*Original Research Article*

# Testing Three Mediation Models of the Relationship between Workplace Bullying, Coping Strategies and Romanian Employees' Strain

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**The present study aims to identify the best mediation model of the relationships between workplace bullying, coping strategies and Romanian employees'strain. 313 (226 female and 84 male) Romanian employees participated at the present study by completing online the questionnares measuring workplace bullying exposure, five different coping strategies and personal strain. The results showed the best fit for the thrid model presenting a second order mediation model having as mediators the passive coping strategies. Employing passive strategies such as denial, mental disengagement and behavioural disengagement has a positive impact on Romanian employees' strain. The workplace bullying exposed employees who employed passive strategies such as denial, mental and behavioural disengagement decreased their physical and mental strain. The results of the present study have practical implications for human resources practitioners in that it provides new ways to cope with workplace bullying.**

**Keywords:** workplace bullying, coping strategies, mental and physical strain, structural equation models.

## INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying is a particular form of aggression where direct and indirect acts lead an employee to being systematically subjected to acts involving degrading and disrespectful treatment due to serious personal differences between employees (Einarsen, Hoel & Nielsen, 2005). These acts are negative not only for employees but also for the entire organisation (Chirilă & Constantin, 2013). A general concern in the workplace is not only how management manages, but also what goes on when colleagues choose to turn their heads (Upton, 2010).

Previous research has looked at such undisclosed behaviour as sexual harassment, emotional and physical abuse, and workplace aggression, the psychological impact of these behaviours on the individual, as well as the organisational cost implications (Cox, 1978; Turney, 2003; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Hoel & Faragher, 2004).

Many factors contribute to workplace bullying in individual, social and organisational contexts, however Einarsen (1999) explains two types of incidents: dispute-related and predatory bullying. According to the above mentioned author, dispute-related bullying typically develops from grievances of work-related conflict where negative behaviour of some nature is said to have been done to, and felt by the bully thus

aggravating the person (i.e. bully) to react in a negative manner. Predatory bullying is probably caused by a combination of the social climate of the organisation where hostility and aggressiveness prevails as well as an organisational culture tolerant to bullying and harassment (Fitzgerald, Hulin & Drasgow, 1995; as cited in Einarsen, 1999), although the organisation can interrupt the negative action at any stage (Upton, 2010).

### The choice of a coping strategy in workplace bullying cases

Although conflicts at work are a daily phenomenon, only a few studies analysed conflict management strategies concerning workplace bullying cases (Zapf & Gross, 2001), thus the major question of this study was: What do bullied people do in case of workplace bullying?

Coping is defined as "ongoing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are considered as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus, 1993, p.237). Coping can be considered by Lazarus (1976; as cited in Cox, 1978) as a form of problem physiological and psychological state as the person may solving in which the risks can be detrimental to a person's

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physiological and psychological state as the person may display uncertainty regarding which best coping response to utilize.

Lazarus (1993) explains that coping research has moved from the traditional thinking where coping was viewed as a trait or style, to one where coping is considered as a process that changes over time, and in accordance with the situational context in which it occurs. The changes over time allow an individual to adapt so as to cope with the changing situation and/or threat. Moreover, the process of coping includes two functions: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is the active way of dealing with the problem that is causing distress (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen & DeLongis, 1986) and emotion-focused coping refers to changing the way the stressful situation is dealt with (as in awareness or avoidance) or the relational meaning of what is happening, which simplifies the stress even though the actual conditions of the relationship have not changed (Folkman & Lazarus, 1990; as cited in Lazarus, 1993). Coping may seem to lessen the effects of an unfavourable situation experienced by a person; however the situation may still need to be addressed (Upton, 2010). Thus coping can be seen as a person's attempts to master those situations (Cox, 1978).

Lazarus (1966, 1976; as cited by Cox, 1978) suggests that coping can involve two processes: direct action and palliation. Direct action refers to problem-focused strategies which may take three forms: preparation against harm, aggression and avoidance (i.e. escape the stressful situation) and palliation is considered a moderator of stress and is done by reducing the psycho-physiological effects of stress through symptom-directed modes and intra-psychic modes. Palliation includes cognitive defence mechanisms such as denial, repression, projection and displacement.

The study of coping strategies used in response to an extreme stressor such as bullying is important, as their effectiveness may be different in reducing the bullying and the choice of coping strategies may also reflect the severity of the bullying and the wider psychological state of the victim (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). Such research is useful for practitioners as it may help them to steer the victim towards more fruitful coping strategies, and to give the support that is needed, taking into account the severity of bullying, the coping skills of the individual and other factors which may determine the choice of coping strategies. (Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004).

There are many ways in which a victim can endeavour to cope with the bullying situation; however research indicates that a strong social support group is essential in attempting to cope with bullying, without the traditional means of seeking psychological help (Upton, 2010). It is essential that the victim be aware of the individual effects on him or her due to the bullying behaviour, and that he make an active effort to take care of himself (Einarsen et al., 2005).

### *The most common coping responses in workplace bullying exposure cases*

Rayner (1997) found that most popular responses to workplace bullying were: confronting the perpetrator, doing nothing, consulting with human resources or colleagues, leaving the job and the least popular responses were requesting counselling, seeking outside help, threatening to tell others, threatening to harm perpetrators and taking sick days or time-off. Moreover, Lee and Brotheridge (2006) suggested that the most used and efficient coping strategies are cognitive restructuring, relaxation and avoidance strategies and Moreno-Jimenez, Rodriguez-Munoz, Pastor, Sanz-Vergel and Garrosa (2009) showed that

there is a moderator effect of psychological detachment on the relationship between workplace bullying and strain.

The choice of coping with bullying in the workplace changes with time (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003, Rayner, 1999; Zapf & Gross, 2001) so that in initial stages of bullying, victims tends to adopt more active strategies to cope with bullying but with time, if the situation escalates, the victims tends to cope with bullying adopting more passive strategies.

The coping responses do not necessarily lead to satisfactory outcomes for victims, so that Zapf & Gross (2001) found that using active coping strategies (i.e. confronting the perpetrators) increased the targeting of individuals (Aquino, 2000) and retaliation of perpetrators (Rayner, 1999) and that the effect is resent not only in the conflict escalation but also heightened strain and ill-health (Hyung-Park & DeFrank, 2010) meaning that there is also an indirect relationship of workplace bullying and inviduals' health through coping strategies (Zapf & Gross, 2001).

Previous research results suggest that coping with bullying is highly stressful (Begley, 1998; Zapf & Gross, 2001; Hoel, Sparks & Cooper, 2002) and may lead to experiencing of physical symptoms (Einarsen & Raknes, 1991; Leymann, 1996; Matthiesen, Raknes & Rokkum, 1989) as well as psychological or affective symptoms, including depression and anxiety (Bjorkvist, Osterman & Hjelt-Back, 1994; Cortina, Magley, Williams & Langhout, 2001) so that, an inability to cope leads to independently undermine one's physical health and affective state (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006).

### AIM

The present article aims at identifying the best mediation model of the relationships between workplace bullying, coping strategies and strain.

### PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

For the present study 313 Romanian employees from the North-West part of the country participated by completing online questionnaires measuring workplace bullying exposure, coping strategies and strain. Employees with at six months experience at the time of data gathering were included in the study.Their ages ranged from 19 to 65 years (M=33.11; SD=9.93), 226 were female employees and 84 were male employees, 156 worked in private firms and 157 worked in public institutions. In the present study four sectors were included: production (N=46), services (N=139), commerce (N=34) and education (N=92). 54 employees had a high-school diploma, 127 had a bachelor degree and 129 had a master degree.

### *Instruments*

The instruments measuring workplace bullying, five different coping strategies and strain were translated into Romanian using the back-method translation procedure. The authors of the original instruments were contacted through e-mail in order to get the permission to use the instruments.

#### *a.  Measuring workplace bullying*
Workplace bullying was measured with the Romanian version of Einarsen, Hoel and Notelaers' (2009) Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (translated and adapted by Chirila & Constantin, 2014). The Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) has 22 items referring to 22 behavioural negative acts

grouped in three dimensions (i.e. intimidation, person-related bullying and work-related bullying). The response to this questionnare was given on a five-point Likert scale were 1 ment never and 5 ment daily. The Cronbach's alpha for the entire questionnaire is α=.92, with α=.84 for intimidation, α=.78 for context-related bullying and α=.92 for intimidation.

### a. Measuring coping strategies

To measure the five different coping strategies employed in case of workplace bullying exposure four scales from COPE Inventory (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989) were used. These scales refers to active coping with α=.94, denial with α=.79, positive reinterpretation with α=.72 and disengagement with its two subdimensions (i.e. mental disengagement with α=.78 and behavioural disengagement with α=.94). The response was given on a four-point Likert scale with 1-I usually don't do this and 4- I usually do this.

### b. Measuring mental and physical strain

Two scales measuring mental and physical strain from Occupational Stress Inventory (Evers, Freese & Cooper, 2000) were used. Participants were told to answer to these items by referring to their past six months. The responsed were given on six-point Likert frequency scale were 1 ment never and 5 ment always. Physical strain scale consisted of 12 items with α=.82 and mental strain scale consisted of 17 items with α=.83.

### Statistics

Results were obtained with the aid of SPSS 16.00 and AMOS 20.00. Because for workplace bullying the distribution present a strong left asymmetry (i.e. positive asymmetry) the scores were normalized with the aid of the formula bullying=1/bullying so that not only for the entire workplace bullying scale but also for its three dimensions, normalized total scores were used.

### RESULTS

Workplace bullying (with its two dimensions, persona-related bullying and context-related bullying) is positively and significantly correlated with mental and physical strain, but negatively and significantly correlated with mental and behavioural disengagement. People encountering workplace bullying acts also feel higher levels of mental and physical strain and use mental and behavioural disengagement less often as a coping strategy.

The third dimension has the same pattern of correlation with the same variables, but it is also negatively and significantly correlated with denial. Those employees that encountered acts of intimidation in their workplaces used denial less often as a coping strategy. Furthermore, mental and behavioural disengagement is negatively and significantly correlated with mental and physical strain. People who employ mental and behavioural disengagement as a strategy for coping with acts of workplace bullying are less mentally and physically strained.

The direct effect of workplace bullying on strain remains statistically significant (B=.427, SE=.130 ß=.249, p=.001) after introducing the five coping strategies as mediators, meaning that the mediation model is partial. Furthermore, only three indirect effects of three coping strategies on strain were statistically significant (i.e. positive reinterpretation on strain with B=.105 SE=.030 ß=.236 p=.001; mental disengagement on strain with B=-.116; SE=.029; ß=-.275; p=.000; and denial

on strain with B=-.070, SE=.028, ß=-.161, p=.014) and only three direct effects of workplace bullying on three coping strategies were statistically significant (i.e. workplace bullying on mental disengagement B=-.672; SE=.242; ß=-.166; p=.006; workplace bullying on behavioural disengagement with B=-1.101; SE=.230 ß=-.282;p=.000; and workplace bullying on denial with B=-.581; SE=.235; ß=-.147; p=.014). Because only three coping strategies were statistically significant regarding their un-standardized and standardised effects on the relationship between workplace bullying and strain, a second mediation is proposed further in the second mode (i.e. *Model 2*).

According to the results shown in Table 3, all of the un-standardised and standardised estimates for the direct and indirect relationships were found to be statistically significant, and the direct relationship between workplace bullying and strain also remains statistically significant (i.e. B=.393 SE=.123 ß=.260 p=.001). The second proposed model revealed a first order partial moderation model. The results obtained in this model were discussed under the framework of a potentially existing second order mediation model, which could be a full mediation model. With the aid of AMOS 20.00, we designed a second order mediation model and computed not only the un-standardised and standardised estimates, but also the absolute and relative fit indices for all three models in order to choose the one that best described the mediation relationships of coping strategies on the relationship with workplace bullying. The second order mediation model is represented in Figure 3, and Table 3 introduces the un-standardised and standardised estimates for all paths.

The second mediation model reveals a full moderation model having three coping strategies as mediators, such as mental disengagement, behavioural disengagement and denial. When all of these three passive coping strategies are introduced in the direct relationship between workplace bullying and strain, the direct relationship becomes statistically insignificant (i.e. B=.223; SE=.135; ß=.141; p=.097). The second order mediation model computed with the aid of AMOS 20.00 revealed not only the fact that these three passive coping strategies acted like mediators on the relationship with workplace bullying, but they also fully mediated this relationship. The more employees' that adopt passive coping strategies, the more the relationship between workplace bullying exposure and level of strain becomes less significant. In other words, passive coping strategies can mitigate the effects of workplace bullying on employees' levels of strain. The more employees use passive coping strategies to face workplace bullying, the less they will feel physical and mental strain.

Furthermore, from all three mediation models proposed and tested in the present study, the third model (i.e. *Model 3* from *Figure 3*) has the best fit indices ($\varkappa(17)$=.32.811, p=.012; RMSEA=.055; RMR=.006; GFI=.974; AGFI=.946; NFI=.952; IFI=.976; CFI=.976), and is thus the best mediation model of the relationships between workplace bullying, passive coping strategies and employees' strain. Those that encounter bullying acts in their workplaces also experienced high levels of mental and physical strain.

**Table 1.** *Means, standard deviations and correlations among workplace bullying's dimensions, coping strategies and strain's dimensions*

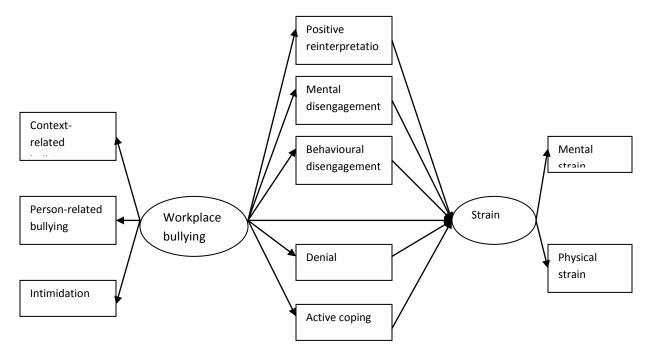| Variables | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.workplace bullying | .68 | .16 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. person-related bullying | .71 | .17 | .847*** | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. context-related bullying | .60 | .19 | .885*** | .573*** | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| 4.intimidation | .76 | .18 | .886*** | .747*** | .648*** | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 5. positive reinterpretation | 3.18 | .56 | -.004 | -.029 | -.039 | .067 | 1 | | | | | | |
| 6. active coping | 1.90 | .72 | -.040 | -.070 | .005 | -.040 | .039 | 1 | | | | | |
| 7. denial | 1.59 | .58 | -.092 | -.118* | -.021 | -.134* | -.091 | .051 | 1 | | | | |
| 8. mental disengagement | 2.42 | .59 | -.158*** | -.194*** | -.110* | -.111* | .267*** | .042 | .262*** | 1 | | | |
| 9.behavioural disengagement | 1.80 | .57 | -.221*** | -.244*** | -.091 | -.264*** | -.220*** | .093 | .295*** | .216*** | 1 | | |
| 10. mental strain | 4.75 | .37 | .176** | .140** | .167** | .176*** | .235*** | -.087 | -.228*** | -.157** | -.226*** | | |
| 11. physical strain | 5.00 | .41 | .258** | .265*** | .205*** | .242*** | .051 | -.059 | -.215*** | -.278** | -.219*** | .487*** | 1 |

*, p<.05; **, p<.01; ***, p<.001



**Figure 1.** Mediation model with all five coping strategies (Model 1)

**Table 2.** Unstandardized and standardized estimates for Model 1

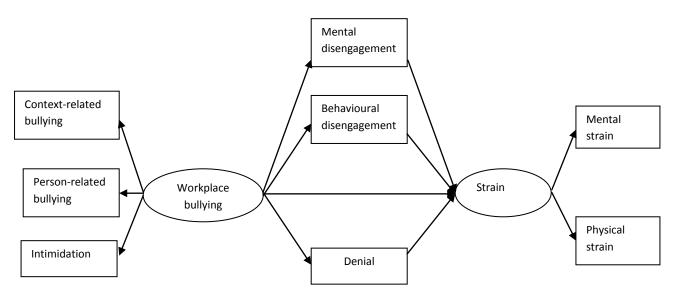| Paths | B | SE | ß | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Workplace bullying->context-related bullying | .911 | .069 | .702 | *** |
| Workplace bullying->person-related bullying | 1.000 | | .820 | |
| Workplace bullying->intimidation | 1.140 | .073 | .912 | *** |
| | | | | |
| Workplace bullying-> positive reinterpretation | .128 | .231 | .033 | .579 |
| Workplace bullying-> mental disengagement | -.672 | .242 | -.166 | .006 |
| Workplace bullying->behavioural disengagement | -1.101 | .230 | -.282 | *** |
| Workplace bullying->denial | -.581 | .235 | -.147 | .014 |
| Workplace bullying-> active coping | -.260 | .295 | -.053 | .379 |
| | | | | |
| Workplace bullying->strain | .427 | .130 | .249 | .001 |
| | | | | |
| positive reinterpretation->strain | .105 | .030 | .236 | *** |
| mental disengagement->strain | -.116 | .029 | -.275 | *** |
| behavioural disengagement->strain | -.038 | .029 | -.282 | .199 |
| Denial->strain | -.070 | .028 | -.161 | .014 |
| Active coping strain | -.026 | .022 | -.073 | .251 |
| | | | | |
| Strain-> mental strain | 1.000 | | .687 | |
| Strain->physical strain | 1.153 | .179 | .703 | *** |

**Figure 2.** Mediation model with three passive strategies (Model 2)

**Table 3**. Unstandardised and standardised estimates for model 2

| Paths | B | SE | ß | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Workplace bullying->context-related bullying | .910 | .069 | .702 | *** |
| Workplace bullying->person-related bullying | 1.000 | | .821 | |
| Workplace bullying->intimidation | 1.139 | .073 | .911 | *** |
| | | | | |
| Workplace bullying-> mental disengagement | -.676 | .242 | -.167 | .005 |
| Workplace bullying->behavioural disengagement | -1.094 | .230 | -.281 | *** |
| Workplace bullying->denial | -.578 | .235 | -.147 | .014 |
| | | | | |
| Workplace bullying->strain | .393 | .123 | .260 | .001 |
| | | | | |
| Mental disengagement->strain | -.080 | .026 | -.214 | .002 |
| Behavioural disengagement->strain | -.053 | .027 | -.138 | .046 |
| Denial-> strain | -.065 | .026 | -.168 | .013 |
| | | | | |
| Strain-> mental strain | 1.000 | | .607 | |
| Strain->physical strain | 1.454 | .273 | .787 | *** |

Those employees that used denial, mental disengagement and behavioural disengagement experienced lower levels of mental and physical strain. It seems that in the short-term, those three passive coping strategies are efficient in cases of exposure to workplace bullying because they can reduce employees' mental and physical strain.

## DISCUSSIONS

The present study revealed significant positive correlations among workplace bullying, mental strain and physical strain, meaning that the more that employees are exposed to workplace bullying acts, the more their levels of mental and physical strain increased. Furthermore, workplace bullying is negatively and significantly correlated with mental and behavioural disengagement. The more that employees' are confronted with workplace bullying acts, the less they will use mental and physical disengagement as coping strategies to face this phenomenon.

Mental strain is positively correlated with positive reinterpretation, meaning that the more employees' use positive reinterpretation, the more they will feel mental strain. Moreover, mental strain is negatively correlated with mental and behavioural disengagement. The more people will employ mental and behavioural disengagement, the less they will feel mental strain. The relationship remains the same for physical strain and the use of mental and behavioural strain.
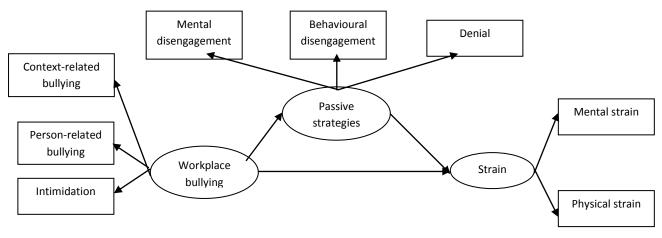
**Figure 3.** Mediation model with three latent variables (Model 3)

**Table 4.** *Unstandardised and standardised estimates for model 3*

| Paths | B | SE | ß | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Workplace bullying->context-related bullying | .917 | .069 | .705 | *** |
| Workplace bullying->person-related bullying | 1.000 | | .819 | |
| Workplace bullying->intimidation | 1.145 | .074 | .914 | *** |
| Workplace bullying-> Passive strategies | -.710 | .184 | -.372 | *** |
| Passive strategies->strain | -.461 | .125 | -.556 | *** |
| Workplace bullying->strain | .223 | .135 | .141 | .097 |
| Passive strategies->mental disengagement | 1.000 | | .470 | |
| Passive strategies->behavioural disengagement | 1.104 | .229 | .539 | *** |
| Passive strategies->denial | 1.068 | .224 | .517 | *** |
| Strain-> mental strain | 1.000 | | .629 | |
| Strain->physical strain | 1.385 | .236 | .774 | *** |

**Table 5.** Absolute and Relatives fit indices for the three models proposed

| Models | Fit Indices | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | K | df | p | RMSEA | [90 low; 90 upper] | RMR | GFI | AGFI | NFI | IFI | CFI |
| *Model 1* | 147.355 | 29 | .000 | .114 | [.096;  .133] | .026 | .914 | .837 | .808 | .840 | .837 |
| *Model 2* | 74.189 | 16 | .000 | .108 | [.084;  .133] | .023 | .941 | .867 | .892 | .913 | .911 |
| *Model 3* | 32.811 | 17 | .012 | .055 | [.025;  .082] | .006 | .974 | .946 | .952 | .976 | .976 |

The more people use mental and behavioural disengagement, the less they feel physical strain. Correlational data suggested that the use of passive coping strategies, such as mental and behavioural disengagement, would have a positive impact on mental and physical strain. Previous research (Hyung-Park & DeFrank, 2010; Moreno et al., 2009; Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004) has shown that coping strategies act like moderators on the relationship between workplace bullying and the psychological and physiological effects of affected employees, but none of them proposed the best mediation model with best fit indices. Thus, the present study filled this gap by presenting

(i.e. active coping) and positive reinterpretation (see Table 2) did not mediate the relationship between workplace bullying

and testing three mediation models with the aid of the AMOS 20.00 programme.

The present study revealed that three passive coping strategies, such as denial, behavioural and mental disengagement (see Figure 3 and Table 4), fully moderated the relationship between workplace bullying exposure and employees' level of strain. If the first two mediation models revealed only partial mediation roles of five and three coping strategies, respectively, the third proposed model revealed a full mediation model. The results of the first model proposed (i.e. from Figure 1) revealed that problem-solving strategies

and employees' strain. In other words, if a workplace bullying victim uses these two types of coping strategies, there will not

be an improvement in his level of strain, but if he uses denial, mental and behavioural disengagement to manage workplace bullying acts, his level of mental and behavioural strain will decrease (see Figure 2 and Table 3).

Furthermore, the relationship becomes statistically insignificant when the third mediation model is proposed (see Figure 3 and Table 4), meaning that the three passive coping strategies fully explained the relationship between workplace bullying exposure and employees' strain. Moreover, when computing the fit indices for the three mediation models (see Table 5), the best fit indices were obtained for the third model (see Figure 3), meaning that this model is the best mediation model out of all three mediation models proposed in the present study.

The results of the present study have practical implications for human resource practitioners because the results can help them improve their training programmes that are designed to increase workplace bullying knowledge and develop better coping skills among workplace bullying victims.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

The present study has some limitations as well, which can be overcome through future studies. The first limitation consists of the fact that this study used cross-sectional data and a correlational design, and causal inferences should be made with caution. In order to overcome this limitation, some quasi-experimental designs should be tested.

A second limitation refers to the fact that the efficiency of these three passive coping strategies are analysed in the short-term, and questions about the efficacy remain the same over the long-term. To overcome this limitation, longitudinal studies are suggested to test the relationship between workplace bullying, coping strategies and employees' health outcomes.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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