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Perpetrators and targets of bullying at work: Role stress and individual differences

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates personality characteristics and experiences of role stress of targets and perpetrators of bullying at work. Perpetrators, that is, employees who admit to having bullied others, have only scarcely been investigated in workplace bullying research. The present study introduces the concept of the provocative victim, meaning employees who report being subjected to bullying and who also admit bullying others. A total of 2215 employees participated in a survey with a response rate of 47 %. The study revealed that about 16 per cent of the sample may be categorized as either perpetrators (5,4%), provocative victims (2,1%), or as targets of bullying (8,3%). Provocative victims reported more prior experiences with bullying compared to other targets, be it in their former jobs or in their childhood. Targets of bullying, provocative victims and bullies were compared with those 84 per cent who does not report any involvement with respect to bullying at work, self-esteem, aggressive tendencies, prior experiences of bullying and experiences of role stress. Perpetrators were found to have a higher level of aggression than did the comparison group and the targets. Provocative victims manifested a low level of self esteem and social competency combined with a high level of aggressiveness. Targets of bullying revealed low levels of self esteem and social competency. Targets, provocative victims as well as perpetrators reported elevated levels of role stress in the form of unclear or conflicting demands and expectations around work tasks and daily work, supporting our hypothesis that micropolitical behaviour may be an important antecedent of workplace bullying.

Perpetrators and targets of bullying at work:

Role stress and individual differences

Bullying is considered to be a subset of the overarching concept of aggression (Griffin & Gross, 2004). The first empirical studies, in which the term “bullying” or “mobbing” was applied without referring to school yard bullying, were published in Scandinavia around 1990 (Leymann, 1990; Matthiesen, Raknes, & Rokkum, 1989). Since the onset of this research, the concept of bullying at work has been considered a synonym for the concepts mobbing and harassment at work (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). The Scandinavian approach defines bullying as a situation where one or more persons systematically and over a long period of time perceive to be on the receiving end of 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 this treatment (Einarsen, 2000). This definition is adapted from research on bullying among school children (Olweus, 1978; Olweus, 1993, 2003). Keashly and Jagatic (2003) defined bullying as interactions between organizational members that are characterized by repeated hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviour, often non-physical, directed at a person such that the targets' sense of himself/ herself as a competent worker and person is negatively affected. “Bullying can be considered as a form of coercive interpersonal influence. It involves deliberately inflicting injury or discomfort on another person repeatedly through physical contact, verbal abuse, exclusion, or other negative actions” (Forsyth, 2006, page 206).

Hence, bullying is a long lasting phenomenon that “wears down” its victims (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). Typically the bullying process lasts for more than a year. About two-thirds of the targets are women, while 50-80 per cent of the perpetrators are managers, most often men (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). Many of the targets of bullying suffer from severe health problems, such as depression, anxiety, compulsive behaviour (Matthiesen &

Einarsen, 2001; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002b; Niedl, 1996), or post-traumatic stress symptoms (Leymann & Gustavson, 1996; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002a; Niedl, 1996; Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2005). So far there has been comparatively more research on the consequences of bullying than on its antecedents (Einarsen et al., 2003). An especially controversial issue in the field has been the role of personality characteristic as antecedents of bullying behaviours and experiences of victimization from bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003).

Perpetrators of bullying

Important empirical knowledge about the phenomenon of workplace bullying has been collected throughout the last decade (Einarsen et al., 2003). Among these phenomena a paradox exist, which Rayner and Cooper (2003) denote as a “black hole” in the research field. Perpetrator behaviour and perpetrator characteristics have generally been reported by the targets of bullying (see, e.g., Adams, 1992; Kile, 1990), or in anecdotal stories in more popular books (e.g. Bing, 1992). There are only few published studies in which the perpetrators of bullying have been the subjects of empirical research. Some exceptions do exist, however.

A survey study conducted by Coyne and his associates revealed that 19,3 per cent of a 288 personnel sample, members of various work groups, indicated that they had subjected others to bullying (Coyne, Chong, Seigne, & Randall, 2003). This somewhat surprisingly high per centage of bully behaviour decreased to 2.7 per cent, however, when the role as a perpetrator operationally was defined more strictly, namely as a combination of self-report and peer-report (that is, at least two colleagues that the focal person had exposed others to bullying). The self-reported and peer reported group of perpetrators was found to be different from the control sample in terms of the personality factor mental stability, according to Coyne

and associates. When personality dimensions such as independency, conscientiousness, and extraversion were assessed, minor and non-significant group differences were found.

According to victim reports, perpetrators are male more often than female, and supervisors and managers more often than colleagues (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003; Zapf et al., 2003). Summarising the sparse empirical findings on the bully as a cause of workplace bullying, Zapf and Einarsen (2003) have suggested three main antecedents of bullying related to perpetrator characteristics, a) self-regulatory processes with regard to threatened self-esteem, b) lack of social competencies, and c) bullying as a result of what has been labelled as micropolitical behaviour (cf. Neuberger, 1989), that is, internal rivalry or competition in the workplace and lack of formal structures or work tasks.

Self-esteem and social competence

In a review of self-esteem research, Baumeister, Smart and Boden (1996) proposed that it is high self-esteem which is related to aggressive behaviour. Low self-esteem is linked to depressive reactions and withdrawal. Individuals with low self-esteem are therefore rarely aggressive because they fear losing the encounter (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Individuals with low self-esteem experience self-doubt, anxiety, self-contempt and ultimately depression (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979), that is, various reactions that on the individual level are inner (intrinsic) directed, against the persons themselves. A high level of self-esteem is not entirely positive, however. A high self-esteem can constitute a stable or an unstable self-evaluation. People with an unstable high self-esteem may well become aggressive in response to even seemingly minor or trivial threats to self-esteem, (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), e.g. after receiving unfavourable feedback (cf. Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993). Bullying may be regarded as a more external (extrinsic) reaction directed against some part of the daily surroundings. Thus, a high level of self-esteem can lead to external reactions as facing others

with tyrannical behaviour. Correspondingly, high self-esteem has been found to be related to perfectionism, arrogance and narcissism (Ashforth, 1994; Baumeister et al., 1996). Hence, perpetrating bullying behaviour and a high, but unstable self-esteem should be associated, as proposed by Zapf and Einarsen (2003). Unstable self-esteem can be viewed in different directions, however. Does an unstable self-esteem indicate instability across time, and moreover, is this instability reflected across measures and scale-items applied to map this psychological construct?

There is a link between hostile or aggressive behaviour and lack of social competency. For example, studies have portrayed e.g. that sex offenders have limited skills with respect to close relationships, having a hostile, un-empathetic style of relating to others, particularly women (Hudson & Ward, 2000). Social and emotional competence requires the ability to detect, understand and respond appropriately to the feelings of others (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). Social competency is closely linked with empathy, the capacity to share the emotional state of another, and is also associated with altruistic behaviour (Eisenberg, 1986). Hudson and Ward (2000) contend that deficits in social competency, specifically those aspects relevant to close relationships, are clearly linked engaging in offending or humiliating behaviour against others. Thus, social competency should be a construct of relevance, in terms of workplace bullying. In line with this notion, e.g. Wiehe (2003) found, in a study of 52 child abuse parents, that the perpetrator group, as compared to a control group, was less able to take the perspective of others, showed less warmth, compassion and concern, and experienced difficulties in tense interpersonal situations. A Finnish study of 61 violent female perpetrators revealed an increased level of psychopathic deviance, as well as other personality disturbances (Weizmann-Henelius, Viemerö, & Eronen, 2003). The high level was particularly pronounced when violence had been directed against someone outside the aggressor's close family.

A low level of social competency also appears to be a dominant factor among many perpetrators of bullying, at least according to some anecdotic case stories (Adams, 1992). Lack of self-reflection and perspective taking may be important antecedent conditions to workplace bullying, why someone become perpetrators of bullying. According to anecdotic reports, perpetrators repeatedly report that they are not aware of the consequences of their behaviour (Leymann, 1987). Social competency may be negatively related to e.g. anxiety or insecurity. Childhood studies have demonstrated that the perpetrators usually report low levels of anxiety or insecurity, or else they are roughly average on such dimensions (Olweus, 1991; Pulkkinen & Tremblay, 1992). Bullying is also found to be associated with psychoticism (Slee & Rigby, 1993), a kind of tough, insensitive behaviour manifested among the perpetrators. In line with this, school bullies do not systematically have low self esteem (Olweus, 2003). At the same time, school perpetrators tend to be more aggressive towards both teachers and parents. Children who are seen as bullies have a more positive attitude towards violence and violent means than pupils in general (Olweus, 1993). They are often characterized by impulsiveness and a strong need to dominate others in a negative way.

Boys who bully are likely to be physically stronger than boys in general, and stronger than the victims in particular (Olweus, 2003). Marked aggressiveness towards peers, manifested as early as in the 8- to 12-year range, has been found to be predictive of antisocial behaviour in years later (Robins, 1978). The development of an aggressive reaction pattern among boys has been found to be associated with parental behaviour, e.g. mother's negativism and the parents' use of power-assertive rearing methods (Olweus, 1980). There is also a group of passive bullies, i.e. followers or henchmen (Olweus, 2001). Here the picture is more mixed, as this group may also contain insecure and anxious pupils.

Among adults, perpetrators of road rage incidents have also been found to possess an elevated level of aggression and psychiatric morbidity, compared with road rage victims, and

a control group (Fong, Frost, & Stansfeld, 2001). In sum, the tendency of various studies of different groups of adult perpetrators seems to reflect that the perpetrators possess more mental problems, higher levels of aggression and lower levels of interpersonal concern for others.

A quite different explanatory model of bullying has been proposed focusing on micropolitical behaviour as an antecedent of workplace bullying behaviour (Salin, 2003; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). The concept of micropolitics is based on the premise that organizations do not consist of fully determined structures and processes (Neuberger, 1989). Thus, the organization expects its members to assist and “close” the gap in the formal structure, for instance, by striving for achieving personal goals, participating in decision making, improving their level of influence, protecting one’s status, or rivalry. Intense micropolitical behaviour may be experienced as stressful for those involved. For example, it may result in increased levels of role conflict and role ambiguity, because of frequent collisions between various role senders or role sets (cf. van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981). Thus, micropolitical behaviour can lead to role stress. Role stress, such as role ambiguity and role conflict, can also be regarded as integrated parts of ongoing micropolitical behaviour at the workplace. In line with this, emotional abuse at work is found to be associated with role conflict and role ambiguity (Keashly, Hunter, & Harvey, 1997).

In order to maintain or increase one’s level of influence, it may be necessary to build coalitions or establish special “in-groups”, to face the challenge of other subgroups within the organization (e.g. competing individuals or units). A function of micropolitical behaviour could be that it is a strategy for protecting one’s self-interests and improving one’s own position (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Hence, micropolitical behaviour may result in frequent episodes of interpersonal conflicts or aggression (De Roche, 1994). Bullying may therefore constitute an extreme type of micropolitical behaviour, or as a next step consequence after

intense interpersonal striving or conflicts, in line with the conflict escalating model of Glasl (1980).

Targets of bullying

Several studies have investigated targets of bullying, searching for individual antecedent conditions or risk factors of victimization. A Norwegian study of psychiatric and personality disorders, using the of MMPI-2 among 85 targets of bullying, portrayed clinically elevated levels of psychosomatic complaints, depressive thoughts, compulsory behaviour, and paranoid or disturbed thoughts (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). The targets could be clustered into 3 subgroups. One subgroup portrayed a quite “normal” or “common” personality profile, and was labelled as the “Common” group. Another subgroup, denoted as “the disappointed and depressed”, reported only some severe mental problems, while the last subgroup disclosed a more severe disturbed personality pattern.

It was actually the “Common group” among the bullied victims that reported the most frequent exposure to negative situations or social sanctions in the Matthiesen and Einarsen (2001) study, thus indicating some support for a vulnerability hypothesis in relation to bullying. Some employees may feel exposed to bullying after rather few negative social incidents at the workplace. Similarly, Zapf (1999), in a German study, identified two groups of bullying targets. One of the subgroups of bullied victims could not be distinguished from the control group in terms of personality dimensions measured. The other subgroup, however, tended to be significantly higher in anxiety and depression as well as lower in social skills.

A recent study (Glasø, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einarsen, submitted paper), where 79 bullied victims are compared with a matched control group, also revealed that bullied victims could be split into two subgroups, when the so-called “big 5” personality perspective (cf. McCrae, 1992) was applied. About 80 per cent of the bullied group was not statistically

significant from the matched control group in terms of “big five” personality, whereas the 20 per cent subgroup was significantly different on 4 out of 5 dimensions (among those, neuroticism and agreeableness). These Norwegian and German studies highlight the notion that there may be different types of victims, with different pre-existing personality traits (such as general self esteem and social competency).

In an empirical investigation of 60 targets of bullying, Coyne, Seigne and Randall (2000) concluded that victims tended to be less independent and extroverted, less mentally stable, but also more conscientious than a control group of non-victims. Vartia (1996) found that bullying targets reported a higher level of neuroticism, in comparison with a group of non-victims. Edelman and Woodall (1997) reported that individual characteristics such as lack of confidence, physical ailments and stress, physical or psychological ill health, inability to cope, and low self-esteem were associated with exposure to bullying. Based upon clinical case interviews, Brodsky (1976) described victims as conscientious, literal-minded, paranoid, rigid and compulsive.

Few of the targets of bullying admit that the reasons why they were bullied lie within themselves, at least partly (Zapf, 1999). In the Zapf study, 63 per cent of the targets did not see any personal contribution in the emergence of the bullying episode. Some two per cent confessed that their work performance was below average. Yet many targets claim that they are bullied because others are envious of them, or because they work too hard (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994).

Some of the empirical findings regarding victim characteristics in school yard bullying may be important to note. Typical victims tend to be more anxious and insecure than what is typical among the pupils in general (Lagerspetz, Björkquist, Berts, & King, 1982; Olweus, 1993). They are often cautious, sensitive and quiet (Olweus, 2003). Olweus labels this victim group as passive or submissive. When bullied, they frequently react by crying and

withdrawal. Thus, the targets of school bullying evidence low self-esteem (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1993). Most commonly, they have few friends as a source of emotional support, and often have higher rates of problems such as depression or anxiety (Carney & Merrell, 2001). Targets of bullying also have negative attitudes towards violence and violence means, according to Olweus (2003). Olweus concludes that the behaviour of passive-submissive victims signals to others that they are insecure and worthless individuals, who will not retaliate if they are attacked or insulted. A follow-up study of victims of school bullying, when they were 23 years of age, showed that they were more likely to be depressed and had lower self-esteem, relative to a group of non-victims (Olweus, 2003). Thus, depression and low self-esteem among adults may be linked with persistent childhood victimization, which again may be a risk factor for victimisation in adulthood.

Provocative victims

Olweus (1978), furthermore, labelled a subgroup of victims as “the provocative victims”. They are characterized by a combination of both anxious and aggressive reaction patterns. This group of children often has problems with concentration, and behaves in ways that may cause irritation and tension in the surroundings, be it among fellow pupils, or among teachers. They also risk social isolation or exclusion, because others perceive their behaviour as annoying and aggressive. Hence they may bully younger and weaker children while being bullied themselves by older and more powerful children. Such targets may have a history of involvement in bullying situations, both as targets and as perpetrators.

Such bullying targets have also been studied among adults. A UK study of 5288 adults in various workplace venues (Smith, Singer, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003) asked respondents to recall their experiences with childhood bullying. An association between childhood and workplace bullying was found: Former school victims were found to be more exposed to

bullying at work. This childhood-adulthood link was especially pronounced among the bullying victims. Some 11 per cent among former school victims and 13 per cent among former school bully-victims reported that they were exposed to bullying at work. The corresponding numbers were found to be 9 per cent for an ordinary student group as well for the former school bullies. Palmer and Thakordas (2005) made a study among 70 male imprisoned offenders. Here, the bully-victim group reported higher levels of hostility than the other offenders. In this selected prison sample, some 43 per cent was categorized as belonging to the bully-victim group (12 per cent were pure bullies and 16 were classified as pure victims).

Aims of the study

The first aim of the present study was to investigate whether targets and perpetrators of bullying at work portrays certain personality characteristics. Secondly, what is the relative number of provocative victims among self-reported targets of bullying? Provocative victims are defined as those employees who admit to having bullied others at the work place as well as claiming to be targets of bullying. The third aim of the study was to ascertain the number of self-reported perpetrators of bullying in a diverse sample of leaders and employees. The fourth aim was to investigate whether role stress and role ambiguity characterise work places where bullying flourishes, creating a futile soil for intense micropolitical behavior.

Micropolitical behaviour, as measured by the concepts of role stress and role ambiguity, has been suggested as a major antecedent of bullying at work. We therefore suggest that bullying may be particularly common in work situations characterised by a high level of role stress. Unclear or conflicting demands and expectations around tasks, obligations, privileges and priorities lay the foundation for a high level of micropolitical behaviour among highly

frustrated individuals, which will increase the risk of bullying behaviours. The following hypotheses will be investigated:

- 1) Provocative victims will report more prior acquaintance with bullying compared to others victims, be it in a) former job(s) or b) in their childhood. Provocative victims will also c) report more childhood experiences as perpetrators of bullying.
- 2) Perpetrators of bullying will report high levels of aggression, a high but unstable level of self-esteem, and a low level of social competence.
- 3) Provocative victims will a) report a low level of self esteem, combined with a high level of aggressiveness, and low level of social competence. Targets of bullying will report a low level of self esteem combined with a low level of social competence.
- 4) Targets of bullying, as well as provocative victims and perpetrators, will report an elevated level of role conflict and role ambiguity.

METHOD

Respondents

Respondents were randomly selected members among six Norwegian labour unions and members of the Norwegian Employers' Federation (NHO). The participating unions, all situated in the geographical area around the city of Bergen, represented a convenient sample that reflected a diversity of work environments, hence increasing the validity and generalizability of the results. The labour unions included the Teachers Union, the Union of Hotel and Restaurant Workers, the Union of Trade and Commerce, consisting mainly of employees in shops and the administration of private businesses, the Union of Graphical Workers, the Union of Electricians, and the Union of Clerical and Officials, consisting of

employees in the city administration of Bergen. All samples were studied as part of a more comprehensive research project on bullying and harassment in the workplace (see also Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen, & Hellesøy, 1994; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996).

A total of 4742 labour union members and employers' representatives were selected randomly from a total population of 10 616 individuals. A total of 2215 people responded (a 47% response rate). In the total sample 53 per cent are men and 47 per cent women. All age groups between 16 and 70 are covered, with a mean age of 38 years (SD 11.9). About 12 per cent are 25 years of age or less, whereas five per cent of the respondents are aged 60 or above. About 80 per cent are employed on a full time basis. Most of the respondents (62%) are employed in private enterprises. Thus, 38 per cent are public employees. Furthermore, about 20 per cent of the respondents work in organizations with more than 100 employees, and nine per cent in organizations with five or fewer employees.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire used in the present study consisted of demographic variables, health-related variables, scales on psychological traits, single questions and scales on harassment and bullying, and scales and questions measuring perceived work environment quality. The following scales and measurements were included in the present study:

Three single questions measured exposure to bullying at work during the last six months as well as and earlier exposure to bullying (in present job, or in earlier jobs). Prior to these questions the respondents were presented with the following definition of bullying:

”Bullying (harassment, badgering, niggling, freezing out, offending someone) is a problem in some workplaces and for some workers. To label something as bullying it has to occur repeatedly over a period of time, and the person confronted has to have difficulties defending

himself/ herself. It is not bullying if two parties of approximately equal “strength” are in conflict or the incident is an isolated event.”

The question on exposure to bullying and harassment was stated as follows: “Have you been subjected to bullying at the work place during the last six months?” The response categories were: “no”, “occasionally”, “now and then”, “about once a week”, and “many times a week”. All respondents who confirmed that they “occasionally” or more often were targets of bullying were defined as being exposed to bullying at work. This single question has been shown to be a valid measure of exposure to bullying at work (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Salin, 2001). The respondents were also asked if they had bullied others at the work place. Respondents who confirmed that this was the case were defined as perpetrators of bullying. Provocative victims are those who claim to be both a victim and a perpetrator of bullying. Two additional questions addressed childhood experiences with bullying at school, be it as a target or a perpetrator of bullying. Two questions addressed earlier experiences of bullying at work.

In addition to the single questions on bullying, the *Negative Acts Questionnaire and Bergen Bullying Index* (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen et al., 1994) were administered. The NAQ consists of 18 items measuring exposure to negative episodes or situations typical for bullying, and may be regarded as a quantitative inventory on exposure to bullying, according to Einarsen and Raknes (1997) and Mikkelsen & Einarsen (2001). The response categories for NAQ are “daily”, “weekly”, “sometimes” and “never”. The Cronbach's Alpha of NAQ was found to be 0.86, indicating a high internal stability. The Bergen Bullying Index is a global measurement of perceived individual and organizational consequences of bullying and harassment. It consists of five items, each scored on a four-point Likert scale from “agree strongly” to “disagree strongly”. The Cronbach's Alpha was 0.82, indicating satisfactory internal stability.

Personality traits. The study contained three measures of aggressive tendencies adopted from research on schoolyard bullying (Olweus, 1987, , 1991), Aggression after provocation was measured by three items (with Cronbach's Alpha= 0.76). Aggression against superiors contained two items (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.52). Aggression against peers were measured by three items (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.70). One measure on self esteem was included in the study, measuring General self esteem (Alsaker & Olweus, 1986; Rosenberg, 1965). The measure of General self-esteem, consisting of six items, had satisfactory internal stability (Cronbach's Alpha=0.84). A four item measure of Social anxiety was also added (Alsaker & Olweus, 1986), measuring perceived incompetence and anxiety in social settings. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was found to be 0.73. In total, the personality inventories consisted of 25 items, all formulated as statements describing oneself as a person. Six response alternatives were applied, with the range from agree completely (1) to disagree completely (6). Negative statements were reversed, resulting in a positive – negative continuum for all scales, with a theoretical range of 1-6 points, with 1 denoting the most positive value.

Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity. These constructs were measured using two scales developed by Rizzo and associates (Rizzo, House, & Lirzman, 1970). Role Conflict, consisting of eight items, measures the degree to which one perceives contradictory expectations, demands, or values in one's job. Role ambiguity, consisting of six items, measures the degree to which the respondents experience their job situation as unpredictable and not clarified. Both scales are scored on a seven point Likert scale, ranging from "totally agree" to "totally disagree". Both scales are scored in a positive – negative direction, with 1 denoting the most positive value. Cronbach's Alphas were found to be 0.78 and 0.81 for role conflict and role ambiguity, respectively.

Statistics. The data were analyzed by the use of SPSS 11.5 statistical package. The following analyses were performed: Oneway ANOVA, Reliability analysis with Cronbach's Alpha, Crosstab analysis for categorical data, and Frequency statistics.

RESULTS

Some eight per cent of the sample reported exposure to bullying at work (figure 1). In addition, two per cent can be defined as provocative victims. About five per cent of the respondents admitted to be perpetrators of bullying at work. In sum, about one in 10 respondents reports to be a victim of bullying, whereas one in 20 acknowledges acting as a perpetrator of bullying. Respondents with no experience of bullying were used as a comparison group (n= 1838).

Figure 1 about here

Most provocative victims (78%) and most perpetrators (74%) were males ($\chi^2 = 34.32$, $df= 3$, $p < 0.001$). Most targets and provocative victims (60% and 80%, respectively) were employed in private sector ($\chi^2 = 21.80$, $df= 3$, $p < 0.001$). Both present and former targets of bullying, as well as perpetrators, were over-represented in companies with 100+ employees ($\chi^2 = 40.87$, $df= 15$, $p < 0.001$), and in companies with skewed gender distribution of either males or females ($\chi^2 = 31.62$, $df= 6$, $p < 0.001$). Union representatives comprised about 25 per cent of both the targets and the perpetrator groups, whereas they constituted 36 per cent of the provocative victim group ($\chi^2 = 18.47$, $df= 3$, $p < 0.001$). In the rest of the sample 18 per cent were union representatives.

Acquaintance with bullying

The first hypothesis addressed whether provocative victims would report more prior experiences with bullying compared to other victims, be it in former jobs or in their childhood. In general, the provocative victim group reported more former workplace experience as bullying targets, relative to all other groups. Thirty-two per cent of the provocative victims admit that they had been bullied earlier in their career, in another work place. The corresponding number in the target group is 17 per cent, 10 per cent in the perpetrator group, and 5 per cent in the comparison group. The group differences are significant ($\chi^2 = 77.54$, $df= 3$, $p<0.001$).

The provocative victims also report more experienced bullying than do the others with respect to childhood experiences (figure 2). Forty-eight per cent of the provocative victims claim that they were bullied as children. In the target group, as well as among the bullies, the corresponding number was 27 per cent, whereas 19 per cent of the comparison group had experienced bullying in childhood ($\chi^2 = 53.18$, $df= 9$, $p <0.001$). The provocative victims also frequently admit that they acted as bullies in their childhood. Forty-five per cent in this group report childhood experiences as bullies. This number is higher than for the bullies (38 %) and for the targets of bullying (14 %). The group difference is significant ($\chi^2 = 94.38$, $df= 9$, $p<0.001$). Summarized, we may regard hypothesis 1 as confirmed.

Figure 2 about here

Perpetrators

Our second hypothesis stated that perpetrators will report a high level of aggression, high but unstable self-esteem, and low social competence. The results showed that perpetrators scored significantly higher on aggressiveness compared to targets, provocative victims, and the

comparison group (see table 1 for details). The perpetrators describe themselves as more aggressive after provocation than the others ($M=3.92$, as compared to mean values between 3.43 and 3.77 for the other 3 groups, 2 out of 3 LSD Post hoc tests were significant). Correspondingly, the perpetrator group reported a higher level of aggression against superiors ($M=3.58$, as compared to mean values between 3.40 and 3.50 for the other 3 groups, 2 out of 3 Post hoc tests were significant). On the other hand, provocative victims reported a higher level of aggression against peers than did the other groups, including the perpetrator group ($M=2.51$, whereas the mean values are 2.24 for the perpetrators, 1.92 and 1.91 for respectively the Bullied victims group and the Comparison group).

Reliability analyses using Cronbach's Alpha were conducted to investigate the second part of hypothesis 2, predicting that the perpetrators have a high, but unstable within-scale self-esteem. The hypothesis can be verified to the extent that the perpetrators report a high level of self-esteem combined with a low internal stability (that is, a markedly lower level of Cronbach's Alpha than for the other 3 groups) on the scale measuring self esteem. As shown in table 1, perpetrators portray a higher level of self esteem compared to the two target groups (lack of self esteem scores: $M= 2.28$ vs. $M= 2.67$ for the target group and $M= 2.75$ for the provocative victim group). The highest level of self esteem was reported by the Comparison group (lack of self esteem score of $M=2.19$).

Table 1 about here

Unstable self-esteem can be reflected as low inter-item reliability score, summarized as Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients. Whereas the Cronbach's Alpha for the General self esteem scale were found to be 0.76 in the perpetrator group, the corresponding numbers for the other groups were 0.82 (targets), 0.69 (provocative victims), and 0.81 (the comparison

group). Hence, the perpetrator group seems to have a more unstable self esteem than the comparison group, as the internal stability of the scale measuring self-esteem is somewhat lower. The provocative victims, who are also perpetrators themselves, portrayed an internal stability lower than 0.70 (that is, 0.69) on General self-esteem. Coefficient 0.70 is seen as the criterion for a sufficient level of internal stability by Nunnally (1978). Hypothesis 2 was partially verified.

Targets and provocative victims

The third hypothesis indicated that provocative victims will report a low level of self esteem, combined with a high level of aggressiveness and a low level of social competence. The hypothesis also states that targets of bullying will report a lower level of self esteem combined with a lower level of social competence. The provocative victims scored lower on self esteem and social competency than did the target group, and the comparison group ($M= 2.75$ and $M= 2.67$, as apposed to $M=2.67$ and $M= 2.53$ for the bullying target group and $M= 2.19$ and $M=2.40$ for the comparison group). Thus, provocative victim group, as target group, reports a lower level of social self-esteem and social competency than the comparison group.

Correspondingly, table 1 portrays that the provocative victims report more aggression than do targets of bullying, and also more than the comparison group (the three measures of aggression vary between $M=3.77$ and $M=2.51$ for the provocative victims, targets scored between $M= 3.43$ and $M=1.92$, whilst the comparison group scored between 3.63 and 1.91). Only the perpetrator group report more aggression, in terms of aggression after provocation and aggression against superiors, than the provocative victim group. Provocative victims did, however, report more aggression against their friends as compared to the perpetrator group. In sum, hypothesis 3 can be regarded as supported.

Role stress

The fourth hypothesis stated that perpetrators, targets as well as provocative victims will report an elevated level of role conflict and role ambiguity. High levels of such role stress may lead to micropolitical behaviour which in turn may be perceived as or may escalate into bullying, e.g. as aggression provoked by frustration. Table 2 provides an overview of the group comparisons regarding role conflict and role ambiguity. Oneway ANOVA statistics revealed significant group differences between the four sub-samples ($p < 0.001$ for both role conflict and role ambiguity), with the three bullying groups reporting elevated levels of role stress compared to the comparison group. Table 1 portrays that the two groups of bullying targets, respectively provocative victims and the other target group, reported a higher level of role conflict ($M = 3.88$ and 3.68) than the perpetrator group ($M = 3.25$) and the comparison group ($M = 2.81$). The group differences are much the same for role ambiguity ($M = 3.01$ and $M = 3.24$, as compared to $M = 2.72$ and $M = 2.56$). The perpetrators also experienced significantly more role stress in terms of role ambiguity than did the comparison group, according to the post hoc test. In sum, hypothesis no. 4 may therefore be regarded as supported.

DISCUSSION

The present study has shown that while some eight per cent claim to be targets of bullying at work, another two per cent may be classified as provocative victims, a concept borrowed from school yard bullying (Olweus, 2003). Some 4 per cent claim to be perpetrators of bullying, in addition. This is in line with bullying research among school children, in which some researchers suggest that passive victims are more prevalent than bullies and aggressive or provocative victims (Hanish & Guerra, 2004). Systematic exposure to negative social experiences in childhood, such as bullying, may cause serious negative after effects in adult life, as e.g. a vulnerable personality. Thus, empirical findings indicate that persons who were victimized at school are more likely to be victimized in the workplace (Smith et al., 2003).

Also found was that the target group, and especially the provocative victims, has more prior experiences with bullying than others. They reported more exposure to bullying, be it in school yard, but also in former jobs. For many of the provocative victims, bullying experience in school age also comprised experiences as perpetrators. Nearly 1 in 2 had such experiences. The notion addressed in hypothesis no. 1 was thus confirmed. Some of the provocative victims may possess what Levinson (1978) labelled as an "Abrasive personality". Abrasive personality reflects a tendency to behave in an insensitive, ruthless way especially when the person is confronted with social pressure situations. However, among school children, Ma (2001) have demonstrated that there seems to exist a victim-offender cycle, the relationship of victim to bully being reciprocal. By the use of multilevel analysis on a sample of more than 13.000 pupils he discovered that many targets of bullying in the next run may act as perpetrators, for instance against younger children. Affective and physical conditions among the children were but some of the factors that contributed to the association.

This study did also reveal an elevated level of aggressiveness among the provocative victims. Brodsky (1976) has pointed this quite categorically, claiming that "*after studying harassers and studying their victims, it seemed that there was never a victim who would not have made an excellent harasser*" (page 109). This statement seems to be supported in the present study as far as the provocative victims is concerned. Among school children, Lorber and associates found that victims of abuse are more often likely to be disruptive, aggressive and violent than their non-abused counterparts (Lorber, Felton, & Reid, 1984). They explained such results as socially learned behaviours. Some of the most extreme victims of bullying are also some of the most aggressive bullies (Ma, 2001). In general, however, bullying victims are found to be less proactively aggressive but more reactively aggressive than pure bullies (Unilever, 2005). In line with this, reactive aggression has been found to be common among bullies as victims, whereas proactive aggression was only characteristic of bullies (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005).

A high level of self-esteem has generally been regarded as desirable and adaptive and has been used as an indicator of good adjustment (Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988). School yard bullying research has portrayed that the child bully in general seems to have high self esteem (Olweus, 2003), although exceptions from such findings do exist (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001; Salmivalli, 2001). In line with Olweus' (2003) notion, our findings portrayed that the adult perpetrator report a relatively high level of self esteem. However, an Irish study of over 8000 school children showed that children that had been involved in bullying as victims, bullies or both had significantly lower global self-esteem than did children who had neither bullied nor been bullied (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Perpetrators characterized by elevated levels of self esteem runs contrary to an entrenched body of wisdom that has long pointed to low self esteem as the root of violence and other destructive kinds of social behaviour (cf. Baumeister et al., 1996). Building on a theoretical assumption by Baumeister

and associates that violent perpetrators are characterized by an elevated but unstable self esteem, we proposed that perpetrators of workplace bullying will report an unstable self esteem. This statement was only partially supported, however.

The perpetrators did report a somewhat lower level of self esteem stability, operationalized as high inter-item correlations between the self esteem measure items, compared to victims and non-victims in the comparison group, although above the recommended threshold for acceptable internal stability recommended by Nunnally (1978) . Thus, the second hypothesis in the present study was only partially supported. Yet, a low stability, below the recommended threshold, was found among the provocative victims. It is possible that our applied six item measure of general self-esteem is not adequate or sensitive enough as a measure of stability-instability in self-esteem. A longitudinal design would probably be better, looking at stability over time.

The perpetrators, comprising five per cent of the sample, did report more aggressiveness than the victim group and the comparison group. The difference is unambiguous as perpetrators admit stronger aggressive reactions after provocations in the work place. Correspondingly, the perpetrators also aggress more against superiors, and against peers. This is in line with Olweus and associates' findings from the school bullying research (Olweus, 1994, 2003). The bullies in the work place tend to react more aggressively than others across different social situations. This may lend support an aggressiveness hypothesis, that is; the perpetrators in general manifest a more aggressive behavioural pattern at the workplace than others. This aggressiveness has e.g. by Ashforth (1994) been denoted as “petty tyranny” among superiors. The workplace, and the bullying that take place therein, may be one but several modes and arenas for the expression of aggressiveness in general. In a study examining prisoners’ responses concerning bullying Ireland (2001) reported that bullies were more likely than other prisoners to react with physical or verbal aggression. Bullies

tended to evaluate the consequences of these aggressive strategies as more favourable than did other prisoners (Ireland & Archer, 2004). In line with this finding, an other study previously demonstrated that participating in bullying behaviours was found to be strongly related to high levels of overall aggression, physical and verbal aggression, hostility and anger (Buss & Perry, 1992).

A target of aggressive social behaviour may especially feel subjected to work place bullying if characterized by a pre-morbid low level of self esteem. Low self esteem rooted in the past of the individual, especially in the childhood, may have the consequence that the person is highly susceptible as a target of bullying (cf. Baumeister, 1993). Bullying may also lead to a low level of organized-based self-esteem. Organized-based self-esteem is defined as the degree to which an individual believes him/ herself to be capable, significant and worthy as an organizational member (Pierce & Gardner, 2004).

Our findings indicate that all targets of bullying, but especially the provocative victims, report a lower level of self esteem and social competency than perpetrators and comparison group, in line with hypothesis no. 3. Research among school children has also found that provocative victims had the lowest self-esteem of the subgroups investigated (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). A possible explanation to this group difference may be that many victims possess a more fragile self esteem, in accordance with Brockner's (1988) "plasticity hypothesis". According to Brockner, individuals with so-called plastic self esteem are very dependent on good work performance and positive appraisal from others to maintain their self esteem. Hence, a low self esteem may then easily become a consequence of bullying. The necessary self esteem nurturance, leading to a stable, favourable global evaluation of oneself, can thus not be obtained. It may also be that some of the targets of bullying feel frustrated or irritated because of lack of self esteem support in the work site, with the result that they act in a provoking manner, as other may perceive as a general lack of

social competency. The low internal stability among provocative targets on the scale measuring self-esteem supports the hypothesis that these victims suffer from a fragile self-esteem.

The importance of social competency in relation to bullying is also demonstrated by Coyne and his associates in their Irish work place study (Coyne et al., 2003). Self- and peer reported victims tended to be more likely than controls to have difficulty coping with personal criticism, to be easily upset, to view the world as threatening, to be anxious, tense, and suspicious of others. The Irish study may also be interpreted as a support for a vulnerability hypothesis of work place bullying (cf. Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). A general vulnerability of bullying may lead to difficulties in terms of social interactions with others. Somehow passive coping strategies related to childhood bullying (“tried to make fun of it”; “did not really cope”) has been found, moreover, to predict greater risk of workplace bullying (Smith et al., 2003). Among school children, social intelligence has been found to be negatively related to victimization (Kaukainen et al., 2002).

Bullying may also be a consequence of micropolitical behaviour, rivalry and competition in the work site (Zapf et al., 2003). The compression of career structures resulting from de-layering processes represent fewer opportunities for advancement in many work places, thereby increasing the competition between managers for promotion to a shrinking pools of jobs (Sheehan, 1999), with growing interpersonal conflict and bullying as possible outcomes (Hoel & Salin, 2003). Role stress, that is, work roles that interfere with each other (role conflict) or work roles that are experienced as unclear or confusing (role ambiguity) may indicate a certain need for micropolitical behavior. The fourth hypothesis in the present study addressed this issue, claiming that the perpetrator group in particular, with their self-reported bullying behaviour, but also the two groups of bullying targets, would report this kind of job stress. The aforementioned hypothesis was supported. The perpetrator

group portrayed a higher level of role stress indicative of a need for micropolitical behaviour than the comparison group. However, targets of bullying, both the provocative victims as well as the pure targets of bullying, reported an even higher level of experienced role stress than did the perpetrators. Previous findings have shown that bullying seem to occur in stressful, competitive and negative working environments (Vartia, 1996), in particular in work places with a high level of role conflict. Thus, it should come as no surprise that targets of bullying report exposure to micropolitical behaviour reflected by role conflict and role ambiguity, equal to or even higher, than the perpetrator group.

Methodological constraints

The present study is conducted by the use of survey method. Questionnaires are distributed by mail, and returned anonymously. The respondents are asked about sensitive topics, issues that may lead them to respond with denial or social desirability. The respondents have been asked not only if they feel subjected to bullying at the work place, but also if they have acted as perpetrators themselves, hence an individual research level is applied (cf. Matthiesen, Aasen, Holst, Wie, & Einarsen, 2003). The result may be valid to the extent that the respondents answer the questions in an honest way and in accordance with their inner subjective experience. However, measurement of perpetrator behaviour is methodologically difficult. The bullying definition presented in our study, and most other bullying studies, does not require any intention about bullying among the perpetrators to meet the definition. When someone is asked if they have bullied others, many will reject or deny the question, because they may never have had any intent to do so. Still the other part in a dyadic relationship at the work site may feel subjected to bullying. To admit perpetrator behaviour in retrospect, thus, require a certain level of empathy or skill to imagine social situations from the perspective of other people. "False negative" bullies or provocative victims may then pose a methodological

problem in the present study. "False positives" may of course also exist, self-critical individuals who are eager to admit perpetrator behaviour, but without ever being in the power position or acting in a manner where others actually feels subjected to bullying.

So far, almost no survey studies have been published with the perpetrators in the role as survey respondents. A possible explanation is that it may be methodologically difficult to get access to the perpetrators at the workplace. Associations for bullied victims have been established in several countries (e.g. Norway, Sweden, Germany). Many of the victims are openly interviewed in media. Not surprisingly, there are no associations for the perpetrators. In Norway, outlined in the "Work environment act, §12", bullying (harassment) is specifically forbidden at work places. Few leaders or subordinates will openly admit to bullying, since it may be associated with social condemnation and career reprisals. Chris Argyris (1974) differentiates between "espoused theories" (the individual's idealised version or glorification of own behaviour, e.g. in daily work) and what that actually takes place (in practice), which he denotes as "theories in use". A relevant question posed is whether it is possible to scientifically investigate the perpetrators' theories in use regarding bullying, in stead of their espoused theories. Social desirability (cf. Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) or guilt reduction (cf. Sigmund Freud, see, e.g., Gomez, 2005) may cause perpetrators of bullying to reject that they act in the role of a bully.

Another limitation inherent within the present study is its cross-sectional design. The general self-esteem among the targets of bullying, and the proneness to express frustration or complex aggression overtly or covertly, may constitute a function of former bullying exposure, to give but an example. The behaviour pattern of the victims may have changed as a consequence of bullying. It is possible that some individuals possess a higher propensity to become troubled with bullying than most others, because they have a more vulnerable personality (cf. Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). Negative perceptions of the work situation has

previously been found to be associated with workplace deviance, with personality traits such as conscientiousness, emotional stability and agreeableness as moderating factors (Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt, & Barrick, 2004). It is also possible that some victims change their behaviour to become more aggressive because of their former experiences of victimization from bullying. Whether aggressiveness may comprise an after effect for some targets after their exposure to workplace bullying is of course impossible to clarify within a cross-sectional survey design. Using survey studies, no cause and effect can be proven.

Conclusion

This study has portrayed, in line with previous bullying research among children, that there seem to exist individual differences, when perpetrators and targets of bullying are compared. Bullied victims can be divided into at least two groups; targets of bullying, and provocative victims. Provocative victims were found to report more prior experiences with bullying, in previous work as well as in their childhood, as compared to other victims. Hypothesis no. 1 was thus confirmed. Many of the provocative victims, even more than among the workplace perpetrators, admit that they had former experiences as childhood bullies. Hypothesis no. 2 was thus also verified. The perpetrators reported that they behaved more aggressively across various social situations than do the others. The notion that this difference partially may be associated with a high, but unstable self-esteem was in the same manner supported.

Also found in the present study was that the targets of work place bullying reported more passive aggression than did the perpetrator group and the provocative victim group. Self-esteem is a personal evaluation reflecting what people think of themselves as individuals (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Provocative victims reported a lower level of such general self esteem, in combination with a higher level of aggressiveness and a lower level of social competency, whereas targets of bullying reported a combination of low self-esteem and low

social competency, confirming hypothesis no. 3. Some of this aggressiveness can be associated with the provocative victims' former bullying exposure (cf. the frustration-aggression hypothesis, Berkowitz, 1989), or be due to social learning (cf. Bandura, 1977). Bullying can also be regarded as an extreme form of social stress at work (Zapf et al., 2003). Such work stress may take the form of micropolitical behaviour, causing role conflict and role ambiguity as some of the outcome. Hypothesis no. 4 was confirmed; targets, provocative victims and perpetrators reported more role stress than the comparison group. Widespread micropolitical behaviour with unclear work demands and e.g. interpersonal conflicts or rivalry may lead some workers into the role as targets of bullying, whereas others turns out to be perpetrators or provocative victims.

The provocative victim group has only briefly been focused on in previous workplace research, and deserves more attention. Correspondingly, it is time to shed more light on the perpetrator in work place bullying, and not only from the perspective of the target. Only a few papers have been published so far, as the aforementioned survey study carried out by Coyne and his associates (2003), where the perpetrators themselves and their responding have been mapped. Most workplace studies are anecdotal in this respect, with the consequence that perpetrators mostly have been studied at a distance. This study must therefore be regarded as a contribution to break the "at a distance" research habit in terms of conducting research on workplace perpetrators. Nevertheless, in forthcoming studies, we specifically call for two research perspectives to gain more knowledge regarding perpetrators. Study initiatives we specifically suggest are a) case study research - to gain deeper insight in the bullying process from the perspective of the perpetrator, and b) longitudinal studies, in which work place bullying may be investigated in a sequential way along the time axis. Interesting research prospects may be revealed if the perpetrators and targets of bullying are subjected to research

before the onset of the bullying incidents, thus collecting valuable data that can be compared with the succeeding future response pattern.

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Table 1.
 Personality differences between targets, provocative bullied victims, bullies and a comparison group. Oneway ANOVA with Post-hoc tests.

	Targets		Provocative victims		Perpetrators (3)		Comparison group (4)		Post hoc +)	Df	F
	(1)	(1)	(2)	(2)	(3)	(3)	(4)	(4)			
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)			
Lack of self-esteem and social competency											
General Self-esteem	2.67	(1.05)	2.75	(0.91)	2.28	(.81)	2.19	(.85)	1> 3-4, 2> 3-4,	3/ 2124	21,14***
Social competency	2.53	(0.85)	2.67	(0.68)	2.46	(0.68)	2.40	(0.72)	1>4	3/ 2130	3.21*
Aggression											
Aggression after provocation	3.43	(1.22)	3.77	(1.30)	3.92	(1.14)	3.63	(1.21)	1<3, 3>4	3/ 2130	3.94**
Aggression against superiors	3.40	(0.62)	3.50	(0.76)	3.58	(0.68)	3.41	(0.63)	1<3, 3>4	3/ 2124	3.03*
Aggression against friends	1.92	(0.82)	2.51	(1.22)	2.24	(0.79)	1.91	(0.81)	1<2-3, 2>4, 3>4	3/ 2130	12.78***

Note. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. Range: 1-4, in which 1 reflects the most positive value. + The numbers in Post hoc column refer to significant pairwise group comparisons. LSD procedure.

Table 2.

Variations in micropolitical behaviour, operationalized as group differences in role conflict and role ambiguity. Group comparison of targets, provocative bullied victims, bullies and a comparison group. Oneway ANOVA with Post-hoc tests.

	Targets (1)		Provocative victims (2)		Perpetrator group (3)		Comparison group (4)		Post hoc tests +)	Df	F
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)			
Role conflict	3.68	(1.21)	3.88	(1.13)	3.25	(1.11)	2.81	(1.13)	1>3-4, 2> 3-4,	3/ 2132	45.99***
Role ambiguity	3.01	(1.17)	3.24	(1.20)	2.72	(0.91)	2.56	(0.93)	1 >3-4, 2 > 3-4, 3 > 4	3/ 2130	18.58***

Note. *** p<0.001. Range: 1-7, 1 reflects the most positive value. + The numbers in Post hoc column refer to significant pairwise group comparisons. LSD-procedure.

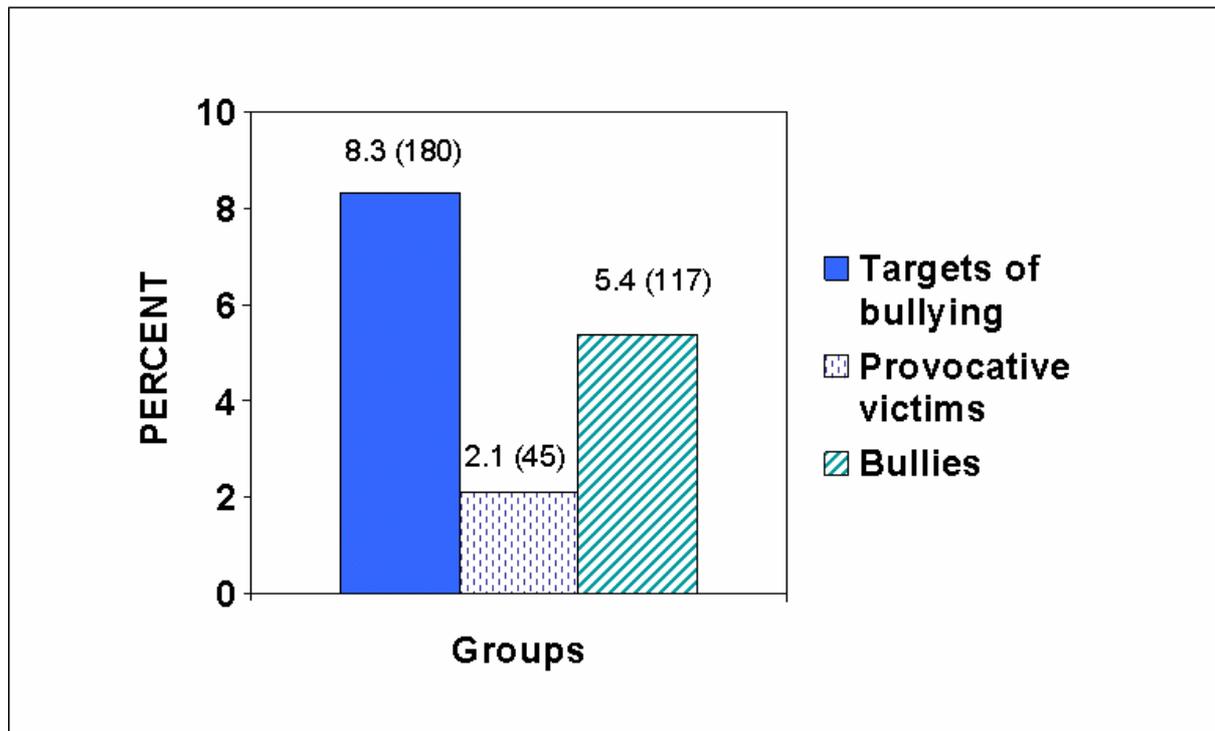


Figure 1. Three bullying groups, percentage distribution (number of respondents in paranthesis). The comparison group is omitted (84.3%, n= 1838).

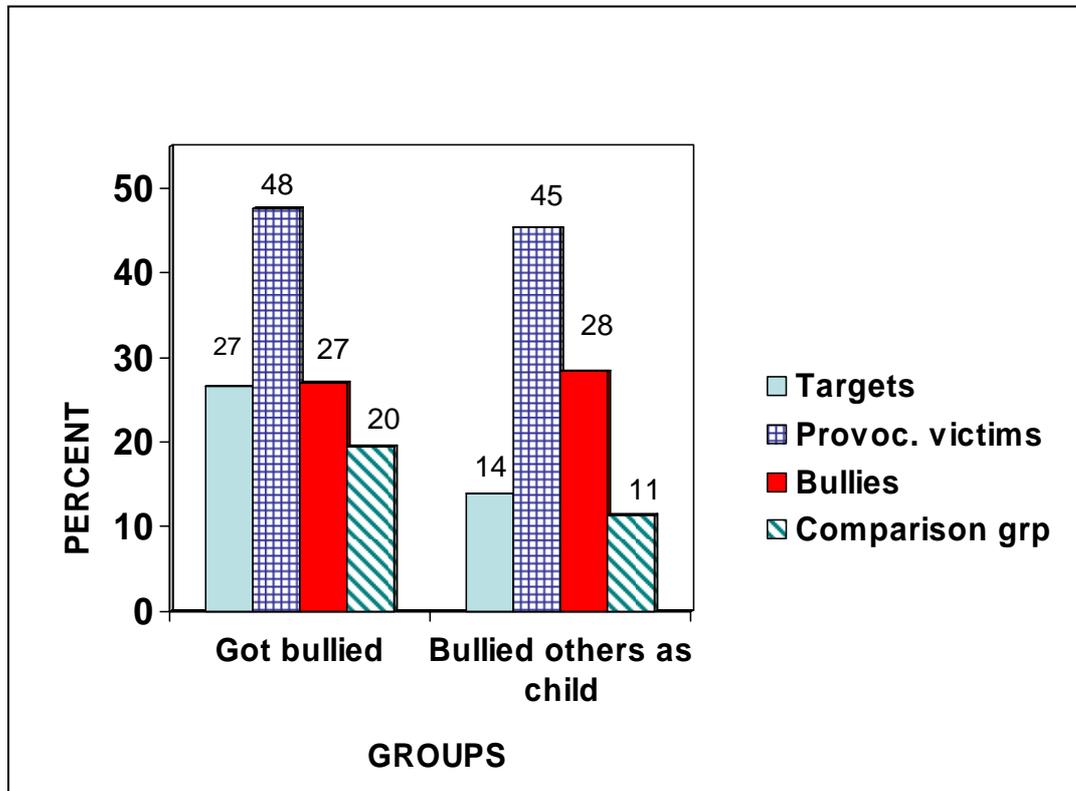


Figure 2. Childhood bullying experiences. Group comparisons ($\chi^2 = 53.19$ and 94.39 , $p < 0.001$ for both).