The Impact of Bullying on Observers and Targets

Helena Cooper-Thomas, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland
h.cooper-thomas@auckland.ac.nz

Tim Bentley, New Zealand Work Research Institute, AUT University

Bevan Catley, School of Management, Massey University, Albany

Dianne Gardner, School of Psychology, Massey University, Albany

Michael O’Driscoll, School of Psychology, University of Waikato, Hamilton

Linda Trenberth, Business School, Griffith University, Australia

Abstract: Workplace bullying is known to be a psychosocial stressor for targets. Meanwhile, the effects of bullying on observers have received scant attention. This study investigated whether greater exposure to bullying, through observation as well as direct experience, was associated with a poorer work environment, and poorer individual wellbeing and work attitudes. Data were collected from 1733 employees, with 586 of these identified as suitable for further analyses. From the total, 13% (225) had neither experienced nor ever observed bullying, 3% (53) were identified as observers, 13% (228) were categorized as targets, and 5% (80) as both observers and targets. Planned statistical data contrasts across the four groups showed that non-bullied employees had the most positive perceptions of the work environment followed by observers, then targets, and finally those who had been both observers and targets. Broadly similar results were found for individual wellbeing and work attitudes. These results support the negative impact of observing bullying, with greatest impact for those who are both observers and targets.

Keywords: workplace bullying, witness, observer, stress, wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION
Workplace bullying is the experience of aggressive and negative behaviours towards one or more employees that results in a hostile work environment (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire, & Smith, 1998). Negative behaviours may involve open verbal or physical attacks, or may be covert and discreet, such as failing to pass on information or spreading rumours (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994). It is the negative, unwanted and enduring nature of the behaviour that forms the essence of bullying, alongside power disparities (including formal and non-formal sources of power) between perpetrator and target (Einarsen, 2000; Einarsen et al., 2011).

A common operationalisation of workplace bullying used in prevalence studies is reported exposure to negative behaviour that occurs regularly (at least weekly) and persistently (continuing for at least 6 months) (Einarsen et al., 2011). Studies of bullying at work have reported prevalence levels ranging from 5% (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001), to 18% (O’Driscoll et al., 2011), to levels as high as 28% (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). Hence, across international studies there is considerable variation in levels of reported exposure to bullying behaviours at work.

Prevalence rates for observing bullying at work also vary widely. In research involving Norwegian employees, 13% of respondents self-identified as observers of bullying, nearly 3% were classified
as targets, and 7% were classified as both observers and targets (Einarsen et al., 1994). Vartia (2001) reported that 9% of Finnish respondents had observed bullying, and Hoel, Cooper, and Faragher (2001) found 46.5% of British respondents had been observers. Even acknowledging that these proportions may be high due to self-selection, the figures suggest that a significant portion of the workforce has observed workplace bullying.

In spite of this, there has been little research on the impact and role of observers in the workplace bullying literature. Instead, the workplace bullying literature largely focuses on targets, bullies, and organisations: investigating the work environment and work-relevant outcomes to understand what is distinctive about bullying, as well as its broader nomological network. This is in stark contrast to the school bullying literature where bystanders are acknowledged to be an important part of bullying events and outcomes (Rayner & Bowes-Sperry, 2008). Indeed observers can play an important role in preventing or halting bullying in school settings (Rayner & Bowes-Sperry, 2008). This suggests that observing bullying is an important, yet heretofore relatively neglected, aspect of workplace bullying. While there is some useful recent workplace research on observers of bullying, it largely aims to understand and theorise possible impacts (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Samnani, 2013). As Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, and Einarsen, (2011) noted, “although it is assumed that witnessing or observing bullying would have a negative effect on third parties, evidence that such is the case is relatively scarce” (p. 136). Given that workplace bullying is a dynamic process, it has the potential for “ripple effects” that reach out beyond the immediate protagonists to negatively impact other employees (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

Following Einarsen et al.’s (1994) approach, we compared data from observers, targets, and those who have been both observers and targets with data from employees who have not reported experiencing or observing bullying at work. Our study therefore provides important potential evidence of such a ripple effect, investigating the impact of observing workplace bullying.

Observing Workplace Bullying

A number of terms have been used to describe the observation of bullying and other negative acts, including observers, witnesses, bystanders, onlookers, co-victims and indirect victims (Janson & Hazler, 2004; Porath & Erez, 2009). Witnessing negative behavioural actions at work between organisational members can lead to increased negative emotions, which may be due to concern for oneself, for the well-being of others, and due to empathy (Porath & Erez, 2009). In terms of actions, bystanders may avoid the situation, offer support, try to stop the bullying, or even support the bully, depending on their perceptions of power, exchange relationships, their own safety, and future outcomes (Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Rayner & Bowes-Sperry, 2008; Samnani, 2013; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004). There is also evidence that bullying is sometimes not identified as such until later, either by observers or targets (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2011).

In studies examining the role of the psychosocial work environment, targets and observers of bullying assessed their work environment more negatively than their non-involved colleagues (e.g., Hauge, Skogstad, and Einarsen, 2007). Einarsen et al. (1994) investigated four factors: Work control, social climate, role conflict and leadership and compared those who were neither targets nor observers (“non-bullied”), to observers, targets, and those who had been both targets and observers. The authors reported that employees with more exposure to bullying – in the order of the four groups outlined above – reported the worst work environment. Similarly, Skogstad, Torsheim, Einsarsen, and Hauge (2011) found that work groups with higher levels of bullying also had a poorer psychosocial work group environment, comprised of unfair leader behaviour, high role conflict, high role ambiguity, and a conflictual and unco-operative social climate.

Perceptions of leader behaviour and a cohesive work climate are key elements of the work environment, yet there has been little research into how perceptions of these work factors differ in relation to experiences of bullying. Laissez-faire leadership, in which leaders are absent or avoid
showing leadership, is a risk factor for bullying (Bass, 1990). Laissez-faire leaders may overlook or ignore issues that should be dealt with, their lack of interest may be experienced by others as a negative act, and interpersonal tensions can be left unresolved which may escalate into bullying (Einarsen, 1999; Leymann, 1996). Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, and Hetland (2007) found that those who reported laissez-faire leadership were more likely to report experiencing bullying. Likewise, we anticipated that more bullying would be experienced and observed in relation to higher levels of laissez-faire leadership.

Unlike laissez-faire leadership, constructive leadership focuses on achieving necessary change with a focus on tasks and employees (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991; Skogstad et al., 2007). Constructive leadership is associated with lower levels of workplace stressors such as role ambiguity and role conflict (Zaccaro & Dobbins, 1989). Previous research has either included constructive leadership as a control variable (Skogstad et al., 2007) with a moderate negative relationships with bullying; or has investigated related constructs such as transformational leadership, authentic leadership and participative leadership which are also moderately negatively related to bullying (Nielsen, 2013; Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010).

The third element we examined is cohesive social climate, which is the extent to which employees perceive that they have a good atmosphere, co-operation and sense of community at work (Kristensen & Borg, 2003). Bullying is often associated with social environments characterised by chaos, interpersonal conflict and competition between employees (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Hauge et al., 2007; Roscigno, Lopez, & Hodson, 2009). While leaders influence local cultural norms, such norms are reinforced via interactions and reproduced in the socialisation of new members (Hoel, Giga, & Davidson, 2007). There is ample evidence that stressed workers are more aggressive to others (Einarsen, 2000) and that a negative social climate is associated with more bullying.

It is worth emphasising that other research has shown that these psychosocial elements differ between bullied and non-bullied employees (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Bentley et al., 2012; Vartia, 1996). This paper examines how increased exposure to bullying, including observers, is related to these psychosocial aspects of work (Einarsen et al., 1994), akin to the dose-response relationship found in medicine, biology, and associated fields where higher exposure to an agent (chemical or behavioural) is associated with a more potent effect, in this case greater harm (Altshuler, 1981; Chen et al., 2010). Based on this prior research and using Einarsen et al.’s (1994) classification, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1:** Successively greater exposure to bullying (none < observer < target < observer and target) will be associated with poorer perceptions of the work environment in terms of a) laissez-faire leadership, b) constructive leadership, and c) cohesive social climate.

**Consequences of bullying for individuals and organisations**

The consequences of bullying are severe for individuals and organisations. Targets experience lower self-esteem, more negative emotion, anxiety, stress, fatigue, burnout, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and changes in daily cortisol levels compared with non-targets (see for example, Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Djurkovic, McCormack & Casimir, 2006; Einarsen, Matthiesen & Skogstad, 1998; Kudielka & Kern, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Vartia, 2001). Moreover, bullying has been associated with suicidal ideation, absenteeism and presenteeism, and early retirement (Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011; Moayed, Daraiseh, Shell, & Salem, 2006). Bullying can have enduring impact, with those who have past experiences of bullying within the previous 5 years having worse self-reported health than those who have never been bullied (Hoel, Faragher, & Cooper, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002).
Although there is less research on the consequences of observing bullying, similar trends are evident for observers as for targets, with observers reporting health and work satisfaction at a level between that of targets and non-bullied employees. More specifically, observers have poorer physical and mental health (Hoel et al., 2004; Niedhammer et al., 2009), report more stress (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Vartia, 2001), as well as lower satisfaction with work and a more negative experience of work (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007) than those who have not been exposed to bullying. These findings challenge narrow conceptualisations of bullying as a purely interpersonal problem affecting only those directly involved, instead indicating a “ripple effect” that reaches out to potentially poison the broader workplace (Fevre, Lewis, Robinson, & Jones, 2012).

Past research has included a range of outcomes. We confirm and extend these to focus on outcomes that reveal whether bullying has a negative impact on individual wellbeing, including psychological wellbeing and strain, and also on outcomes that affect both the individual employee and the organization, namely affective commitment, performance, and turnover intention. Based on past findings, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 2: Greater exposure to bullying will be associated with successively poorer experiences of work (none < observer < target < observer and target) in terms of a) wellbeing, b) strain, c) affective commitment, d) performance, and e) turnover intention.

In summary, prior research suggests that the ripple effect does exist, and is associated with a poorer work environment for observers and worse outcomes. However, no study has followed up on Einarsen et al.’s (1994) four categories of successively greater exposure (non-involved, observer only, target only, observer and target) to confirm whether the effect of both witnessing and experiencing bullying is associated with a worse work environment. Moreover, only one study (Niedhammer et al., 2009) has investigated whether being both a target and an observer has more severe consequences than bullying alone, with that study confirming an effect for sleep disturbance.

METHOD
Participants
Participants were 1733 employees from 36 organisations across four service-based industries: Health, education, hospitality, and travel. Previous research has indicated that these sectors are likely to have employees who have either observed or experienced bullying (see Zapf et al., 2011, for an overview).

Of the total sample of 1733, we identified 586 employees comprising the four groups of non-bullied (225, 13%), observer (53, 3%), target (228, 13%), observer and target (80, 5%); see below for more detail on how the groups were derived). Of these 586 employees, 76% percent (447) indicated their gender as female and the mean age was 43 years. Respondents had an average of 7 years in their current job.

Procedure
Participants completed a computer-based survey, either online or on a laptop. Laptops were set up in a central location at each organisation, with each laptop screened for privacy.

Measures
Frequency or Likert-type scales were used for all items, and included a “no opinion” or equivalent option which was coded as missing data where applicable.

Bullying and observing bullying. Bullying was measured with the 22-item revised version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) constructed by Einarsen and his associates (Einarsen, Hoel,
This measure lists 22 negative behaviours that may be displayed toward a person by another individual in their work environment, with the respondent asked to indicate how often they had experienced each of these behaviours over the previous 6 months. Responses can range from 0 (never) to 4 (daily). Following previous researchers (Hauge et al., 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007), the criterion for defining bullying was experiencing at least two of the negative behaviours at least weekly over the past six months. To assess observing bullying, we presented a definition of bullying and asked a single question on the frequency with which employees had observed other people being bullied at their workplace over the past six months. The scale ranged from 0 (no bullying observed) through to 4 (yes, almost daily; $\alpha = .94$).

Leadership. Laissez-faire leadership was measured with eight items from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1990; e.g., “fails to interfere until problems become serious”). Constructive leadership was measured with six items from Ekvall and Arvonen’s (1991) measure of change-oriented leadership (e.g., “is flexible and ready to rethink his/ her point of view”). For both scales, respondents rated their immediate manager on a 6-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (always) (laissez faire leadership $\alpha = .96$; constructive leadership $\alpha = .93$).

Cohesive social climate. We used three items from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (Kristensen & Borg, 2003; Kristensen, Hannerz, Hogh, & Borg, 2005) to measure social climate (e.g., is there a good atmosphere between you and your work colleagues?) Ratings were on a five point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always) ($\alpha = .88$).

Wellbeing. Participants rated their wellbeing on Warr’s (1990) adjective checklist. This comprises 15 adjectives, such as “tense”, “uneasy”, “enthusiastic”, and “optimistic”. Ratings were for experiences in the job over the previous six months, ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (all the time). Negatively-worded adjectives were re-coded so that a high score indicated greater well-being ($\alpha = .97$).

Psychological strain. We used the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) to measure strain (Goldberg, 1972). Respondents indicated how often they had experienced each of twelve psychosocial symptoms in the previous 6 months (e.g., “lost much sleep over worry?”), on a scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (much more than usual). We recoded positively worded items such that a higher score indicated more strain ($\alpha = .91$).

Affective commitment. This was measured with six items from Meyer and Allen’s (1997) scale. Example items are “I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own”, and “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me”. Ratings were on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = .84$).

Performance. We used three items to assess individuals’ perceptions of their own job performance compared to others (Kessler et al., 2003). An example item is “How would you rate your own usual job performance over the past 6 months?” Ratings were on a 10-point scale, from 1 (the worst performance anyone could have at your job) to 10 (the performance of a top worker) ($\alpha = .74$).

Turnover intention. We measured turnover intention with three items from O’Driscoll and Beehr’s scale (1994). An example item is “Thoughts about quitting this job cross my mind”. Ratings were on a 6-point scale from 1 (never) to 6 (all the time) ($\alpha = .92$).

Data analysis
For all items, “no opinion,” “not applicable,” and “do not know” responses were re-coded as missing data. Following this, a mean average score was computed for each scale. To produce our
four groups for analysis, we used the bullying criterion as applying to respondents who had experienced at least two negative acts (NAQ-R) towards them each week for the last six months. Similarly, the criterion for observing bullying was that the participant had observed bullying either several times per week or almost daily over the last six months. The largest proportion of our sample were those who had neither observed nor been targets of bullying at a high rate. In order to obtain a smaller sample of this last category for analysis that would be more comparable in size to the other groups, we selected only those who had not experienced or observed any bullying (i.e., omitting from further analysis those who had experienced low levels of negative acts).

RESULTS

Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics and correlations. Note that the four groups are not evenly represented in this data. Observing and experiencing bullying are strongly correlated ($r = .49$); these two bullying variables show similar relationships with the other variables investigated, although experiencing bullying shows consistently stronger relationships. This suggests a stronger impact of bullying relative to observing bullying. However in both cases the correlations show that bullying has negative associations with the work environment and individual wellbeing and attitudes.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Laissez-faire leadership</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Constructive leadership</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>-.67**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cohesive work climate</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>-.51**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>-.65**</td>
<td>.61**</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Strain</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>-55**</td>
<td>-55**</td>
<td>-83**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Affective commitment</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>-.44**</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>-48**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Turnover intention</td>
<td>7.66</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>-.53**</td>
<td>-.49**</td>
<td>-.72**</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>-.60**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Experiencing bullying</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>-.53**</td>
<td>-.52**</td>
<td>-.72**</td>
<td>.68**</td>
<td>-.44**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Observing bullying</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>-.45**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>42.92</td>
<td>12.44</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.14**</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $n = 586$; gender is coded 1 = female, 2 = male; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The Levene’s statistic was significant for every ANOVA, indicating heterogeneity of variances for each variable across the four groups. Hence we used robust Welch and Brown-Forsythe F statistics, which showed each ANOVA to be significant. We investigated the differences between groups using three planned contrasts for each variable. The first comparison was for those neither observing nor experiencing bullying against the other three groups. The second comparison was those observing but not experiencing bullying against the two groups of those experiencing bullying, and those both experiencing and observing bullying. The third comparison was those experiencing bullying and those both experiencing and observing bullying. The results are shown
Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and comparisons of study variables across the four employee groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-bullied</th>
<th>Observer</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Observer &amp; Target</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Welch F (df)</th>
<th>Brown-Forsythe F (df)</th>
<th>Significant differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laissez-faire leadership</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive leadership</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesive work climate</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strain</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective commitment</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>8.26</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>7.29</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover intention</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. All F statistics are significant at p < .001. M = Mean, SD = standard deviation, N is not-bullied, O is observer, T is target, O&T is observer and target. In the significant comparisons column, “>” and “<” indicate a significant difference at p < .05.*

The Impact of Bullying on Observers and Targets

Page | 88
in Table 2 (the planned contrasts are available from the first author).

Hypothesis 1 (a-c) proposed that greater exposure to bullying (none, observer, target, observer and target) would be associated with successively poorer perceptions of the work environment in terms of laissez-faire leadership, constructive leadership and cohesive social climate respectively. The results are generally supportive, with the significant comparisons showing that with increased exposure to bullying, individuals reported higher levels of laissez-faire leadership, lower levels of constructive leadership, and poorer social cohesion. Significant differences were found between the four groups for all variables, with the exception of cohesive work climate, for which there were no differences in the perceptions of those who were targets and those who were both targets.

Hypothesis 2 (a-e) proposed that increased exposure to bullying (none, observer, target, observer and target) would be associated with successively poorer outcomes in terms of wellbeing, strain, affective commitment, performance and turnover intention. The planned contrasts generally support this, with higher exposure to bullying associated with lower wellbeing, higher strain, lower affective commitment, lower self-rated performance, and higher intentions of leaving. However, while being both a target and observer was associated with worse wellbeing and higher strain relative to being a target alone, there were no significant differences between these groups for the remaining three outcomes of affective commitment, performance, and turnover intention. These results support Hypotheses 2a and 2b and provide partial support for Hypotheses 2c, 2d, and 2e.

DISCUSSION
This research makes several contributions to the workplace bullying literature. Firstly, it confirms Einarsen et al.’s (1994) finding that observers of workplace bullying experience a poorer work environment than non-bullied employees, although not as poor as that experienced by targets. Further, it extends the work environment variables associated with bullying to include two types of leadership – laissez-faire and constructive – as well as the general cohesiveness of the work climate. While the act of observing negative behaviours towards one’s work colleagues is associated with a poorer work environment, causality is not proven and it may be that bullying creates a worse work environment, or that bullying is enabled in chaotic work environments or both (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2013). Bullying was associated positively with laissez-faire leadership and negatively with constructive leadership, suggesting that leadership may be key to reducing bullying (see Practical Implications).

Secondly, our research shows that successively greater exposure to bullying is associated with poorer outcomes across a range of measures. These results confirm the compounding effects of being an observer and target of bullying for well-being and strain, as well as experiencing poorer leadership overall, specifically greater laissez-faire leadership and less constructive leadership. Moreover, for those who were solely observers of bullying, this was associated with negative outcomes at a level between not experiencing any bullying and being a target. These results for observers confirm that the ripple effect does occur, and that bullying has impacts at work beyond those experienced directly by targets (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

It is also interesting to consider prevalence rates compared to past studies. Eight percent of our sample either observed or were both observers and targets of bullying. While still confirming that a significant minority of the workforce was exposed to bullying, this figure is actually lower than in reported research, which ranges from 9% (Vartia, 2001), to 20% (Einarsen et al., 1994), and up to 46.5% (Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001) for either observing or both observing and experiencing bullying. Even though there is only a small amount of research on observing
bullying, the findings indicate that this should be a cause for concern additional to the direct experience of being bullied.

Limitations
While we propose that a poor psychosocial work environment supports the occurrence of bullying, the reverse might equally be true in that those who experience bullying provide a more negative assessment of their work environment (Vartia, 1996). In addition, those exposed to bullying may find it harder to interact with colleagues in general. That is, bullying may have indirect effects on perceptions of the work environment, in that bullied employees may not wish to engage with others and this in turn may lead to perceptions of a poor psychosocial work environment (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004). Longitudinal research may help to address these questions of causality, although causal relations can only truly be confirmed with experimental designs (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002) which are ethically fraught when investigating bullying. In the meantime, while imperfect, cross-sectional research can contribute to our knowledge of bullying.

With regard to our classification of the four groups, we used the checklist of negative acts to identify bullied employees, and self-reported observation of bullying alongside a definition of bullying to identify observers. These methods are not equivalent. However self-reporting of being bullied is problematic in that targets may be unwilling to self-identify as bullied if they do not wish to be labelled as victims (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010), and this may be true for observing bullying also. To make these methods more comparable we could have asked about witnessing negative acts, although the 22 items on the Negative Acts Questionnaire would have added to the length of the survey and potentially reduced the response rate (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). These issues should be considered in future research.

All of our data are self-report which can alter relationships between variables; although research has shown that such relationships may be largely unaffected, as the inflationary effects from common method bias are largely offset by the deflationary effect of measurement error (Lance, Dawson, Birkelbach, & Hoffman, 2010). Moreover, in our analysis we were looking at differences across groups; the gradations we found cannot be explained as method effects.

Practical Implications
The pernicious effects of bullying on observers, combined with the evidence on prevalence, indicate the potential benefit of interventions that improve the work environment to impact a high proportion of employees, rather than just focusing on interpersonal relations between bullies and targets. Given research showing that observers can themselves either promote or prevent bullying, clarifying observers’ responsibilities may be crucial (Salin, 2009; Samnani, 2013). Beyond this, leadership is revealed as a key factor in our research as elsewhere (Hoel et al., 2010). Laissez-faire leadership is associated with higher exposure to bullying, while the reverse is true for constructive leadership. This suggests that leader training to deal with workplace misbehaviour as it occurs will be effective in the long run and conducive to a positive work environment (Wu, Hu, & Yang, 2012). Finally, Beirne and Hunter (2013) emphasise the importance of engaging with employees and managers to implement and sustain anti-bullying initiatives to suit each specific context.

CONCLUSION
Our research set out to investigate whether observing bullying was associated with a worse work environment, and whether there was an additional impact of observing bullying in addition to being a target. Eight percent of our sample reported either observing bullying only, or being an observer and a target; a further 13% reported levels of negative acts that classified them as targets. For the work environment, laissez-faire leadership, lack of constructive leadership and low workplace social cohesion were associated with higher levels of bullying, consistent with the importance of relationship-oriented aspects of the work context (Skogstad et al., 2011). Moreover,
those who experienced higher levels of exposure to bullying reported poorer workplace outcomes in terms of wellbeing, strain, affective commitment, self-reported performance and turnover. The results largely confirmed that greater exposure to bullying across the four groups of non-bullied, observer, target, observer and target, was associated with a poorer interpersonal work climate and worse outcomes. Negative experiences have more durable impacts than positive ones (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Hence the injurious effects of bullying at work, including those people directly involved and indirectly as observers, are likely to endure.

**Acknowledgement**
Funding and support for this research was provided by the New Zealand Health Research Council and the New Zealand Department of Labour (now the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment). We gratefully acknowledge their support of this project.
REFERENCES
Hoel, H., Cooper, C. L., & Faragher, B. (2001). The experience of bullying in Great Britain: The


The Impact of Bullying on Observers and Targets

Page | 95