

## Paper 3

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The escalation of conflict: a case study of bullying at work



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**Abstract:** This paper presents a rare case in the literature of workplace bullying: a victim who took her case to court, won, and then continued in her job, surrounded by her former bullies. The theoretical conflict escalation model of Evert van de Vliert is used to identify significant events and behaviour in the conflict process, categorising them as either conflict-escalating or conflict de-escalating, as well as strategic or spontaneous. Social support is discussed as a possible explanation of the 'happy ending' of this particular bullying episode. Methodological constraints are discussed, including the distinction between different levels of research. A version of the conflict that is valid in the eyes of the victim may not be regarded as such by the opponent, nor by the group or organisation involved. However, we cannot ignore the individual perspective in the attempt to understand workplace bullying.

**Keywords:** Bullying at work; workplace bullying; work harassment; victimisation; emotional abuse; interpersonal conflict; case study; conflict escalation model; social support.

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Matthiesen, S.B., Aasen, E., Holst, G., Wie, K. and Einarsen, S. (2003) 'The escalation of conflict: a case study of bullying at work', *Int. J. Management and Decision Making*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp.96–112.

**Biographical notes:** Stig Berge Matthiesen and Ståle Einarsen are both Associate Professors and Organisational Psychologists at the University of Bergen. Bullying at work has been their main research topic for many years. Elizabeth Aasen, Gisken Holst and Kenneth Wie work as psychologists in public and private practice.

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### 1 Introduction

This paper presents a case of bullying which is an exception to the typical negative fate of bullied victims. Many workplace victims of bullying lose their job, be it by long term sick-leave or by resignation. Bullying is also associated with loss in self-confidence and self-respect [1], and with shattered cognitive assumptions about the world and one's place in it [2]. People exposed to workplace bullying may also be hampered with health

problems such as anxiety, depression, and various psychosomatic and mental complaints [3]. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) reactions have also been demonstrated [2,4]. Leymann and Gustaffson revealed that 65% of the bullied victims had PTSD symptoms five years after the bullying had taken place.

The fate of the interviewee in the present case study is different. This particular victim was capable of fighting against her bullies. She took her case to court and won. She is still working in the same workplace, where she meets her former alleged bullies every day. Moreover, she claims to be in good health and good spirit. In the present paper we will illuminate some important aspects and possible implications of this particular case.

### *1.1 The bullying concept*

Bullying can be described as a certain subset of conflicts [5]. It takes place when one or more persons systematically and over time feel that they have been subjected to negative treatment on the part of one or more persons, in a situation in which the person(s) exposed to the treatment have difficulty in defending themselves against them the perpetrator(s) [6]. Additional facets to this definition, based upon extensive contact with many victims of bullying, may be that the exposed individual:

- experiences the bullying as intentional
- lacks opportunities to evade it
- lacks adequate social support that could act as a 'buffer'
- experiences the sanctions as unfair or out of place (over-dimensional)
- is vulnerable
- experiences the treatment so often that it has the effect of making him or her feel insulted or humiliated.

The latter aspect is a question of both time and quantity.

The exact number of negative repetitions of humiliating or aggressive acts needed before one may feel bullied probably differ from person to person due to individual differences in vulnerability. This notion is partly supported in a study among 85 Norwegian victims, in which three different groups, in terms of their individual personalities, were revealed by the use of cluster analysis [3]. Those victims with the most elevated (disturbed) personality profile, reported the least exposure to specific negative acts. This result supports a vulnerability hypothesis, indicating that bullying may cause severe mental problems to some victims, whereas others are less harmed.

According to Zapf and his colleagues, the bullying process may start between two equal parties, but their relative strength may change in the course of time [7]. If the victim is forced into an inferior position in which it is difficult to defend himself/herself, a conflict may turn into bullying. In certain cases conflicts can poison the social climate and escalate into serious personal conflicts and internal office war [8]. In such cases, the total destruction of the opponent seems to be the aim of the protagonists [9]. Denial of the human values of the opponent opens the potential for manipulation, revenge, elimination and destruction.

## *1.2 Social support and bullying*

A number of studies have shown that social support in the form of friendship, confidence, respect and access to information, in addition to practical help in difficult situations, can reduce stress, reduce health problems and reinforce the ability to cope [10]. Social support involves a subjective feeling of belonging, of being accepted and liked, and of being appreciated for one's self and what for one's capabilities. Many victims of bullying experience such support as absent in their workplace [11].

House [12] distinguishes between four types of social support. Applied into a conflict perspective, these types of support are:

- 1 emotional support (the person is, for example, given care and attention from someone in heated conflict)
- 2 evaluative support (the person is given realistic feedback about his or her own behaviour and the impact upon others)
- 3 informative support (the person is given information about his or her rights and about alternative ways of dealing with the conflict)
- 4 instrumental support (direct help and support for victims in the specific fight in which they find themselves).

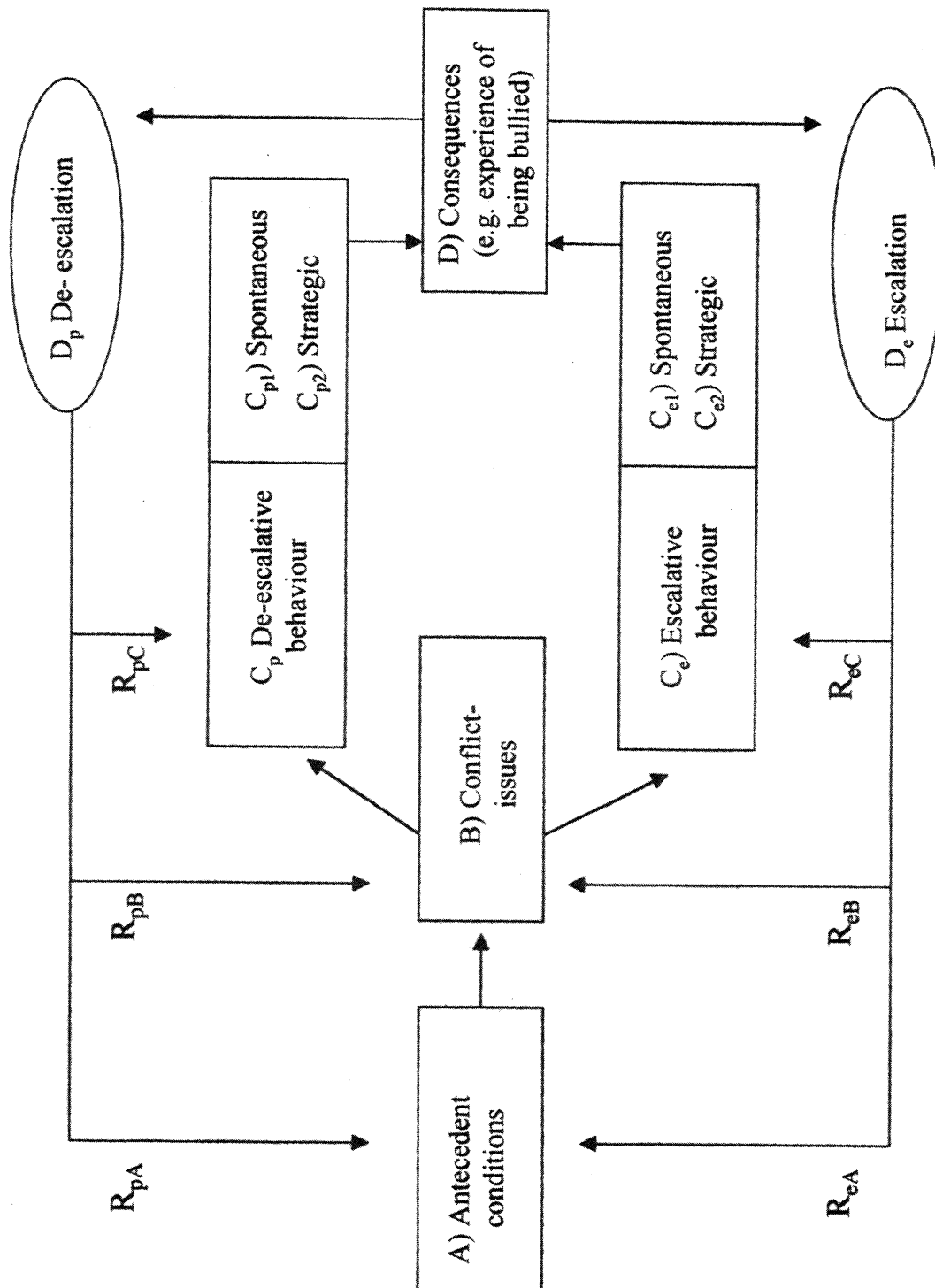
The absence of support is typical of the situation of victims of bullying [4]. By the ways in which the victim is met and treated, and by the advice that he or she is given, the person offering support can play a decisive role in determining how the victim manages to cope with a difficult situation that is characterised by a feeling of powerlessness.

Research has demonstrated that the type of support that is most appropriate in a given situation is determined by the recipient's present needs [13]. Support will have limited effect if these needs are not taken into account. An example could be a person who is met in a friendly way by his or her colleagues (emotional support), without anyone being honest and providing the victim with appropriate advice on what they really think he or she should do (evaluative support). A hypothesis that deserves attention is that where the victim has received adequate social support, then more often than not the bullying conflict will end favourably.

## *1.3 Analysis of bullying development – choice of model*

Traditionally there have been two approaches to the study of interpersonal conflict in the workplace, a structural and a process approach [8]. Structural models focus on factors that may cause the conflict in the first place and the behaviour of the parties involved, while process models look at the conditions that may tend to intensify or moderate the conflict. Van de Vliert has incorporated elements from both the structural and process approaches into his escalation model of interpersonal conflicts. The Escalation model puts the incidents that take place between the parties into a constellation of forces (structure) and a sequence (process), and also evaluates the preventive and conflict-intensifying effects of all types of both spontaneous and strategic conflict management. The term 'conflict management' refers in this context to any type of behaviour that has the effect of either escalating or de-escalating the conflict in question. We will apply the Escalation model as a theoretical framework for this case study. The present case will be decomposed using the model as a supplementary tool. Figure 1 gives a graphical overview of the escalation model.

**Figure 1** Multi-step model of the development of interpersonal conflicts, modified from van de Vliert [8]. The relationships R correspond to preventive (p) and escalating (e) effects on behaviour (part C), topics of conflict (part B) and previously existing conditions (part A)



*Antecedent conditions* (Part A in Figure 1) are the conditions that create the point of departure for a potential conflict. These conditions may be found at any of several levels

in an organisation, for example an authoritarian management style or poor work organisation. These conditions will be present irrespective of whether a conflict exists or not, but will be more obvious when a conflict arises. The *conflict issues* (Part B in Figure 1) are those issues that are actually debated between the parties or those issues that are conceptualised as being at the heart of the frustration experienced by the parties. Conflicts concerning the role of the individual in the workplace or the tasks for which he or she should have responsibility are typical issues of conflict. Other issues may be related to the aims, means and rewards of the work-unit or particular individual. Long-lasting conflicts have a tendency to become more intense. The issue of the conflict may then move away from the initial issues to become more personal, indicating stronger emotional involvement. When an issue in a conflict has been conceptualised, any further behaviour should be regarded as a form of conflict management. In van de Vliert's model, such behaviour is categorised as either spontaneous or strategic, at the same time as it is evaluated as potentially intensifying (escalating) or reducing (de-escalating) the conflict. Strategic behaviour implies the existence of a conscious plan to de-escalate or escalate the conflict, while spontaneous behaviour must be seen more as an unconscious reflex.

A typical example of *spontaneous preventive* behaviour would be denial of the existence of the conflict (Part C<sub>p1</sub> in Figure 1). In some cases victims of bullying refuse to admit, either to themselves or others, that they are being bullied. *Spontaneous escalating* behaviour might be exaggerating the scope of the conflict or attacking one's opponent, for example when an innocent remark is taken in its worst sense or when various motives are attributed to the other party (Part C<sub>e1</sub> in Figure 1). Conflict management of this sort is not planned, and for this reason its consequences are less predictable than those of strategic behaviour. Strategic behaviour is intentional as the person concerned has a reason, at least perceived, for displaying that behaviour.

*Strategic de-escalating* behaviour involves an attempt to play down the conflict. An example of such behaviour might be negotiations or problem-solving attempts (Part C<sub>p2</sub> in Figure 1). Strategic escalating conflict management might be seeking out allies within the organisation, for instance when the victim of bullying contacts a trade union representative or other colleagues. Such behaviour might also involve hurting the other party, for example by way of the spreading of rumours (Part C<sub>e2</sub> in Figure 1). Strategic escalating behaviour may also form part of a plan to intensify the conflict in order to force a solution.

Both spontaneous and strategic conflict management will have consequences (Part D in Figure 1) on how the conflict develops, be it conflict de-escalation (Part D<sub>p</sub> in the Figure) or conflict-escalation (Part D<sub>e</sub>). A particular behaviour need not necessarily have the intended effect. The consequence of a behaviour may for instance be the experience of being bullied, without this having been the intention of the other party. Studies have shown that bullies are often unaware of what they are doing, because they are given too little feedback about the consequences of their behaviour [7]. The consequences of the behaviour may in turn directly affect previous conditions (R<sub>pa</sub>/R<sub>ea</sub> in Figure 1), the issues at stake (R<sub>pB</sub>/R<sub>eB</sub>) and the behaviour that follows R<sub>pc</sub>/R<sub>ec</sub>), or affect it indirectly by way of opinions, and positive or negative feelings.

#### *1.4 Aim of the study*

The course of events, and not least the atypical aspects of a case of bullying at work, is the focus of this article. The question to be addressed is what can such an interpersonal conflict, which grew to be experienced by the victim as bullying, tell us about the phenomenon of bullying at work? The importance of social support in the present bullying conflict will be investigated. Van de Vliert's [8] Escalation model is employed as the analytical tool. The usefulness of such a model in obtaining a better understanding of a specific case of bullying will also be discussed.

In research we can distinguish between different levels of analysis [14]. One such level is the individual's experience, for example of a social incident, another is the dyadic level, which consists of two parties' (conflicting) experiences and the attribution of the causes of a personal conflict. The individual analytical level is essential to our understanding of a bullying conflict. A person's subjective experience of being victimised is decisive to the definition of whether or not bullying has taken place [15]. The subjective experience of being bullied has been called the "heart of bullying" [16]. A definition that takes as its point of departure the person's subjective experience of being bullied corresponds to a central point in the study of psychology, for instance in humanistic psychology (cf. [17]), namely that people's problems should be taken seriously, and should be regarded as "true for those they concern". The fact that an experience is true for the person concerned does not of course mean the version of the conflict given by one party is universally valid, for example in a legal sense (which would give the right to compensation) or for both parties to a conflict (the dyadic level). In many cases the other party (the bully) will disagree that bullying has been taking place.

A single-case study describes an individual person in the course of a short period of time, usually in retrospect. Method triangulation, that is, combining different sources of information, for instance interview and archival material, is recommended in the typical case study [18]. The aim of the psychological case study is to understand the person and, if possible, others in similar situations [19]. Hence, our aim is to gain insight into the atypical, special, unique and deviant, in order to shed light on the problem from several different points of view, in line with Kvale's [20] outline of qualitative research. For this reason, our aim is not to draw conclusions about a general understanding of the problem of bullying in a statistical sense. Forming generalisations is not the point of qualitative research [21]. The participant in this research study provides an opportunity for understanding the problem of workplace bullying from her unique perspective. The fact that she took up a fight with her employer, took the case to court and won that case, is a rare occurrence in Norwegian working life. Even more rare is the fact that she kept on working in that same working environment for years after the bullying episode and the court case.

## **2 Methods**

In the case presented in this paper, the available information consisted of the experience of a victim and her account of the conflict. Our analysis is based on these data, and it therefore makes no claim to being an objective study of the conflict. Throughout the



course of events the participant had gathered a large volume of written documentation (for example letters, court papers, meeting summaries, short notes), that illustrated how the conflict had developed, as well as her opponent's point of view regarding certain parts of the conflict. This written archival material was made available to us, and subsequent contact by telephone enabled us to become familiar with the bullying conflict and with the participant. Subsequently, a qualitative semi-structured research interview was carried out. The interview lasted altogether eight hours, and was audiotaped.

A shortened and simplified summary of the case was construed on the basis of the interview and the written documentation. The summary was approved by the participant with only a few minor modifications. Some of the incidents in the summary were selected for a more thorough interpretation. The selected incidents (italicised and numbered in the summary) were related to van de Vliert's [8] model. These interpretations are intended to demonstrate how the incidents were analysed in terms of the model.

### *2.1 Criteria that determined the choice of incidents described in the summary*

The incidents and actions that were regarded as being of importance for the development of the conflict were selected on the basis of conversations with the participant, and the reading of written documents concerning the case. What the chosen incidents have in common is that one or both of the parties involved have been directly involved or affected by those incidents.

In the course of the interpretation process the preconditions for the conflict were identified, followed by different issues and themes of conflict. We also attempted to decompose significant incidents into simple sequences. In this phase the model was utilised to provide an evaluation of intentions and actual consequences, and of how these fed back into the other aspects of the conflict.

## **3 Results**

### *3.1 Summary of the conflict*

The participant is hereafter called XY. XY is a 52 year old woman; a qualified nurse with a high level of post-qualification education and long work experience. The company in which XY is employed is relatively small, with some 45 employees in seven departments. The company has a number of long-term contracts with various public and private corporations, and its areas of activity include preventive health care. It has a relatively small work environment, easy to supervise, and is rather competitive. According to XY the company was characterised by gossip and slander.

When XY was first employed, the company was in the initial phases of various projects in which XY had former work experience, and she offered suggestions as to how the company ought to proceed with these projects. According to XY, her manner is direct; she lets people know when she disagrees with them, and speaks in a 'hard' tone. This may cause misinterpretations by others, and she is often regarded as being 'tough'. Thirteen stages may be identified as follows:

- 1 *She was soon warned that if she did not adapt, she would have to go.* This message came from both doctors and nurses. However, XY did not perceive herself as bullied at this point in time.
- 2 *She felt that there was a degree of envy, particularly on the part of the other nurses.*

The general work environment problem was in fact so salient that an external consultant was engaged. The consultant was to work inside the company for six months, investigate the work environment, and identify problems and their cause. Among other things, the consultant carried out a series of lengthy interviews with everyone in the company, and concluded that the social climate was indeed unsatisfactory. The problem was that there was no money left after this process to do anything about the identified problems.

- 3 *When she had been with the company for a few months, she broke her leg, and had her leg in plaster for six weeks.* While she was on sick leave, the chairman of the board rang her at home, and asked XY to turn up on four occasions at the office because the company was unable to find a substitute capable of doing some of the jobs for which she had been responsible. The management also made it quite clear that it was extremely difficult for the company when she was off sick. XY felt that this was unpleasant, and she 'pestered' her own doctor to take off the plaster. Accordingly, this was done too early, leading to new problems with her leg, and another period of sick leave. She noticed that this was unpopular both with the management and the other employees in the company.

After ten months or so she had more bad luck.

- 4 *While travelling to a conference for company staff she was involved in a car accident, in which she was injured once more.* XY was reluctant to go to the doctor since she was afraid of being laid off, but she was in great pain and was admitted to hospital, where whiplash and other injuries were diagnosed. She was off work for eight months, during which she heard nothing from either the management or her colleagues in the company. On the very day she returned to work, she was called in by the chairman of the board.
- 5 *He told her that she was unwanted at work, and that she should stay at home and wait for further directions.* She was also told that "no-one believed that you would come back". XY was extremely surprised, and did not understand any of this. She tried several times to speak with the chairman in order to understand the reasons for what was happening, but he refused to speak to her until the management had held a board meeting.
- 6 *Her notice of dismissal arrived by registered post a week later.* The reasons for the dismissal were that she had been unable to carry out her work responsibly while she was healthy, and that the other employees had been caused 'additional stress' because of her absence. She had also created unnecessary risk situations for the patients by her behaviour which was interpreted as neglect, and had not followed up her clients properly. It was also doubted whether she really had been ill. It was further claimed that the whiplash injury had not taken place during her working hours, and it was suggested that she would often be sick in the future, which would cause the company serious problems. XY was unable to understand these

accusations, as she had never previously been the subject of complaints, either by management, colleagues or patients.

XY realised that she needed help to deal with this conflict. However, she did not turn to the trade union representative at work, who happened to be one of the nurses who was beginning to turn against her. Nor did she contact the trade union, because her experience with it had been that it was difficult to obtain good help. However, she was given the full support of her husband and the rest of her family. While the conflict was escalating she kept going to work on a 50% basis.

- 7 *She then contacted a lawyer who specialised in labour law. Accompanied by her lawyer she met the chairman of the board several times in an attempt to reach an agreement. She demanded that she should be given her job back, and claimed that her dismissal was null and void.*
- 8 *A formal negotiating meeting between XY, her lawyer and the chairman was held one and a half weeks after she had been dismissed. Agreement could not be reached. The chairman also refused to sign the minutes of the meeting, and stood by his reasons for her dismissal.*
- 9 *XY refused to accept this treatment, and she and her lawyer decided to take the company to court. Nevertheless, the possibility for a negotiated settlement was held open. XY would have preferred to avoid a court case, and in any case found the ongoing conflict wearisome, being exposed to negative acts almost every day, for example being socially excluded by her colleagues. While the conflict continued, the local social security office sent an injury report about the accident (the whiplash injury) to the company management. The chairman refused to sign this report.*
- 10 *As mentioned above, the bullying started when she returned to work after the sick leave. In addition to the accusations of the management, she found that her colleagues were turning their backs on her. She felt that she was being maligned, they turned away when she approached, and she experienced negative comments such as "you have such good contacts; you can easily get hold of a sick-note". No one would speak 'normally' to her, and no one would greet her when she came to work in the morning. She was transferred to another department without prior warning, felt socially and professionally isolated, was given no information, and felt that she was being socially and professionally excluded from the 'in-groups' at work. No one would sit at her table in the canteen, she felt aggressive glances, and heard spiteful comments.*
- 11 *At the same time, however, she was receiving a high degree of support at home and from her lawyer. XY believes that without this support she would not have been able to carry on working.*

When the court case was finally ready to start, a whole year had passed.

- 12 *The trial was to be held on a Monday, and on the previous Friday the management withdrew and agreed to go to arbitration. According to XY the management realised that they did not have a strong enough case. They had always claimed that the grounds for dismissal would be confirmed by several witnesses. It gradually turned out that none of these witnesses existed. XY was awarded a generous compensation for what she had suffered.*

- 13 *XY wanted to go back to work in the company right away.* The people who had supported her asked her if she really wished to go back, but she would not accept that her colleagues should “frighten her off”. She felt more than ever that she was capable of doing a good job, now that she had experienced problems at close hand.

After the court case all her colleagues seemed to be embarrassed, but not a single one of them apologised or ever mentioned the court case. The direct bullying came to an end, but even now, ten years after the bullying conflict, there is still a great deal of ‘muttering’, according to XY. XY feels that she is still used as a scapegoat at work. But now she speaks out right away when anything happens, and does not allow anyone to mistreat her. During the years that she has been working since the described conflict episode, she has been involved in a number of cases of bullying that have ended up very differently from her own. XY is careful to emphasise that her story “ended well” precisely because she was privileged enough to enjoy a good financial position that enabled her to hire a good lawyer, and because she had support from family, friends and her lawyer.

The paragraphs presented in Table 1 describe the conflict on the basis of a qualitative interpretation of conflict-intensifying and conflict-reducing incidents, according to van de Vliert’s escalation model [8]. The table shows that there were more conflict-escalating incidents than conflict-reducing incidents in this conflict, which indeed suggests that the conflict became ‘tougher’ and gradually developed into something that the victim characterised as bullying.

**Table 1** Analysis of bullying conflict. Conflict decomposed on the basis of van de Vliert’s escalation model [8]

<i>Incident</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
1. XY was told that if she did not adapt, she would have to leave	The company climate said that one must not “talk too loudly” about what one knows; this applied particularly to the nurses, who were not supposed to contradict the doctors. Conditions of this sort can be ascribed to what van de Vliert calls “organisational characteristics”, and if certain employees do not obey the norm, an inter-group conflict may result [8]. XY proposed another way of working than the management had already planned. This was not well received, and it led to a conflict that revolved around work strategies (part B in Figure 1). Instead of setting store by her competence and experience from previous jobs, they asked her to “shut up”. XY’s behaviour was what van de Vliert calls “non-conformist”. She was too “forward” for the role she was expected to play as a nurse. The management recognised that there were work environment problems in the company, and made a specific attempt to deal with these by engaging a consultant to make a survey of the work environment. This was an attempt at strategic preventive behaviour, in which management tried to do something about the existing conditions.
2. XY experienced envy, particularly from the other nurses.	According to XY, the other nurses felt “threatened” because she had higher formal education and longer practical experience than them, while she was also prepared to correct and criticise the doctors. XY also felt that other people were envious of her because of her personal circumstances. According to van de Vliert, envy is a typical underlying condition in cases of conflict, caused by what he calls “relationship characteristics”.

**Table 1** Analysis of bullying conflict. Conflict decomposed on the basis of van de Vliert's escalation model [8] (continued)

<i>Incident</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
3. When XY had been working for the company for a few months, she broke her foot.	The management apparently found this extremely frustrating, and XY's sick leave gradually became an issue of conflict (part B in Figure 1). The management contacted her at home (attempt at strategic preventive behaviour) (part C in Figure 1). XY came to work several times even though she was on sick leave. This must also be seen as strategic preventive behaviour on the part of XY, in that she was afraid of "creating problems" as she puts it (C <sub>p1</sub> ). According to van de Vliert's theory a conflict was all the more likely to develop since there already existed a negative attitude to XY. It is not certain that the management would have reacted in the same way if one of the other nurses had reported sick. When XY had her plaster cast taken off too early it was in order to prevent a further escalation of the conflict (strategic preventive behaviour) (C <sub>p2</sub> ). She had no desire to become even more unpopular with the management. In fact, the result was the opposite of what XY had wished; an escalation of the conflict (part D in Figure 1), since it meant that she had to take sick leave again.
4. On the way to a conference for company employees the car in which XY and a colleague were driving was involved in a collision.	XY did not 'dare' to report sick again, and went to work even though she was in pain. This was another attempt on her part at strategic preventive behaviour (part C <sub>p2</sub> in Figure 1). She tried to prevent a worsening of the tense situation at work. Putting her on sick leave yet again probably confirmed the impression that XY was "often ill", and that she had "the right contacts" to obtain a sick note. The consequence was a further escalation of the conflict (part D <sub>e</sub> in Figure 1).
5. XY was told that she was unwanted at work, and that she should go home and wait for further directions.	XY could not understand what was going on (denial = spontaneous preventive behaviour) (part C <sub>p1</sub> in Figure 1). She attempted to negotiate and speak with the management, and demanded to know why she could not work. According to van de Vliert, such behaviour is "confrontational and problem-solving", and is a strategic preventive method of conflict management (part C <sub>p2</sub> in Figure 1). The management did not wish to discuss the case, making XY even more frustrated (D <sub>e</sub> ). A typical feature of acute conflicts is that one of the parties wishes to have as little contact as possible with the other.
6. Notice of dismissal arrived by registered post a week later.	From the point of view of management, dismissing XY was probably intended to be a strategic preventive behaviour (part C <sub>p2</sub> in Figure 1), and an attempt to de-escalate the conflict by ending it (D <sub>p</sub> ). The dismissal became a new issue of conflict (part B in Figure 1). Instead of looking back at the previous conditions and doing something about them, management attempted to solve the problems of the company by dismissing XY. The result was the opposite from what may have been intended, since XY accepted the challenge (C <sub>e2</sub> ). She claimed not to understand the grounds for dismissal and asked to be told of specific complaints from colleagues and clients. The management's claims made her extremely angry (C <sub>e1</sub> ). She was also realistic, and knew that she did not enjoy the best possibilities in the labour market. Both her age and her dismissal would count against her if she had to look for a new job. The management based her dismissal on poor work performance. XY regarded this as extremely unfair and as a personal attack on her. According to van de Vliert (1998), an attack on an opponent is a typical example of spontaneous escalating behaviour, which increases the likelihood that the conflict will increase in intensity.

**Table 1** Analysis of bullying conflict. Conflict decomposed on the basis of van de Vliert's escalation model [8] (continued)

<i>Incident</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
7. XY contacted a lawyer who specialised in labour law.	XY sought help outside of the company, since she was not receiving any support from within. This was strategic behaviour, which van de Vliert calls "looking for allies" (part C <sub>e2</sub> in Figure 1).
8. A formal negotiating meeting was held a week and a half after XY's dismissal.	The chairman of the board finally agreed to a meeting (part C <sub>p2</sub> in Figure 1), but this only led to a further intensification of the conflict (D <sub>e</sub> ). The conflict appeared to be 'locked'. The chairman also refused to sign the minutes of the meeting, since among other things he did not agree that XY had the right to work until a court case was held (C <sub>e1</sub> ). This can be interpreted as an attempt to make XY's situation more difficult, an action which is typical of this stage of a conflict [9].
9. XY refused to accept this treatment, and she and her lawyer decided to take the company to court.	XY's primary claim was that her dismissal was not based on the facts of the case and was therefore invalid. She also demanded financial compensation for the treatment that she had received. The court summons led to yet another intensification of the conflict (part C <sub>e2</sub> in Figure 1). The conflict had become so acute that XY was now even being bullied by the management.
10. As mentioned above, the bullying started as soon as she returned to work.	XY felt that she was being bullied as soon as she returned to work after eight months sick leave. She felt that the 'rumour mill' had been in operation while she had been off work, and that management and her colleagues had influenced each other's opinions of her. No-one supported or defended her. Spreading rumours can be regarded as an example of strategic escalating behaviour (part C <sub>e2</sub> in Figure 1), and it is clear that bullying also leads to escalation of existing conflicts (D <sub>e</sub> ).
11. At the same time, she was receiving a high degree of support at home, and from her lawyer.	Her lawyer gave her informative support in the shape of sending letters to the chairman of the board and the management of the company. He also offered evaluative support, with specific advice and recommendations regarding what XY ought to do (strategic preventive behaviour) (part C <sub>p2</sub> in Figure 1). Emotional support came primarily from her husband, who always believed in her, listened to her and stood up for her (this may be interpreted as both spontaneous and strategic preventive behaviour) (parts C <sub>p1</sub> and C <sub>p2</sub> in Figure 1).
12. The court case was due to be held on a Monday, and on the previous Friday the company withdrew from the case and agreed to go to arbitration.	The management was unable to produce the witnesses that it claimed to have. There was no evidence that XY had not carried out her job properly. XY also heard later that the colleague with whom she was in the car when it collided had been told what to say in court. The result was that XY won every point of the case, as well as financial compensation from the company for the treatment she had been given. Her victory led to a de-escalation of the conflict, at least on her part (part D <sub>p</sub> in Figure 1)
13. XY wanted to work in the company right away.	XY felt that she had won, and that she could return to work with her head high. She had always been determined that the people who were bullying her should not break her down. Now she felt extra strength to continue in her job. The court decision demonstrated that the management's claim that she had not performed her work well enough was not true. She was also aware that if she stopped working and "laid herself up" at home with her pains, she would become even more ill. It helped her to have a meaningful job to go to. The work environment in the company gradually improved, and XY now has a number of new colleagues with whom she can cooperate well.

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 *Some important experiences*

This particular conflict, experienced as bullying by the victim, has been analysed, decomposed into sequences, and categorised in accordance with van de Vliert's [8] model. The model offers no guidelines regarding how detailed an analysis ought to be. In our analysis we have concentrated on the incidents and behaviour that we believe have been most significant for the course of the conflict, and which the victim experienced as significant aspects and a valid description of the conflict. However, other incidents may also have influenced the conflict. Within the company, managers and colleagues all played important roles. The husband and the lawyer offered a continual series of inputs in the course of the conflict. Part of this behaviour was probably spontaneous, for instance the husband's ongoing social support. Characteristics of the work environment in combination with envy among colleagues have been identified as possible underlying conditions for the conflict.

In many of the identified situations, the behaviour displayed had the opposite effect to that probably intended, with the result that the conflict escalated even more than intended. On many occasions, attempts at de-escalating behaviour were made (for example trying to negotiate in an informal way), the results of which were further escalations. Such actions may originally have had nothing to do with the conflict, or may have been attempts to play it down, but the opposing party interpreted them otherwise. Thus, most actions and conflict management strategies appeared to be escalating in effect. It is possible that these are the incidents that XY remembers best, for example the occasions on which she felt that she had been particularly poorly treated.

Bullying and intense personal conflicts are complex social phenomena, and there is little benefit to be gained from simplified ideological explanations that unilaterally emphasise personal or situational factors [3]. Van de Vliert [8] illustrates the complexity of the interactions that take place among factors in the individual and the environment which, in the course of time, help to either escalate or de-escalate conflicts. Among other things, the model suggests that conflicts that are not constructively managed, but which broaden in scope and escalate in intensity, may develop into tough interpersonal conflicts or even bullying. Van de Vliert's model may help to systematise the course of events and actions of the present conflict case in such a way that the relationships between the events/actions are illuminated. In retrospect, this may contribute to a better understanding of the conflict or bullying episode, and how both attempts at escalating and de-escalating behaviours are intertwined into a progressing interpersonal conflict.

### 4.2 *An atypical case of conflict*

XY's story is unusual in that it 'ends well', that is, in victory to the victim of bullying. Many victims of bullying gradually lose their self-confidence and stop believing that it is worth fighting the bullies [1]. What often happens is that they leave their jobs or claim to disability benefit. However, a growing number of victims of bullying decide to call their bullies and/or their employers to account for their misdeeds. The Norwegian High Court has handed down several judgements in disputes of this sort in the last few years.

When the bullying started, XY felt that she was not receiving support from any of her colleagues; in fact, she felt that most of them took part in the bullying. This is an unusual

situation in that group bullying is relatively infrequent. In most cases, three or four persons are involved [22]. At the time at which the conflict arose she had not developed good relationships with any of her colleagues, but even so, she expected that some of them would react when the bullying started.

Based on earlier studies [23,24], we can assume that XY's colleagues did not realise that they were behaving extremely negatively towards her. Bullying in the workplace often consists of a series of actions which, when considered separately, may appear to be trifles, but which are felt to be hurtful and insulting over a period of time [23]. A number of studies have shown that bullies are often unaware of what they are doing, because they are given little information about the consequences of their actions [7]. XY may also have interpreted the behaviour of her bullies as being more ill-intentioned than was intended. Some people may also have wished to help. Victims of bullying often are unaware of the support they are being offered [23].

Leymann emphasises that we need to be in possession of certain resources if we are to deal successfully with a bullying situation [1]. As well as having a high level of self-confidence it is essential to be in good shape both physically and psychologically. Even though XY was in great pain after the car crash she managed to 'hang in' and fight for her job. XY was always certain that she had right on her side. Leymann points out that it is our own self-belief that controls the way that we evaluate extreme situations in life or work [1]. Self-belief affects the strategy we choose in order to cope with the difficulties. This may be the reason why some people in a long-lasting bullying situation manage to hold out, while others evade the situation and end up in severe depression. XY knew that she was capable of doing her job. She had always been given favourable reports by her previous employers, and she was certain that the management had no grounds for its claim that she had done a poor job.

Several studies of bullying at work have reported that victims complain of an insufficiency or absence of social support, not only from their work-mates but also from family and friends [23]. In this case XY had support from family and friends. Many researchers regard emotional support as the most central type of support a person can receive, in that it allows victims of bullying to feel that they are being given care and attention, and that they are valued and listened to actively [25]. In health terms such support is invaluable [23]. XY's nearest and dearest gave her such feedback, and she stresses that it was her husband in particular who best understood what sort of support she needed when she was facing problems at work. The typical tendency is that the families of bullied victims get exhausted after about six months [26]. The evaluative support she received from her lawyer was also probably very important. XY states that he helped her to put things into a "realistic framework", tried to see the case from both sides and gave her sincere feedback. The lawyer provided her with the necessary informative support regarding legislation, and XY's rights in this situation.

Victims of bullying must be prepared to follow a long and often traumatic path before the conflict will be solved. Workers who feel that they are being bullied must be able to point to concrete, serious and evident infringements of their rights. A court case is always a tough experience, and one can never be certain of its result. Kile [26] advises against taking up the fight against bullies at absolutely any price, and believes that victims of bullying should not sacrifice their health for the sake of winning in or out of court. A victim of bullying must be realistic with regards to his or her own strengths and limitations. Targets of bullying are highly different in terms of vulnerability [3] or



psychological strength [27]. All the same, it is perfectly possible to win such a case if you have enough resources, in particular access to adequate social support, as the experience of XY has demonstrated.

### *4.3 Methodological limitations*

A limitation of this case study is that it is based on written and oral information provided by only one of the parties involved. Speculation and suppositions easily arise regarding what the other party felt and thought, and what the intentions that lay behind the behaviour of the opponent(s) were. This analysis has a basic limitation in that only one of the parties to the conflict is represented in it. However, the information presented is valid as part of XY's universe of experience. Part of the written documentation confirms much of what XY told us, and from the letters we can glimpse the strained relationships that existed between the parties. To be able to analyse the case in terms of the presented model, the actions of the opposite party must of course be made concrete. It is difficult, however, in the course of interpretation, to draw conclusions regarding the other party's intentions on the basis of their actions.

Another problem with this story is that the interview took place many years after the conflict started. A great deal of information must have been lost, in particular details and nuances of the development of the conflict. The course of events and important incidents have been cognitively and emotionally processed, and much of the 'temperature' in the dynamics of the conflict has been lost in the process of time. XY's version of the conflict is naturally affected by her negative feelings about her opponents, and it is the difficult moments that have been fixed in her memory. Poor communication between the opposing parties in a conflict means that opponents' behaviour is probably more often interpreted negatively, which in turn leads to the conflict being further escalated [9]. We must assume, based on the reports of many of the actions in the course of the conflict, that the other party also had good intentions. These may include actions that XY did not emphasise when she told her side of the story. It may well be that the management was trying to resolve the existing problems without XY realising this in the heat of the conflict.

This presentation has utilised a theoretical model of conflict to study an actual case of conflict and a case of perceived bullying at work. Zapf and Gross [5] have shown that a conflict perspective is highly useful in analysing and understanding bullying at work. To a greater extent than when quantitative methods are employed, the method is determined on the basis of the content that we wish to study; the semi-structured interview is the point of departure for subsequent conflict decomposition. Van de Vliert's [8] conflict escalation model sets out the premises for the methodology. The study of an individual case has told us something of the applicability of the model to this particular case. Our evaluation is that it was indeed possible to integrate the case and the theoretical model of conflict. To the extent to which we are able to regard our sampling unit as being relevant to what we wish to study, in this case the development of an interpersonal conflict to a case of at least perceived bullying at work, analytical generalisation of the case ought to be possible. An example of such a generalisation might be that other victims of bullying ought not simply to follow in XY's footsteps. Considerable psychological fortitude combined with a good network of social support are decisive factors in determining whether the challenge ought to be accepted.

## 5 Concluding remarks

Obtaining access to the views of both of the parties involved in a bullying conflict ought to be the aim of any future case study. Follow-up case studies might involve allowing the parties themselves to analyse their own conflict situation, and then look at how well these correspond, and possibly also to check their correspondence with an analysis carried out by a third party. This might also create a point of departure for a dialogue between the two parties. The qualitative approach could in this way provide an important supplement to more quantitative research intended to offer better understanding of bullying and serious personal conflicts, in accordance with the point of view of Beehr [28]. Beehr claims that there is a need to experiment with research design in the psychology of working life and stress, and he suggests case studies as one important approach to the problem.

Similarly, Hoel and his colleagues believe that the quantitative approach to bullying should be supplemented by qualitative approaches such as case studies, semi-structured interviews and focus groups [29]. These might reveal more subtle psychological processes involved in bullying. This present case study may be regarded as a contribution in this respect, in its dyadic decomposition of a specific bullying conflict into different escalating and de-escalating incidents. The study also demonstrates the importance of social support when being involved in bullying and harsh interpersonal conflicts. Whether one may have access to adequate social support or not may determine the outcome of the bullying process.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the interviewee of this case study, for her generous offer of time and patience, giving us full access to her conflict story. We are also in strong debt to Norman Anderssen and Arild Raaheim for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper and Hugh Allen for helping us with English text and grammar.

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