoności przyczyn bycia poddawany mobbingowi w miejscu pracy przyjęto za podstawę teoretyczną teorię zdarzeń afektywnych (*Affective Event Theory*, AET, Weiss i Cropanzano, 1996), która była często wykorzystywana przez innych badaczy (np. Gamian-Wilk i in., 2022; Glasø i in., 2011; Jahanzeb i in., 2020) jako podłoże

teoretyczne w badaniach nad zjawiskiem mobbingu w miejscu pracy. Teoria ta bierze pod uwagę czynniki organizacyjne jako jedno z uwarunkowań zdarzenia afektywnego oraz zakłada, że różne aspekty miejsca pracy mogą mieć addytywny wpływ na pojawianie się zdarzenia afektywnego, czyli doświadczania mobbingu. Dodatkowo, w celu wyjaśnienia związku między niejasnością zadań, sprzecznością poleceń a doświadczaniem mobbingu posłużono się teorią frustracji-agresji (Berkowitz, 1989), na podstawie której założono, że niejasność zadań i poleceń wywołuje frustrację pracowników. Natomiast zgodnie z teorią społecznego interakcjonizmu (Felson, 1992; Felson, Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman, Baron, 2011), frustracja pracowników i jej wyrażanie wiąże się z pojawianiem się wrogiego klimatu pracy, który to z kolei bezpośrednio wiąże się z byciem poddawanych mobbingowi (Zahlquist i in., 2023). Ponadto, zgodnie z pierwotnymi założeniami Leymanna (1996) zakładano, że związek między niekorzystnymi warunkami pracy (niejasnością zadań, sprzecznością poleceń) będzie silniejszy w sytuacji, gdy przełożony podejmuje niewłaściwe praktyki zarządzania (jest niewspierający i niesprawiedliwy).

Artykuł pierwszy – pt.: *Dealing with employees' frustration in time saves your company from workplace bullying: The mediating roles of frustration and a hostile climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying* – opisuje wyniki dwuetapowego badania przeprowadzonego wśród osób pracujących. Jego wyniki potwierdzają postawione hipotezy, wskazując na podwójną mediację indywidualnej frustracji pracowników i wrogiego klimatu pracy w relacji między niejasnością wykonywanych zadań, sprzecznych poleceń i byciem poddawanych mobbingowi w pracy. Należy zaznaczyć, że wcześniej (Einarsen i in., 1994; Einarsen i in., 2020) jedynie zakładano hipotetyczną zależność między niejasnością zadań a frustracją i dalej konfliktami interpersonalnymi a byciem mobbingowanym, lecz nie przeprowadzono do tej pory badań potwierdzających taki mechanizm.

Artykuł drugi – pt.: *A role that takes its toll? The moderating role of leadership in role stress and exposure to workplace bullying* – prezentuje rezultaty badania podłużnego wskazujące na moderacyjną rolę niesprawiedliwego i niewspierającego zarządzania w relacji między niejasnością zadań i oczekiwań a byciem poddawany mobbingowi. Choć wcześniejsze badania wskazywały na niewłaściwe praktyki zarządzania (okazywanie braku wsparcia i sprawiedliwego traktowania) jako silne predyktory pojawiania się mobbingu (Hauge i in., 2007, 2010, 2011), to nie weryfikowano wzajemnych zależności między niejasnością zadań, sprzecznością poleceń a praktykami zarządzania i doświadczaniem mobbingu.

Przeprowadzone badania wyjaśniają, w jaki sposób organizacyjne czynniki ryzyka przyczyniają się do doświadczania mobbingu. Badania podłużne pozwoliły na określenie mediatorów i moderatorów w relacji między niejasnością wykonywanych zadań, sprzecznych poleceń a byciem poddawany mobbingowi. Wskazują bowiem na mechanizm leżący u podstaw hipotezy uwarunkowań organizacyjnych (*work environment hypothesis*, Leymann, 1996), tym samym nie tylko poszerzają wiedzę na temat mechanizmów działania hipotezy uwarunkowań organizacyjnych, ale dają nowy wkład w literaturę badań nad mobbingiem.

## Summary

This dissertation consists of a series of two published articles. The articles present the results of two longitudinal studies on the determinants of workplace bullying. The articles constitute a thematic series pointing to mediators and moderators of the relationship between workplace stressors and being exposed to bullying. Both articles have been published in international JCR-listed journals *Cogent Business & Management* (IF = 3.0) and *International Journal of Conflict Management* (IF = 3.3).

The series of longitudinal studies conducted aimed to clarify the relationship between the various organizational factors contributing to the experience of bullying at work. The project undertaken in the dissertation focuses on the relationship between one of the organizational predictors of bullying at work, namely role ambiguity and role conflict, that is ambiguity of duties, tasks, contradictory instructions (role stress, Beehr, 1995; Rizzo et al., 1970) and being subjected to bullying. This organizational risk factor was chosen because of the documented strong relationship between role stress and being exposed to bullying (Harlos & Holmvall, 2021). The common purpose of both articles was to identify the mechanism underlying the relationship between role ambiguity, role conflict and the experience of bullying, that is, to examine when and why role stress leads to the experience of bullying at work. A series of studies was conducted to identify mediators and moderators in the relationship between role stress and being subjected to bullying.

In order to explain the complexity of the causes of being exposed to workplace bullying, the Affective Event Theory (AET, Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), which has often been used by other researchers (e.g., Gamian-Wilk et al, 2022; Glasø et al, 2011; Jahanzeb et al, 2020) as a theoretical frame for research on the phenomenon of workplace bullying, has been adopted. This theory takes into account organizational factors as one of the determinants

of an affective event, and assumes that different organizational factors can have an additive effect on the occurrence of the affective event, i.e. the experience of bullying. In addition, the frustration-aggression theory (Berkowitz, 1989) was used to explain the relationship between role ambiguity, role conflicts and the exposure to bullying, on the basis of which it was assumed that role stress causes frustration for employees. Moreover, according to the theory of social interactionism (Felson, 1992; Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman, Baron, 2011), employee frustration and its expression is associated with the emergence of a hostile work climate, which in turn is directly related to exposure to bullying (Zahlquist et al., 2023). In addition, according to Leymann's (1996) original assumptions, it was assumed that the relationship between poor working conditions (here task ambiguity, conflicting instructions) would be stronger when the supervisor undertakes poor management practices (is unsupportive and unjust).

The first article – titled: *Dealing with employees' frustration in time saves your company from workplace bullying: The mediating roles of frustration and a hostile climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying* – describes the results of a two-wave study. Its results confirm the hypotheses, pointing to the double mediation of individual employee frustration and a hostile work climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying. It should be noted that previously (Einarsen et al., 1994; Einarsen et al., 2020) the relationship between role stress – frustration – further interpersonal conflicts – exposure to bullying was only hypothesized, but no studies have been conducted to date to confirm such a mechanism.

The second article – titled: *A role that takes its toll? The moderating role of leadership in role stress and exposure to workplace bullying* – presents the results of a longitudinal study



indicating the moderating role of unfair and unsupportive leadership practices in the relationship between role ambiguity, role conflict and being exposed to bullying. Although previous studies have pointed to poor management practices (showing lack of support and fair treatment) as strong predictors of bullying occurrence (Hauge et al., 2007, 2010, 2011), the interrelationships between role stress and leadership practices and bullying experience have not been verified.

The research conducted clarifies how organizational risk factors contribute to the experience of bullying. Longitudinal studies have identified mediators and moderators in the relationship between role stress and exposure to bullying. In fact, they point to the mechanism underlying the work environment hypothesis (Leymann, 1996), thereby not only expanding knowledge of the mechanisms of the work environment hypothesis, but providing a new contribution to the literature of bullying research.

## Autoreferat

### Wprowadzenie

Problem nękania w miejscu pracy, znęcania się psychicznego i przemocy w takiej czy innej formie istniał od zawsze. Do 1980 roku świadomość tego zjawiska była jednak znikoma a badania w tym zakresie były prowadzone sporadycznie (Gamian-Wilk, 2018). Począwszy od lat 90-tych XX wieku można wyraźnie zaobserwować, że zjawisko mobbingu w miejscu pracy stało się przedmiotem zainteresowania wielu badaczy na całym świecie. Co więcej, widoczny jest wyraźny ciągły wzrost ilości publikowanych badań na ten temat (León-Pérez i in., 2021).

Mobbingiem (*bullying, harassment*) nazywane są negatywne zachowania występujące w miejscu pracy. Zachowania te dotyczą pracownika lub pracowników, charakteryzują się powtarzalnością (nie są zachowaniami tylko incydentalnymi), występują przez dłuższy okres czasu oraz bazują na relacjach podporządkowania i nierówności władzy wynikającej z zależności i zależności służbowych (Brodsky, 1976; D’Cruz i Noronha, 2021; Einarsen, 2000; Einarsen i in., 2020; Leymann, 1990, 1996). Mobbing przejawia się między innymi częstym i trwałym narażaniem na negatywne działania, jak np. obrażanie, zastraszanie, plotkowanie, negatywne wpływanie na pracownika lub pracowników, prowadzące do wykluczenia, przed którym ofiara/ofiary nie są w stanie się obronić. Występowanie mobbingu w miejscu pracy wiąże się z poważnymi konsekwencjami doświadczanymi na poziomie indywidualnym (Conway i in., 2021; Mikkelsen i in., 2020; Hansen i in., 2021) i wewnątrzorganizacyjnym (Hoel i in., 2020; Høgh i in., 2021). Aby móc zapobiegać i projektować skuteczne programy przeciwdziałania temu patologicznemu zjawisku, spójnie z polityką odpowiedzialnego i zrównoważonego zarządzania (Ahmad i in., 2023) i etycznej kultury pracy (Einarsen K. i in., 2017; Gamian-Wilk, 2023), konieczne jest poznanie uwarunkowań mobbingu w pracy.

## **Uwarunkowania mobbingu w miejscu pracy**

Mobbing jest zjawiskiem wyjątkowo złożonym i wieloaspektowym a jego rozwój może być spowodowany wieloma czynnikami (D’Cruz i Noronha, 2021; Nielsen i Einarsen, 2018).

Mimo prowadzonych przez wiele lat rozważań teoretycznych i badań empirycznych na temat jego uwarunkowań, badacze nie są zgodni co do jednoznacznych przyczyn jego powstawania, przebiegu i czynników modyfikujących – mediatorów i moderatorów (Mościcka i Drabek, 2010; Nielsen i Einarsen, 2018).

Dotychczasowe badania koncentrują się na dwóch wyjaśnieniach przyczyn występowania mobbingu: uwarunkowaniach wewnątrzorganizacyjnych – *work environment hypothesis* (Balducci i in., 2021; Salin i Hoel, 2020; Hauge i in., 2011; Leymann, 1996) oraz uwarunkowaniach osobowych – *vulnerability hypothesis* (Bowling i Beehr, 2006). Biorąc pod uwagę zmienne indywidualne jako potencjalne predyktory bycia poddawany mobbingowi zaznaczyć należy, że chociaż badania korelacyjne wykazały szereg cech związanych z byciem mobbingowanym (Persson i in., 2021), wyniki badań podłużnych wyraźnie wskazują, że niewiele jest takich cech, które predysponują pracowników do bycia poddawany mobbingowi (Raknes i in., 2021; Zahlquist i in., 2022) a raczej przemawiają za tym, że zmienne indywidualne należy rozpatrywać w kategoriach skutków doświadczania mobbingu jako traumy w pracy (Gamian-Wilk i in., 2022; Nielsen i Knardahl, 2015; Podsiadły i Gamian-Wilk, 2017).

Natomiast hipoteza uwarunkowań organizacyjnych (*work environment hypothesis*, Leymann, 1996; Hauge, 2010; Einarsen i in., 1994; Einarsen i in., 2020) znalazła potwierdzenie w wielu badaniach poprzecznych jak i w badaniach podłużnych oraz w przeglądach badań (Balducci i in., 2021). Zgodnie z hipotezą uwarunkowań organizacyjnych czynniki organizacyjne są głównymi predyktorami pojawiania się mobbingu w pracy (Leymann, 1996; Hauge i in., 2010). Co ważne, część wyników badań wskazuje na to, że

czynniki organizacyjne są silniejszym predyktorem pojawiania się mobbingu niż cechy osób poddawanych mobbingowi (Gamian-Wilk i in., 2022).

Zgodnie z pierwotnymi założeniami Leymanna (1996) za powstawanie mobbingu w pracy odpowiedzialne są nie zmienne indywidualne, tj. predyspozycje osób poddawanych mobbingowi, ale takie czynniki jak niekorzystne warunki pracy (*poor working conditions*) oraz sposób zarządzania (*leadership practices*). Co więcej, Leymann (1996) sugerował, że poszczególne czynniki organizacyjne mogą wzajemnie na siebie wpływać lub mieć interakcyjny wpływ, prowadząc do rozwoju mobbingu.

Późniejsze badania pozwoliły na zidentyfikowanie czynników organizacyjnych mających najsilniejszy wpływ na rozwój mobbingu (przeгляд: Balducci i in., 2021). Hauge wraz z zespołem wskazali na takie czynniki jak stresory w pracy (*role stress*, Kahn i in., 1964) związane z niejasnością wykonywanych zadań (*role ambiguity*) jak i sprzeczne oczekiwania i polecenia (*role conflict*, np., Hauge i in., 2007, 2011; Notelaers i in., 2010; Zahlquist i in., 2023). Ponadto badania wskazują na szereg innych uwarunkowań doświadczania mobbingu, takich jak nadmierne wymagania (np. Baillien i in., 2011; Goodboy i in., 2017; Nel i Coetzee, 2020; Spagnoli i Balducci, 2017), czy style zarządzania (destrukcyjny, np., Aasland i in., 2010; *laisser-faire*, np., Ågotnes i in., 2018; Nielsen, 2013; Skogstad i in., 2007).

Stresory w pracy (*role stress*), czyli niejasność, niejednoznaczność ról, konflikt ról, przeciążenie pełnioną rolą, wiążą się ze spostrzeganym przez pracownika wzorcem zachowania, którego się od niego oczekuje (Tubre i Collins, 2000). Tradycyjnie stresory dzielone były na trzy rodzaje: niejednoznaczność zadań (*role ambiguity*) polegającą na braku wskazówek, informacji odnośnie obowiązków, wymagań i zachowań, których się od pracownika oczekuje (Rizzo i in., 1970); sprzeczność poleceń (*role conflict*) polegającą na zbyt dużej ilości sprzecznych poleceń i informacji (Tubre i Collins, 2000) oraz przeciążenie

pracą (*role overload*) związane z sytuacją, w której pracownik ma za dużo obowiązków, aby mógł je pogodzić, mając ograniczone umiejętności i zasoby czasowe (Eatough i in., 2011).

Niejasność zadań (*role ambiguity*) i sprzeczność poleceń (*role conflict*), chociaż są odrębnymi pojęciami, są ze sobą pozytywnie i umiarkowanie powiązane (Jackson i Schuler, 1985; Schmidt i in., 2014). Jednak pod względem teoretycznym i empirycznym są to odrębne konstrukty i mierzone są jako dwa odrębne typy stresorów związanych z pełnioną rolą (Schmidt i in., 2014).

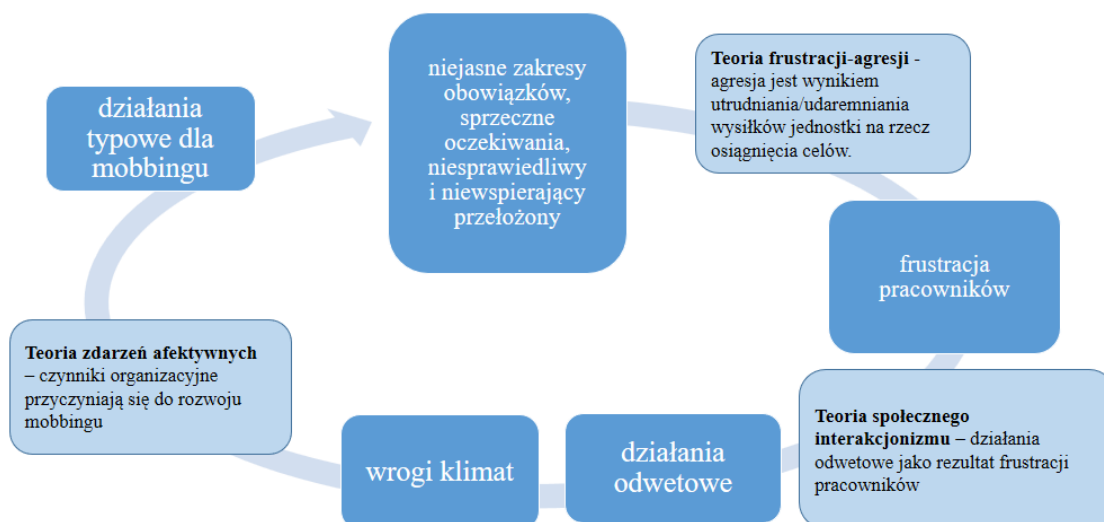
Stres związany z niejasnościami wykonywanych zadań, sprzecznych poleceń (*role stress*) okazuje się być jednym z najsilniejszych predyktorów doświadczania mobbingu, na co wskazują badania podłużne (Balducci i in., 2012; Reknes i in., 2014; Salin i Hoel, 2020) jak i przeglądy badań i metaanalizy (Harlos i Holmvall, 2021; Van den Brande i in., 2016).

Ponadto, na podstawie poprzednich badań spodziewać się również można, że sposoby zarządzania bezpośredniego przełożonego mogą być istotnym czynnikiem modyfikującym związek między niekorzystnymi warunkami pracy a doświadczaniem mobbingu. Poprzednie badania wykazały, że sposoby zarządzania, tj. sprawiedliwe i wspierające działania bezpośredniego przełożonego nie tylko wiążą się z doświadczaniem mobbingu (Blomberg i Rosander, 2020, 2021; Gardner i in., 2013; Goodboy i in., 2017; Hauge i in., 2011; Magerøy i in., 2009) pełniąc ochronną rolę, ale mogą być ważnymi moderatorami między doświadczaniem mobbingu a konsekwencjami zdrowotnymi (Blomberg i Rosander, 2021; Nielsen i in., 2019).

Podczas gdy główne założenia hipotezy uwarunkowań organizacyjnych znalazły potwierdzenie w badaniach empirycznych zarówno poprzecznych (np. Hauge i in., 2007, 2011), jak i podłużnych (np. Reknes i in. 2014; Gamian-Wilk, 2018) niewiele jest badań wskazujących na to, w jaki sposób czynniki organizacyjne prowadzą do powstawania mobbingu, czyli jakie mechanizmy leżą u podstaw tego procesu.

Zgodnie z wczesnymi spekulacjami dotyczącymi procesu związanego z pojawianiem się mobbingu niejasności zadań, sprzeczności poleceń wywołują stres i frustrację pracowników (Einarsen i in., 1994) zgodnie z założeniami teorii frustracji-agresji (*frustration-aggression theory*, Berkowitz, 1969, 1981, 1989). Ponadto, w celu wyjaśnienia procesu leżącego u podstaw powstawania mobbingu badacze przytaczają teorię społecznego interakcjonizmu (*social interactionist perspective on aggression*, Felson, 1992; Felson i Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman i Baron, 2011), zgodnie z którą frustracja pracowników i jej wyrażanie wiąże się z pojawianiem się konfliktów interpersonalnych i wrogiego klimatu pracy. Zgodnie z tym podejściem występowanie takich czynników jak niejasność zadań i sprzeczne polecenia może podsycać eskalację konfliktów interpersonalnych między pracownikami. Dostawanie od przełożonych niejasnych wytycznych, niepełnych informacji oraz pełnienie sprzecznych ról może generować u pracownika lub pracowników frustrację i stres. To z kolei powoduje, że sfrustrowany pracownik wyraża swoje niezadowolenie rozmawiając o tym, dzieląc się tym z innymi pracownikami. Takie zachowanie na ogół powoduje zdenerwowanie i niechęć, przyczyniając się do wzrostu pełnego napięcia i negatywnego klimatu. Podwyższony poziom występowania stresorów i konfliktów może z kolei być pretekstem dla sprawców do odwzajemniania frustracji współpracowników i do przejawiania negatywnych działań o charakterze mobbingu (Bowling i Beehr, 2006).

Przebieg opisanego wyżej procesu ilustruje poniższy schemat:



Rysunek 1

*Podstawy teoretyczne przeprowadzonych badań*

Teoria zdarzeń afektywnych (*affective events theory*, Weiss i Cropanzano, 1996) stanowi bazę teoretyczną wyjaśniającą udział poszczególnych zmiennych w powstawaniu mobbingu. Za sugestią Branch i współpracowników (2021), którzy dokonali przeglądu różnych podejść teoretycznych tłumaczących rozwój i eskalację mobbingu, teoria zdarzeń afektywnych, jako jedna z niewielu, pozwala na możliwie szerokie spojrzenie zarówno na czynniki przyczyniające się do rozwoju tego zjawiska jak i na jego potencjalne konsekwencje. Chociaż teoria zdarzeń afektywnych jest bardzo kompleksowa, my koncentrujemy się na jej fragmencie wskazującym na możliwy wpływ pośredni i bezpośredni czynników natury organizacyjnej (niejasności zadań, sprzeczność poleceń, sposoby zarządzania) na występowanie zdarzenia afektywnego, jakim jest doświadczanie mobbingu w pracy.

## Cele i hipotezy

Celem przeprowadzonych dwu badań podłużnych jest określenie mechanizmu wyjaśniającego rolę czynników organizacyjnych w rozwoju mobbingu w pracy. Zakładano, że niejasność związana z wykonywanymi zadaniami i sprzeczne oczekiwania wiążą się z późniejszym doświadczaniem mobbingu. Ponadto, zakładano, że, zgodnie z teorią frustracji-agresji (Berkowitz, 1989) i teorią społecznego interakcjonizmu (Felson, 1992), niejasność ról prowadzi do frustracji emocji, co z kolei wiąże się z pogorszeniem klimatu w miejscu pracy, powodując doświadczanie mobbingu. Oczekiwano zatem, że frustracja emocji i wrogi klimat w pracy będą mediatorami w relacji między koniecznością wykonywania niejasnych zadań, sprzecznych oczekiwań a doświadczaniem mobbingu w pracy. Hipotezę tę weryfikowano w badaniu pierwszym. W drugim badaniu podłużnym weryfikowano moderacyjną rolę sposobów zarządzania w relacji między koniecznością wykonywania niejasnych zadań, sprzecznych oczekiwań a doświadczaniem mobbingu w pracy.

Na bazie teorii zdarzeń afektywnych (Weiss i Cropanzano, 1996) oraz hipotezy uwarunkowań organizacyjnych (Leymann, 1996; Hauge, 2010) założyliśmy, że czynniki organizacyjne przyczyniają się do rozwoju mobbingu w pracy. Biorąc pod uwagę dotychczasowe badania (Hauge i in., 2007, 2010, 2011; Reknes i in., 2014; Salin i Hoel, 2020; przegląd: Balducci i in., 2021; Harlos i Holmvall, 2021; Van den Brande i in., 2016), postanowiliśmy w badaniu sprawdzić, czy niejasność zadań i sprzeczność poleceń jest predyktorem narażenia na mobbing. Założyliśmy, że:

**H1:** Niejasność zadań i poleceń jest pozytywnie związana z byciem mobbingowanym w miejscu pracy.

Hipoteza uwarunkowań organizacyjnych (*work environment hypothesis*) znalazła potwierdzenie w wielu badaniach poprzecznych, podłużnych oraz w metaanalizach. Jest dominującym w literaturze wyjaśnieniem dla stosowania mobbingu w miejscu pracy



(Balducci i in., 2021). Zgodnie z tą hipotezą, takie czynniki jak zła organizacja pracy, niewłaściwe zachowania przywódcze (Hauge i in., 2007, 2009, 2011; Einarsen i in., 2020) stwarzają warunki sprzyjające powstaniu mobbingu w miejscu pracy. Jak pokazują liczne badania podłużne (np. Balducci i in., 2012; Hamre i in., 2023; Reknes i in., 2014; Salin i Hoel, 2020), badania przekrojowe (np. Lòpez-Cabarcos i in., 2017; Notelears i in., 2010) a także metaanalizy (Bowling i Beehr, 2006; Van den Brande i in., 2016) pracownicy doświadczają frustracji związanej niejasnością obowiązków i sprzecznością poleceń. Stąd w badaniach sprawdzaliśmy związek między niejasnością zadań i poleceń a poczuciem frustracji.

**H2:** Niejasność zadań i poleceń jest pozytywnie związana z indywidualną frustracją.

Z kolei frustracja spowodowana niejasnością zadań i poleceń, przyczynia się do pogorszenia klimatu w pracy, powstawania wrogiego klimatu pracy (Mawritz i in., 2012, 2014).

Sfrustrowany pracownik zaczyna narzekać i opowiadać o swoim niezadowoleniu, co prowadzi zwykle do eskalacji konfliktów interpersonalnych oraz agresji (Zahlquist i in., 2023). W naszym badaniu, chcąc sprawdzić tę zależność, założyliśmy, że frustracja wiąże się z wrogim klimatem w miejscu pracy.

**H3:** Poczucie frustracji jest pozytywnie związane z wrogim klimatem w pracy.

Pracownicy pracujący we wrogim klimacie są bardziej zagrożeni doświadczaniem mobbingu (Zahlquist i in., 2023). Taki wrogi klimat pracy zwykle prowadzi do zachowań patologicznych (Mawritz i in., 2012). Chcieliśmy zreplikować te wyniki, sprawdzając czy wrogi klimat pracy, wiążący się z konfliktami i agresywnymi zachowaniami, jest dodatkowo związany z poczuciem bycia mobbingowanym.

**H4:** Postrzegany wrogi klimat pracy jest pozytywnie związany z byciem mobbingowanym.

Dotychczas, zgodnie z założeniami hipotezy organizacyjnych uwarunkowań mobbingu (Leymann, 1996), badacze jedynie spekulowali na temat mechanizmu leżącego u podstaw zależności między niejasnością zadań, sprzecznością poleceń a byciem poddawany mobbingowi (Einarsen i in., 1994; Einarsen i in., 2020). Nie przeprowadzono jednak badań wskazujących na taki mechanizm (Hamre i in., 2023). W naszym badaniu postanowiliśmy sprawdzić zależność między: niejasnością zadań – frustracją a byciem mobbingowanym. Stąd zakładaliśmy, że:

**H5:** Poczucie frustracji jest mediatorem w relacji między niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem mobbingowanym.

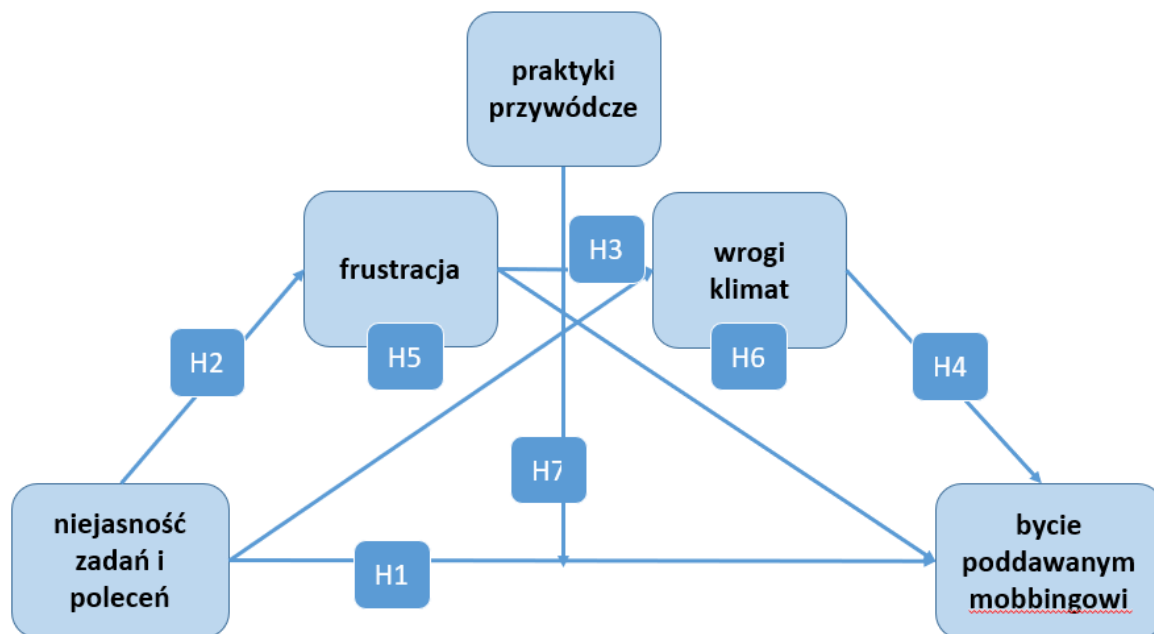
Nieprzyjazna atmosfera pracy, wrogi klimat organizacyjny może wywoływać poczucie zagrożenia mobbingiem w miejscu pracy (Hamre i in., 2023; Zahlquist i in., 2019, 2023). Brak jasnych wskazówek odnośnie wykonywania zadań i poleceń może wywoływać frustrację i w dalszym procesie przyczynić się do konfliktów interpersonalnych (de Rivera, 1992). W związku z czym między niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem mobbingowanym mediatorem może być wrogi klimat pracy (De Rivera, 1992; Mawritz i in., 2012, 2014), który jak wcześniej wykazano powoduje narażenie na mobbing w miejscu pracy (Zahlquist i in., 2023), dlatego postawiliśmy hipotezę, że:

**H6:** Wrogi klimat pracy jest mediatorem w relacji między niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem mobbingowanym.

Ponadto, Leymann (1996) wskazał na ważny związek oddziaływania praktyk przywódczych w relacji pomiędzy niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem poddawany mobbingowi. Literatura przedmiotu odnosi się tutaj do rodzajów stylu zarządzania (Francioli i in., 2018; Hoel i in., 2010) oraz do praktyk przywódczych (Leymann, 1996; Hauge i in., 2011). Założenia teoretyczne dotyczące związku między stylami zarządzania a ryzykiem

wystąpienia mobbingu zostały również potwierdzone w dotychczasowych badaniach empirycznych (Hoel i in., 2010; Samnani, 2021). Pojawieniu się mobbingu sprzyja zarówno autokratyczny, despotyczny, styl zarządzania – oparty na presji psychicznej i zastraszaniu (Agervold, 2009; Agervold i Mikkelsen, 2004), jak i niesprawiedliwy, niewspierający i unikający styl zarządzania tzw. *laissez-faire*, (Ågotnes i in. 2018, 2021) polegający na unikaniu podejmowania decyzji i odpowiedzialności czy kontaktu z pracownikami. Natomiast demokratyczny, pozytywny i wspierający styl przywództwa może zapobiegać zachowaniom mobbingowym. Biorąc pod uwagę dotychczasowe badania, postanowiliśmy w badaniu sprawdzić, czy istnieje związek między niejasnością zadań, sprzecznością poleceń i praktykami przywódczymi a byciem mobbingowanym. Założyliśmy, że wysoce wspierające i sprawiedliwe przywództwo będzie buforującym czynnikiem rozwoju mobbingu w miejscu pracy.

**H7:** Praktyki przywódcze pełnią moderującą funkcję w relacji pomiędzy niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem mobbingowanym: w przypadku wysoce wspierających i sprawiedliwych praktyk przywódczych związek między niejasnością zadań i poleceń i późniejszym poziomem bycia poddawanych mobbingowi będzie słabszy niż w przypadku niskiego poziomu wspierających i sprawiedliwych praktyk przywódczych.



Rysunek 2

*Model koncepcyjny prezentujący założenia przeprowadzonych badań*

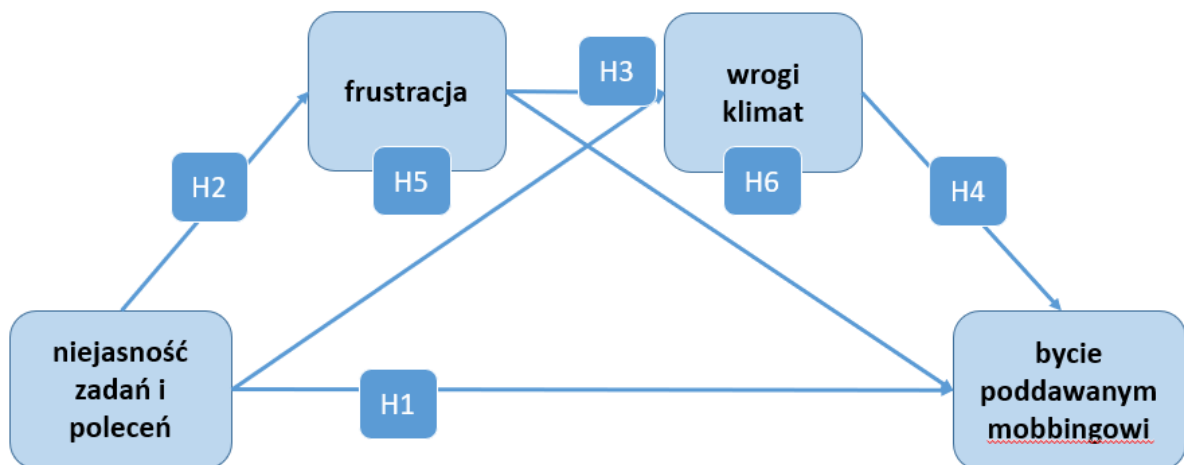
### Podsumowanie wyników badań

W tej sekcji omówię problemy badawcze oraz wnioski z badań przeprowadzonych w serii przedłożonych artykułów.

#### **Artykuł 1: Dealing with employees' frustration in time saves your company from workplace bullying: The mediating roles of frustration and a hostile climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying**

W ramach pierwszego artykułu w zaprezentowanej serii pt. „Dealing with employees' frustration in time saves your company from workplace bullying: The mediating roles of frustration and a hostile climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to

workplace bullying.” (Stapinski i Gamian-Wilk, 2024) odpowiadamy na pytanie o to dlaczego niejasność zadań, sprzeczność poleceń prowadzi do doświadczania mobbingu w pracy. Celem opisanego w artykule badania podłużnego było zatem zweryfikowanie mechanizmu leżącego u podstaw hipotezy organizacyjnych uwarunkowań mobbingu (Leymann, 1996). Leymann uważał, że główną przyczyną występowania tego zjawiska są złe warunki pracy (*poor workplace conditions*) oraz niewłaściwe praktyki przełożonych (*leadership practises*), co zresztą potwierdzały wcześniejsze badania (Hauge i in., 2011). Na podstawie teorii frustracji-agresji (Berkowitz, 1989) i teorii społecznego interakcjonizmu (Felson, 1992) założono, że pracowanie w miejscu, gdzie zadania są niejasne a oczekiwania sprzeczne wiąże się z doświadczaniem frustracji emocji i występowaniem wrogiego klimatu, co z kolei generuje doświadczanie mobbingu w pracy.



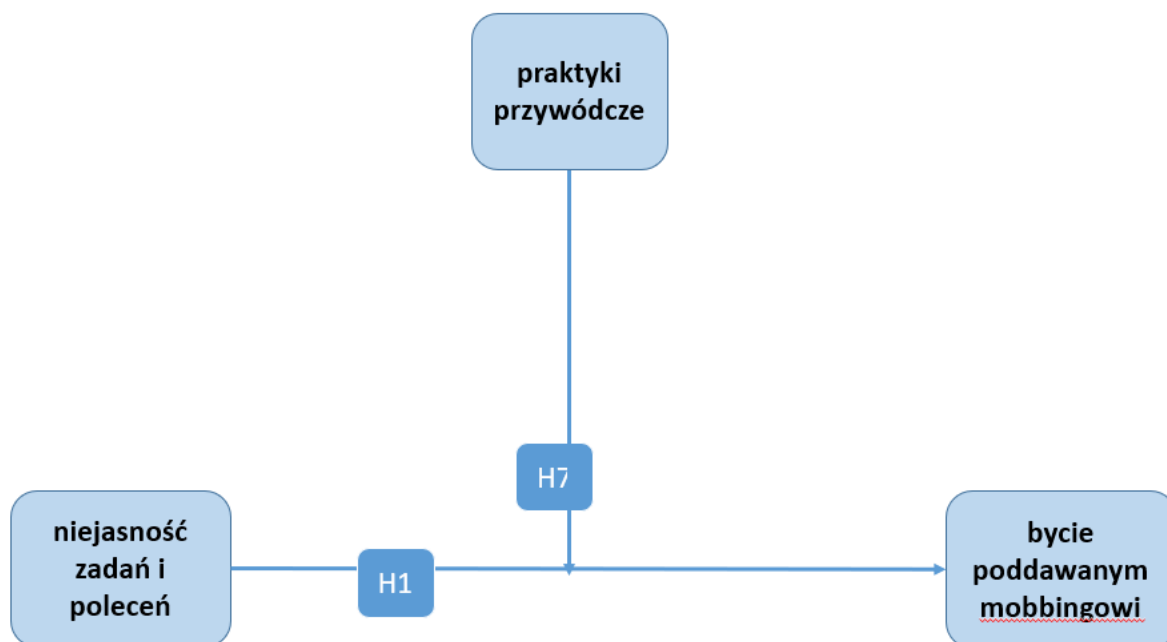
Rysunek 3

*Model przedstawiający mediującą rolę frustracji i wrogiego klimatu w relacji między niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem poddawany mobbingowi*

W badaniu podłużnym złożonym z dwu etapów udział wzięło 353 pracowników. Wykazano istotny efekt mediacji zarówno frustracji emocji jak i wrogiego klimatu organizacyjnego w relacji między niejasnością warunków pracy a doświadczaniem mobbingu. Innymi słowy, konieczność pracowania w sytuacji braku klarownych zadań i sprzecznych oczekiwań wiąże się z doświadczaniem mobbingu pół roku później, ponieważ wykonywanie niejasnych zadań generuje frustrację emocji, co wpływa na ogólny wrogi klimat pracy, czego wynikiem jest doświadczanie mobbingu. Podsumowując, wyniki badania pozwoliły na określenie mechanizmu tłumaczącego, dlaczego określone organizacyjne czynniki ryzyka prowadzą do rozwoju mobbingu w pracy.

## **Artykuł 2: A role that takes its toll? The moderating role of leadership in role stress and exposure to workplace bullying**

W drugim artykule w serii – „A role that takes its toll? The moderating role of leadership in role stress and exposure to workplace bullying” (Stapinski i in., 2023) odpowiadamy na pytanie kiedy, w jakich warunkach pojawia się relacja między występowaniem niejasności wykonywanych zadań, sprzecznych poleceń a byciem poddawanych mobbingowi w pracy. Celem badania było zatem sprawdzenie moderacyjnej roli sprawiedliwego i wspierającego stylu zarządzania (*fair and supportive leadership practices*) w roli między występowaniem niejasności wykonywanych zadań a doświadczaniem mobbingu pół roku później.



Rysunek 4

*Model przedstawiający moderującą rolę praktyk przywódczych w relacji między niejasnością zadań a byciem mobbingowanym*

W badaniu podłużnym złożonym z dwu etapów udział wzięło 364 pracowników. Zgodnie z wynikami poprzednich badań (Balducci i in., 2012; Reknes i in., 2014; Salin i Hoel, 2020; Harlos i Holmvall, 2021; Van den Brande i in., 2016) wykazano, że konieczność pracowania w środowisku pracy, gdzie zadania są niejasne a oczekiwania sprzeczne, wiązała się z podwyższonym ryzykiem doświadczania mobbingu pół roku później. Co ważne, tak, jak zakładano, sprawiedliwe i wspierające oddziaływania bezpośredniego przełożonego pełniły rolę moderatora w relacji między koniecznością wykonywania niejasnych i sprzecznych zadań a doświadczaniem mobbingu. Inaczej mówiąc, bycie traktowanym w sposób wspierający (np. bezpośredni przełożony wysłuchuje, rozumie, oferuje pomoc i adekwatne wskazówki) i sprawiedliwy (tj. bezpośredni przełożony traktuje pracowników w sposób egalitarny i obiektywny) łagodzi negatywne skutki pracowania w warunkach niejasności.

## **Podsumowanie**

Głównym celem przedstawionej w niniejszej rozprawie doktorskiej serii badań było wyjaśnienie zależności pomiędzy poszczególnymi czynnikami organizacyjnymi przyczyniającymi się do doświadczania mobbingu w pracy, a konkretnie: określenie mediatorów oraz moderatorów w relacji między wybranymi stresorami w pracy (niejasnością wykonywanych zadań, sprzecznych poleceń) a byciem poddawany mobbingowi.

Spośród wielu czynników organizacyjnych wybrałem i skoncentrowałem się na jednym z organizacyjnych predyktorów, jakim jest niejasność obowiązków, zadań, sprzeczność poleceń z uwagi na fakt, że od początku rozważania na temat przyczyn rozwoju mobbingu koncentrowały się na tym właśnie czynniku (Leymann, 1996) oraz ze względu na udokumentowany we wcześniejszych badaniach silny związek między niejasnością obowiązków, zadań i poleceń a doświadczaniem mobbingu (przeгляд: Harlos i Holmvall, 2021).

Moim celem było zbadanie kiedy i dlaczego niejasność zadań i poleceń prowadzi do doświadczenia mobbingu. W ramach badania opisanego w artykule pierwszym założono, że niejasność zadań i poleceń jest pozytywnie związana z byciem mobbingowanym w miejscu pracy (H1); niejasność zadań i poleceń jest pozytywnie związana z indywidualnie doświadczaną frustracją (H2); poczucie frustracji jest pozytywnie związane z wroгим klimatem w pracy (H3); postrzegany wrogi klimat pracy jest pozytywnie związany z byciem mobbingowanym (H4); poczucie frustracji jest mediatorem w relacji między niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem mobbingowanym (H5) oraz wrogi klimat pracy jest mediatorem w relacji między niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem mobbingowanym (H6). Uzyskanie wyniki, zgodnie z naszymi założeniami oraz wcześniejszymi sugestiami (Einarsen i in., 1994), potwierdziły łańcuch zależności od niejasności zadań i poleceń wywołujących



frustrację pracowników poprzez wrogi klimat pracy prowadzący do bycia mobbingowanym. Badanie potwierdziło mediacyjną rolę indywidualnej frustracji w relacji między niejasnością i byciem poddawany mobbingowi. Potwierdzona została również mediacyjna rola wrogiego klimatu pracy w relacji między niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem mobbingowanym. Wyniki badania drugiego potwierdziły natomiast założenia H7, sugerującej, że praktyki przywódcze pełnią moderującą funkcję w relacji pomiędzy niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem mobbingowanym. Wykazano, że przypadku wysoce wspierających i sprawiedliwych praktyk przywódczych związek między niejasnością zadań i poleceń i późniejszym poziomem bycia poddawany mobbingowi jest słabszy niż w przypadku niskiego poziomu wspierających i sprawiedliwych praktyk przywódczych.

Uzyskany wzorzec wyników potwierdza założenia przedstawionego przez nas modelu koncepcyjnego opracowanego na gruncie teorii zdarzeń afektywnych (Weiss i Cropanzano, 1996) oraz teorii frustracji-agresji (Berkowitz, 1989) i teorii społecznego interakcjonizmu (Felson, 1992; Felson i Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman i Baron, 2011). W myśl założeń teorii frustracji-agresji niejasność zadań i poleceń wywołuje frustrację pracowników oraz zgodnie z teorią społecznego interakcjonizmu frustracja pracowników i jej wyrażanie wiąże się z pojawieniem się wrogiego klimatu pracy, który to generuje pojawianie się działań o charakterze mobbingu.

Seria przeprowadzonych dwóch badań podłużnych pozwoliła na określenie mediatorów oraz moderatorów w relacji między niejasnością wykonywanych zadań, sprzecznych poleceń a byciem poddawany mobbingowi. Badanie pierwsze wykazało mediacyjną rolę doświadczanej frustracji i wrogiego klimatu organizacyjnego w relacji między niejasnością zadań i oczekiwań a byciem poddawany mobbingowi. Z kolei badania drugie wykazało moderacyjną rolę niesprawiedliwego i niewspierającego zarządzania w relacji niejasność zadań i poleceń – bycie mobbingowanym. Tym samym seria badań

wyjaśnia, w jaki sposób organizacyjne czynniki ryzyka przyczyniają się do doświadczania mobbingu, poszerzając dotychczasową wiedzę na temat mechanizmu działania hipotezy uwarunkowań organizacyjnych (*work environment hypothesis*).

Wskazując na ograniczenia przeprowadzonych badań, pokreślić należy, że oba badania składały się z dwu etapów – co nie pozwala w pełni wyjaśnić mediacyjnej roli frustracji i wrogiego klimatu w relacji między niejasnością zadań i poleceń a byciem mobbingowanym. Konieczne zatem są replikacje z uwzględnieniem czterech etapów, na poziomie zarówno indywidualnym (pomiar frustracji) jak i grupowym (pomiar wrogiego klimatu). Ponadto, badania były przeprowadzone wśród pracowników pracujących w Polsce, stąd być może niektóre kwestie, charakterystyczne dla organizacji funkcjonujących w polskich warunkach, takie jak poczucie niejasności zadań i poleceń lub klimat organizacyjny, ze względu np. na kulturę narodową, będą się inaczej kształtowały w innych krajach. Dlatego przyszłe badania powinny uwzględniać próby międzynarodowe lub replikować uzyskane wyniki w różnych krajach.

Jednakże niewątpliwie, nasze badania nie tylko potwierdzają hipotezę uwarunkowań organizacyjnych, ale wskazują na mechanizm leżący u podstaw hipotezy uwarunkowań organizacyjnych, dając nowy wkład w literaturę badań nad mobbingiem. Wcześniej bowiem tylko zakładano hipotetycznie zależność: niejasność zadań – frustracja – konflikty interpersonalne – bycie mobbingowanym (Einarsen i in., 1994; Einarsen i in., 2020), ale nie przeprowadzono badań wskazujących na taki mechanizm (Hamre i in., 2023). Otrzymane wyniki są nowatorskie, ponieważ jak dotąd nie weryfikowano mechanizmu wyjaśniającego sposób, w jaki organizacyjne czynniki ryzyka przyczyniają się do doświadczania mobbingu (Balducci i in., 2021). Nasze badania wypełniają ważną lukę w badaniach nad mobbingiem w pracy, do tej pory niewiele było bowiem badań uwzględniających moderatory w procesie rozwoju mobbingu w ogóle (Nielsen i Einarsen, 2018; Rai i Agarwal, 2018) a w

szczegółności moderatorów wskazujących na to, kiedy niejasność zadań i poleceń może zmniejszać ryzyko rozwoju mobbingu.

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## Spis artykułów naukowych wchodzących w skład rozprawy

### Artykuł 1:

Stapinski, P., & Gamian-Wilk, M. (2024). Dealing with employees' frustration in time saves your company from workplace bullying: The mediating roles of frustration and a hostile climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11: 2292775.

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### Artykuł 2:

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**Name of the candidate:** Piotr Stapiński



Publication: Stapinski, P., & Gamian-Wilk, M. (2023). Dealing with employees' frustration in time saves your company from workplace bullying: The mediating roles of frustration and a hostile climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying. *Cogent Business & Management*. DOI 10.1080/23311975.2023.2292775

We, the undersigned, co-authors of the above publication, confirm that the above publication has not been submitted as evidence for which a degree or other qualification has already been awarded.

We, the undersigned, further indicate the candidate's contribution to the publication in our joint statement below.

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No.	Name:	Institution:	Email:	Signature:
1.	Piotr Stapiński	SWPS University of Social Science and Humanities, Wrocław Poland	pstapinski@st.swps.edu.pl	
2.	Małgorzata Gamian-Wilk	Wrocław Faculty, Institute of Psychology, Social Behavior Research Center, SWPS University of Social Science and Humanities, Wrocław, Poland	mgamian@swps.edu.pl	

## Oświadczenie współautorów publikacji nr. 2

### The Co-Authorship Statement

**Name of the candidate:** Piotr Stapiński



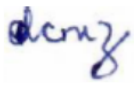


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No.	Name:	Institution:	Email:	Signature:
1.	Piotr Stapiński	SWPS University of Social Science and Humanities, Wrocław Poland	pstapinski@st.swps.edu.pl	
2	Brita Bjørkelo	Department of Research, Norwegian Police University College, Oslo, Norway and Department of Psychology, Oslo New University College, Oslo, Norway	brita.bjorkelo@pfs.no brita.bjorkelo@oslonh.no	
3.	Premilla D'Cruz	Organizational Behaviour Area, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, Ahmedabad, India	pdcruz@iima.ac.in	
4.	Eva Gemzøe Mikkelsen	Department of Psychology, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark	egmikkelsen@health.sdu.dk	
5.	Małgorzata Gamian-Wilk	Wrocław Faculty, Institute of Psychology, Social Behavior Research Center, SWPS University of Social Science and Humanities, Wrocław, Poland	mgamian@swps.edu.pl	

**Artykul 1: Dealing with employees' frustration in time saves your company from workplace bullying: The mediating roles of frustration and a hostile climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying.**



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\*Corresponding author: Piotr Stapinski, SWPS University, Faculty in Wrocław, ul. Ostrowskiego 30b, 53-238 Wrocław, Poland  
E-mail: [pstapinski@st.swps.edu.pl](mailto:pstapinski@st.swps.edu.pl)

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Pablo Ruiz, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

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## MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Dealing with employees' frustration in time saves your company from workplace bullying: The mediating roles of frustration and a hostile climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying

Piotr Stapinski<sup>1\*</sup> and Malgorzata Gamian-Wilk<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** The development of workplace bullying, which involves negative behaviors occurring regularly and over a period of time, is explained by the work environment hypothesis, namely, that it is due to organizational factors, such as leadership practices and organizational climate. Although this has been the predominant theoretical framework for studying workplace bullying, the mechanism whereby particular organizational factors trigger exposure to bullying remains unclear. The present study aims to apply both the revised frustration—aggression theory and the social interactionist perspective of aggression to examine the mechanism responsible for the relationship between role stressors and exposure to bullying. In a two-wave longitudinal study, we collected data from 353 Polish employees. The double mediation analysis revealed the mediating role of both individual frustration, measured in wave 2, and perceived hostile work climate, measured in wave 2, in the relationship between the role stressors measured in wave 1 and exposure to workplace bullying measured in wave 2. The current study sheds light on the mechanism responsible for the relationship between organizational antecedents and exposure to workplace bullying, thus explaining the core assumptions of the work environment hypothesis. The findings suggest that to reduce the risk of workplace bullying development, it is crucial to identify and respond constructively to employees' frustration and dissatisfaction by, for example, reorganizing work structures that may foster a hostile work climate and mistreatment.

**Subjects:** Counseling Psychology; Social Psychology; Work & Organizational Psychology; Psychological Science

**Keywords:** workplace bullying; role stress; hostile work climate; work environment hypothesis; frustration – aggression theory; social interactionist perspective of aggression

## 1. Introduction

Workplace bullying is defined as emotional aggression in the form of insulting, intimidating, belittling, gossiping, or social excluding that is displayed regularly and over time by co-workers toward one or a few employees in situations where the target cannot defend themselves against this treatment (D'Cruz et al., 2021; Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Einarsen et al., 2020). Recognized as a serious challenge for organizations all over the world (León-Pérez et al., 2021; Zapf et al., 2020), workplace bullying is a multifaceted construct that includes interpersonal, depersonalized, real, cyber, internal, and external bullying (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2014, 2021). For decades, a growing body of workplace bullying literature has provided evidence of its detrimental effects on both individuals (Conway et al., 2021; Hansen et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2023; Mikkelsen et al., 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Pauksztat et al., 2022) and organizations as a whole (Hoel et al., 2020; Høgh et al., 2021).

Two principal explanations of the antecedents of workplace bullying have been proposed: the vulnerability hypothesis (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Bowling et al., 2010) and the work environment hypothesis (Hauge, 2010; Hauge et al., 2007; Leymann, 1996). The vulnerability hypothesis, which concentrates on the individual traits of workers exposed to bullying and assumes that these individual factors can explain the development of bullying at work, has gained some empirical support (e.g., Bowling et al., 2010; Gamian-Wilk et al., 2022; Reknes et al., 2021; see; Persson et al., 2021 for review). However, the findings are mixed and suggest that the shifts in traits in employees subjected to workplace bullying are a result rather than a cause of being bullied (e.g., Gamian-Wilk et al., 2022; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015; Podsiadly & Gamian-Wilk, 2017). Conversely, the work environment hypothesis, which focuses on the impact of organizational causes and assumes that factors such as the type of leadership and social climate can explain the development of bullying at work, has been empirically evidenced (Balducci et al., 2021). A vast number of organizational factors have been identified as bullying antecedents (e.g., Hauge et al., 2011; see; Balducci et al., 2021, for a review); however, one of the most frequently examined risk factors is role stress in the form of role ambiguity and role conflict (Harlos & Holmvall, 2021; Van den Brande et al., 2016).

Although a great deal of evidence supports the relationship between role stress and workplace bullying, few studies have looked at the mechanism underlying this relationship (e.g., Hamre et al., 2023). In line with the frustration—aggression (FA) hypothesis (Berkowitz, 1969, 1981, 1989) and the social interactionist perspective (SIP) on aggression (Felson, 1992; Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman & Baron, 2011), Einarsen et al. (1994) argue that role stressors may generate employees' stress and frustration, which, in turn, may worsen the social climate, leading to the development of bullying behaviors. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has investigated these assumptions or tested the proposed causal chain of occurring factors. The aim of the present study is to examine the mechanism underlying the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying. In a longitudinal study, we examine the mediating roles of both individual employees' frustration and the perceived hostile work climate in the relationship between role stressors and exposure to workplace bullying.

Our study contributes to the literature on the organizational antecedents of workplace bullying by using affective events theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) as a theoretical background to explain how work environment generates affective events. Additionally, our study expands understanding of AET as a workplace bullying theoretical framework by implementing both the revised FA theory (Berkowitz, 1989) and the SIP on aggression (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman & Baron, 2011) to indicate how role stressors trigger exposure to bullying via employees' feelings of frustration and a perceived hostile work climate. These assumptions have previously been only hypothesized (Einarsen et al., 1994) or empirically examined in a fragmentary manner in either qualitative (Baillien et al., 2009) or cross-sectional (Van den Brande et al., 2017) research by taking either frustration (Baillien et al., 2009) or a hostile work climate (Zahlquist et al., 2023) as mediators of organizational factors and the development of workplace bullying. The present study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first attempt to verify the mechanism underlying



both frustration and a hostile work climate as mediators of the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying in a longitudinal design. Moreover, as few studies have investigated possible organizational mediators in the relationship between the work environment and exposure to workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Rai & Agarwal, 2018), the current research fills this gap by identifying two mediators, namely, individual frustration and a hostile work climate, that are responsible for bullying escalation. Therefore, the present study expands the literature on the work environment hypothesis (Einarsen et al., 2020, 1994; Hauge et al., 2011; Leymann, 1996) and on the relationship between role stressors and exposure to workplace bullying (Harlos & Holmvall, 2021).

### **1.1. Theoretical background**

Although researchers have drawn on various prominent theories to explain the development of workplace bullying (e.g., social exchange theory (SET), the conservation of resources (COR) model, the cognitive activation theory of stress (CATS), the job demands—resources (JDR) model, social identity theory (SIT), and social rules theory (SRT)), Branch and colleagues' (2021) theoretical review of the workplace bullying literature concludes that AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) is an especially relevant and comprehensive theory that describes the complexity of workplace bullying antecedents and outcomes. AET has been frequently used to investigate the workplace bullying phenomenon (e.g., Gamian-Wilk et al., 2022; Glasø et al., 2011; Jahanzeb et al., 2021). AET claims that individuals respond emotionally to affective events, such as workplace bullying. These work events, in turn, impact affective responses and work attitudes and behaviors. In light of AET, we assume that affective events may be directly or indirectly generated by a work environment. This approach resonates with the work environment hypothesis (Hauge et al., 2010; Leymann, 1996), which states that organizational features trigger affective events, such as workplace bullying exposure.

Additionally, based on both the revised FA theory (Berkowitz, 1969, 1981, 1989) and the SIP on aggression (Felson, 1992; Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman & Baron, 2011), we explain the mechanism underlying the relationship between work environment and exposure to bullying. According to the FA hypothesis, aggression is the result of hindering or frustrating an individual's efforts to achieve their goals. As stated in the SIP on aggression, when individuals are confronted with injustice and conflicts, they respond by complaining and displaying aggression to exert social influence and enhance or maintain their desired social position in their groups. Thus, in line with the revised FA theory (Berkowitz, 1989), we assume that, as fulfilling job requirements is difficult or impossible because of role ambiguity and role conflict, employees feel frustrated and stressed. Then, as proposed by the SIP on aggression (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993), faced with role conflict and being stressed and frustrated, they tend to misbehave, violate social norms to influence their social surroundings, and thus provoke interpersonal conflicts that damage the overall social climate at the workplace. Moreover, according to the SIP of teasing and bullying (Kowalski, 2004; Neuman & Baron, 2011), by implementing negative behaviors bullies gain power and achieve personal goals. Bullying is therefore used for instrumental reasons to maintain position within a social hierarchy (Kowalski, 2004).

Situational factors, such as role stressors, are thus critical in activating aggression. Branch et al. (2021) argue that both the FA hypothesis (Berkowitz, 1989) and the SIP on aggression (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman & Baron, 2011) are helpful in understanding the interactions within a system. Therefore, drawing on FA theory and the SIP to explain the work environment hypothesis mechanism, we assume that individual frustration and hostile work climate caused by role stressors predict exposure to workplace bullying.

### **1.2. Role stressors as workplace bullying predictors**

The work environment hypothesis has undoubtedly been the predominant theoretical framework used to examine workplace bullying (Balducci et al., 2021). In line with this hypothesis (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2020), a poorly organized work environment, that is, lack of work design and

proper leadership behaviors (Hauge et al., 2007, 2009, 2011), and permitting or even rewarding such negative practices (Einarsen et al., 2020), generates conditions fueling bullying activities.

With regard to work design, role stress has been one of the most reported and best documented causes of workplace bullying development (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Harlos & Holmvall, 2021; Van den Brande et al., 2016). Generally, individuals respond with stress when they experience pressure from others' expectations and work demands (Kahn et al., 1964), that is, role stressors in the forms of role ambiguity and role conflict (Beehr, 1995; Rizzo et al., 1970).

Role ambiguity is characterized by uncertain job requirements and unclear information from role senders regarding what is expected of an employee and how tasks should be performed (Beehr, 1995; Rizzo et al., 1970). Role conflict concerns the existence of two or more inconsistent or contrary sets of expectations directed toward an employee such that performing one makes fulfilling the other difficult or impossible (Beehr, 1995; Rizzo et al., 1970). Several cross-sectional (e.g., López-Cabarcos et al., 2017; Notelaers et al., 2010) and prospective (e.g., Balducci et al., 2012; Hamre et al., 2023; Reknes et al., 2014; Salin & Hoel, 2020) studies as well as reviews (Harlos & Holmvall, 2021) and meta-analyses (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Van den Brande et al., 2016) have consistently indicated the positive association between role stress and experiencing workplace bullying. Therefore, our first aim is to replicate previous patterns of results; thus, we anticipate that:

**H1:** Role stress is positively related to exposure to workplace bullying.

### **1.1. Role stress, frustration at work, and a hostile work climate**

As suggested in early works on the work environment hypothesis (Leymann, 1996), aversive organizational factors lead to physiological stress reactions and activate feelings of frustration. Therefore, role stressors, such as unclear requirements at work and incompatible or conflicting job demands, are viewed as organizational factors generating stress, frustration, and negative emotions within employees and thus facilitating the latter to vent or displace the accumulated pressure on co-workers (Einarsen et al., 2020; Leymann, 1996). This reasoning is consistent with the FA theory (Berkowitz, 1989), which has been used to explain how organizational antecedents lead to exposure to workplace bullying (Einarsen, 2000). In essence, being constantly confronted with role stressors leads to the inability to perform tasks, which is related to persistent exposure to stress and frustration. In line with stressor—strain theories, such stressors, if not adequately coped with, result in psychological (e.g., anxiety), physical (e.g., somatic symptoms), or behavioral (e.g., aggression) strain (e.g., Beehr, 1995; Jex & Beehr, 1991; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Keashly et al., 1997). Indeed, role stressors are related to such outcomes as anxiety, depression, or job dissatisfaction (e.g., Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006; Spector, 1986; Spector & Jex, 1998). Frustration is therefore connected with negative emotions, particularly anxiety and tension caused by the inability to perform work duties. Thus, we anticipate that:

**H2:** Role stress is positively related to individual frustration.

Furthermore, individual frustration caused by role stressors may create tensions within a workgroup as, in line with the SIP on aggression (Neuman & Baron, 2011), stressed employees tend to use inappropriate ways of coping (Reknes et al., 2014). Similarly, Baillien et al. (2009) highlight the role of frustration and the risk of irritation caused by work stressors in bullying development. Work environment features may form the basis for frustration and conflicts to which employees respond either actively or passively, but rather inefficiently, for example, by aggressively stopping discussions or avoiding tasks, thus violating norms, which, in turn, triggers further negative responses.

Therefore, generally, frustration and negative emotions may create the ground for a hostile work climate (Mawritz et al., 2012, 2014), which “refers to a social environment in the department characterized by escalated interpersonal conflicts and aggressive behaviour” (Zahlquist et al., 2023, p. 5). In workplaces with a hostile work climate, employees tend to be untrusting and aggressive (Mawritz et al., 2012). As a work climate is generally defined as a set of shared attitudes toward and perceptions of behaviors, values, and emotions in a certain working group (De Rivera, 1992), in workplaces characterized by a hostile work climate, destructive employee behaviors are perceived as a norm or “common practice” (Zahlquist et al., 2023, p. 4469). Employees who are stressed out, frustrated, insecure, and tense because of the dearth of clarity and conflicting demands and expectations tend to engage in interpersonal conflicts (De Rivera, 1992). Therefore, frustration resulting from role stressors may lead to a hostile work climate. Thus, we predict that:

**H3:** Feelings of frustration are positively related to a hostile work climate.

Finally, a hostile work climate is related to interpersonal conflicts and aggressive behaviors. Therefore, employees working in a hostile work climate are more likely to be exposed to bullying (Zahlquist et al., 2023), and such a climate generally creates the grounds for deviant behaviors (Mawritz et al., 2012). We would like to replicate these results and therefore hypothesize that:

**H4:** A perceived hostile work climate is positively related to exposure to workplace bullying.

### **1.1. Frustration and a hostile work climate in the relationship between role stress and workplace bullying**

In early assumptions within the work environment hypothesis, Leymann (1996) and then Einarsen et al. (1994) suggested a causal process in which organizational features may trigger employees’ stress and frustration, which, in turn, may worsen the workplace climate, leading to bullying development. Therefore, the core of the work environment hypothesis is the assumption of a causal chain in which frustration and interpersonal tensions may play a mediating role in the pathway between organizational antecedents, such as role stressors, and exposure to bullying. The main aim of the present study is to test these assumptions.

To date, few studies have concentrated on mediation models to understand how workplace bullying is related to other variables (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Rai & Agarwal, 2018). Emotions and psychological stress have usually been regarded as outcomes of being bullied (Bowling & Beehr, 2006) and have hardly ever been studied as mediators in the workplace bullying process. When emotions have been studied in this way, they have been perceived to have a mediating role in the relationship between exposure to bullying and health problems (e.g., Casimir et al., 2012; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2011; Vie et al., 2012) or between exposure to bullying and job satisfaction (Glasø et al., 2011).

However, strain and frustration may also be considered mediators in the relationship between organizational antecedents, such as role stressors, and exposure to bullying. Working under frustration, stress, and negative emotions may constitute a kind of vulnerability; that is, strained employees may become victims for aggressive behaviors (Baillien et al., 2009). Applying the SIP on aggression (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 2011), Baillien and colleagues (Baillien et al., 2009), in a qualitative study, indicated that workplace bullying may be triggered by inefficient coping with frustration. Frustrated employees tend to verbalize and ventilate emotions to their co-workers, slowing down task performance and thus violating workplace norms. In reply, co-workers may display aggression towards frustrated employees. Indeed, in a cross-sectional study, Van den Brande et al. (2017, p. 4) revealed that emotion-focused coping (“focus on and venting of emotions”) increased the relationship between role conflict and exposure to workplace bullying. Therefore, we argue that:

**H5:** Feelings of frustration mediate the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying.

In previous research, organizational climate, including a hostile work climate, has been studied as a moderator between organizational antecedents and workplace bullying (Hamre et al., 2023; Zahlquist et al., 2019, 2023). Thus, work climate has been perceived as a relatively stable contextual factor. However, a hostile work climate may also be fueled by an uncertain and insecure work environment, such as a lack of clarity on how to behave and how to perform duties, which triggers interpersonal conflicts (De Rivera, 1992). Thus, role stressors may serve as antecedents of a hostile work climate perceived as a state at a certain moment. We may therefore assume a dynamic process in which certain role stressors generate frustration, tensions, and perceived shifts in a hostile work climate (De Rivera, 1992; Mawritz et al., 2012, 2014), which, in turn, trigger exposure to workplace bullying (Zahlquist et al., 2023). Thus, we hypothesize that:

**H6:** A hostile work climate mediates the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model and summarizes the hypotheses.

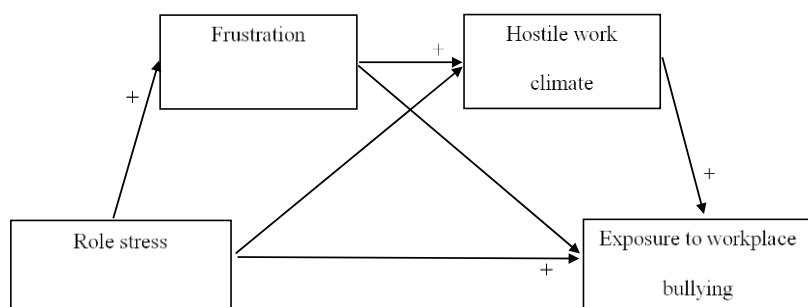
## 1. Method

### 1.1. Procedure and participants

To test our hypotheses, we collected data across two waves. In the first wave, data were collected among 716 employees (aged 18–63,  $M_{age} = 29.34$ ,  $SD_{age} = 10.79$ , 71.8% women) from several private and public corporations, including working students. We used convenience sampling: participants were approached by the first author in their workplaces (e.g., state forest workers, firefighters, and bank accountants) in five Polish cities and asked to complete surveys. University students with working experience were recruited via SONA systems (Participant Pool Management for Universities; a platform allowing researchers at universities to build their own participant pools, run lab and online studies, and grant credit or cash to participants). The selection criteria required participants to be employed in full-time positions and to be in contact with their superiors or subordinates at least three times per week (e.g., Glasø & Einarsen, 2008). All respondents were invited to participate in the second wave of the study.

In total, 353 employees took part in both waves (aged 19–63,  $M_{age} = 30.02$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.01$ , 63.5% women). The participants' tenure varied from 3 to 412 months ( $M_{tenure} = 34.55$ ,  $SD_{tenure} = 56.12$ ). The majority of participants ( $N = 289$ ) worked as subordinates. Only those participants whose working situation did not change from wave 1 to wave 2 (i.e., they did not change job) took part in the second wave (the results of three participants were excluded on this basis). We analyzed the drop-out group—second wave differences; that is, we compared between participants in the second wave and those who dropped out after the first wave. The differences were insignificant in *t*-test comparisons (the drop-out group: for role stress,  $t = 1.28$ ,  $p = .31$ ; for exposure to bullying,  $t = .87$ ,  $p = .56$ ; for individual frustration,  $t = .78$ ,  $p = .49$ ; for hostile work climate:  $t = .29$ ,  $p = .82$ ).

**Figure 1. Conceptual model of the present study.**



Prior to data collection, all participants signed an informed consent form in which they agreed to take part in the study. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee at the SWPS University (decision No. 07/P/12/2021).

### 1.1. Instruments

#### 1.1.1. Bullying

Workplace bullying was measured by a Polish version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire—Revised (NAQ-R) (Warszewska-Makuch, 2007), developed by Einarsen and colleagues (Einarsen et al., 2009). The NAQ-R consists of 22 items and describes different behaviors that may be perceived as bullying if they occur regularly. All items were formulated in behavioral terms, with no reference to the phrase “bullying and harassment.” The NAQ-R contains items referring to both direct (e.g., open attack) and indirect (e.g., social isolation, slander) behaviors. It also contains items referring to personal as well as work-related forms of bullying. For each item, the participants were asked how often they had been exposed to the behavior at their present workplace during the last six months on a 5-point scale (1–“never,” 2–“now and then,” 3–“monthly,” 4–“weekly,” and 5–“daily”). The 22 NAQ items were summarized (in line with, e.g., Nielsen et al., 2011).

#### 1.1.2. Role stress

We used two subscales used by Hauge et al. (2011) back-translated into Polish. Hauge based his subscales on the General Nordic Questionnaire (QPSNordic) for Psychological and Social Factors at Work (Dallner et al., 2000). In line with this, role ambiguity was measured by three statements referring to the clarity of behavioral requirements at work (“Clear, planned goals and objectives have been defined for your job”; “You know what your responsibilities are”; “You know exactly what is expected of you at work”). Role conflict consisted of three statements referring to inconsistencies in the requirements of participants’ work roles (i.e., “You have to do things that you feel should be done differently”; “You are given assignments without adequate resources to complete them”; “You receive incompatible requests from two or more people”). Responses were measured by seven categories of responses ranging from “very seldom or never” to “very often or always” for both scales. Role ambiguity items were reverse scored, thus, the sum of both scales, the Role Stress scale indicate high level of role stress (role ambiguity and role conflict).

#### 1.1.3. Frustration

To measure individual feelings of frustration, three items focusing on emotion-focused coping (“focus on and venting of emotions”) based on the brief-COPE scale were used (Carver et al., 1989; Polish adaptation by Juczyński & Ogińska-Bulik, 2009), following Van den Brande et al. (2017). Respondents were asked to consider three statements “I express my negative feelings at workplace,” “I express my frustration and irritation at the workplace,” and “I talk with my colleagues about difficulties at my work.” Participants could respond to the statements using seven categories of responses ranging from “very seldom or never” to “very often or always.” High scores on the Frustration scale indicate a high level of individual frustration at work.

#### 1.1.4. Hostile work climate

We used eight items back-translated into Polish based on the Short Inventory to Monitor Psychosocial Hazards (Notelaers et al., 2007; Zahlquist et al., 2023) and Hostile Work Climate taken from the Psychosocial Work Environmental Questionnaire (PSYWEQ, Blomberg & Rosander, 2020; Rosander & Blomberg, 2018) to measure hostile climate in the workplace. The items are as follows: “My workplace is characterized by aggressiveness from colleagues,” “My workplace is characterized by aggressiveness from my boss,” “My workplace is characterized by conflicts with my colleagues,” “My workplace is characterized by conflicts with your my,” “My workplace is characterized by suspicion and rudeness,” “My workplace is characterized by conflicts and misunderstandings,” “At our workplace, the atmosphere is bad,” and “I feel unsafe at my workplace.” Responses were measured by seven categories of responses ranging from “very seldom or never”

to “very often or always.” High scores on the Hostile Work Climate scale indicate high level of perceived hostile work climate.

### 1. Results

First, the means and standard deviations were calculated, and correlation analyses (Table 1) were conducted.

The correlation analysis revealed that the higher the stress role measured in wave 1, the higher the exposure to workplace bullying (in both waves 1 and 2), which supports H1. In line with H2, the higher the role stress measured in wave 1, the higher the individual frustration measured in wave 2. As predicted in H3, the higher the individual frustration measured in wave 2, the higher the perceived hostile work climate measured in wave 2. Hostile work climate was also related to exposure to bullying, as suggested by H4. Moreover, the higher exposure to bullying (in both waves 1 and 2), the higher the level of individual frustration and hostile work climate measured in wave 2.

To test H5 and H6, we ran a double mediation analysis (model No. 6) with role stress measured in wave 1 as an independent variable, frustration at work measured in wave 2 and hostile climate at work measured in wave 2 as mediators, and workplace bullying exposure measured in wave 2 as a dependent variable. We used sampling with replacement and with a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure (5,000 samples) using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). The results indicate that both frustration at work and a hostile climate play the mediating role in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying. We controlled for age, gender, and exposure to bullying measured in wave 1 (Figure 2). The overall (total effect) model explained  $R^2 = 36.1\%$  of the variance in the dependent variable;  $F_{(4, 348)} = 49.17, p < .001$ .

Role stress in wave 1 predicted frustration in wave W2 ( $coeff = .20, se = .04, t = 3.87, p < .001, CI [.07, .22]$ ), controlling age (which predicted frustration in wave 2,  $coeff = .12, se = .02, t = 2.29, p = .02, CI [.006, .08]$ ), gender (which did not predict frustration in wave 2,  $coeff = .01, se = .42, t = .26, p = .80, CI [-.72, .93]$ ), and exposure to bullying in wave 1 (which predicted frustration in wave 2,  $coeff = .28, se = .02, t = 5.38, p < .001, CI [.05, .12]$ ). These results provide additional support for H2.

Both role stress in wave 1 ( $coeff = .45, se = .08, t = 11.84, p < .001, CI [.76, 1.06]$ ) and frustration in wave 2 ( $coeff = .44, se = .10, t = 11.58, p < .001, CI [1.002, 1.41]$ ) predicted a hostile climate in wave 2, controlling age (which predicted a hostile climate in wave 2,  $coeff = -.09, se = .04, t = -.2.64, p = .009, CI [-.16, -.02]$ ),

**Table 1. Correlations and descriptive statistics between particular variable, reliabilities in parentheses (N = 353)**

		1	2	3	4	5
1	Exposure to bullying T1	(.93)				
2	Role stress T1	.33*	(.72)			
3	Frustration T2	.34*	.29*	(.82)		
4	Hostile climate T2	.37*	.61*	.59*	(.94)	
5	Exposure to bullying T2	.59*	.22*	.39*	.40*	(.94)
	Min	22.00	6.00	3.00	8.00	22.00
	Max	100.00	42.00	21.00	56.00	101.00
	M	35.45	23.58	9.70	27.14	35.72
	SD	12.89	5.32	3.95	10.73	13.83

\* $p < .01$

gender (which did not predict a hostile climate in wave 2,  $coeff = -.04, se = .81, t = -1.11, p = .27, CI [-2.50, .69]$ ), and exposure to bullying in wave 1 (which marginally predicted a hostile climate in wave 2,  $coeff = .07, se = .03, t = 1.75, p = .08, CI [-.007, .12]$ ). These results provide additional support for H3.

Finally, as predicted in H1, role stress in wave 1 marginally predicted exposure to bullying in wave 2 ( $coeff = -.10, se = .14, t = -1.92, p = .056, CI [-.53, .007]$ ), while both frustration in wave 2 ( $coeff = .15, se = .18, t = 2.88, p = .004, CI [.17, .90]$ ) and a hostile climate in wave 2 ( $coeff = .18, se = .08, t = 2.88, p = .004, CI [.07, .39]$ ) predicted exposure to bullying in wave 2 (in line with H4), controlling age (which predicted exposure to bullying in wave 2,  $coeff = -.12, se = .05, t = -2.67, p = .008, CI [-.25, -.04]$ ), gender (which did not predict exposure to bullying in wave 2,  $coeff = .009, se = 1.23, t = .21, p = .83, CI [-2.16, 2.66]$ ), and exposure to bullying in wave 1 (which predicted exposure to bullying in wave 2,  $coeff = .50, se = .05, t = 10.93, p < .001, CI [.44, .63]$ ).

Notably, while the direct effect of role stress in wave 1 on exposure to bullying in wave 2 was marginally significant ( $effect = -.26, se = .14, t = -1.92, p = .056, CI [-.53, .007]$ ), the total effect of role stress in wave 1 on exposure to bullying in wave 2 is no longer significant ( $effect = .07, se = .12, t = .60, p = .55, CI [-.16, .30]$ ), controlling age (which predicted exposure to bullying in wave 2,  $coeff = -.11, se = .06, t = -2.38, p = .02, CI [-.24, -.02]$ ), gender (which did not predict exposure to bullying in wave 2,  $coeff = .005, se = 1.28, t = .11, p = .92, CI [-2.39, 2.65]$ ), and exposure to bullying in wave 1 (which predicted exposure to bullying in wave 2,  $coeff = .58, se = .05, t = 12.62, p < .001, CI [.52, .71]$ ).

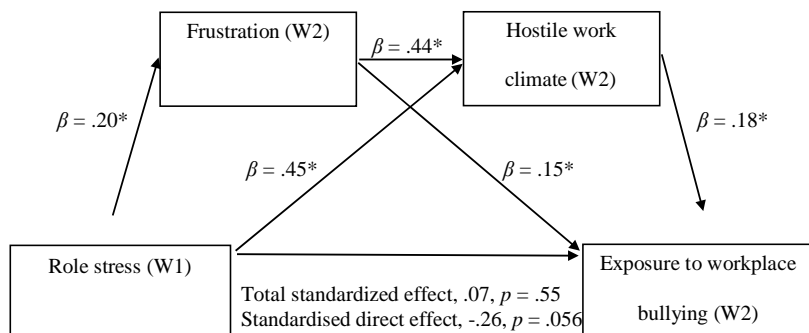
Most importantly, the double mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect effect (full mediation) of role stress in wave 1 on exposure to bullying in wave 2 via frustration and hostile climate (total standardized indirect effect = .13,  $se = .04, [.06, .21]$ ). All of the indirect effects that occurred were significant, which supports both H5 and H6 (Figure 2).

#### 4. Discussion

Workplace bullying, with its detrimental negative effects (e.g., Conway et al., 2021; Hansen et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2023; Mikkelsen et al., 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Pauksztat et al., 2022), involves a gradually escalating process caused primarily by the immediate working environment and the design and management of work (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023). The present longitudinal study focused on identifying the mechanism underlying the well-documented relation between role stressors and exposure to workplace bullying. We examined and found support for six hypotheses. Firstly, applying AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and based on the work environment hypothesis

**Figure 2. Frustration and hostile work climate as a mediators of the role stress—exposure to bullying relationship (standardized coefficients).**

\*  $p < .01$  Standardised indirect effects: Total = .13,  $se = .04, [.06, .21]$  role stress—frustration—exposure to bullying: = .03,  $se = .02, [.004, .07]$  role stress—hostile climate—exposure to bullying: = .08,  $se = .03, [.02, .15]$  role stress—frustration—hostile climate—exposure to bullying: = .02,  $se = .008, [.003, .04]$



(Leymann, 1996), we replicated the previously obtained pattern of results (Harlos & Holmvall, 2021; Van den Brande et al., 2016) indicating that working under role stress is related to exposure to bullying six months later (H1). In line with H2, working under role stress is linked with experiencing frustration. As predicted in H3, individual frustration was related to a perceived hostile work climate. Finally, a hostile work climate was associated with exposure to bullying (H4). Most importantly, basing on both the revised FA theory (Berkowitz, 1989) and the SIP on aggression (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman & Baron, 2011), we anticipated and revealed the double mediation effect of both individual frustration and a perceived hostile work climate in the relationship between role stressors and exposure to workplace bullying (H5 and H6). The study provides original findings with important theoretical and practical implications.

The aim of the present study was to expand our understanding of work-related features responsible for exposure to workplace bullying. Although the work environment hypothesis is well-documented (Balducci et al., 2021), the mechanism underlying the relationship between role stress and exposure to bullying remained empirically unsupported. Einarsen et al. (1994) assumed that role stress may cause frustration and stress, generating tensions and aggressive behaviors. An increased level of strain and interpersonal conflicts may, in turn, provide a reason for perpetrators to counteract when faced with frustrated co-workers' norms violation (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Applying the revised FA theory (Berkowitz, 1989), we indicated the mediating role of individual frustration in the relationship between working under contradictory and unclear demands and experiencing bullying.

Next, drawing on the SIP on aggression (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman & Baron, 2011), we showed the mediating role of a hostile work climate between role stressors and exposure to bullying. The double mediation effect suggests a chain process in which role stressors trigger exposure to workplace bullying because of both individual frustration and a perceived hostile work climate. Thus, when information and requirements regarding work-related roles in the organization are unclear, and employees do not know what is expected from them or feel that they cannot perform their obligations because information is contradictory or absent, employees tend to express frustration, irritation, and disappointment, in line with FA theory (Berkowitz, 1989). Employees who vent their frustration may provoke tensions and interpersonal conflicts or be perceived as "notorious complainers" by co-workers (Baillien et al., 2009, p. 2), which is consistent with the SIP on aggression (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 2011). Such social circumstances may be perceived as a hostile work climate characterized by bitter, unfriendly, suspicious communication and deviant, aggressive behaviors within the work group (Mawritz et al., 2012, 2014). Finally, a hostile work climate, as found in previous studies (Zahlquist et al., 2023), is related to workplace bullying.

Accordingly, the findings not only support the work environment hypothesis (Einarsen et al., 2020; Hauge et al., 2010; Leymann, 1996), but provide an explanation of the mechanism underlying the association between work-related stressors, such as role ambiguity and role conflict, and experiencing bullying. Therefore, our results indicate that bullying may develop because of individual frustration and a perceived hostile work climate generated by organizational deficiencies.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to show the mediating effects in the relationship between work environment and exposure to bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Rai & Agarwal, 2018). Previous research focused on the link between exposure to bullying and its consequences, for example, health problems (e.g., Casimir et al., 2012; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2011; Vie et al., 2012) or job satisfaction (Glasø et al., 2011). Therefore, our findings are novel in identifying mediators between organizational antecedents and experiencing bullying. It is crucial to understand why certain organizational features trigger workplace bullying. The current study provides an explanation of how role ambiguity and role conflict generate exposure to bullying. The present study therefore contributes to the literature on workplace bullying antecedents by identifying new mediators in the process of bullying development, thus meeting the expectations of research on mediation and moderation effects (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).



#### **4.1. Limitations and future research directions**

Investigating mediators explaining the relationships between organizational antecedents and exposure to workplace bullying within a longitudinal design with a six-month time lag is certainly a strength of the present study from both a theoretical and a methodological perspective. A relatively large and heterogeneous sample including employees from various occupations is also a strength. However, the present study also has some limitations that must be addressed. Firstly, the collected responses in the study come from employees working in Poland. There may be some national cultural issues in the organizational context, especially in relation to workplace climate. Thus, future studies should either consider international samples or replicate the present results in different countries. Secondly, our data come from self-reported measures. Common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003) is a risk when examining self-report questionnaire data. However, a longitudinal two-wave design may decrease the risk of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Moreover, in the present study, participants filled out questionnaires outside from the workplace context; thus, we may reason that socially desirable answers were low.

Next, in our study, frustration was measured by a scale focusing on emotion-focused coping (“focus on and venting of emotions”). We were inspired by Van den Brande et al. (2017) use of this scale to show that frustration measured in this way amplified the relationship between role conflict and exposure to workplace bullying. This method of measuring frustration is close to the theoretical assumptions of SIP on aggression (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 2011) where frustration is related to verbalizing and ventilating emotions to co-workers, which are met with aggression from other employees. Frustration can, however, be conceptualized and measured differently. Future research might concentrate on other conceptualizations of frustration and include the expression of various stress-related negative emotions, such as anxiety, irritation, disappointment, tension, depression, or job dissatisfaction, which have been shown to be outcomes of role stress (e.g., Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006; Spector, 1986; Spector & Jex, 1998). Based on stress—strain research, psychological (e.g., anxiety), physical (e.g., somatic symptoms), or behavioral (e.g., aggression) strain (e.g., Beehr, 1995; Jex & Beehr, 1991; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Keashly et al., 1997) might also be included to measure frustration as a result of inability to perform work duties. Including such strains would be closer to the FA theoretical conceptualization of frustration (Berkowitz, 1989). Therefore, further conceptual replications of the current study are needed.

Moreover, as a hostile work climate is defined in terms of a group phenomenon, it should be measured on the group level, as Zahlquist and colleagues (Zahlquist et al., 2023) did. As we did not have aggregated data that would enable a multilevel approach, we measured a hostile work climate on the individual level by implementing a perceived hostile work climate scale, following, *inter alia*, Blomberg and Rosander (2020). However, to gain more insight into the process of bullying development, future studies should focus on including group-level measurements of hostile work climate. Moreover, when examining the relationship between a hostile climate and bullying exposure, it might be beneficial to include individual perpetrators’ traits, such as Machiavellianism (Turska & Pilch, 2016), and leadership practices (e.g., Stapinski et al., 2023) as moderators. As a positive correlation between an employee’s Machiavellianism and the displaying of bullying activities was found only among employees working in negative culture organizations (Turska & Pilch, 2016), it seems that a hostile work climate might provide ground for individuals with specific tendencies.

Last but not least, although our findings shed some light on the mechanism underlying the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying, the question of a causal relationship between particular variables needs further investigation. Future studies might include four instead of two waves to measure the double mediating effect of both experienced frustration and a hostile work climate in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying with each variable measured in separate waves. To measure the workplace bullying process and the dynamics between working under role stressors, expressing frustration, a hostile work climate, and exposure to bullying, we might think of a study that uses a multi-wave design

with shorter time lags (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Such procedures might include more crucial mediators or moderators and would provide insight into bullying dynamics. Moreover, increasing personal growth by having ethical leaders in teams could help to reduce the effects that bullying may have on implicated individuals (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021).

#### **4.1. Practical implications**

Generally, our findings indicate that both individual frustration and a perceived hostile work climate caused by role stress are responsible for exposure to workplace bullying. These findings have several practical implications for managers and HR personnel. Significantly, our results suggest a hazardous chain of negative outcomes, here, employees' frustration and a hostile work climate, of a dearth of well-structured working conditions. This result implies that bullying interventions should be planned at various stages of the bullying development process. Most importantly, interventions should concentrate on creating clear requirements and demands by reducing uncertainty. By examining organizational risk factors, that is, identifying frustrating insecurities, managers may not only reduce grievances but have more social control over task performance. Furthermore, our results point to the fact that managers should pay attention to identifying the sources of frustration, thus examining which employee goals or values are blocked. To decrease bullying development, signals of dissatisfaction, irritation, and frustration should be detected and solved. Thus, managers should let employees express complaints instead of suppress frustration and try to discuss alternatives to resolve the problem (Glasø et al., 2011; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002).

Moreover, managers should focus on the organizational climate. The findings of the present study indicate that a hostile work climate is extremely harmful because it increases the chances of workplace bullying development. Shaping the workplace climate, as a set of shared attitudes, policies, practices, and values in a certain working group (De Rivera, 1992), might constitute a challenge. Thus, workplace bullying interventions should include enhancing the positive aspects of workplace climate, namely, by changing certain attitudes, introducing policies and procedures encouraging to use good practices, and influencing commonly shared values. This suggestion resonates with the notion that ethical infrastructure crucial in workplace bullying interventions (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2017), based on both formal (e.g., standardized procedures, such as codes of conduct) and informal (e.g., informal signals of organizational values, beliefs, traditions) characteristics. Other research focusing on workplace climate also indicates that, for example, a psychosocial safety climate (Zahlquist et al., 2019) or conflict management climate (Hamreet et al., 2023) may hinder bullying progress and promote ethical behavior (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2013). Moreover, a climate of responsibility weakens the relationship between unethical leadership and subordinates' personal growth satisfaction (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). Therefore, it seems crucial to investigate the interplay between particular organizational workplace bullying antecedents, such as role stressors, individual emotions, and frustration, as well as the workplace climate to create successful interventions.

#### **5. Conclusions**

In the present two-wave study, we documented the mechanism underlying the relationship between role stressors and exposure to workplace bullying. In line with AET, role stressors, that is, role ambiguity and role conflict, acted as indirect risk factors of exposure to bullying. Drawing on both the revised FA theory (Berkowitz, 1989) and the SIP of aggression (Felson, 1992; Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Neuman & Baron, 2011), our findings indicated that individual feelings of frustration at work as well as a perceived hostile work climate mediate the relationship between role stressors, that is, role ambiguity and role conflict, and exposure to workplace bullying. We believe that our findings will inspire further studies on the interplay between particular workplace bullying organizational risk factors and shed more light on the process of responsible workplace bullying development. We also hope that our research findings will serve managers as guidelines to protect their employees from exposure to workplace bullying.

#### Author details

Piotr Stapinski<sup>1</sup>  
E-mail: [pstapinski@st.swps.edu.pl](mailto:pstapinski@st.swps.edu.pl)  
Malgorzata Gamian-Wilk<sup>2</sup>  
ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6095-5269>  
<sup>1</sup> Institute of Psychology, SWPS University, Warszawa, Poland.  
<sup>2</sup> Institute of Psychology, SWPS University, Wroclaw, Poland.

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**Artykuł 2: A role that takes its toll? The moderating role of leadership in role stress and exposure**

# A role that takes its toll? The moderating role of leadership in role stress and exposure to workplace bullying

A role that takes its toll?

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Piotr Stapinski

*SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Wroclaw, Poland*

Brita Bjørkelo

*Department of Research, Norwegian Police University College, Oslo, Norway and  
Department of Psychology, Oslo New University College, Oslo, Norway*

Premilla D'Cruz

*Organizational Behaviour Area, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad,  
Ahmedabad, India*

Eva G. Mikkelsen

*Department of Psychology, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark, and*

Malgorzata Gamian-Wilk

*Wroclaw Faculty, Institute of Psychology, Social Behavior Research Center,  
SWPS University of Social Science and Humanities, Wroclaw, Poland*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of the article is to provide further evidence for the work environment hypothesis. According to the work environment hypothesis and as documented by empirical evidence, organizational factors play a crucial role in the development of workplace bullying. However, to better understand and prevent bullying at work and establish sustainable, responsible and ethical workplaces, it is crucial to understand which organizational factors are particularly important in the development of bullying and how these factors, independently and combined, act as precursors to bullying over time. One prominent theory that explains how organizational and individual factors interact is the affective events theory (AET).

**Design/methodology/approach** – In a two-wave, time-lagged study ( $N = 364$ ), the authors apply AET to test and explain the interplay of organizational factors in the development of bullying at work.

**Findings** – The results revealed that supportive and fair leadership moderates the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying.

**Practical implications** – Knowledge of the buffering role of supportive and fair leadership practices is important when implementing organizational interventions aimed at preventing bullying at work.

**Originality/value** – Although previous studies have shown the general protecting effects of supportive leadership on exposure to bullying, the current study indicates that high level of supportive and fair leadership practices decreases the level of exposure to bullying, even when role ambiguity and role conflict are relatively high.

**Keywords** Workplace bullying, Role stress, Role ambiguity, Role conflict, Leadership practices, Supportive leadership, Fair leadership, Work environment hypothesis, Affective events theory

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### Introduction

With its documented detrimental consequences for individuals (Conway *et al.*, 2021; Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2020; Hansen *et al.*, 2021) and organizations (Hoel *et al.*, 2020; Høgh *et al.*, 2021b), it is crucial to prevent bullying at work, defined as a frequent and persistent exposure to negative acts such as intimidating, offending, gossiping, socially excluding or negatively affecting one's work which the target is unable to defend themselves against (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994, 2020). Indeed, addressing such a prolonged stressor and a

tremendously traumatic experience as workplace bullying is in line with sustainable workforce management, responsible management and ethical workplace cultures (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). According to the work environment hypothesis (Leymann, 1996) and empirical evidence (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994, 2020; Hauge, 2010), organizational factors are the main predictors responsible for the emergence and persistence of workplace bullying (Balducci *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, from both a theoretical and a practical perspective, identifying the relationships between risk factors is essential to understanding how they co-act to trigger the development of workplace bullying.

To illustrate the impact of the work environment on exposure to bullying, the present study applies affective events theory (AET; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). The AET postulates that organizational risk factors, either directly or indirectly, may generate affective events (i.e. workplace bullying). Based on previous research (Van den Brande *et al.*, 2016), we suggest that role stress (role ambiguity and role conflict) directly predicts exposure to bullying, while leadership practices (fair leadership and supportive leadership) indirectly trigger exposure to bullying. Therefore, in line with AET, some organizational aspects, such as leadership practices, may play a moderating role in the relationship between other organizational features (e.g. role stress and exposure to bullying).

Our study contributes to the literature on organizational antecedents of workplace bullying by using AET to develop and investigate hypotheses concerning how particular organizational risk factors interact with each other and trigger the development of workplace bullying over time. The study broadens knowledge on the relationship between role stressors and exposure to workplace bullying (Harlos and Holmval, 2021) and the mechanisms explaining when particular risk factors trigger exposure to bullying. Few studies have investigated possible organizational moderators in the relationship between the work environment and exposure to workplace bullying (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018; Rai and Agarwal, 2018). The present study therefore expands current literature on the work environment hypothesis by suggesting the moderating role of leadership practices between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying over time.

### *Theoretical background*

AET describes the causes, structures and consequences of affective experiences in the workplace. According to Weiss and Cropanzano (1996, p. 11), "things happen to people in work settings and people often react emotionally to these events". Despite being, at its core, a theory on momentary events (Fisher, 2002), the AET macro structure includes how work environment features indirectly impact which work events consequently arise. Albeit originally directing the "attention away from features of the environment and towards events as proximal causes of affective reactions" (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996, p. 11), the features of a work environment may, according to AET, have both "indirect and direct influences; directly by evaluation in the 'cognitive' judgement part of satisfaction and indirectly through their influence on the likelihood of various events" (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996, p. 12), while also influencing judgment-driven behaviour (Robinson *et al.*, 2014). Thus, being a part of a work environment that exposes an individual to dysfunctional

coworker behaviour, a negative and personally relevant event can evoke highly salient emotional reactions from the individual employee. Those emotional reactions, in turn, may elicit aggressive responses, interfere with cognitive and behavioural processes that undermine job performance and satisfaction, and negatively impact one's mental and physical well-being (Robinson *et al.*, 2014). To summarize, AET describes interpersonal relations between situations, affective events, work attitudes and work behaviours. Although AET includes a variety of variables, we here focus on the situation–affective events pathway, that is, how particular work environment features trigger affective events in the form of workplace bullying.

#### *The work environment hypothesis*

In line with AET assumptions, the most common theoretical explanation of workplace bullying occurrence as an affective event is the presence of a problematic workplace environment (Balducci *et al.*, 2021; Einarsen, 2000; Salin and Hoel, 2020). After analysing about 800 workplace bullying cases, Leymann (1996) distinguished two unique factors triggering bullying: poor working conditions in combination with inadequate leadership practices. According to Leymann (1996), poorly organized work gives rise to stress and frustration, which, in turn, prompts employees to release pressure by acting aggressively against co-workers. Leymann's pioneering assumptions on the work environment hypothesis have gathered robust empirical evidence (Balducci *et al.*, 2021; Salin and Hoel, 2020).

*Organizational risk factors* In line with AET and the work environment hypothesis, certain organizational features may provide aggressive cues, which again may trigger frustration and increase disharmony among colleagues, which, as a result, precipitates the development of bullying at work (Sischka *et al.*, 2021). We, however, need more research to understand the process leading to bullying occurrence and the interactions of particular predictors.

Research on organizational bullying risk factors has focused on various aspects, such as organizational culture (e.g. sanctions, reinforcements, e.g. Finchilescu *et al.*, 2019); organizational climate (e.g. ethical, psychosocial, e.g. Tagoe and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2019) and its aspects (e.g. competitiveness, e.g. Sischka *et al.*, 2021); change processes (e.g. downsizing, re-engineering, e.g. D'Cruz and Noronha, 2014); job insecurity (Baillien *et al.*, 2009; Kleizen *et al.*, 2023); role stressors (e.g. role conflict, role ambiguity, e.g. Hauge *et al.*, 2007, 2011; Notelaers *et al.*, 2010; Zahlquist *et al.*, 2023); job demands (e.g. task overload, time pressure, e.g. Baillien *et al.*, 2011; Goodboy *et al.*, 2017; Nel and Coetzee, 2020; Spagnoli and Balducci, 2017); lack of job resources (e.g. autonomy, rewards, support, e.g. Tagoe and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2019); leadership styles (e.g. destructive, tyrannical, e.g. Aasland *et al.*, 2010; e.g. *laissez-faire*, e.g. Ågotnes *et al.*, 2018; Nielsen, 2013; Skogstad *et al.*, 2007); and low quality leader-member relationships (Francioli *et al.*, 2018; Samnani, 2021). In line with extant research (Hauge *et al.*, 2007, 2009, 2011), which indicates that work stress and leadership practices (i.e. unsupportive and unfair practices towards immediate subordinates) are some of the strongest workplace bullying predictors (Balducci *et al.*, 2021), we focus on these factors as organizational risk factors for bullying.

According to organizational role theory, role stress refers to employees' responses when they experience significant work overload or pressure from others' expectations (Kahn *et al.*, 1964). Traditionally, role stress has been categorized into roles of ambiguity and conflict (Beehr, 1995). Role ambiguity concerns unclear job requirements, uncertain information from role senders regarding what is expected of an employee, and how to fulfil the requirements (Beehr, 1995; Rizzo *et al.*, 1970). Role conflict is the existence of two or more

contradictory sets of expectations towards an employee, i.e. obeying one set makes fulfilling the other set difficult or impossible (Beehr, 1995; Rizzo *et al.*, 1970). As indicated clearly in reviews (Harlos and Holmvall, 2021), and in meta-analyses (Van den Brande *et al.*, 2016), role stress is consistently related to workplace bullying. Some support for a causal relationship between role stress and workplace bullying comes from longitudinal studies (Balducci *et al.*, 2012; Reknes *et al.*, 2014; Salin and Hoel, 2020), showing that bullying at work, first and foremost, develops in workplaces where employees have previously faced contradictory and

unclear demands and expectations. Therefore, we anticipate that role stress is a unique, independent contributor to the development of bullying at work:

*H1.* Role stress is related to exposure to workplace bullying six months later.

The interplay between leadership practices *and* role stress

In line with AET and the work environment hypothesis, Leymann (1996) emphasized the crucial role of leadership practices as an additional and important workplace risk factor facilitating the development of bullying. Workplace bullying literature refers to leadership style (Francioli *et al.*, 2018; Hoel *et al.*, 2010) or leadership practices (Leymann, 1996). Leadership may be defined "in terms of traits, behaviour, influence, interaction patterns, role relationships and occupation in an administrative position" (Yukl, 2010, p. 3). Most definitions focus on intentional behaviour directed to guide, structure or facilitate individual activities and group relationships, while some also include destructive features (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007).

The theoretical assumptions on the relationship between leadership styles triggering workplace bullying have gathered some empirical support. Leadership styles which accentuate the power imbalance (e.g. authoritarian, tyrannical, *laissez-faire*) are, for example, consistently and positively related to workplace bullying, while leadership styles which downplay the power imbalance (e.g. constructive, empowering, positive) are repeatedly and negatively associated with workplace bullying (Hoel *et al.*, 2010; Samnani, 2021). Research on the work environment hypothesis indicates that autocratic (Agervold, 2009; Agervold and Mikkelsen, 2004) as well as unfair and unsupportive leadership styles are indicative of exposure to workplace bullying (Hauge *et al.*, 2011; Magerøy *et al.*, 2009). Further studies focus on either leadership behaviour in general (Hauge *et al.*, 2007) or supportive leadership in particular (Blomberg and Rosander, 2020, 2021; Gardner *et al.*, 2013; Goodboy *et al.*, 2017) as direct precursors of workplace bullying. Less focus is paid to the association between fair leadership practices and exposure to bullying (Hauge *et al.*, 2011).

Supportive leadership as a specific type of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) means providing emotional (e.g. showing empathy), instrumental (e.g. providing help and assistance), informal (e.g. providing advice) and appraisal (e.g. providing information used for self-evaluation) (Cohen, 2004; House, 1981) support. Leaders' support has been shown to have protective outcomes against experiencing workplace bullying (Blomberg and Rosander, 2020, 2021; Gardner *et al.*, 2013; Goodboy *et al.*, 2017), such as, for example, early retirement among employees exposed to workplace bullying (Clausen *et al.*, 2019). Supportive leadership has also been found to moderate the relationship between bullying and mental health (Blomberg and Rosander, 2021; Nielsen *et al.*, 2019). Therefore generally, research indicates that leader support has a buffering role in workplace bullying development.

However, despite the overarching strong support for the work environment hypothesis, the mechanisms underlying particular risk factors and exposure to bullying are unclear (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). One of the studies that provides some clarity found evidence of how a passive-avoidant leadership style, indicative of an absence of leadership and an

abdication of leader responsibilities, moderated the relationship between competitive climate and workplace bullying (Sischka *et al.*, 2021). Other research has also found that *laissez-faire* leadership moderates the relationship between organizational antecedents and workplace bullying (Ågotnes *et al.*, 2018, 2021). Moreover, Zahlquist *et al.* (2019) found team-level perceptions of conflict management to moderate the relationship between role conflict and exposure to bullying.

Clearly, various leadership practices have been treated as moderators in the relationship between organizational antecedents and experiencing workplace bullying (Ågotnes *et al.*, 2018, 2021; Sischka *et al.*, 2021; Zahlquist *et al.*, 2019). Such reasoning is in line with AET, which assumes an additive and interactive relationship between organizational factors and affective events. We therefore test whether there is an interactive relationship between role stress and inadequate leadership practices over time. Further, we examine the strength of adequate leadership styles (e.g. supportive and fair) in their interactive relationship with role stress and exposure to workplace bullying. Based on this, we anticipate that:

- H2. Leadership practices moderate the relationship between role stress and exposure to bullying; in the case of highly supportive and fair leadership practices, the relationship will buffer or weaken the unique impact of role stress on the later development of bullying at work.

## Method

### *Procedure and participants*

To test our hypotheses, we collected data across two waves. In the first wave, data were collected among 524 employees (aged 18–63 years,  $M_{age} = 28.81$ ,  $SD_{age} = 10.25$ , 69.2% women) from several private and public corporations, including working students, in Poland. We used convenience sampling: participants were approached by the first author in their workplaces (e.g. state forest workers, firefighters, bank accountants and so on, from five Polish cities) and asked to complete surveys. University students with working experience were recruited via SONA systems (Participant Pool Management for Universities, a platform allowing researchers at universities to build their own participant pools, run lab and online studies and grant credit or cash to participants). The response rate was 81%. All respondents were invited to participate in the second wave of the study. The selection criteria required participants to be employed in full-time positions and to be in contact with their superiors or subordinates at least three times per week (Glasø and Einarsen, 2008). In total, 364 employees took part in both waves (aged 18–63 years,  $M_{age} = 29.64$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.04$ , 67.3% women). The participants' tenure varied from 3 to 385 months ( $M_{tenure} = 44.34$ ,  $SD_{tenure} = 63.76$ ). The majority of participants ( $N = 299$ ) worked as subordinates. Only employees who were in the same job in both waves 1 and 2 were included. As a result, six participants were excluded. Prior to data collection, all participants signed an informed consent form in which they agreed to take part in the study. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities (decision No.07/P/12/2021).

### *Instruments*

*Workplace bullying.* We used a Polish version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised (NAQ-R) (Warszewska-Makuch, 2007), developed by Einarsen and colleagues (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009), to measure workplace bullying. The NAQ-R consists of 22 items and describes different behaviours that may be perceived as bullying if they occur regularly. All items were formulated in behavioural terms, with no reference to the phrase “bullying and

harassment". The NAQ-R contains items referring to both direct (e.g. open attack) and indirect (e.g. social isolation, slander) behaviour. It also contains items referring to personal as well as work-related forms of bullying. For each item, the participants were asked how often they had been exposed to the behaviour at their present workplace during the last six months on a five-point scale (1 – "never", 2 – "now and then", 3 – "monthly", 4 – "weekly" and 5 – "daily"). The 22 NAQ items were summarized (in line with e.g. [Nielsen et al., 2011](#)).

*Role stress.* We used two subscales adopted by [Hauge et al. \(2011\)](#), backtranslated into

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Polish. Hauge based his subscales on the General Nordic Questionnaire (QPSNordic) for Psychological and Social Factors at Work ([Dallner et al., 2000](#)). In line with this, role ambiguity was measured by two statements formulated as role clarity, referring to clarity of behavioural requirements at work (i.e. "Clear, planned goals and objectives have been defined for your job.", "You know what your responsibilities are."). Role conflict consisted of two statements referring to inconsistencies in the requirements of participants' work roles (i.e. "You have to do things that you feel should be done differently.", "You are given assignments without adequate resources to complete them."). Responses were measured by five categories of responses ranging from "very seldom or never" to "very often or always" for both scales. The role ambiguity scale was reversed coded. A confirmatory factor analysis on a larger sample ( $N = 1533$ ) of similar participants on four role stress items was conducted and revealed that a two factor solution occurred to fit the data quite well,  $\chi^2 = 12.9$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $CFI = 0.99$ ,  $TLI = 0.97$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.09$ .

*Leadership practices.* Two scales used by [Hauge et al. \(2011\)](#) to measure leadership practices were included. Hauge based his subscales on the General Nordic Questionnaire (QPSNordic) for Psychological and Social Factors at Work ([Dallner et al., 2000](#)). In line with this, fair leadership consisted of two items referring to participants' immediate superiors' objectivity and equality (i.e. "Your immediate superior distributes the work fairly and impartially." and "Your immediate superior treats the workers fairly and equally."). Supportive leadership was measured by two statements referring to the participants' possibilities of obtaining support and help at work from their immediate superiors (i.e. "If needed, you can get support and help with your work from your immediate superior." and "If needed, your immediate superior is willing to listen to your work-related problems."). Respondents could respond to the statements with options ranging from "very seldom or never" (1) to "very often or always" (5) for both scales. A confirmatory factor analysis on a larger sample ( $N = 1,533$ ) of similar participants on four leadership practices items was conducted and revealed that a two-factor solution occurred to fit the data well,  $\chi^2 = 0.22$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.64$ ,  $CFI = 1$ ,  $TLI = 1$ ,  $RMSEA < 0.001$ , indicating good scale validity.

### Results

First, calculations of the means and standard deviations and correlation analysis ([Table 1](#)) were conducted.

The correlation analysis revealed that the higher the role stress and its components, role ambiguity and role conflicts, in wave 1, the higher the exposure to workplace bullying (both in waves 1 and 2), which supports *H1*. Moreover, the higher the exposure to bullying (both in waves 1 and 2), the lower the level of good leadership practices, both fair leadership and supportive leadership.

Next, to verify *H2*, a moderation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro ([Hayes, 2013](#)) for the relationship between role stress and exposure to bullying with leadership practices as moderators. We included age and gender as covariates in the analysis. The overall model ([Figure 1](#), [Table 2](#)) explained  $R^2 = 16.20\%$  of the variance in the

dependent variable,  $F_{(5,358)} = 13.85, p < 0.0001$ . The interaction effect of role stress and leadership practices was significant,  $DR^2 = 0.03, F_{(1,358)} = 11.24, p < 0.001, effect = -.05, se = 0.02, t = -3.34, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [-.09, -.02]$ . The relationship between role stress and exposure to bullying was significant,  $effect = .87, se = 0.35, t = 2.46, p = .01, 95\% CI [.17, 1.56]$ , which also supports *H1*.

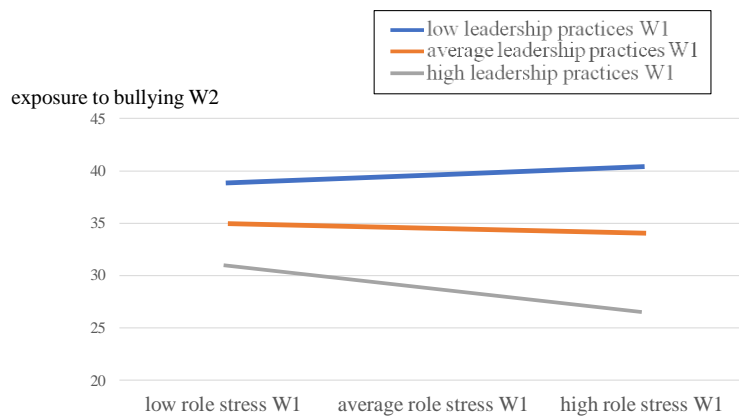
The effect of leadership practices on exposure to bullying was insignificant,  $effect = .16, se = .37, t = .45, p = .65, 95\% CI [-.56, .89]$ . Age ( $effect = -0.20, se = 0.06, t = -3.25, p = 0.001, 95\% CI [-0.33, -0.08]$ ) and gender had only marginal ( $effect = 2.51, se = 1.48, t = 1.70, p = 0.09, 95\% CI [-0.39, 5.41]$ ), but was also found to have an impact on exposure to bullying. Exposure to bullying was higher when the level of leadership practices was low (-1 SD) than when it was average or high (±1 SD). These results indicate that the probability of exposure to bullying in the presence of role stress decreases as the use of good leadership practices increases. We conducted the Johnson–Neuman procedure (Johnson and Fay, 1950; Preacher et al., 2006) for leadership practices. The results revealed that the moderator values significance regions were 6.00 (3.02% below, 96.98% above) and 23.36 (78.30% below, 21.70% above).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Exposure to bullying wave 1	(0.94)							
2 Fair leadership wave 1	-0.48*	(0.95)						
3 Supportive leadership wave 1	-0.46*	0.81*	(0.67)					
4 Role ambiguity wave 1	0.26*	-0.62*	-0.63*	(0.74)				
5 Role conflict wave 1	0.39*	-0.71*	-0.73*	0.78*	(0.82)			
6 Leadership practices wave 1	-0.50*	0.95*	0.95*	0.66*	0.76*	(0.82)		
7 Role stress wave 1	0.34*	-0.70*	-0.72*	0.95*	0.94*	-0.75*	(0.62)	
8 Exposure to bullying wave 2	0.60*	-0.33*	-0.29*	0.18*	0.26*	-0.33*	0.23*	(0.94)
Min	22.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	22.00
Max	100.00	18.00	18.00	18.00	18.00	36.00	36.00	101.00
M	35.26	9.06	9.51	9.77	9.71	18.57	19.49	35.44
SD	12.84	3.09	2.91	2.95	2.71	5.70	5.34	13.66

Table 1. Means and standard deviations and minimum and maximum results and correlations between particular variable (N = 364)

Note: \* $p < 0.001$

Sources: Authors own work. Derived from the statistical analysis of this study



Sources: Authors' own work. Derived from the statistical analysis of this study

Figure 1. Leadership practices in wave 1 as a moderator of the role stress in wave 1—exposure to workplace bullying in wave 2 relationship (with age and gender as covariates)

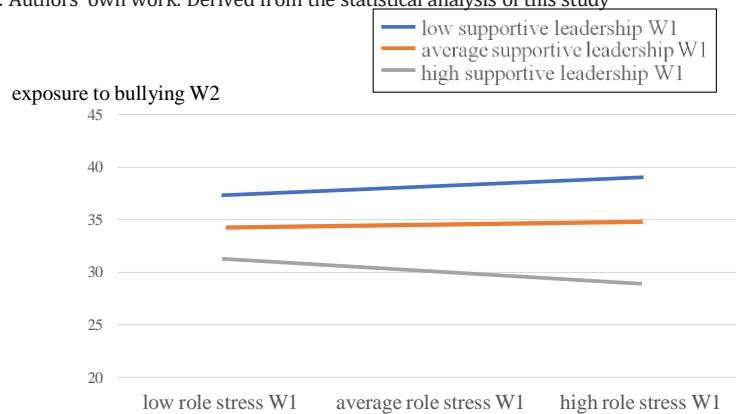
Additionally, we ran separate analyses for the components of leadership practices as moderators between role stress and exposure to bullying. Supportive leadership was confirmed as a moderator. The overall model (Figure 2, Table 2) explained  $R^2 = 13.18\%$  of the variance in the dependent variable,  $F_{(5,358)} = 10.87, p < 0.0001$ . The interaction effect of role stress and supportive leadership was significant,  $DR^2 = 0.02, F_{(1,360)} = 7.17, p = 0.008, effect = -.09, se = 0.3, t = -2.68, p = 0.008, 95\% CI [-.15, -.02]$ . The relationship between role 1 stress and exposure to bullying was significant,  $effect = .89, se = .37, t = 2.45, p = .01, 95\% CI [.18, 1.61]$ . The effect of supportive leadership on exposure to bullying was insignificant,  $effect = .39, se = .75, t = .53, p = .60, 95\% CI [-1.07, 1.86]$ . Age ( $effect = -0.21, se = 0.06, t = -3.29, p = 0.001, 95\% CI [-0.34, -0.09]$ ) had an impact on exposure to bullying, but gender did not ( $effect = 2.43, se = 1.50, t = 1.62, p = 0.11, 95\% CI [-0.52, 5.39]$ ). Exposure to bullying was higher when the level of supportive leadership was low (-1 SD) than when it was average or high (p1 SD). The conducted Johnson–Neuman procedure for supportive leadership indicated that the moderator values significance regions were 4.61 (6.32% below, 93.68% above) and 16.71 (99.18% below, 0.82% above).

Table 2. Conditional effect of role stress in wave 1 on exposure to bullying in wave 2 of the moderator (leadership practices, supportive leadership and fair leadership) in wave 1, with age and gender as covariates

Moderator	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
<i>Leadership practices</i>						
12.87 (-1SD)	0.17	0.21	0.81	0.42	-0.24	0.57
18.57 (M)	-0.14	0.19	-0.76	0.45	-0.51	0.23
24.27 (+1SD)	-0.45	0.21	-2.14	0.03	-0.87	-0.04
<i>Supportive leadership</i>						
6.60 (-1SD)	0.30	0.21	1.46	0.14	-0.10	0.71
9.51 (M)	0.04	0.18	0.24	0.81	-0.32	0.41
12.42 (+SD)	-0.22	0.21	-1.03	0.30	-0.63	0.20
<i>Fair leadership</i>						
5.97 (-1SD)	0.33	0.20	1.65	0.099	-0.06	0.71
9.06 (M)	-0.05	0.17	-0.17	0.87	-0.37	0.31
12.15 (+SD)	-0.38	0.20	-1.92	0.056	-0.78	0.01

Sources: Authors' own work. Derived from the statistical analysis of this study

Figure 2. Supportive leadership in wave 1 as a moderator of the role stress in wave 1–exposure to workplace bullying wave 2 relationship (with age and gender as covariates)



Sources: Authors' own work. Derived from the statistical analysis of this study

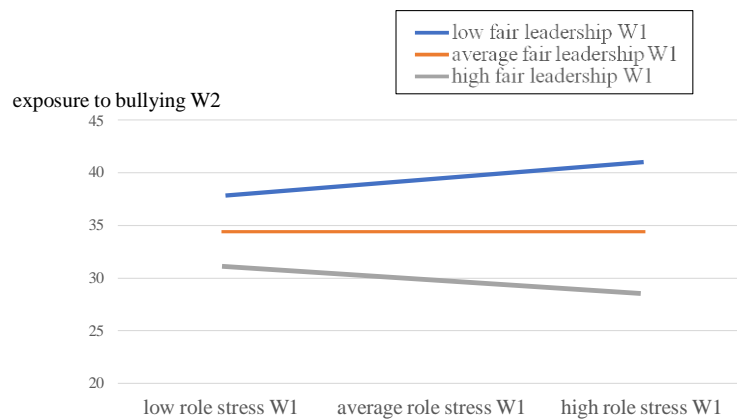
Fair leadership also acted as a moderator. The overall model (Figure 3, Table 2) explained  $R^2 = 16.53\%$  of the variance in the dependent variable,  $F_{(5,358)} = 14.16, p < 0.0001$ . The interaction effect of role stress and fair leadership was significant,  $DR^2 = 0.03, F_{(1,358)} = 13.81, p < 0.001, effect = -.12, se = .03, t = -3.72, p < .001, 95\% CI [-0.18, -.05]$ . The relationship between role stress and exposure to bullying was significant,  $effect = 1.01, se = .33, t = 3.10, p = 0.002, 95\% CI [0.37, 1.66]$ . The effect of fair leadership on exposure to bullying  $effect = .73, se = .68, t = 1.09, p = .28, 95\% CI [-.60, 2.07]$  was insignificant. The effect of age was significant ( $effect = -0.18, se = .06, t = -2.89, p = 0.004, 95\% CI [-0.30, -0.06]$ ). Gender, however, had a marginal ( $effect = 2.53, se = 1.47, t = 1.72, p = 0.09, 95\% CI [-0.36, 5.43]$ ) impact on exposure to bullying. Exposure to bullying was higher when the level of fair leadership was low (-1 SD) than when it was average or high (p1 SD). The conducted Johnson–Neuman procedure (Johnson and Fay, 1950; Preacher et al., 2006) for fair leadership revealed that the moderator values significance regions were 5.24 (11.81% below, 88.19% above) and 12.26 (85.99% below, 14.01% above).

Discussion

This study, relying on longitudinal data, provides insight into the mechanism explaining when negative work environment features trigger workplace bullying on the basis of AET (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) and the work environment hypothesis (Leymann, 1996). In line with H1, we predicted and evidenced that workplaces characterized by high role stress were related to later exposure to bullying. Further, as predicted in H2, we examined the additive relationship between particular organizational features and affective events and found that leadership practices have a moderating role in the relationship between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying. As such, our study provides novel findings with important theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical contribution

First, role stress, that is, role ambiguity and role conflict, acts as an antecedent of exposure to workplace bullying. In line with previous research (Harlos and Holmvall, 2021; Van den Brande et al., 2016), employees who report increased level of role stress tend to experience workplace bullying. Obtaining unclear requirements and uncertain information and getting



Sources: Authors' own work. Derived from the statistical analysis of this study

Figure 3. Fair leadership in wave 1 as a moderator of the role stress in wave 1–exposure to workplace bullying wave 2 relationship (with age and gender as covariates)



conflicting and incompatible roles from leaders and co-workers is therefore related to exposure to bullying. As [Einarsen et al. \(1994\)](#) argued, role stress may generate frustration and stress, triggering tensions and negative behaviours. Increased levels of stressors and conflicts may also elicit affective reactions from other employees (e.g. perpetrators) who again counteract, which results in frustrated co-workers' norms being violated ([Bowling and Beehr, 1995](#)). Indeed, role stress predicted exposure to workplace bullying in several longitudinal studies, with work under contradictory and unclear demands and expectations

being related to experiencing bullying one year or two years earlier ([Balducci et al., 2012](#); [Reknes et al., 2014](#); [Salin and Hoel, 2020](#)). Importantly, the results of our study indicate that bullying may develop in a much shorter period of time, even six months after experiencing high levels of role stress. Therefore, our study indicates that role ambiguity and conflict have long-term negative effects on employees' behaviour. These results give further support to the work environment hypothesis ([Einarsen et al., 2020](#); [Hauge et al., 2007](#); [Leymann, 1996](#)), stating that workplace bullying is generated by various organizational deficiencies. This result is also in line with AET assumptions that affective events, i.e. workplace bullying, may be directly driven by work environment features.

Second, the relationship between role stress and exposure to bullying was weaker for employees who experienced supportive and fair leadership. Taking the moderator significance regions into consideration, our results show that only very high levels of both fair and supportive leadership practices decrease the chance of feeling bullied among employees who work under role stress. Therefore, the results suggest that to mitigate the role stress-exposure to workplace bullying relationship, leaders should display high levels of fair and supportive behaviours. In other words, being provided with support (e.g. being listened to and understood, being given help and guidance) and fair (e.g. objective and equal) treatment from the superiors buffers the negative consequences of ambiguous and conflicting role demands.

Previous studies have evidenced the general protective effects of supportive leadership ([Clausen et al., 2019](#)) as well as the particular negative relationship between supportive leadership and exposure to bullying ([Blomberg and Rosander, 2020](#); [Gardner et al., 2013](#); [Goodboy et al., 2017](#); [Hauge et al., 2011](#)). However, our study provides a novel contribution, evidencing the moderating effect of leadership practices on exposure to workplace bullying. It means that a high level of good leadership practices (i.e. supportive and fair leadership) decreases the level of exposure to bullying within organizational circumstances characterized by role ambiguity and role conflict. Leadership practices serve as good examples for subordinates or as cues to follow and are important for employees to identify which values and behaviours are legitimate at work ([Hattke and Hattke, 2019](#); [Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978](#); [Shamir et al., 1993](#)). Thus, highly supportive and fair leadership may function as a signpost for ethical behaviour ([Hattke and Hattke, 2019](#)) even in poorly organized work environments, i.e. experiencing high levels of role stress. Our findings resonate with Leymann's pioneering suggestion that various workplace organizational risk factors have an additive effect on exposure to bullying ([Leymann, 1996](#)). In other words, and in line with AET assumptions, work environment features may impact affective events in both direct and indirect ways. While role stress generates exposure to bullying in a direct way, leadership practices (supportive and fair) influence bullying more indirectly. Since only a few studies have examined possible organizational moderators in the relationship between work environment and exposure to workplace bullying ([Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018](#); [Rai and Agarwal, 2018](#)), our results contribute to a better understanding of the interplay of particular organizational factors triggering workplace bullying.

The current research is one of the first longitudinal studies to demonstrate fair leadership as an important workplace bullying antecedent interacting with other organizational risk factors (Balducci *et al.*, 2021). Although some research has indicated the association of unfair leadership practices with exposure to bullying (Hauge *et al.*, 2011; Magerøy *et al.*, 2009), none of these had longitudinal designs. Our results indicate that fair immediate superiors' practices (i.e. displaying objectivity and equality) as well as supportive immediate superiors' behaviours (i.e. providing help and guidance) mitigate the impact of a poor workplace environment on later exposure to workplace bullying. Therefore, our study provides knowledge on the unique role of supportive as well as fair leadership practices as organizational antecedents of workplace bullying on the one hand and contributes to knowledge on the importance of leadership practices on the other hand. Here, immediate leaders' behaviours (i.e. supportive and fair practices towards immediate subordinates) buffered workplace bullying. Our findings highlight the importance of studying particular risk factors separately to ascertain their unique and interactive impact on bullying escalation (Reknes *et al.*, 2014).

#### *Limitations and future research directions*

Despite its longitudinal design and novel theoretical contributions, this study has some limitations. First, having a relatively large and heterogeneous sample with employees from various occupations is a strength. The sample was, however, not representative, and the study was conducted exclusively in Poland. According to Hofstede *et al.* (2010) and the Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) study (Bakacsi *et al.*, 2002; House *et al.*, 2004) findings, Polish culture is characterized by a combination of high power distance and a high level of uncertainty avoidance. These features may imply a need for supportive autocratic leaders and a preference for structured workplace situations. Moreover, although the Polish Labour Code provides protection for employees, the effectiveness of legal regulations is limited, and the anti-bullying policies lack detailed regulations and sanctions (Pilch and Turska, 2016). Therefore, it may be that the participants were more stressed and were experiencing more role stress and lack of supportive and fair leadership than employees in countries with more supportive leaders and detailed workplace bullying policies.

Second, common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003) is a risk when examining self-reported questionnaire data. However, a longitudinal, two-wave design may decrease the risk of common method variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, in the present study, participants filled up the questionnaires outside of the workplace context, so we may reason that socially desirable answers were low.

Third, we analysed data on an individual level. Thus, although the tools we used measure objective indices of bullying behaviours, we rely on employees' perceptions of exposure to bullying, as well as employees' perceptions of role stress and leadership practices. Organizations may differ in how leaders provide support or the extent to which organizational risk factors interact with each other. Therefore, future research is encouraged to aggregate the findings on a group level to have additional insight, for example, by analysing if contextual group-level factors (e.g. leadership practices) moderate the relationship between role stress (which could also be measured at the group level to increase measurement objectivity) and exposure to bullying at the individual level.

Next, we observed high correlations between leadership practices and role stress. Some argue (Iacobucci *et al.*, 2016) that high correlations between the moderator and predictor cause problems with multicollinearity and a high variance inflation factor. However, such an approach was strongly contested (McClelland *et al.*, 2017). High correlations between role

stress and leadership practices in our study are commonly observed and indicate that various workplace bullying risk factors simply coexist within organizations (Gamian-Wilk, 2018; Hauge *et al.*, 2007; Skogstad *et al.*, 2011).

Lastly, we have not controlled the causal and reverse causal relationships between organizational risk factors and exposure to bullying. As Harlos and Holmvall (2021) underscore, reciprocal relations of influence are frequent in workplace bullying research. It is therefore possible that exposure to bullying generates role stress as well. Future research

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is thus encouraged to focus on full two wave panel designs. This will enable the testing of causal and reverse causal relationships between role stress and exposure to workplace bullying. We need further research to examine the dynamics and interplay between particular organizational risk factors and bullying development by conducting multi-wave longitudinal studies including moderators and mediators (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018).

#### *Practical implications*

In sum, the findings of our study indicate that if there is uncertainty about roles and work tasks, the type of leadership (supportive and fair) may reduce and, to some extent, even hinder negative workplace behaviours (e.g. perpetrators) from developing and escalating into bullying at work. This has several implications for leaders and HR personnel *vis-à-vis* organizational bullying risk factors. First of all, interventions should focus on providing clearly organized working conditions, that is, well-defined roles and adequate requirements. Therefore, standardized procedures, for example, on recruitment, motivation systems and communication practices, should be implemented within organizations. By reducing ambiguity and conflicting demands, leaders enhance employees' feeling of safety.

Second, our results point to the fact that leadership practices interact with other workplace factors and may be a part of the solution to address workplace bullying. This expands the field's current focus beyond destructive types of leadership (Samnani, 2021; Einarsen *et al.*, 2007) and draws attention to the potential of positive organizational psychology (Rayner, 2021) and more sustainable types of leadership (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023) in workplace bullying intervention work. Our findings indicate that effective workplace bullying interventions should focus on impacting leadership practices by providing behavioural cues and encouraging leaders to display support by listening, organizing help and providing guidance. Leaders may implement dyadic approaches and focus on deepening their relationship with subordinates (Yukl, 2010). They may encourage their subordinates by involving them in interactions using communication media or sending messages. Moreover, our findings suggest that leaders should increase both supportive and fair behaviours. Therefore, it seems essential to increase clear awarding and communication systems to support leadership development. The outcome of providing leadership development may subsequently be benchmarked against how subordinates rate feelings or experiences of being treated fairly and level of support received. By increasing leaders' awareness of fair and supportive practices, organizations should not only observe a drop in reported bullying but also a decrease in mental distress and strain, sickness absence and disability pensioning (Blomberg and Rosander, 2021; Høgh *et al.*, 2021a; Nielsen *et al.*, 2020) among their employees. In so doing, organizations exhibit efforts towards sustainable workforce management, responsible management and ethical workplaces (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). Displaying supportive and fair behaviour towards one's subordinates is consistent with ethical leadership, which means following such behaviours and motives as being trustworthy and fair (Yukl, 2010). Providing supportive and fair leadership practices may thus work both as formal (e.g. standardized procedures such as codes of conduct) and informal (e.g. informal signals of organizational values, beliefs and traditions) characteristics of ethical infrastructure

(Einarsen *et al.*, 2017) and organizational governance (D’Cruz and Noronha, 2016), which has been particularly recommended in workplace bullying interventions. Thus, not only do we need to study interactions between workplace factors and leadership, we also need to test and monitor the effect of adequate leadership practices in the workplace in terms of hindering negative affective behaviours from developing and escalating into bullying at work.

A role that  
takes its toll?

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### Conclusions

The present study contributes to advancing knowledge on workplace bullying by showing the buffering role of supportive and fair leadership in role stress on exposure to workplace bullying. Applying AET and the work environment hypothesis in a longitudinal study, we illustrate how role stress directly relates to exposure to workplace bullying and how both supportive and fair leadership indirectly diminish this relationship. We hope that our results initiate further research on the interplay of particular organizational risk factors on workplace bullying development and serve as a useful input for leaders on the importance of investing in providing support to subordinates to diminish the probability of workplace bullying escalation and establishing and maintaining sustainable, responsible and ethical workplaces.

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Corresponding author

Malgorzata Gamian-Wilk can be contacted at: [mgamian@swps.edu.pl](mailto:mgamian@swps.edu.pl)

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