

Article

Acceptable Behavior or Workplace Bullying?—How Perpetrator Gender and Hierarchical Status Affect Third Parties' Attributions and Moral Judgments of Negative Behaviors

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Abstract: Workplace bullying consists of repeated, long-term exposure to a variety of negative behaviors. However, it remains unclear when behaviors are seen as morally acceptable vs. become bullying. Moral judgments affect whether third parties deem it necessary to intervene. In this qualitative study, we first conceptualize and then explore via 27 interviews with Austrian HR professionals and employee representatives whether twelve diverse negative behaviors elicit distinct causal attributions and moral judgments. In particular, we examine how a perpetrator's hierarchical position and gender shape the third parties' evaluations. A qualitative content analysis reveals the behaviors vary in their perceived acceptability and associations with workplace bullying. Ambiguous behaviors require specific cues such a perpetrator's malicious intent to be labeled workplace bullying. Overall, third parties judge behaviors by supervisors more harshly, particularly when managerial role expectations are violated. The majority of informants reject the notion that their perceptions are affected by perpetrator gender. Still, women who engage in behaviors associated with anger or a lack of empathy are often perceived as acting with intent. The findings suggest that the violation of social role expectations amplifies the attribution of dispositional causes (e.g., malicious intent). We discuss the relevance of perpetrator intent for research and practice.

Keywords: workplace bullying; moral judgments; attributions of intent; perpetrator status; perpetrator gender; ethical decision making



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1. Introduction

Researchers usually measure exposure to the phenomenon of workplace bullying via behavioral checklists. Repeated, long-term exposure to at least one or two negative behaviors by supervisors, peers, or subordinates indicates severe victimization [1,2]. The negative behaviors may include person-related behaviors such as yelling or spreading rumors; work-related behaviors such as persistent criticism or withholding important information; and behaviors of social exclusion such as ignoring someone or performing practical jokes [2]. However, particular work-related behaviors like persistent criticism are often considered legitimate managerial practices by HR professionals [3,4], i.e., they are then not attributed to a malicious perpetrator intent.

However, it remains under-researched how the hierarchical status of a perpetrator (e.g., supervisor vs. peer) “normalizes” or aggravates third-party evaluations of (ambiguous) behaviors. In addition, there is a lack of conceptual and empirical studies which investigate how other social roles such as gender may affect third parties' attributions and labeling of negative behaviors as acceptable vs. workplace bullying. For example, we propose that highly anti-communal behaviors such as physical violence or screaming will be interpreted more negatively when performed by female perpetrators since the behaviors disconfirm gender stereotypes.

In this qualitative study we aim to conceptualize and then investigate via 27 interviews with Austrian HR professionals and employee representatives how and to what extent gender and the hierarchical status of the person performing a negative behaviour can influence attributions and moral judgments of third parties. To do so, we present 12 different “typical” negative workplace behaviors to informants. We explore via a qualitative content analysis how informants arrive at their moral judgments and how their (primary) attributions and the social role affected the labeling of a behavior as “acceptable” or “workplace bullying”.

This study sets itself apart from the “European tradition” of workplace bullying research by going beyond a narrow focus on targets’ perceptions and victimization processes. To the authors’ best knowledge, the impact of perpetrator characteristics on conceptualizations of workplace bullying has not yet been scrutinized from the perspective of attribution theory [5,6] or recent social-intuitionist approaches in moral psychology [7]. Examining the perspectives of different organizational third parties also has great practical relevance: not only are human resources professionals and employee representatives in charge of prevention, these non-observing third parties often also have the prerogative of interpretation, as they can decide whether a target’s complaint is workplace bullying or not.

In the following sections we first review third-party conceptualizations of negative behaviors and workplace bullying and then shed light on how gender and hierarchical status may affect the moral judgments and attributions of blame. We then present our study design, results, and discussion in detail.

1.1. Evaluating Negative Behaviors from a Third-Party Perspective

Heinz Leymann, a Swedish psychiatrist of German origin and a pioneer of bullying research, defined bullying and proposed four key features of “mobbing” [1]. These features still constitute the defining criteria of workplace bullying from the European perspective. The first defining feature is *exposure to a variety of negative behaviors* of a mostly psychological nature, with only a few reports of physical violence or sexual harassment. Often, these behaviors are further classified into work-related (e.g., constant criticism of a person’s performance, withholding information) and person-related behaviors (e.g., gossiping behind a person’s back, yelling) [8,9].

Some authors regard behaviors entailing social exclusion (“non-behaviors” such as ignoring or excluding someone) and/or physical violence as additional categories, while others regard these as separate categories [2,3]. To be labeled workplace bullying, the behaviors must occur *repeatedly* (at least weekly) and *over a long period of time* (usually more than six months). As such, workplace bullying is less about the content, intensity, or severity of a single act. Rather, it is the continuous exposure to (low-intensity) behaviors that over time makes targets feel powerless to defend themselves [1]. This perceived *power imbalance* distinguishes bullying from “normal” conflicts and other constructs like incivility.

Negative behaviors involving emotional abuse and social marginalization, such as humiliating, ridiculing, insulting, or spreading rumors about someone, were considered the most severe in a Spanish sample encompassing targets, witnesses, and non-observing third parties [8]. Supervisors are more often reported as bullies than peers or subordinates. Overall, men are reported as perpetrators more often than women [10].

In academic research, workplace bullying is typically defined according to the four criteria listed above. However, empirical evidence from the Anglo-American context indicates that organizational third parties are often reluctant to name employees’ complaints “workplace bullying” [4,11]. Cowan [12] showed that HR professionals engage in sensemaking when faced with ambiguous behaviors and search for external verification of cues like severe outcomes and/or malicious intent to harm the target by the perpetrator before labeling a given complaint bullying [3,12–14]. The nature of the hierarchical relationship between perpetrator and target might strongly shape third-party sensemaking and associations with workplace bullying: supervisory bullying has been trivialized as “bad leadership” or “managerial prerogative”, as third parties often automatically assume

that underperformance by the target is the underlying cause [3,4,11,15]. To the best knowledge of the authors, no empirical research has been conducted on how the gender of a perpetrator might affect the (causal) attributions and labeling of a behavior.

1.2. How Perpetrators' Social Roles Affect Moral Judgments by Third Parties

Most existing (psychological) approaches to moral responsibility ignore the socio-cultural context in which the perpetrator's conduct is embedded [16]. Attribution theory suggests that the more a behavior fails to conform to role and situational expectations at work, the more likely it will be attributed to the perpetrator's "malicious" disposition and intent [5]. Any social or organizational role encompasses both descriptive and normative behavioral expectations by members of the respective group [17]. Accordingly, we propose that third parties' moral judgments are influenced not only by their (tacit) understanding of how people in certain roles usually behave, but also how they *should* behave in a work context. Before we conceptualize the influence of two roles (hierarchical status and gender of the perpetrator) on moral judgments and attributions, we review other factors impacting the moral judgments of a behavior.

1.3. Moral Judgments

Making a moral judgment requires, first and foremost, moral awareness. If organizational third parties do not consider a negative behavior a moral issue, they will not judge it negatively and eventually will not intervene (ethical decision-making framework) [18,19].

Moral judgments can be fast and emotional or the result of a deliberate cognitive process. We propose that behaviors which severely violate established workplace norms (e.g., physical violence against other employees) will elicit moral intuition ("This is just wrong") [7] and quick deontic responses, i.e., the act should/ought not be performed as it violates established fairness norms at the workplace [7,20,21]. Conversely, a negative behavior could be associated with potentially positive causes (e.g., a supervisor trying to support the target via criticism) and outcomes (e.g., complying with organizational and performance requirements). Hence, in particular for work-related behaviors the moral reasoning process might be longer [21,22].

However, not every evaluation might elicit a blame judgment against a perpetrator [23]. Assigning blame for an act usually involves sensemaking in the form of (causal) attributions: was the act caused solely by the perpetrator, was the act controllable and/or intended, was the act immoral and/or its outcome severe? [21,23–27]. The belief that the negative act has its origin in the perpetrator's mental state of free will (i.e., malicious intent) to severely harm the target is central to blame attributions [23,25,26,28–30]. Attributing intent implies believing that the perpetrator had a plan, that he/she foresaw the link between his/her action and the harmful outcome [23,25,31]. People are more inclined to say (retrospectively) that an act was performed intentionally when they consider that act to be morally wrong [32], severe and harmful [33], and/or when the act resulted in foreseeable negative (side) effects [32]. Hence, behaviors such as physical violence may elicit attributions of perpetrator agency and blaming more than others due to the foreseeable harm and moral intensity they involve.

Third parties usually find reasons that explain or mitigate the perpetrator's underlying intent [34]. Reasons such as pursuing one's own selfish goals, revenge, or taking pleasure in harming others imply malicious intent and violate deontic norms. Attributions of benevolence, thoughtlessness, or a higher moral cause or goal mitigate intent [7,23,29]. Even when a perpetrator is attributed to act with intent, the attribution of stable, uncontrollable dispositions, mental states, habits or reflexes, or a lack of cognitive capacity to control or prevent a behavior might reduce the perpetrator's blameworthiness [7,28,29]. Moreover, external situational requirements (e.g., organizational restructuring) might affect the perceived controllability of a (work-related) negative behavior by the perpetrator (e.g., removing key areas of responsibility) and thus reduce blame. Furthermore, although the perpetrator engages in the behavior, the target might be found culpable: if a target is

believed to be underperforming due to low effort rather than a stable, uncontrollable low level of ability, negative perpetrator behavior such as persistent criticism is more likely to be excused [7,29].

The search for causality is also influenced by the information available to the third party [5]. The factors of consistency (perpetrator exhibits the same behavior in different situations), distinctiveness (singling out; perpetrator exhibits the behavior only toward one specific person), and consensus (other people at the workplace exhibit the same behavior) are likely to affect third-party attributions of causes [5,35].

We propose that high consistency and distinctiveness may increase attributions of internal causes (e.g., the perpetrator's malicious disposition) to a negative behavior and thus perceptions of workplace bullying. However, if the behavior can be justified with external causes (e.g., job requirements or employee's low performance), external attributions of blame are more likely. Moreover, high consensus (e.g., seeing a behavior as "common practice" in the organization or in workgroup interactions) will make the behavior seem more acceptable and thus tend to excuse the perpetrator's behavior.

1.4. How the Hierarchical Status of a Perpetrator Influences Moral Judgments

A hierarchical difference can result from differences in status (admiration and respect) or in power, defined as "asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations" [36]. Third parties' interpretations might be sensitive to the (hierarchical) relationship between the perpetrator and the target. First, negative behaviors by supervisors might be judged more negatively due to the potentially more severe outcomes of a supervisor's actions. For both targets and third parties, ambiguous negative behaviors committed by supervisors with higher formal power may be more distressing due to possible sanctions in the case of resistance [37]. Second, perpetrators with higher hierarchical status are held to a higher moral standard due to role expectations. Role expectations for supervisors include distributing resources fairly and focusing on attaining group and organizational goals to a higher extent than "normal" employees. In other words, supervisors are expected to model expected behavior for their subordinates [37,38]. In Haidt and Baron's [39] experimental study in the US, both behaviors of omission (e.g., withholding information) and "active" behaviors were judged more harshly when conducted by people in positions of authority than by people with less responsibility. Thus, when a supervisor violates expectations, it could lead to deontic responses or beliefs that the supervisor could/should/ought to have acted differently to prevent the behavior or the outcome [16,20,23,40]. Hence, we propose that supervisors will generally be judged more severely than peers or subordinates for negative behavior, unless the behavior conforms to managerial role expectations in performance-driven business cultures (e.g., persistent criticism of low-performing targets). Engaging in negative behaviors and expressing negative emotions might be judged as even less acceptable in cultures with low power distance, in which supervisors' abuse of (formal) power may be considered reprehensible [41]. Moreover, Sloan [42] argues that while a "neutral" expression of emotions is permissible in many professional occupations, supervisors' higher hierarchical status may make it more acceptable for them to express negative behaviors associated with anger. This is at least partly because the free expression of anger is often associated with a higher status, masculinity, and power [12,43–45].

1.5. How the Gender of a Perpetrator Influences Moral Judgments

We claim that many gendered perceptions of perpetrator behavior stem from traditional beliefs about gender differences in emotional intensity and expressivity. As women often occupy low-status roles and jobs in which they are required to display caring and service-oriented attitudes, perceivers may assume that women not only possess corresponding dispositions, but that they also should be more communal, socially competent, warm, and "emotional" [17,42]. Also, men are believed to have a higher propensity to engage in overt person-related aggression (e.g., violence, screaming) because they often have a hostile attributional style; gender differences for work-related behaviors might be

less pronounced [46]. In contrast, women are stereotypically attributed higher empathy levels, greater emotional intensity, and greater sensitivity to the nuances of others' behavior [44,45]. While the existence of gender differences regarding the frequency of such emotional experiences have been called into question, women are expected and found to be more "emotionally expressive" than men [41,46,47]. This greater acceptance of emotional expression often leads to the stereotype that women are less able to control their emotions and are at higher risk of having their emotions influence their thoughts and behaviors [43]. In contrast, traditional gender stereotypes depict men as engaging in behaviors involving agency (i.e., being aggressive, ambitious, dominant, and independent). Men are also stereotypically considered to be less emotionally intense and more in control of their positive and negative emotions, with two exceptions: anger and pride are considered acceptable emotions for men at work [12,45,48]. When men display anger, it is considered an indicator of power and may even lead to more respect and fear; in contrast, angry women are often judged as complainers or as being too emotional and lacking a communal orientation [43].

It is known from sexual harassment research that female targets whose behavior does not conform to traditional gender stereotypes (e.g., because they are "too" agentic and assertive) are often attributed even more blame than those who conform to stereotypical role expectations [49]. Cultural values such as low gender egalitarianism and a high level of assertiveness practices [41] (a dimension which resembles Hofstede's masculinity index) might make a stereotypical "masculine" demeanor (e.g., yelling, angry outbursts) even more acceptable for men and less acceptable for women.

In summary, we propose that gender-role conforming behavior by perpetrators will be more expected and more accepted. In particular, behaviors associated with a lack of social competence and caring might elicit more negative moral judgments when they are performed by women. We also suggest that highly gendered behaviors may evoke gender-specific attributions regarding their cause and (emotional) controllability. As an exception, male-connoted behaviors involving physical violence and sexual harassment might still be judged as more severe when performed by men, as these behaviors might be perceived as less harmful when performed by female perpetrators.

1.6. Third-Party Roles and Other Factors Influencing Moral Judgments

The search for causality is also influenced by the beliefs and motivation of the perceiver [5]. HR professionals' rejection of bullying claims by targets has been linked to role dilemmas between being an "employee champion" and "strategic partner of management" in the capitalist, performance-driven Western business world [11,12,50]. Van Gramberg and Teicher [51] caution against viewing HR as an impartial party per se, since HR must represent the firm's interests; the role of employee representatives as "employee advocates" is likely to put more emphasis on targets' accounts. Moreover, interpretations may be influenced by the dominant organizational discourse on workplace bullying and organizational trainings.

For example, Skarlicki and Kulik [31] note that in sexual harassment cases third parties are encouraged to consider the "reasonable person standard" by explicitly adopting the victim's (usually female) perspective. Likewise, individual characteristics like a person's stage of moral development, moral and social identities (e.g., similarity with the perpetrator), and interactions with the other actors also affect attributions of blame, but are not the focus of this study [31].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The Austrian Context

This study based on interview data from Austrian HR professionals and employee representatives is part of an international project on bullying perceptions across different culture clusters worldwide based on the GLOBE culture dimensions [3,40]. Austrian HR professionals and employee representatives—more than third parties from other cultures—tend to conceptualize *Mobbing am Arbeitsplatz* as a "singling out" (peer) phenomenon

involving subtle social exclusion and manipulation to strategically get rid of a certain person [3].

Austria has no anti-bullying legislation, which likely reduces awareness on the constitutive criteria of workplace bullying [3]. Employee representatives in organizations are part of the Austrian tradition of consensus-seeking between “labor” and “capital” (as opposed to confrontational measures like strikes, which are preferred in other countries) [52]. In Austria, works councils occupy one-third of seats on company boards. Similarly, participatory leadership and a team orientation are considered characteristics of outstanding leadership in the Germanic cultural cluster [41]. Consequently, negative behavior and workplace bullying of one’s subordinates may be perceived as even less common and/or less acceptable than peer bullying. A relatively low gender egalitarianism index and high level of assertiveness practices [41] further characterize Austrian culture. This may make stereotypically masculine behaviors less acceptable when performed by women than by men.

2.2. Interview Guide

The second author of this study and a researcher partner developed the interview guide as part of a larger project. The guide consists of a list of various negative behaviors identified based on a review of frequently used, well-established questionnaires on workplace bullying [13,53]. The final list includes twelve different behaviors (work- and person-related, social exclusion/isolation, and overt aggression/intimidation).

All behaviors were formulated in active grammatical form. Informants were presented the twelve behaviors and asked if and why they regarded each behavior as (un)acceptable in specific work contexts in Austria; afterwards, we asked informants to explain whether and under which conditions they would label the behavior as *Mobbing am Arbeitsplatz*. Moreover, informants indicated whether it made a difference in their evaluation whether the behavior was performed by a superior, peer, or subordinate, and whether they perceived the behavior differently depending on whether a man or a woman performed it.

The semi-structured interview guide was translated into German by the first author, and back-translated into English by a German-English bilingual researcher. The twelve behaviors in English are listed below:

1. Spreading false rumors about someone or their work
2. Insulting someone or putting them down
3. Telling jokes or encouraging others to tell jokes about someone or engaging in practical jokes
4. Verbal abuse (e.g., yelling, cursing, angry outbursts)
5. Making aggressive or intimidating eye contact or physical gestures (e.g., pointing one’s finger, slamming objects, obscene gestures)
6. Making unwanted physical contact (e.g., hitting, pushing, poking, spitting)
7. Giving tasks with unreasonable deadlines/assigning an unmanageable workload
8. Persistent criticism of errors or mistakes
9. Removing key areas of responsibility or replacing them with trivial or unpleasant tasks
10. Ignoring someone’s opinion
11. Socially excluding or ignoring someone
12. Withholding necessary information from someone

2.3. Sampling of Organizational Third Parties

The first author conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with HR professionals (16) and employee representatives (11), including one expert from an Austrian trade union association. The sampling of informants was purposeful: while this is a qualitative study, we selected informants from industries with the highest numbers of employees in Austria in order to ensure that the most common organizational and sociocultural contexts were considered. We followed the principle of maximum variation [54] regarding company size.

However, because professional HR departments and designated employee representatives tend to go along with a specific company size, most interview partners were from large companies with more than 500 employees in and around Vienna (Table 1). Employee representatives were employed as representatives either part-time or full-time (“exempted” from their original position). Most informants held a university degree, often in business or law (17). Ten interview partners were female and 17 were male. The informants’ average age was 47.

Table 1: Sample of interview partners.

Table 1. Description of the Sample.

Pseudonym	Gender	HRP or ERP	Highest Education of Informant	Approx. Number of Employees	Public/Private	Industry Informant is Working in
Anna	F	Employee rep.	University	1500	Private	Pharmaceutical industry
Bernhard	M	Employee rep. (part-time)	University	850	Private	Information services
Christoph	M	HR professional	University	2650	Private	Paper production
Dora	F	HR professional	University	50	Private	Commercial cleaning services
Erwin	M	Employee rep. (part-time)	Apprenticeship	325	Private	Food retail
Felix	M	HR professional	University	1000	Private	Food wholesale
Gottwald	M	Employee rep.	University entrance qualification	400	Private	Hospital/rehabilitation
Hilde	F	HR manager	University	320	Public	Social insurance
Ingrid	F	HR professional	University entrance qualification	120	Private	Construction
Julia	F	HR Professional	University	300	Private	Call center
Kathrin	F	Employee rep. (part-time)	University	215	Public	Municipality (housing office)
Lore	F	HR professional	University entrance qualification	210	Private	Metalworking
Michael	M	HR manager	University	135	Private	IT/Consulting
Nelly	F	HR manager	University	16,000	Public	Municipality
Otto	M	HR manager	University	1150	Private	Clothing production
Peter	M	Employee rep.	University entrance qualification	4000	Public	Education
Quentin	M	Employee rep. (part-time)	University entrance qualification	>1000	Private	Tourism
Richard	M	HR manager	University	>5000	Private	Banking
Stefan	M	HR manager	University	650	Private	Insurance services
Thomas	M	HR professional	University	3500	Public	Social insurance
Ulf	M	HR manager	University entrance qualification	191	Private	Catering/Restaurant
Veit	M	Employee rep.	Apprentice-ship	3500	Public	Social insurance
Wilma	F	HR professional	University	5000	Private	Furniture retail
Xerxes	M	HR manager	University	800	Private	IT
Yuri	M	Employee rep.	University	5000	Public	Hospital
Zeno	M	Employee rep. (part-time)	Apprenticeship	500	Private	Construction
Aava (7 quest.)	F	Employee rep./Consultant	University	2500	Public	Trade union

All but one interview was conducted face to face (the interview with *Otto* was conducted via phone). Interviews lasted between 26 min and 1 h 18 min; the average interview length was 50 min. Interviews were transcribed in detail, meaning that minor utterances, laughter, pauses, etc. were also transcribed.

2.4. Data Analysis

We considered a summarizing qualitative content analysis to be most appropriate for the study purpose [55]. This method allows the amount of content to be reduced through paraphrasing and abstraction, but it never strays too far from the raw material. The prevalent themes and associations with negative behaviors were put into a categorization scheme. As such, the method lends itself to a “quantitative” overview and comparison of dominant themes/cues across categories [55].

In the first rounds of data analysis, the first author and a research assistant formed meaningful coding units from the raw data. After unitization, each unit was paraphrased. At this stage, both the first author and research assistant kept notes of their overall impressions of each informant’s conceptualizations and patterns across behaviors.

Then, in a more detailed analysis, we coded each paraphrased unit [55]. Taking an inductive approach, the initial categories were not based on a prior theoretical concept; however, each interview question served as an initial unit for coding. Again, the researchers met frequently to compare their initial independent codes. Through continuous discussion and co-interpretation, we iteratively established coding rules for (ambiguous) categories. To ensure comparability, we aligned the category labels making up the final categorization scheme across behaviors (unless not applicable).

For example, to capture different degrees of moral acceptability, we formed the categories “unacceptable”, “conditionally unacceptable”, “conditionally acceptable”, and “acceptable”. The “unacceptable” category comprised units in which behaviors were (immediately) evaluated as unacceptable without any reasoning or with (fast) deontic responses (for example: “I cannot imagine that such a behavior could be acceptable in any organizational context”). If informants reasoned that a behavior was generally unacceptable but might be excusable under certain conditions (e.g., when there was no intent to harm), it was categorized as “conditionally unacceptable”.

The respective subcategory then listed “intent to harm” as a criterion and attributional cue. Similarly, a behavior was categorized as “conditionally acceptable” if informants evaluated it as generally acceptable as long as certain conditions (e.g., criticism is justified by the target’s performance). Similar categories were formed for the workplace bullying criteria (“workplace bullying”, “conditionally bullying”, “not bullying”). We also classified responses concerning perpetrators’ social roles into different categories and subcategories across behaviors and further differentiated within each category whether informants drew on corresponding role expectations for perpetrators or other factors made a difference in perception. For example, we formed the category “hierarchical differences”, which included subcategories such as “higher role expectations for supervisor” and “potentially more severe outcomes due to power differential” to describe responses where respondents perceived negative behaviors by a supervisor as more severe. The categorization scheme for perpetrator gender distinguished between whether informants found that gender stereotypes about what is the “common” or traditionally expected behavior affected perceptions (while often distancing themselves from the traditional views) or whether they engaged in gender stereotyping themselves. Also, other factors potentially affecting perceptions of misbehavior (e.g., the gender composition in the team) were kept as a separate subcategory.

We then considered the *degree* and *form* in which informants chose to make sense of each behavior and its (un)acceptability. We found that the type of behavior—rather than the perceiver’s organizational role or other sample characteristics—evokes distinct criteria and attributional cues. We extracted three patterns of moral reasoning by comparing (prima facie) associations with behaviors and comparing the form and degree to which informants drew on specific attributional cues when evaluating a behavior and when labeling it as

“workplace bullying”. The different degrees of acceptability and the cue of malicious intent were particularly important for establishing the patterns.

3. Results

3.1. Three (Moral) Reasoning Patterns

We identified three reasoning patterns across behaviors, each of which involves a distinct degree of acceptability and distinct attributional cues and criteria: (1) “universally” unacceptable behaviors; (2) unacceptable behaviors with ambiguous intent or causal control; (3) conditionally acceptable behaviors caused by the target or the organization. Table A1 (Appendix A) provides an overview of the major findings for each behavior including the impact of the gender and hierarchical status of the perpetrator. The table will be explained in detail in the following subsections.

3.2. “Universally” Unacceptable Bullying Behaviors

The first reasoning pattern could be found across all behaviors, but most consistently with respect to “spreading false rumors about someone or their work”, “withholding necessary information from someone” and “making unwanted physical contact”.

In many cases, informants labeled a behavior as unacceptable *prima facie*. Negative moral judgments tended to come quickly and did not involve extensive justification or causal reasoning. This relates to the concept of “moral intuition” [8]. (Post-hoc) deontic reasoning included cues concerning moral intensity, usually a low social consensus and high magnitude of outcomes, and to a lesser degree the high probability and foreseeability of harm.

In particular with respect to spreading false rumors or withholding information, intent and harm were undisputable in the eye of many informants. This made the search for blame, alternative causes, and excuses for the perpetrator’s behavior obsolete. Many informants associated these two behaviors with workplace bullying *prima facie*. Making unwanted physical contact or engaging in overt violence was often seen either as an extreme stage of workplace bullying or a unique type of assault.

Among professionals who had received *training* on this topic, these behaviors nevertheless only became workplace bullying if performed regularly and over a long period. This suggests that scientific definitions of workplace bullying have become institutionalized via trainings, and may “override” the moral intensity of a certain behavior.

The following excerpt from the interview with *Gottwald* (ERP, private hospital, 100 employees) on “spreading false rumors about someone or their work” shows how this behavior elicits quick moral judgments and associations with the intention to severely harm a target.

Interviewer: (...) spreading false rumours about someone or their work. Would this behaviour be considered acceptable in certain work contexts in Austria?

Gottwald: No, definitely not.

Interviewer: Why not?

Gottwald: It does not belong in the workplace. Starting and spreading rumours with the intention to harm or defame others are behaviours that do not belong in the workplace at all.

Interviewer: Ok, could this be called bullying?

Gottwald: One aspect of bullying, for sure. In my view telling untruths about someone is one characteristic of bullying.

3.3. Ambiguous Intent or Causal Control

The second pattern was predominantly but not exclusively found for “verbal abuse (yelling, angry outbursts etc.)”, “insulting or putting someone down”, “making aggressive eye contact or physical gestures”, “ignoring someone’s opinion”, “socially excluding or ignoring

someone”, “giving tasks with unreasonable deadlines or assigning unmanageable workloads”, and “telling jokes or encouraging others to tell jokes about someone or engaging in practical jokes”.

The majority of informants applied quick deontic responses to these behaviors—at least initially. They framed these behaviors as highly unprofessional and with potentially severe outcomes, often due to the (public) denigration involved. However, these behaviors often also triggered a cognitive reasoning process in which the initially assumed agency and intent of the perpetrator were called into question. Here, informants often drew on their own experiences or gave hypothetical examples.

Examples included specific interaction patterns between actors in the workplace that might lead to high consensus and thus normalize specific rituals and (vulgar) practices in certain departments or masculine-typed cultures (in particular “practical jokes”, “making aggressive eye contact or physical gestures”, “verbal abuse”). Similarly, external pressure (e.g., a stressful work environment or time pressure) might excuse the perpetrator’s conduct (especially “insulting or putting someone down”, “verbal abuse”, etc.). Likewise, uncontrollable reflexes/impulses (e.g., having a hot-tempered or insensitive personality) and thoughtlessness often reduced the perceived perpetrator agency (particularly for “socially ignoring or excluding someone”, “ignoring someone’s opinion”, “insulting”).

The individual behaviors within this pattern commonly required specific cues to be present in order to be labeled workplace bullying. Intentionality and repeated and/or long-term exposure were mentioned most often. Less frequently, *distinctiveness* (e.g., jokes aimed at one specific person, ignoring a specific person’s opinion constantly) narrowed the range of possible explanations apart from intent to hurt the person.

The interview with *Otto* (HRP, private company in the textile industry, 1150 employees) illustrates how informants often needed to draw on additional information to evaluate the acceptability of ambiguous “contextual” behaviors unless they attributed intent.

Interviewer: *Okay the next one: Telling jokes or encouraging others to tell jokes about someone or engaging in practical jokes. Would you consider this behaviour acceptable in certain work contexts in Austria?*

Otto: *If it is funny for everyone involved including the person addressed and if he [target] really considers it funny, too, and if it is appropriate in a situation and everyone has a laugh together, yes, it is okay. But, definitely, if you laugh at someone and he [target] doesn’t find it funny at all (. . .) in that case it is not acceptable. If you really tell a joke with the intention to hurt and offend someone, and in this case the intention is crucial, it is unacceptable, and it is bullying.*

3.4. Conditionally Acceptable Behaviors Caused by the Target or Organization

Two work-related behaviors were found to be (conditionally) acceptable and did not elicit deontic responses: “Persistent criticism of errors and mistakes” and “Removing key areas of responsibility or replacing them with trivial or unpleasant tasks.”

The underlying cause and thus controllability of the perpetrator’s behavior was often instantaneously attributed to the target (underperformance) or the situation (work requirements). However, informants mentioned at least one of the following conditions in order for the behavior to be rendered acceptable: a good reason, such as the target’s low performance; the absence of malicious intent or “personal motives”; and conducting the behavior in a constructive manner (e.g., not criticizing the person in public).

Intent to harm was an important cue for the behavior to be labeled workplace bullying. Repetition was less often mentioned than in the other patterns, because “persistent criticism” already implied repetition and informants often considered “removing key areas of responsibility” to be a one-time activity. The reflection by *Nelly* (HR manager, municipal government, >1000 employees) is an example of how such behaviors often do not elicit moral awareness unless third parties attribute intent.

Interviewer: *Removing key areas of responsibility or replacing them with trivial or unpleasant tasks, for example. Is that acceptable for you in specific work contexts in Austria?*

Nelly: *That is acceptable, if it (.)so it depends on the reason why I am doing it. If the supervisor does it because the employee is unable to cope with the task, is in over his/her head, then I have two options: either I let the employee do other tasks or I have to part with the employee. So that [behavior] can even be positive, by ensuring as a supervisor that I can deploy the person differently.*

Interviewer: *And could this be workplace bullying?*

Nelly: *Yes, again, if it is precisely this person who I am (...) excluding, i.e., where I have this end in mind.*

3.5. The Impact of the Perpetrator's Hierarchical Status

When asked whether they would evaluate the behavior differently depending on the perpetrator's hierarchical status, most informants' answers concerned downward bullying. The informants rarely mentioned differences regarding peer bullying, let alone upward bullying. Only one informant (*Richard*) argued that the perpetrator's hierarchical status did not affect the perception of any behavior.

Overall, the third parties considered supervisory bullying more severe than peer and upward bullying. Only the two "acceptable" work-related behaviors—persistent criticism and removing key areas of responsibility—were perceived as more severe when exhibited by peers among a few informants, as such behaviors violate role expectations for peers. The behaviors making up the first two patterns elicited even stronger deontic responses by about half of informants when exhibited by supervisors, often due to role-model violations. However, the severity of behaviors within the first and second patterns often rendered the perpetrator's hierarchical status irrelevant in the informants' eyes, as *Stefan* (HR professional, private company in the insurance industry, >350 employees) illustrates:

Stefan: *Again, totally terrible if a supervisor performs this behavior. But also among peers this is completely unacceptable.*

The other half of informants mentioned the supervisor's higher (formal) power as well as harmful outcomes or potential sanctions against the target when the behavior is performed by a supervisor. Four employee representatives also considered the target less able to defend him- or herself against a variety of behaviors when performed by a supervisor rather than a peer, as the following example of "ignoring someone's opinion" from *Veit* (ERP, public hospital) demonstrates:

Interviewer: *Does it make a difference who performs it [the behavior], a supervisor, a co-worker or a subordinate?*

Veit: *Well, a difference in the way of looking at it, yes surely it makes a difference. Because if the supervisor performs it/there again you have the question: How can I defend against it?" If a peer does it, I might be able to. [. . .] With supervisors, this is more difficult for me; surely, that means I will be more likely to accept it.*

There are exceptions to the findings discussed above. In some exceptional cases, "contextual" behaviors within the second pattern were regarded as more acceptable when conducted by a supervisor (e.g., ignoring someone's opinion, social exclusion). Some of these informants argued that, if anyone, a supervisor may perform this behavior.

3.6. The Impact of the Perpetrator's Gender

We asked informants whether they perceived each behavior differently depending on whether it was exhibited by a man or a woman. Eight out of 27 informants in our sample consistently perceived no gender differences in any behavior. However, many of these informants stressed that gender *should not* make a difference, or that the behavior itself was

so unethical (see first pattern) that it did not matter who performed it. Moreover, hardly any perceived gender differences were mentioned for work-related behaviors.

The majority of the 18 informants who reported perceptual differences in at least one behavior referred to behaviors associated with a lack of social competence or anger (physical assaults, obscene threats or gestures, verbal abuse, insulting or putting someone down, practical and sexist jokes, ignoring someone's opinion). For example, 14 informants mentioned gender differences in perception for verbal abuse, which includes yelling and angry outbursts. Critical acknowledgements of the existence of traditional gender roles which bias perceptions and outcomes were predominant.

However, informants drew a subtle distinction when discussing the content of these behaviors: it was more expected that "common" aggressive masculine behaviors like yelling, making obscene gestures, or spitting would be performed by men in certain (male-dominated) settings; nevertheless, these behaviors were also judged more harshly when performed by men because of the greater impact of men's physical and/or direct aggression. Hence, higher expectation and frequency did not make stereotypical aggressive behavior exerted by men appear more acceptable or less severe.

Moreover, the gender ratio in the organization or department was mentioned as relevant for the perception and evaluation of the above behaviors. For example, a practical or sexist joke against the only female member of a work group is perceived differently than in a gender-balanced environment. Furthermore, many informants claimed the same behavior was perceived *differently* if performed by women: not necessarily as more severe, but as more shocking or awkward. An example by *Anna* (ERP; private organization, >1000 employees) demonstrates this.

Interviewer: *Would this behaviour be perceived differently if performed by a man versus a woman?*

Anna: *Of course. This is definitely a behaviour that is perceived differently. Cursing and yelling often seems more acceptable if performed by a man. I'll give you a typical example: a man who shouts at everybody around him and bangs his fists on the table is perceived as assertive whereas a woman acting in the same way is considered to be hysterical.*

Interviewer: *Mm-hm.*

Anna: *Yes, it is unfair, but that's the way it is.*

Anna was one of eight informants who explicitly mentioned that (unexpected) behaviors performed by women involving dominance, physical aggression, or yelling and insulting were likely to be regarded as resulting from a malicious personality disposition or a personal vendetta (intent). For men, such behavior might be attributed to a stable and uncontrollable deficient personality disposition, such as insensitivity, thoughtlessness, egoism, or a lack of social competence.

While most of these informants critically reflected on these gender stereotypes, four (mostly male) informants from different educational and organizational backgrounds also stuck to existing stereotypes throughout the interview. *Xerxes'* (HR manager, private IT services company, 800 employees) interpretation of the behavior "insulting or putting someone down" is an example of this.

Xerxes: *And also [men don't think about] the words they use. They insult. While women have the potential to be—my impression—yes, sensitive. And if they consciously and obviously insult, then it has a clear intention. So, the intention to hurt is greater if a woman does it. [With] a man, one first asks the question: Does he really want to hurt the other person, or did he not reflect. And just focused on himself."*

3.7. Third-Party Characteristics and Their Impact on (Moral) Reasoning

Despite the qualitative nature of the study, we examined whether characteristics of our maximum variation sample might have affected our results. While, overall, HR professionals and employee representatives had similar moral attribution patterns, employee

representatives more often referred to hierarchical power imbalances, i.e., the inability of the target to defend against supervisory bullying, than did HR professionals.

Informants with a university degree and those employed in large private or public companies (>500 employees) more often indicated that they had received training on definitions and scientific criteria of workplace bullying in the past. Hence, alongside the previously identified patterns, highly skilled professionals who were aware of the scientific criteria for workplace bullying used them as primary attributional cues. They also often mentioned Leymann's criteria and categorization of behaviors [1] and argued that bullying is typically defined by a combination of behaviors.

Informants without a university degree often came from small- and medium-sized companies and had not received training, and were thus less consistent in their reasoning: They were more likely to unconditionally label various behaviors as bullying due to perceived harmful outcomes (e.g., psychological strain, feeling insulted) or strategic intent (to get rid of someone, to show someone that he/she is unwanted). Perceived lack of intent led to a denial of workplace bullying. Below, *Ingrid* (HRP, private construction company, 120 employees) reflects upon "making aggressive or intimidating eye contact or physical gestures":

Interviewer: And could that be labelled as "workplace bullying"? Under (...).

Ingrid: (. . .) Puh. No, I do not think so. I think that is only a spontaneous (.)—If you are angry about something. A spontaneous gesture and one is not trying to put someone down over the long term.

4. Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to explore how (causal) attributions shape moral judgments and the labeling of diverse negative behaviors at work. The study corroborates earlier findings by showing that third parties differentiate between different types of negative behavior [56]. We explained these differences by showing that diverse behaviors elicit different degrees of moral awareness and distinct reasoning processes. With respect to perpetrators' social roles, we find that disconfirmation of role expectations due to both gender and hierarchical status affects moral evaluations of negative behaviors. Purely work-related behaviors were perceived as gender neutral by our informants.

The moral intensity of first-pattern behaviors such as withholding information or spreading rumors might have overshadowed possible gender effects. Moreover, social desirability might have influenced our interview partners' answers, as most were aware that gender *should* not make a difference in their perceptions. Timmers and colleagues [57] found in an experiment that respondents are reluctant to express or endorse stereotypically gendered beliefs concerning emotional behavior. When gender differences were mentioned, they concerned both the frequency and the acceptability of (non-conforming) role behavior by men and women.

Kelley and Michela [5] propose that disconfirmation of expected behavior results in causal attributions to the perpetrator's disposition rather than the situation. Some informants exhibited biases reflecting archetypal stereotypes about women, such as high sensitivity or an "innate" desire for personal vendettas. Likewise, excusing aggressive or insulting behavior by men as thoughtless, egotistical, and/or spontaneous aligns with stereotypes about men's aggression levels and lower self-control regarding anger—in other words, their relative lack of agency due to uncontrollable, stable factors. Prior studies on leadership have also found that the same domineering and assertive behavior is evaluated more negatively when performed by women [58].

In addition, the perceived ritualistic character of masculine-typed practices like practical jokes and screaming in specific work settings might make men appear less personally responsible for these behaviors. For example, male chefs' abusive work practices in commercial kitchens are often explained away as an expression of their artistic soul and leadership qualities [59]. Research on negative performance evaluations indicates that low performance by men receives more favorable causal attributions (e.g., bad luck),

while women's failure is attributed to a lack of ability, particularly when the task is not "feminine" [60]. Such stereotypical causal attributions might affect third parties' moral judgments of misbehavior, but this requires further research.

Disconfirmation of perceived role expectations and moral obligations for supervisors led to high negative moral judgments and deontic reasoning. In contrast, mistreatment by peers and subordinates did not evoke anywhere near the same moral awareness among respondents. The participatory leadership norms, low power distance, and high performance orientation in the Germanic cultural cluster might make most negative behaviors by supervisors seem more morally reprehensible. As outlined above, gendered leadership norms highly affect the expression of misbehavior and need to be investigated in more detail in future studies.

Our broader results on attributional cues show that alongside repetition/long-term exposure, perceived intent was salient for labeling a given behavior as workplace bullying [14]. When a behavior is associated with full perpetrator agency, respondents often react with "moral intuition" and give deontic responses. Such high moral awareness and subsequent negative judgments are likely to motivate further action in organizational practice [61]. In contrast, the causal control, outcome, and intent of other behaviors are more ambiguous, which results in a search for other blame factors. Here, deontic reasoning does not necessarily guide third parties' sensemaking processes. Drawing upon Thiel et al. [62], we argue that an ethical decision-making process may not even be possible in ambiguous and complex situations.

Organizational third parties often lack first-hand information on the exact content of the behavior (e.g., content of the joke), actors' characteristics and interactions between them to engage in reasoning about the behavior. It thus comes as no surprise that such behaviors are made sense of as unacceptable or bullying only if they occur repetitively and/or with direct witnesses verifying the perpetrator's malicious intent [12]. Nevertheless, this could potentially lead to biased second-hand interpretations and responses. Violations of procedural or interactional justice (e.g., if persistent criticism is made without justification or in a destructive form) also raised (post-hoc) moral concerns among our informants.

However, it is important to note that many professionals in our sample were aware that perpetrators might use performance-related behaviors to engage in (subtle) bullying. Possible measures for increasing organizational awareness regarding such ambiguous behaviors include brochures and training that highlight the difference between legitimate negative feedback on (allegedly) low performance and workplace bullying.

Our findings reopen earlier discussions on whether to include the perpetrator's intent as a criterion for workplace bullying, as this factor strongly shapes bullying conceptualizations in organizational practice [34]. This clearly involves risks, as a perpetrator may easily deny any bad intention. Nevertheless, researchers applying quantitative surveys should keep in mind that popular items such as "spreading gossip and rumors about you" and "someone withholding information that affects your performance" (*Negative Behaviors Questionnaire*, Einarsen and colleagues [53]) are more likely to suggest intent and causal control compared to items such as "being confronted with an unmanageable workload" and may thus affect respondents' perceptions. Active vs. passive grammatical forms also have moral implications, as the former highlights perpetrator agency, whereas the latter focuses on the behavior's effect on targets.

Overall, contrary to our initial expectations, we did not find substantial differences between the conceptualizations of HR professionals and employee representatives. The Germanic "consensus" model might make role dilemmas between "labor" and "capital" within organizations less pronounced [52]. Another interpretation is that this occurred because informants were discussing negative behaviors and workplace bullying on a general level. Our results also indicate that HR managers' tendency to deny bullying might not (only) relate to their organizational role as a strategic partner of management [12,50], but (also) to the moral outrage each behavior causes. However, a difference between the roles was employee representatives appeared more sensitive to the inability to defend

against negative behaviors in a subordinate position. Real-life cases may shed more light on the impact of third party roles, in particular on how to respond and intervene in cases with formal power differences (employees as targets and supervisors as bullies). (Quasi-) experimental designs with fictional bullying cases, where the perpetrator's hierarchical status is manipulated, may also shed more light on differences in responses by employee representatives in their role as "employee advocates" and HR professionals as strategic partners of management. Also, further training, in particular for HR professionals, on the effect of power differentials for targets' responses can increase awareness and effective organizational intervention. Training on the negative economic effects of WP bullying for all workforce members and the whole organization might also be effective to increase awareness on WP bullying among (HR) management.

In addition, our results indicate that informants from large public companies were particularly likely to be aware of the scientific criteria for workplace bullying and Heinz Leymann's [1] understanding of workplace bullying as systematic behavioral patterns excluding someone from the workplace. These findings demonstrate how practitioners' conceptualizations of workplace bullying are shaped by the dominant (scientific) discourse in a country and its dissemination through workshops and trainings.

It is important to note potential limitations of our study. This interview study was intended to conceptualize and explore primary (moral) attribution patterns among organizational third parties when confronted with a negative behavior. In organizational practice, contextual information and actor-specific information may affect attributions. Furthermore, real-life targets may exhibit a combination of behaviors, potentially overshadowing the relevance of any specific behavior. Moreover, Austria's high performance orientation and the connotation of the German term "*Mobbing am Arbeitsplatz*" as a strategic group phenomenon involving the singling out of one person [3] make our findings less generalizable to non-German speaking countries.

Lastly, the impact of gender or other characteristics of organizational third parties on attributions deserve to be studied in more detail than was possible with our sample size and methodological approach. Future studies should address this topic through approaches such as quasi-experimental scenario designs in which perpetrator gender is manipulated.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Overview on third-party responses and the impact of gender and hierarchical status on moral judgments.

Behavior	Acceptability of Behavior	Criteria for WP Bullying	Behavior Perceived Differently If Performed by Men vs. Women?	Does Hierarchical Status of Perpetrator Affect Evaluations?
1. Spreading false rumors about someone or their work	universally unacceptable	Intent	Gender irrelevant	Irrelevant due to high moral intensity/more severe if performed by supervisor
2. Insulting someone or putting them down	ambiguous intent or causal control	Intent, Repetition, Distinctiveness	Gender can make a difference	More severe or acceptable if performed by supervisor
3. Telling jokes or encouraging others to tell jokes about someone or engaging in practical jokes	ambiguous intent or causal control	Intent, Repetition, Distinctiveness	Gender can make a difference	More severe if performed by supervisor
4. Verbal abuse (e.g., yelling, cursing, angry outbursts)	ambiguous intent or causal control	Intent, Repetition	Gender can make a difference	More severe or acceptable if performed by supervisor
5. Making aggressive/intimidating eye contact, physical gestures (pointing finger, obscene gestures)	ambiguous intent or causal control	Intent, Repetition	Gender can make a difference	More severe if performed by supervisor
6. Making unwanted physical contact (e.g., hitting, pushing, poking, spitting)	universally unacceptable	Intent	Gender can make a difference	More severe if performed by supervisor
7. Giving tasks with unreasonable deadlines/assigning an unmanageable workload	ambiguous intent or causal control	Intent, Repetition	Gender irrelevant	Can only be performed by supervisor
8. Persistent criticism of errors or mistakes	conditionally acceptable	Intent, Repetition, Public Ridiculing	Gender irrelevant	More severe if performed by peers
9. Removing key areas of responsibility or replacing them with trivial or unpleasant tasks	conditionally acceptable	Intent	Gender irrelevant	Can only be performed by supervisor
10. Ignoring someone's opinion	ambiguous intent or causal control	Intent, repetition, distinctiveness	Gender can make a difference	More severe or acceptable if performed by supervisor
11. Socially excluding or ignoring someone	ambiguous intent or causal control	Intent	Gender can make a difference	More severe if performed by peers
12. Withholding necessary information from someone	universally unacceptable	Intent	Gender irrelevant	Irrelevant due to high moral intensity/more severe if performed by supervisor

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