



Article

The Unethical Managerial Behaviours and Abusive Use of Power in Downwards Vertical Workplace Bullying: A Phenomenological Case Study

Alicia Medina ¹, Eduardo Lopez ^{2,*} and Rolf Medina ¹

¹ Umeå School of Business, Economics and Statistics (USB), 901 87 Umeå, Sweden; alicia@medina.se (A.M.); rolf@medina.se (R.M.)

² Jack C. Massey College of Business, Belmont University, Nashville, TN 37212, USA

* Correspondence: eduardo.lopez@belmont.edu

Received: 19 May 2020; Accepted: 18 June 2020; Published: 24 June 2020



Abstract: The aim of this article is to introduce an ethical perspective of managerial behaviours to the study of vertical workplace bullying. A framework called the *line of impunity* was chosen that describes the missuses of power by certain ranks in organizations. Previous research on bullying addresses several perspectives such as the consequences of the bullying situation for the organization, the target and bystanders, the leadership style of the bully, the perceived structural support, and the manifestations of the abusive behaviours. However, to date, the ethical aspects have been poorly outlined. Applying the *line of impunity* brings light to several aspects of workplace bullying that are connected to an unethical use of power. This study is unusual because it is a phenomenological research based on two case studies that present the field experiences of two of the authors while working in different organizations, one in Sweden and the other in USA, during an extended period of time. The two main contributions of the study are the new concepts *power methods* and *reinforcing*, which highlight the connection between abusive behaviour and the ethical aspects that are present in downwards vertical workplace bullying situations.

Keywords: workplace bullying; abusive supervision; unethical management

1. Introduction

An increasing amount of bullying and harassment is reported in all types, and at all levels, of organizations on a regular basis. The body of knowledge on workplace bullying is also increasing (Parzefall and Salin 2010; Hoel et al. 2010). Managers and supervisors are considered the main perpetrators of bullying and harassment, but the research on the relationship between the leadership style of managers and supervisors and the perception of experienced bullying in previous studies (Zapf et al. 2003; Hoel et al. 2010) is mostly quantitative. The current study is qualitative and is based on observations and experiences that lasted several months. The relation between leadership and power is depicted by Maner and Mead (2010), who highlighted aspects of dominance and prestige related to the use of power in the hierarches, where dominance is the strategy that leaders use to benefit themselves while prestige is used in the benefit of the group. The authors also make a comparison with what McClelland (1970, 1975) and Winter (1973) called *personalised power*, which refers to power used for personal gain, and *socialised power*, which refers to power used to the benefit other people (Maner and Mead 2010).

Furthermore, the way in which the leaders and supervisors use their power defines their leadership. For example, an autocratic leadership style (Lewin 1947) may be considered a source of bullying because leaders with this leadership style tend to use their power in a tyrannical way, especially if

they are under stressful situations (Hoel and Salin 2003). In addition, power is used in a style that is perceived as coercive and intimidating (Hoel et al. 2010).

There is still no agreement on the influence of power in managerial abusive behaviour; however, Hu and Liu (2017) found that supervisors' social dominance orientation is related to their abusive behaviour, especially when the organizational climate is hostile and when they experience instability or perceive low internal respect. In addition, Wisse and Sleebos (2016) suggested that the perception of having a high-power position induces managers to Machiavellian forms of abusive supervision, in line with Lopez's (2016) concept of *line of impunity*.

The purpose of this paper is to add an ethical perspective to the growing body of knowledge on bullying and harassment by investigating the relationship between the *line of impunity* and its possible association with the perception of downwards vertical bullying, meaning from the manager to a subordinate (Salin 2001). This kind of bullying involves an abusive supervision that affects a target person.

In this study we observed the views and definitions of Einarsen et al. (2011) and Salin et al. (2018) that claim that at least one of the following behaviours need to be present in order to consider it bullying: person-related (e.g., screaming or spreading rumours), work-related (like withholding information) or social exclusion (e.g., ignoring someone or excluding from activities). Also, that it needs to be repeated with at least a weekly periodicity for a minimum of six months and where there is a perceived power imbalance from the target.

This is a significant phenomenological study where two of the authors were interviewed by the third author about their own experiences as the targets of bullying during their fieldwork. For one of the authors, the field experiences occurred at a global Swedish corporation, whereas the other author's experiences occurred at an American corporation. The study is composed by two case studies in which a cross case reference is applied.

2. Abusive Supervision

Two decades ago, in their study about workplace behaviours, Reiss and Mitra (1998) contemplated locus of control, gender, and years of job experience among the factors affecting whether an individual considers a certain behaviour acceptable. Later, Detert et al. (2008) found that the attributes of cynicism and locus of control orientation are associated with moral disengagement. According to Noval and Stahl (2017), even mood influences managerial ethical decision.

Abusive supervision in work organizations is defined as nonphysical forms of hostility perpetrated by managers against their employees and is currently detailed by a growing body of literature (Tepper 2007). Among them, Ahmed and Muchiri (2014) linked abusive supervision with employee citizenship behaviours, turnover intentions, employees' perceptions of organizational support, and psychological contract breach. Power distance is defined as the degree to which a society admits unequal distribution of power in institutions and organizations (Hofstede et al. 2010). Applying this definition, Lian et al. (2012) suggested that in high power distance scenarios, subordinates are lenient with managerial ill-treatment. This finding was also confirmed by Lin et al. (2013) who stated that power distance orientation has an impact in the perception of abusive supervision and the employee psychological health and job satisfaction, finding that is weaker for employees with higher power distance orientation. Park et al. (2015) reaffirmed those findings, stating that the negative implications of abusive supervision were stronger in lower power distance cultures. Furthermore, a study by Hussain and Sia (2017) revealed a substantial and positive influence of abusive management to employee's workplace nonconformity. Indeed, facing abuse drains self-resources required to sustain appropriate conduct (Thau and Mitchell 2010). Tepper et al. (2009) suggested a link between abusive supervision and subordinates' organization deviance. Lopez and Medina (2016) found that workplace deviance could be related to elites, privileges, social stratification, position, power distance, status, executive accountability, feeling above the rules, no concern about penalisation, and double standards. In addition, a study conducted by Ahmad et al. (2016) found that all the negative effects of abusive

supervision on job satisfaction and employee's turnover intention as well as the moderating effect of power distance are significant.

It was also found that the adverse effects of managerial abuse can affect co-workers (Mackey et al. 2015, p. 732) (Choi et al. 2018), resulting in the fact that as abusive management increase, workers with lesser levels of social malleability described job tension, emotional exhaustion, and reduced job satisfaction (Mackey et al. 2013). In addition, abusive supervision leads to employee poor mental health and lower job satisfaction. Restubog et al. (2011), found that workers involved in bond-oriented professions displayed higher psychological distress as result of abusive management.

On one hand, according to Tepper et al. (2011), high-performing subordinates could contribute to their supervisor's goal accomplishment, such that their perceived value may safeguard them from abusive management. Low-performing subordinates, on the other hand, could not contribute to their supervisor's goal accomplishment and required more attention in addressing their poor performance. For this reason, managers are prone to abuse underperformers, as hostile, aggressive, and even immoral behaviour toward them appears adequate as a method of punishment to inspire better subordinate performance. (Walter et al. 2015). This argument has been refuted several times, including recently by Khan et al. (2018), who theorised that high performers may also be victims of abusive supervision. In addition, White (2008) states that targets are often high achievers that are highly skilled, competent, and able to create trustful relationships in the organizations. It was also demonstrated that a supervisor's use of unethical practices to expedite work for self-serving purposes stimulates employees' unprincipled behaviours (Greenbaum et al. 2018).

In addition, Lopez and Medina (2016) stated that some people believe that they are above others and that their actions are right, while others know that their actions are wrong, but they feel entitled to proceed. As despotic leadership behaviours relate negatively to effectiveness and optimism (De Hoogh and Den Hartog 2008), a productive management of workplace aggression is required (Fredericksen and McCorkle 2013).

3. Workplace Bullying

One of the characteristics of workplace bullying is that it consists of actions or behaviours that take place during a period and are repetitive (Leymann 1996; Einarsen et al. 2003; Salin 2003). The target person has difficulty defending him/herself (Gardner et al. 2013). Thus, the definition includes the fact that the targets feel that they could not defend themselves or were not able to respond to the bullying situations (Hoel et al. 2001). Another definition of workplace bullying is:

the unwanted, unwelcome abuse of any source of power that has the effect of or intent to intimidate, control or otherwise strip a target of their right to esteem, growth, dignity, voice or other human rights in the workplace. (Carbo and Hughes 2010, p. 400)

In most cases, the bully is in a senior position in relation to the target, usually the immediate manager or supervisor (Zapf et al. 2003). This specific bullying behaviour is called vertical (downwards) bullying (Salin 2001). However, bullying can take place at all levels in the organization, such as between peers and from subordinates towards their superiors (Gardner et al. 2013). Parzefall and Salin (2010) indicated that bullying can be both intentional and unintentional. What previous studies showed is that the consequences for the targets and for the organization are the same despite being intentional or unintentional.

Earlier literature about bullying presented the target as being insecure or lacking self-esteem (Leymann 1996), but recent studies suggest these traits are the result of being bullied (Popp 2017 (2017)), targets are often high achievers, well skilled, competent, and trustful. He also stated that, in many cases, targets are also attractive and successful persons.

The Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI 2018) expanded on the WBI 2003 survey with the WBI 2012-I Instant Poll of 655 respondents exploring targets' perspectives of why they were targeted for bullying. The participants were asked to answer the following question: Why were you (or the

witnessed person) targeted for bullying? Check top two reasons. The responses are displayed in Figure 1.

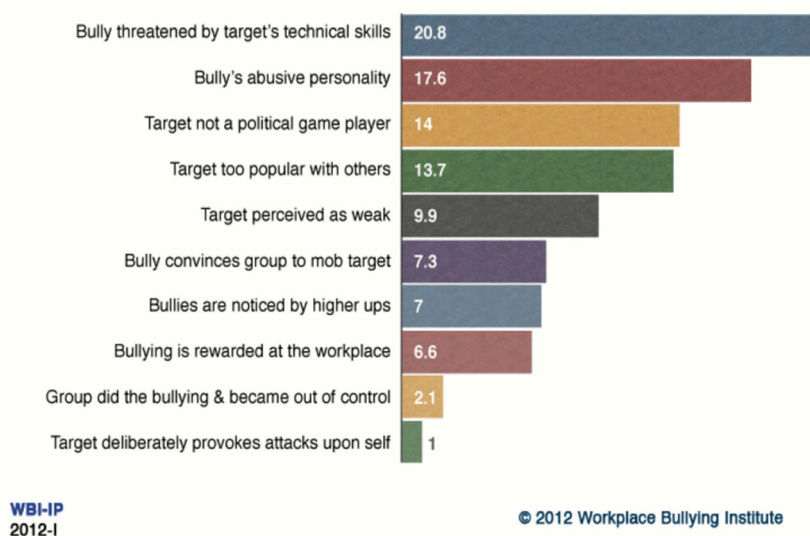


Figure 1. Reasons for being target of bullying (from Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) 2013).

The above results are in line with [Maner and Mead \(2010\)](#), who stated: “leaders might become vigilant to group members who seem to threaten their power, view those individuals as competitors, and suppress the possible threats those individuals pose” (p. 483). Bullying is perceived a kind of psychological contract breach because the target feels he/she has been abused, and it causes the feeling that the promises and commitments of the employer are not being followed ([Parzefall and Salin 2010](#)).

The targets of workplace bullying experience both psychological and physical issues, including anxiety and distress caused by increased levels of cortisol. Often, they interpret this reaction as a sign of personal weakness ([Hoel and Salin 2003](#); [Popp 2017](#)). This is line with the demand-control model ([Karasek 1979, 1989](#); [Karasek and Theorell 1990](#)) that states employees experience high levels of stress, which can also affect their physical health when exposed to high-demand and low-control situations.

4. Line of Impunity

The concept of *line of impunity* was introduced by [Lopez \(2016, p. 268\)](#): “[It] refers to the idea that certain ranks or positions in the social hierarchy entitle prerogatives or advantages, and that the power granted at those levels transcends the limits of control and law enforcement (such as a tyranny).” Overcoming the *line of impunity* implies a rise in the ethical tolerance level, and hence a detachment from the customary ethical behaviours still demanded for lower ranks. In their research, [Lopez and Medina \(2016\)](#) found an inverse relationship between executive capacity and executive accountability. As executive capacity grows towards unrestrained autonomy, executive accountability fades away. Factors such as no fear of punishment for ethical violations and a perception that there are two sets of rules, one for the ordinary people and another for the out-of-touch elites, enters into the equation, as well as ambition, elitism, prejudice, and perceptions of entitlement and privilege. Aligned with researchers such as [Jenkins et al. \(2008\)](#), [Hood and Koberg \(1991\)](#) and [Chow et al. \(2002\)](#), [Lopez and Medina \(2016\)](#) also found evidence of subcultures across ranks that allow, even in low-power-distance cultures, behaviours paired with high-power-distance cultures. Adherents of such subcultures are unwilling or unable to grasp the magnitude of their wrongdoings, even when some could challenge the legal limits. In fact, they still feel as if their acts are entirely justified, as different rules should apply to them. [Washington and Zajac \(2005\)](#) found that the judgement of these actors is deviated by their social rank yielding privilege and discrimination.

Extreme examples of the *line of impunity* as a clear division between two worlds can be found in the old caste system, the absolutism and the master-slave relationship, where one side had all the rights and privileges while the other was deprived of them. Currently, in democratic countries, the criteria for application of the *line of impunity* has shifted from blood and origin towards social pre-eminence based on power, which is largely related to hierarchy or rank in the corporate world. In this way, historically offensive behaviours perpetrated against certain ethnicities depicted as inferior are replicated today in the modern workplace.

5. Research Approach and Methodology

We chose an inductive, qualitative case study approach based on an analysis of two cases following the case study methodology presented by Yin (2014). The two cases were analysed inductively separately and then, following Eisenhardt (1989). The findings were compared to enable new findings to emerge. This study is considered a first step in a larger global study and the aims are two-fold: to investigate the connection between the experienced bullying in the manager-employee relation with the *line of impunity* and to look for findings that can generate statements that are to be tested at the next step.

The first case is the perceived bullying from an abusive manager that author one (A1) experienced during a period of 18 months in a Swedish corporation where the author had an executive position. The second case is the perceived bullying from an abusive manager that author two (A2) experienced during a period of 17 months in a global manufacturing corporation in the USA where A2 also had an executive position (Table 1).

Both cases refer to very high positions in the hierarchy of the organizations where the focus is to support, coach, and provide expertise to the rest of the company. These positions were within knowledge-intensive environments and had similar characteristics regarding the level of expertise and seniority required.

In order to avoid ethical concerns, neither the names of the companies and positions, nor the specific time frames are referred in this paper.

Table 1. The Studied Cases.

	A1	A2
The company	A Swedish global retailer with a focus on cultural values.	An American global manufacturing company of tire and rubber.
The position	Executive	Executive
Position new or existing?	Newly created position	Newly created position
Total time in the position	18 months	17 months
Total years of work experience	27 years	33 years
Total number of years of positive supervision experience.	24 years	29 years
Education	B.Sc. Mathematics and Computer Science M.Sc. Mathematics and Computer Science B.Sc. Organizational Psychology PhD Strategy, Project and Programme Management	B.Sc. Electrical Engineering M.Sc. Project Management PhD Strategy, Project and Programme Management
Education of the manager	BA	MBA
Gender of the employee	Female	Male
Gender of the manager	Female	Male

5.1. Case 1: Field Experiences in the Global Swedish Retailer with Focus on Cultural Values (A1)

A1 took a position at a global Swedish retailer at a newly created function. The company is well known for being value driven and has, as many other Swedish companies, an inclusive leadership style. People at all levels are both able and expected to express their opinion, even when they disagree or prefer a different solution than what the manager is proposing.

According to the culture model (Hofstede et al. 2010), Sweden scored low (31 in Power Distance and 5 in Masculinity), which indicates that Sweden is considered a feminine society in which a manager is supportive of his/her staff and decision making is achieved through involvement. People are used to equality and solidarity, and expect respect and consensus.

The manager of A1 was from the UK, which scored slightly higher in Power Distance and significantly higher in Masculinity (66) compared with Sweden (Hofstede et al. 2010). The power distance score implies that the UK is driven by competition, achievements and success, and the Masculinity score reflects the concept of having a winner. The manager was still living in the UK and managing virtually.

The company began a transformation programme only six months after A1 started the position, which implicated that the workforce was going to be reduced through redundancies and experience a change regarding benefits. The entered operating model was being scrutinised and questioned, the upper management team was in a hurry to be done with the transformation and putting pressure on the entire organization, but specially on A1's department to provide quick solutions and results. The time plan together with hostility from the rest of the corporation was the major constraint that the organization was facing.

5.2. Case 2: Field Experiences at the US Corporation (A2)

A2 joined the company after several large project failures had overrun costs, exceeded schedules, and affected quality. However, the overall economic situation of the company was good. Although it seemed as though there was executive support for this move during the hiring process, soon after A2 started in the position it was clear that there were political issues involved and that not everybody was on board. Specifically, recruitment was done to please the Chief Operating Officer (COO) but the direct manager of A2 had reservations about the need to create the new position.

Both A2 and his manager were from the USA, which scores 40 in Power Distance and 62 in Masculinity (Hofstede et al. 2010). These scores imply a culture in which participation is allowed although certain levels of hierarchy, status, and competition are governing factors.

6. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through documentation in the form of emails between the managers and the targets as well as emails from the people that were receiving the services provided by the targets. Also, field notes that described different incidents and behaviours, and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data collection followed the collection methods described by Eisenhardt (1989). The sources of evidence for the different case studies are summarized in Table 2.

The interviews covered professional background information to understand the level of experience as well as information regarding the structure of the company, country, industry, and organizational culture. The interview schedule questions regarding the description of the perceived vertical bullying, including feelings, and consequences, with a focus on collecting the interviewees' opinion about their manager's behaviours in relation to the *line of impunity*. Each interview took about 60 min. Complementary questions were asked by email during the data analysis phase.

The interviews were conducted and analysed following a four-step procedure:

1. Author three (A3) interviewed both A1 and A2 and performed the first analysis of the interviews by coding the interview data and developing constructs.

2. The other sources (mails and documents) were analysed and constituted evidence of what was expressed in the interviews. This step was crucial to minimise biases due to the sensitive nature of the field experiences of A1 and A2.
3. A1 and A3 analysed the interview of A2. In the same way, A1's interview was analysed by A2 and A3.
4. A final cross case analysis was performed by the three authors together.

Table 2. Summary of the sources of evidence.

Sources	Case 1 Swedish Global Retailer	Case 2 USA Global Manufacturer	Total
Interviews	1	1	2
Emails between bully and target	65	10	75
Emails from the receivers of the services provided by the target	19	12	31
Documents and material created by the target (Templates, Blueprints, Concepts, Workshop Design, etc.)	50	20	70
Fields notes entries	80	130	210
Feedback forms from the receiver of the services provided by the target	12	N/A	12

Since the cases are based on two of the authors' experiences, this study is ethnographic in nature. The aim of an ethnographic study is to get *under the skin* of the circumstances using qualitative methods to observe and/or interact with participants in their real-life environment.

Ethnographies are based on observational work settings.

Anthropologists use ethnography to fully understand as much as possible about an entire society, whereas the authors of this study focused on learning about the manager–employee relationship in relation to the *line of impunity*. [Rudestam and Newton \(2007\)](#) explained that in ethnographic studies there is a central strain between being an impartial detached observer and a passionate involved participant. [Maxwell \(2005\)](#) expressed that what is brought by the researcher's background and identity has been traditionally considered as bias, something whose effects should be removed, rather than a valuable component of the research.

The interviews were coded using Miles and Huberman "Method for pattern coding." The codes were emerging from the answers of the interviews. Since each of the interviews were analysed separately, the codes founded at one interview were also searched in the other one. All the codes were then labelled, and constructs were developed. A1 and A3 performed the coding as A2s interview, first individually and then jointly until there was no differences. The same procedure was performed for A1s interview, by A2 and A3. This procedure provided a cross-coder validity. In addition, and because of the limitation of the study, that is about the experiences of two persons, and to minimize the inside bias we analysed what other people that suffered abuses were writing in LinkedIn and the narratives and stories provided at the focus groups. Those were also codified in the same way. The comparison control applies to the codification and not to the ethnographical study itself.

To minimise the risk for bias in this study, A3 had a crucial role because he was not personally involved with either of the cases, and therefore he was chosen to conduct the interviews, to collect the other data sources, and to perform the first steps of the analyses. Furthermore, the cases were first analysed by the two authors who were not part of the case. This procedure was followed to increase objectivity, which is especially needed when the topic is of a sensitive nature. After the first two steps in the analysis, all three authors participated, and more questions and clarification were provided by

A1 and A2. The remaining sources (mails, documents, fieldnotes and logs) of evidence were analysed for both evidence and new codes. During analysis, 39 posts about the experiences of others on the same topic from LinkedIn, business ethics classes at Belmont University collected during 2018, and the outcome of three workshops discussing the *line of impunity* in Sweden and its connection to managerial use of power were also analysed as a source of comparison and control.

As Sekaran (2003) observed, when a researcher wishes to study an organization from within, joining it as an employee provides the opportunity to become part of the work team and then to witness its internal dynamics by playing the role of participant-observer. The main difference between ethnography and phenomenology is that ethnography focuses on the collective experiences of a community whereas phenomenology focuses on the individual experiences of individuals. In this research, the scholars used both ethnographic and phenomenological observation methods of data collection. The documentation of the behaviour and interaction patterns was done as they occurred in the natural setting, as A1 and A2 were active participants in the interpersonal environment of the units observed.

7. Results

Both cases show work situations in which vertical bullying occurred and the manager treated subordinates in a discriminating way. The analysis of the interviews and other sources of evidence led to three different concepts in relation to the vertical bullying: the *power methods* that the managers felt entitled to use, the *consequences of vertical bullying* and the *reinforcing* factors that strengthen vertical workplace bullying.

7.1. Power Methods

Power methods refer to the means managers feel entitled to use when exercising their power over subordinates in vertical bullying. These methods are summarised in Table 3 (sorted in alphabetic order without any ranking).

Table 3. Power methods of bullying.

Method	Description
Controlling	This occurs when the manager controls every subordinate activity, task, behaviour, time, interaction with others, etc. In case 1, this was expressed as: "I was even asked to inform to whom I was talking to during lunches and breaks."
Decreasing responsibility	This occurs when the manager takes away responsibility from the subordinate, in most instances without explanations. Tasks can be moved to other employees reducing the role of the subordinate. In case 1, it was described as: "Some of my important duties were taken away from me."
Denying requests	This occurs when subordinate requests for ordinary things are denied. Examples are denying mandatory training, rejecting the purchase of necessary software, avoiding filling open positions in the subordinate organization, preventing subordinate movement to other spots within the organization.
Discriminating	Refers to situations in which the manager shouts, uses improper language (both orally as well as in written communication), treats the subordinate differently from colleagues or excludes the subordinate from meetings.
Ignoring performed tasks	This occurs when the manager requests tasks to be completed only to ignore the results. A1 experienced this and explained: "I was asked to write a plan. I worked numerous hours, even late evenings and weekends, but then the result was ignored."
Inconsistent behaviour	Describes a manager with unpredictable mood and who constantly changes communication patterns with the subordinate. A2 expressed: "He showed two personalities, as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, one as a tyrannical manager and another as a sensible person."

Table 3. *Cont.*

Method	Description
Overuse of negative feedback	Relates to instances when the manager gives the subordinate negative feedback independent of actual performance or positive feedback from others. A1 experienced both verbal and written negative feedback in stark contrast with the positive reaction of other stakeholders. For A2 this was done in a subtle verbal communication.
Reducing the subordinate	This occurs when the manager acts in a way that implies the subordinate has lower competences or position than he or she really has. This method also describes cases in which positive feedback is given for very simple tasks, as described by A1: "I received positive feedback but in a way that only made me feel minuscule. Like if I was a child or a tested student."
Utilising dependence	This occurs when the manager extorts the subordinate to get personal favours. In case 1, the manager asked for a recommendation letter from the subordinate and her husband (both with higher academic credentials than the manager).
Exploiting position	This occurs when the manager exploits his or her power to depress or command the subordinate. A1 was prevented from taking other spots in the organization. A2 stated: "He could only support his actions by the power of his position and his high influence in the internal politics of the corporation."

7.2. Consequences of Vertical Bullying

The negative consequences of vertical bullying were encapsulated in eight factors, as summarised in Table 4. The factors are sorted in alphabetic order without any ranking.

Table 4. Consequences of vertical bullying.

Factor	Description
Feeling stress and frustration	The subject of bullying has difficulty sleeping and reports negative feelings about the situation. As described by A2: "I felt highly stressed by the fact that every day my manager could come with something new." A1 shared a similar experience: "I could think the whole night about the situation and about how I should tackle it."
Feeling "This is wrong"	The target realises that what the bully is doing is wrong. A1 expressed: "I had the sensation of throwing up when I saw the manager manipulating or just acting in some situations."
Isolation from social relationships	After experiencing bullying, some subordinates isolate themselves from social events and avoid talking about work situations with other people.
Leave the company	Some targets may believe the only option for ending the bullying is to seek another job or to switch careers.
Loss of energy	Another consequence of bullying is that all energy is focused on the situation, leaving the bullied tired and with no energy to do anything else at work or in his/her personal life. A1 described this as: "I felt more and more physically tired, coming home after a long day and not having the energy to do anything else."
Negative impact on performance	When subordinates spend all their time and energy on managing the situation with the manager their work performance deteriorates. A2 expressed: "I wanted to highlight the loss of productivity that comes associated to this situation. I expend lot of time trying to figure out how to confront him, how to please him, and finally how to avoid him."
Physical illnesses	The mental strain of the work situation often leads to physical symptoms, such as high blood pressure, headache, depression, memory loss, etc.
Reduced self-confidence	Ongoing bullying may lead the bullied person to question his or her capacity or ability, to lose pride in his/her work or to feel as a person of little value. A1 described: "I also starting questioning everything that I was doing."

7.3. Reinforcing

The analysis revealed that vertical bullying can be reinforced by a variety of factors summarised in Table 5. They are sorted in alphabetic order without any ranking.

Table 5. Factors that reinforce bullying.

Factor	Description
Discrepancy between manager's and employee's expectations	When the manager has different expectations than the subordinate, the communication becomes challenging. In case 1, having a manager from the UK and a subordinate from Sweden led to situations where manager's expectations diverged from those of the subordinate. In case 2, A2 explained: "Expectations of behaviour were unclear, and the system seemed broken down, while simultaneously purpose and ideal were demolished."
Leadership style not in line with organizational culture	Almost certainly the strongest factor. In case 1, the manager's leadership style required constant reporting, strict use of detailed instructions, and a controlling behaviour, in contrast with an organizational culture based on autonomy, employee responsibility, mutual support, transparency, etc. The use of a leadership style that differed from the organizational culture strengthened the effects of the vertical workplace bullying, where the subordinate was very senior and independent, who used to assume responsibilities and to act according to the organizational ethos. A2 described that the manager acted "detached from the customary norms."
Uncertain situations and disputes	Both cases showed that the manager was in a situation of larger changes. In case 1, "when the company entered a transformation programme, the abuses accelerated." In case 2, the unwanted new sub-organization created for the subordinate led to internal disputes with the manager, reinforcing the vertical bullying.
Unethical managerial behaviour	Among the perceived managerial unethical behaviour were inappropriate comments about other employees and demanding personal favours from subordinates. In case 1 it was observed: "The manager presented as his own the material that I had prepared and applied all the explanations that I offered to him in a previous meeting."
Manager's lower academic education than the subordinate	In both cases, the managers had lower academic education than the subordinates. They used bullying to denigrate subordinates due to their own lack of competence and capacity. A1 stated: "My manager made me feel belittled, like if I was a child or a freshman student."

Since the cases are based on the perception of the phenomenon for 18/17 months, a longitudinal view was also created by A3 by analysing the evidence that were present in emails and reviewed by A1 and A2 at a later stage. The results are presented in Figure 2, and it can be seen that although in both of the cases the manager's abusive behaviour was already present from the beginning, it increased and was followed by a plateau before increasing again to end at a very high level. The periods where the abusive behaviour plateaued out coincided with some HR meetings that were initiated by A1 and A2. Almost all the occasions where increasing period started coincided with some positive stakeholders' feedback, with some critical situations at the company or/and with successful events in the lives of A1 and A2, like the marriage or graduation of a family member, an academic publication or other positive happening. In both cases HR was very understanding and aware of the situation but didn't take actions beside a few meetings where they listened and then applied fact finding and informal counselling (Salin et al. 2018). No other HR interventions took place despite the documented evidence that A1 and A2 provided.

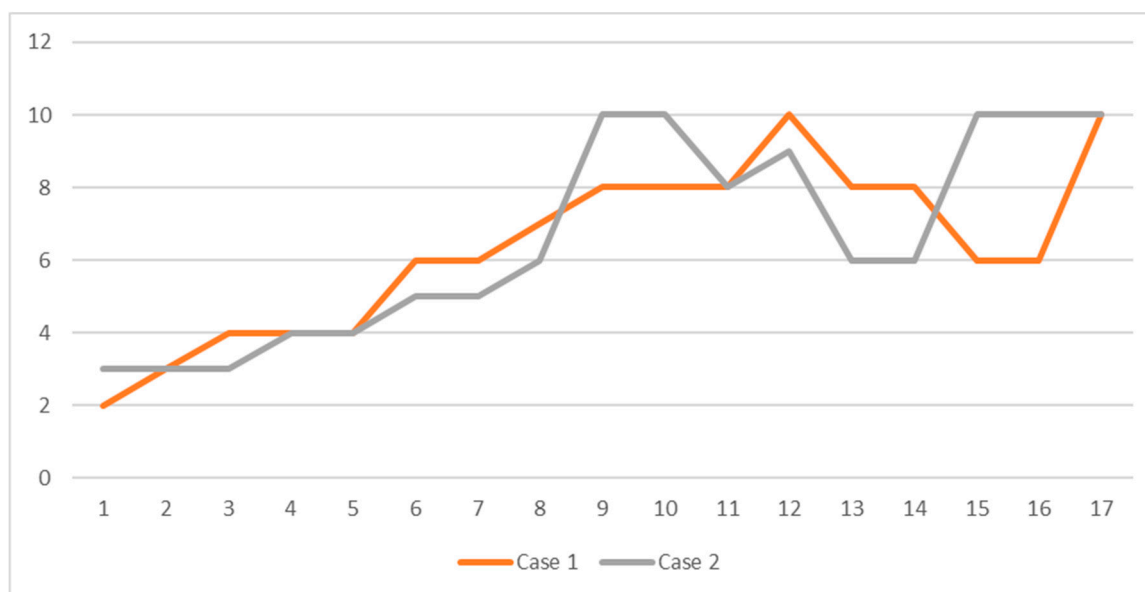


Figure 2. Longitudinal scores.

8. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has extended the traditional target perspective in workplace bullying and abusive leadership research with an ethical perspective that uses the *line of impunity* in an organizational context.

One of the contributions is the development of a new concept (*power methods*) that links vertical bullying with the *line of impunity* in organizations. This study indicates that some managers use these methods to control subordinates, resulting in situations of abuse. This is in line with the description from Lopez and Medina (2016) that states that people with higher ranks in the organizations sometimes feel that they are entitled to perform unethical actions. Moreover, in both cases, the manager utilised the *line of impunity* to perform acts that were an abuse of power. The sources of evidence showed that both managers felt they were above the rules and had no concern about penalisation or applying double standards as defined in the definition of the *line of impunity*. Although several of the described power method factors could be used for the benefit of the group or the subordinate, in the cases being study, the power was used for the personal benefit of the managers. This is similar to the description of dominance power, as defined by Maner and Mead (2010) and personalised power, as offered by McClelland (1970, 1975) and Winter (1973), in which the managers use their power for their own personal benefit. Furthermore, Popp (2017, p. 3) stated the following about managers' use of power: "In their ability to bring down more socially desirable individuals and productive workers, they [the managers] prove their power over all others, which, as it turns out, is remarkably easy to accomplish." This is also in line with the way the managers of the two cases utilised their power methods.

The study also showed that vertical bullying has several negative consequences for the bullied as well as for the organization itself. The types of consequences detailed in this study and presented previously in the concept *consequences of vertical bullying*, which is composed by eight factors, verify the results from previous studies, including Einarsen (2005), Hoel et al. (2010), Salin (2003), Popp (2017) and Salin and Notelaers (2017).

Another outcome of the current study linking the *line of impunity* with downwards vertical bullying is the idea of *reinforcement*. The results identify various factors that reinforce vertical workplace bullying, which contribute to a higher degree of vertical bullying and are based on the position of the manager in relationship with the subordinate. The study could not show if the reinforcing factors led to the vertical bullying situation or only strengthened the already ongoing bullying. This would be an important question for future research.

The findings also illustrate that leadership and organizational development theories would benefit from considering how organizational instability and uncertainty in the manager's role affects the *line of impunity* and can lead to unethical actions and abusive supervision. Previous studies partially refer to this phenomenon. For instance, [Maner and Mead \(2010\)](#) suggested that in case of instability, "leaders might become vigilant to group members who seem to threaten their power, view those individuals as competitors, and suppress the possible threats those individuals pose" (p. 483). However, a deeper understanding of the unethical use of power would be beneficial to explore.

A practical implication for organizations is to focus on the ethical values of both the bully and the target when dealing with workplace abuse. It is also important to take into consideration the cultural aspects that might be associated with those values, such as power distance. Both the ethical values and the cultural issues could be the trigger of the bullying situation or have a considerable impact on the target's perception of the situation. It is also important to recognise the situation of the managerial role. This was discussed by [Lopez and Medina \(2016\)](#) when they explained that everyone could have various sets of ethical values. In addition, an explanation of workplace bullying can be found in what is called moral relativism, as some people justify their actions "by arguing that there is no one absolute code of ethics and that morality is relative" ([Wheelen et al. 2018](#), p. 82). Particularly, the two observed managers could have been prey of role relativism, adopting one personality for their personal life and another personality when in their managerial role.

We conclude by stating that there is a positive relationship between vertical bullying perpetuated by abusive and unethical managerial behaviours and the *line of impunity*.

9. Recommendations

This study has strengths and limitations. Among the strengths we find that the study is phenomenological, with two case studies that have a longevity of 18/17 months and with analysis of work situations from two different countries. Among the limitations, we acknowledge that our study only covers the perspective of the target, meaning that neither the managers (the bullies in the two presented case studies) nor the observers were investigated or considered. A deeper analysis about the role of HR was not done since the authors were not able to perform interviews with HR representatives or collect more data. Also, this is based on only two cases. For this reason, a recommendation for future studies is to investigate the phenomenon of downwards vertical bullying in a larger group, including the bullies, the bystanders, and the HR perspective, as well as to include an analysis of the root causes that make these situations possible.

Author Contributions: A.M. and E.L. collected the data from their own experience in the field. Then A.M., E.L. and R.M. analysed, coded, and elaborated together. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Ahmad, Wisal, A. Khattak, and G. Ahmad. 2016. Impact of abusive supervision on job satisfaction and turnover intention: Role of power distance as a moderator. *City University Research Journal* 6: 122–36.
- Ahmed, Ezaz, and Michael Muchiri. 2014. Linking abusive supervision to employees' OCBs and turnover intentions: The role of a psychological contract breach and perceived organizational support. *Contemporary Management Research* 10: 147–64. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Carbo, Jerry, and Amy Hughes. 2010. Workplace bullying: Developing a human rights definition from the perspective and experiences of targets. *Working USA* 13: 387–403. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Choi, Woohee, Seckyoung Loretta Kim, and Seokhwa Yun. 2018. A social exchange perspective of abusive supervision and knowledge sharing: Investigating the moderating effects of psychological contract fulfilment and self-enhancement motive. *Journal of Business and Psychology* 34: 305–19. [[CrossRef](#)]

- Chow, Chee W., Graeme L. Harrison, Jill L. McKinnon, and Anne Wu. 2002. The organizational culture of public accounting firms: Evidence from Taiwanese local and US affiliated firms. *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 27: 347–60. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- De Hoogh, Annebel H. B., and Deanne N. Den Hartog. 2008. Ethical and despotic leadership, relationships with leader's social responsibility, top management team effectiveness and subordinates' optimism: A multi-method study. *The Leadership Quarterly* 19: 297–311. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Detert, James R., Linda Klebe Treviño, and Vicki L. Sweitzer. 2008. Moral disengagement in ethical decision making: A study of antecedents and outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 93: 374–91. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Einarsen, Ståle. 2005. The nature causes and consequences of bullying at work. The Norwegian experience. *Pistes* 7: 1–14. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Einarsen, Stale, Helge Hoel, and Cary Cooper. 2003. *Bullying and Emotional Abuse: International Perspectives in Research and Practice*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Einarsen, Ståle, Helge Hoel, Dieter Zapf, and Cary L. Cooper. 2011. The concept of bullying and harassment at work: The European tradition. In *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Developments in Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd ed. Edited by Stale Einarsen, Helge Hoel, Dieter Zapf and Cary Cooper. Boca Raton: CRC Press, pp. 3–39. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Eisenhardt, Kathleen M. 1989. Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review* 14: 532–50. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Fredericksen, Elizabeth D., and Suzanne McCorkle. 2013. Explaining organizational responses to workplace aggression. *Public Personnel Management* 42: 223–38. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Gardner, Dianne, Michael P. O'Driscoll, Tim Bentley, Bevan Catley, Helena D. Cooper-Thomas, and Linda Trenberth. 2013. When workplaces go sour—Bullying at work. In *Relationships in Organizations*. Edited by Morrison Rachel and Helena D. Cooper-Thomas. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Greenbaum, Rebecca L., Mary B. Mawritz, Julena M. Bonner, Brian D. Webster, and Joseph Kim. 2018. Supervisor expediency to employee expediency: The moderating role of leader—Member exchange and the mediating role of employee unethical tolerance. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 39: 525. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hoel, Helge, Cary L. Cooper, and Brian Faragher. 2001. The experience of bullying in Great Britain: The impact of organizational culture. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 10: 443–56. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hoel, Helge, and Denise Salin. 2003. Organizational antecedents of workplace bullying. In *Bullying and Emotional Abuse in the Workplace: International Perspectives in Research and Practice*. Edited by Stale Einarsen, Helge Hoel and Cary Cooper. London: Taylor and Francis, pp. 203–18.
- Hoel, Helge, Lars Glasø, Jørn Hetland, Cary L. Cooper, and Ståle Einarsen. 2010. Leadership style as predictor of self-reported and observed workplace bullying. *British Journal of Management* 21: 453–68. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hofstede, Geert H., Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov. 2010. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hood, Jacqueline N., and Christine S. Koberg. 1991. Accounting firm cultures and creativity among accountants. *Accounting Horizons* 5: 12–19.
- Hu, Lingyan, and Yan Liu. 2017. Abuse for status: A social dominance perspective of abusive supervision. *Human Resource Management Review* 27: 328–37. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hussain, Imran, and Surendra Kumar Sia. 2017. Power distance orientation dilutes the effect of abusive supervision on workplace deviance. *Management and Labor Studies* 42: 293–305. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Jenkins, J. Gregory, Donald R. Deis, Jean C. Bedard, and Mary B. Curtis. 2008. Accounting firm culture and governance: A research synthesis. *Behavioral Research in Accounting* 20: 45–74. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Karasek, Robert A., Jr. 1979. Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: Implications for job redesign. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 24: 285–308. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Karasek, Robert. 1989. Control in the workplace and its health-related aspects. In *Job Control and Worker Health*. Edited by Steven L. Sauter, Joseph J. Hurrell and Cary L. Cooper. Chichester: Wiley, pp. 129–59.
- Karasek, R., and T. Theorell. 1990. *Healthy Work*. New York: Basic Books.
- Khan, Abdul Karim, Sherry Moss, Samina Quratulain, and Imran Hameed. 2018. When and how subordinate performance leads to abusive supervision: A social dominance perspective. *Journal of Management* 44: 2801–26. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Lewin, Kurt. 1947. Frontiers in group dynamics. *Human Relations* 1: 5–42. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Leymann, Heinz. 1996. The content and development of mobbing at work. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 5: 165–84. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Lian, Huiwen, D. Lance Ferris, and Douglas J. Brown. 2012. Does power distance exacerbate or mitigate the effects of abusive supervision? It depends on the outcome. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 97: 107–23. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Lin, Weipeng, Lei Wang, and Shuting Chen. 2013. Abusive supervision and employee well-being: The moderating effect of power distance orientation. *Applied Psychology* 62: 308–29. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Lopez, Eduardo V. 2016. *Influence of Ethical Behaviors in Corporate Governance: Small Sins Allowed and the Line of Impunity*. Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Lopez, Eduardo Victor, and Alicia Medina. 2016. *Ethics and Governance in Project Management: Small Sins Allowed and the Line of Impunity*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Mackey, Jeremy D., Rachel E. Frieder, Pamela L. Perrewé, Vickie C. Gallagher, and Robert A. Brymer. 2015. Empowered employees as social deviants: The role of abusive supervision. *Journal of Business and Psychology* 30: 149–62. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Mackey, Jeremy D., B. Parker Ellen III, Wayne A. Hochwarter, and Gerald R. Ferris. 2013. Subordinate social adaptability and the consequences of abusive supervision perceptions in two samples. *The Leadership Quarterly* 24: 732–46. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- McClelland, David C. 1970. The two faces of power. *Journal of International Affairs* 24: 29–47.
- McClelland, David C. 1975. *Power: The Inner Experience*. New York: Irvington.
- Maner, Jon K., and Nicole L. Mead. 2010. The essential tension between leadership and power: When leaders sacrifice group goals for the sake of self-interest. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99: 482–97. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Maxwell, Joseph. 2005. *Qualitative Research Design: An Alternative Approach*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Noval, Laura J., and Günter K. Stahl. 2017. Accounting for proscriptive and prescriptive morality in the workplace: The double-edged sword effect of mood on managerial ethical decision making. *Journal of Business Ethics* 142: 589–602. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Park, Hae Sang, Jenny M. Hoobler, Junfeng Wu, Jia Hu, and Morgan Wilson. 2015. Abusive supervision, justice, power distance, and employee deviance: A meta-analysis. *Academy of Management Proceedings* 2015. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Parzefall, Marjo-Riitta, and Denise M. Salin. 2010. Perceptions of and reactions to workplace bullying: A social exchange perspective. *Human Relations* 63: 761–80. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Popp, Jerome. 2017. *Social Intelligence and the Explanation of Workplace Abuse*. New York: SAGE Open.
- Reiss, Michelle C., and Kaushik Mitra. 1998. The effects of individual difference factors on the acceptability of ethical and unethical workplace behaviors. *Journal of Business Ethics* 17: 1581–93. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Restubog, Simon Lloyd D., Kristin L. Scott, and Thomas J. Zagenczyk. 2011. When distress hits home: The role of contextual factors and psychological distress in predicting employees' responses to abusive supervision. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 96: 713–29. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Rudestam, Kjell Erik, and Rae R. Newton. 2007. *Surviving Your Dissertation*, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Salin, Denise. 2001. Prevalence and forms of bullying among business professionals: A comparison of two different strategies for measuring bullying. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 10: 425–41. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Salin, Denise. 2003. Ways of explaining workplace bullying: A review of enabling, motivating and precipitating structures and processes in the work environment. *Human Relations* 56: 1213–32. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Salin, Denise, and Guy Notelaers. 2017. The effect of exposure to bullying on turnover intentions: The role of perceived psychological contract violation and benevolent behavior. *Work & Stress* 31: 355–74.
- Salin, Denise, Renee L. Cowan, Oluwakemi Adewumi, Eleni Apospori, Jaime Bochantin, Premilla D'Cruz, and Nikola Djurkovic. 2018. Prevention of and interventions in workplace bullying: A global study of human resource professionals' reflections on preferred action. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 1–2. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sekaran, Uma. 2003. *Research Methods for Business: A Skill Building Approach*, 4th ed. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Tepper, Bennett J. 2007. Abusive supervision in work organizations: Review, synthesis, and research agenda. *Journal of Management* 33: 261–89. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Tepper, Bennett J., Sherry E. Moss, and Michelle K. Duffy. 2011. Predictors of abusive supervision: Supervisor perceptions of deep-level dissimilarity, relationship conflict, and subordinate performance. *Academy of Management Journal* 54: 279–94. [CrossRef]
- Tepper, Bennett J., Jon C. Carr, Denise M. Breau, Sharon Geider, Changya Hu, and Wei Hua. 2009. Abusive supervision, intentions to quit, and employees' workplace deviance: A power/dependence analysis. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 109: 156–67. [CrossRef]
- Thau, Stefan, and Marie S. Mitchell. 2010. Self-gain or self-regulation impairment? Tests of competing explanations of the supervisor abuse and employee deviance relationship through perceptions of distributive justice. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 95: 1009–31. [CrossRef]
- Walter, Frank, Catherine K. Lam, Gerben S. Van Der Vegt, Xu Huang, and Qing Miao. 2015. Abusive supervision and subordinate performance: Instrumentality considerations in the emergence and consequences of abusive supervision. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 100: 1056–72. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Washington, Marvin, and Edward J. Zajac. 2005. Status evolution and competition: Theory and evidence. *Academy of Management Journal* 48: 282–96. [CrossRef]
- WBI. 2018. Workplace Bullying Institute. Available online: <http://www.workplacebullying.org> (accessed on 8 December 2018).
- Wheelen, Thomas L., J. David Hunger, Alan N. Hoffman, and Charles E. Bamford. 2018. *Concepts in Strategic Management and Business Policy*, 15th ed. New York: Pearson.
- White, Peter. 2008. *Record of Investigation into Death: Case No: 3625/06*. Melbourne: State Coroner.
- Winter, David G. 1973. *The Power Motive*. New York: Free Press.
- Wisse, Barbara, and Ed Sleebos. 2016. When the dark ones gain power: Perceived position power strengthens the effect of supervisor Machiavellianism on abusive supervision in work teams. *Personality and Individual Differences* 99: 122–26. [CrossRef]
- Yin, Robert K. 2014. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 5th ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Zapf, Dieter, Jordi Escartin, Miriam Scheppa-Lahyani, Ståle Valvatne Einarsen, Helge Hoel, and Maarit Vartia. 2003. Empirical findings on bullying in the workplace. In *Bullying and Emotional Abuse in the Workplace: International Perspectives in Research and Practice*. Edited by Stale Einarsen, Helge Hoel and Cary Cooper. London: Taylor and Francis.



© 2020 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).