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## Workplace Bullying as an Organizational Problem: Spotlight on People Management Practices

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Though workplace bullying is conceptualized as an organizational problem, there remains a gap in understanding the contexts in which bullying manifests—knowledge vital for addressing bullying in practice. In three studies, we leverage the rich content contained within workplace bullying complaint records to explore this issue then, based on our discoveries, investigate people management practices linked to bullying. First, through content analysis of 342 official complaints lodged with a state health and safety regulator (over 5,500 pages), we discovered that the risk of bullying primarily arises from ineffective people management in 11 different contexts (e.g., managing underperformance, coordinating working hours, and entitlements). Next, we developed a behaviorally anchored rating scale to measure people management practices within a refined set of nine risk contexts. Effective and ineffective behavioral indicators were identified through content analysis of the complaints data and data from 44 critical incident interviews with subject matter experts; indicators were then sorted and rated by two independent samples to form a risk audit tool. Finally, data from a multilevel multisource study of 145 clinical healthcare staff nested in 25 hospital wards showed that the effectiveness of people management practices predicts concurrent exposure to workplace bullying at individual level beyond established organizational antecedents, and at the team level beyond leading indicator psychosocial safety climate. Overall, our findings highlight where the greatest risk of bullying lies within organizational systems and identifies effective ways of managing people within those contexts to reduce the risk, opening new avenues for bullying intervention research and practice.

*Keywords:* people management practices, workplace bullying, risk contexts, risk audit tool, work environment hypothesis

Workplace bullying is a form of systematic mistreatment that occurs repeatedly and regularly over time, whereby the target has difficulty defending themselves due to the power imbalance between the parties involved (Einarsen et al., 2011). The persistent and frequent nature of bullying, together with power imbalance as a sustaining factor, helps to distinguish it from other mistreatment concepts such as incivility, abusive supervision, and social undermining (Hershcovis, 2011). Bullying undermines the healthy functioning of employees and organizations alike. It has an erosive effect on targets, triggering a resource loss process (Naseer & Raja, 2021; Tuckey & Neall, 2014) that results in diverse deleterious effects such as psychological health problems, symptoms of posttraumatic stress, emotional exhaustion, elevated intention to leave, and reduced job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Boudrias et al., 2021; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). There is also growing evidence that

bullying at work is related to poorer cardiovascular health (e.g., Kivimäki et al., 2003; Xu et al., 2019), suicidal ideation (Leach et al., 2017), and sleep problems (Nielsen et al., 2020). Once escalated, it is difficult to effectively resolve bullying situations (Zapf & Gross, 2001), particularly in unsupportive work environments (Kwan et al., 2016; Törnroos et al., 2020). There is thus a strong impetus for evidence-based prevention and intervention to circumvent cycles of damaging interpersonal interactions.

Though it manifests in the form of negative acts within dyads or small groups, bullying at work has long been recognized as an organizational problem (see Leymann, 1996). Research under the work environment hypothesis, which positions “characteristics of the psychosocial work environment as precursors of bullying” (Skogstad et al., 2011, p. 476), has emphasized job characteristics, leadership styles, and facets of organizational climate as risk factors. Less discussed is how, in daily working life, these risk factors operate and intersect within organizational contexts in which tasks and roles are coordinated, job performance is managed, and relationships are nurtured in the pursuit of organizational objectives. For example, managers display certain leadership styles not in a vacuum, but in the context of clarifying tasks, allocating workloads, appraising performance, and so on, in order to steer employees toward organizational goals. This steering process is, in turn, likely to affect perceived job characteristics typically associated with bullying, such as the level of job autonomy, supervisor support, or role

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ambiguity. The actions taken by managers in these contexts also determine how climate is transmitted from organizational to work group level, with potential flow-on effects for bullying exposure. Paying explicit attention to the organizational contexts in which bullying manifests is thus likely to be valuable for enriching knowledge of the antecedents beyond existing studies, and for understanding how those antecedents are connected to the development of bullying—important considerations for effective prevention.

Recognizing the critical role of organizational contexts in affecting the behavioral phenomena within (cf. Porter, 1996), we set out to leverage the rich content contained within official workplace bullying complaint records to uncover the contexts in which bullying occurs within organizations; these “risk contexts” (cf. Lazzarini & Pistolesi, 2013) are indicative of “systemic errors in the way the organization functions” (Akerboom & Maes, 2006, p. 23) that, in this case, foster bullying. We discover inductively in Study 1 that bullying manifests in organizational contexts related to people management (see Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Here, we refer to micro-organizational conditions wherein supervisors implement human resource (HR) policies and procedures to meet organizational goals by managing and organizing people and tasks within time and resource constraints. After documenting the (people management) contexts in which bullying arises in Study 1, we develop a behaviorally anchored rating scale (BARS)—called a risk audit tool—comprising indicators of effective and ineffective people management practices (Study 2) and validate the risk audit tool as a predictor of bullying exposure (Study 3).

Theoretically, our research contributes to understanding bullying as an organizational problem by identifying where the greatest risk of bullying lies in day-to-day organizational life and providing guidance on how to intervene to mitigate bullying risk. Specifically, we demonstrate that exposure to bullying is associated with ineffective people management in particular risk contexts; conversely, cultivating more effective people management within those contexts offers a targeted opportunity for proactive bullying prevention. Practically, our discoveries open the door to the possibility of “designing out” bullying from organizational systems—enhancing people management practices in general, and particularly within the contexts identified here, offers concrete focal points for prevention and intervention. Methodologically, our research develops and validates a measurement tool for assessing people management practices linked with workplace bullying that can be used to inform and evaluate workplace bullying interventions in both research and practice.

## Theoretical Background

The extensive body of research on workplace bullying antecedents illustrates that bullying is largely influenced by work environment factors such as job characteristics (e.g., job demands, job resources), leadership styles (e.g., transformational leadership, laissez-faire leadership), and organizational climate (e.g., psychosocial safety climate, mistreatment climate; see Feijó et al., 2019). To prevent bullying, the consensus from this literature is to ensure job demands are reasonable and job resources are sufficient; positive leadership styles are selected for and/or developed; and healthy organizational climates are cultivated. So far, however, few studies have examined how these factors shape the development of bullying (see Baillien et al., 2009, for an exception) or how they come

together to influence bullying risk (as recently explored by Plimmer et al., 2021). Moreover, there remains a lack of research effort toward understanding how these factors are situated within and connect to the broader organizational context and how this context influences bullying.

By way of illustration, we suspect that one reason for inconsistent findings regarding the impact of job characteristics on bullying (e.g., Gardner et al., 2016; Notelaers et al., 2010; Van den Broeck et al., 2011) is a lack of knowledge about how such characteristics emerge and in what contexts they take effect to shape bullying exposure. For example, if task autonomy does *not* offer protection against bullying exposure (e.g., Notelaers et al., 2010), contradicting prevailing findings regarding job control, could context matter here? A context wherein supervisors drive subordinate staff to attain particular goals, and grant wide-ranging discretion around the methods by which the goals are attained, may be ripe for bullying through competition for essential resources (cf. Tuckey et al., 2012); in this kind of context, task autonomy may be associated with higher levels of bullying. Similarly, the leadership literature focuses on the general traits and behavioral styles of leaders and how these are associated with bullying exposure, where there have also been unexplained findings (e.g., Gardner et al., 2016; Yun & Kang, 2018). More attention needs to be paid to the contingencies concerning how and in what circumstances those traits and styles are manifested in the service of organizational objectives to result in bullying. For example, transformational leaders motivate followers to aim higher. In a context where supervisors do not manage workloads with appropriate resourcing, such expectations may exacerbate the impact of work stress, and counteract the supportive role of transformational leadership in mitigating bullying. Further, organizational climate reflects the shared sense held by employees regarding the formal policies, procedures, and practices within an organization (Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Neglected in this picture, however, is the important role played by line managers in their implementation, which heavily influences employees’ shared perceptions of the climate and flow-on outcomes such as bullying (e.g., Plimmer et al., 2021).

Exploring what happens at the interface between supervisors and subordinates is thus likely to be useful for advancing our understanding of bullying at work in a way that builds on the knowledge generated through the major streams of inquiry. Informed by our inductive exploration of the contexts in which bullying manifests in organizations, we examine the supervisor–subordinate interface through the lens of people management practices.

## The Role of Supervisors in People Management

Organizations utilize HR policies and practices to encourage employee behavior that contributes to desirable operational and financial objectives (Jiang et al., 2012). There is a growing devolution of HR responsibilities wherein HR managers are increasingly tasked with designing policies to ensure integration of HR issues with strategic decision making while the implementation of people management practices is progressively shifting to line managers (Perry & Kulik, 2008). Line managers have thus begun to play a more critical role in coordinating, appraising, and motivating employees to work toward organizational goals.

Although widely recognized, the role of line managers in enacting people management is underresearched (Knies et al., 2020).

Existing research has focused on formally established HR policies developed by HR managers (the so-called intended HR; Wright & Nishii, 2006; e.g., Gong et al., 2010) or on perceived HR practices in the eyes of employees (e.g., Alfes et al., 2012). Yet, line managers build the bridge between intended HR policies and perceived HR practices by enacting them through their day-to-day interactions with employees. The effectiveness with which they do this is considered the major cause of the gap between intended and perceived HR (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Negligence of this aspect of contemporary line manager roles is detrimental to understanding the mechanisms through which formal organizational policies contribute to organizational performance and employee health and well-being outcomes (Boxall et al., 2011).

Key to this diminished line of research is the dearth of appropriate measurement instruments for people management. There have been some important attempts to operationalize people management by line managers, such as Gilbert et al.'s (2011) measure of line manager enactment of HR practices and Knies et al.'s (2020) people management scale. Both instruments distinguish management and leadership components within the role of line managers, though these dimensions are conceptualized as being mutually reinforcing. Therefore, as reflected in the measures, items from the management component appear to tap content similar to the leadership component, making it difficult to distinguish between these two dimensions. By contrast, the risk audit tool we develop in Study 2 incorporates management and leadership components reflecting *how* line managers use leadership behaviors to perform people management. Moreover, the risk audit tool uses an extended range of effective and ineffective behaviors to capture how line managers implement people management practices in each risk context. In comparison, the existing measures assess fewer people management practices, utilize just one or two items per practice, and focus on general perceptions of the existence of the practices rather than on the effectiveness through which they are enacted.

The risk audit tool we develop here is also distinct from measures of leadership. Many measures of leadership behavior "are not related to line managers' implementation of HR practices" (Knies et al., 2020 p. 709). Leadership measures tend to be abstract, reflecting how supervisors manage individual employees' personal feelings, interests, and needs, without being connected to how supervisors perform people management. That is, leadership tends to be measured without being grounded in the contexts in which people management practices are implemented to influence employees' attitudes and behaviors. For example, transformational leaders value individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1989), which may manifest in how supervisors assign tasks in accordance with employee competencies, how they accommodate reasonable leave and break requests, and/or how they tailor training and development opportunities—all aspects of people management. In this way, measures of leader behavior do not explicitly indicate to line managers how they can provide better leadership while implementing people management practices as a supervisor. Our risk audit tool bridges this gap and provides instrumental guidance regarding where and how supervisors are performing well in terms of people management and where and how they can improve their performance.

## The Present Research

Here, we begin with an inquiry into the risk contexts in which bullying arises at work, with the premise that these contexts serve as

indicators of where systemic errors in organizational functioning increase the likelihood of bullying. In Study 1, we carry out a content analysis of 342 official case records of workplace bullying complaints lodged with a state work health and safety regulatory body and discover that the risk contexts for bullying relate to people management. In Study 2, through a sequence of stages, we develop a BARS to measure the people management practices linked to bullying, called a risk audit tool, and establish its psychometric properties. Finally, in Study 3, we use the risk audit tool as part of a multilevel multisource study with 25 hospital teams to establish criterion-related validity. We demonstrate that the perceived effectiveness of people management practices, assessed by the risk audit tool, predicts self-reported workplace bullying exposure at individual level for subordinates beyond established bullying antecedents, and at the team level beyond organizational climate for both supervisors and subordinates. The samples and analyses used in each study are summarized in Table 1. Overall, our findings highlight which aspects of people management are associated with the greatest risk of bullying and pinpoint targets for effective ways of managing people to mitigate bullying risk, providing a foundation for organizational interventions in research and practice.

## Study 1

To explore the organizational risk contexts for bullying, we examined the official case records of 342 workplace bullying complaints lodged by South Australian workers with the state government work health and safety body. The official case records provide access to rich textual information on what complainants perceive as fundamental to their experiences of bullying at work, which can shed light on the complexities of how work environment factors manifest in bullying situations in a way that quantitative research designs cannot, and in a form that offers potential for maximum variation in experiences rather than being narrowly constrained by existing thinking on the role of the work environment in bullying (cf. Guerin, 2016). Further, noting that few studies have investigated bullying at work and related phenomena using methods other than self-report surveys and, more recently, diary entries (see the review by Neall & Tuckey, 2014), we follow several other scholars in recognizing the value of official documents and records as valuable sources of information for learning about personnel issues beyond those methods traditionally used in the organizational sciences (e.g., Barrett & Kernan, 1987; Miller et al., 1990; Russell, 1984; Werner & Bolino, 1997).

## Method

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee before commencing the research. The following sections outline the sourcing, transcribing, cleaning, and coding of the official case files analyzed in Study 1.

## Data Acquisition

Between 2004 and 2013 (March), 1,205 requests for an investigation into alleged workplace bullying were lodged with SafeWork SA. Close inspection of the case files revealed that the quality and volume of the material varied considerably. Some cases had more

**Table 1**  
*Summary of Analyses and Samples Used in Each Study*

Study description	Methodology	Sample details
Study 1: identify the risk contexts for bullying at work	Inductive content analysis	Sample 1: 342 official case records of workplace bullying complaints lodged with a state work health and safety regulatory body (Archival data transcribed and de-identified in Study 1)
Study 2: develop a BARS to measure the risk contexts	Mixed methods	
	Step 1: content analysis of critical incident interviews to elicit indicators	Sample 2: $N = 44$ ; workers ( $n = 22$ ), managers ( $n = 19$ ), and work health and safety representatives ( $n = 3$ ) (Collected in Study 2)
	Step 2: indicator retranslation into risk contexts	Sample 3: $N = 132$ (female: 78.1%; aged between 21 and 59: 88.5%; organizational tenure longer than 2 years: 77.27%) (Collected in Study 2)
	Step 3: indicator effectiveness ratings and scaling	Sample 4: $N = 74$ (female: 75.7%; aged between 21 and 59: 89.2%; organizational tenure longer than 2 years: 75.7%) (Collected in Study 2)
Study 3: validate the risk contexts for bullying at work by using the BARS to predict self-reports of workplace bullying exposure	Exploratory factor analysis	Sample 5: 62 supervisors and managers in the same 25 hospital teams as Sample 6 (female: 80.6%; full time: 62.9%; age between 21 and 59: 95.2%; organizational tenure longer than 2 years: 82.2%) (Collected in Study 3)
	Multilevel regression and regression analysis at the team level	Sample 5: 62 supervisors and managers in the same 25 hospital teams as Sample 6 (female: 80.6%; full time: 62.9%; age between 21 and 59: 95.2%; organizational tenure longer than 2 years: 82.2%) (Collected in Study 3)
		Sample 6: $N = 145$ clinic healthcare staff members nested within 25 hospital teams (female: 84.6%; full time: 46.2%; age between 21 and 59: 93.7%; organizational tenure longer than 2 years: 78.5%) (Collected in Study 3)
		Sample 7: 193 clinic healthcare staff members in the same 25 hospital teams as Sample 5 (female: 86.5%; full time: 53.6%; aged between 21 and 59: 90.0%; organizational tenure longer than 2 years: 90.1%) (Preexisting independent data linked at team level in Study 3; unable to be matched at individual level with Samples 5 and 6, thus matched only at group level)

*Note.* BARS = behaviorally anchored rating scale.

than 480 pages of information; others contained as few as 10 pages. In addition, the breadth and thoroughness of the SafeWork SA investigation process for psychosocial hazards have evolved since 2010 (in line with an expanding legal scope), with a corresponding increase in the quality and volume of case-file data. As a result, the ability to identify key contextual factors from cases prior to 2010 was severely limited and, based on their comprehensiveness, we utilized case files from 2010 onwards. A total of 524 cases were opened between January 2010 and March 2013. Of these, 55 were still under investigation at the time of transcription, and a further 124 were not available on site. In addition, two cases were removed from the analysis as the complaints were outside of the jurisdiction of the SafeWork SA investigation process, and one case was removed due to insufficient information provided regarding employment. Thus, a final data set of 342 usable cases was available for analysis (referred to as Sample 1 in Table 1).

Information from the 342 case files was de-identified and transcribed into Microsoft Word files onsite at SafeWork SA by an independent agency. Key materials and documents transcribed for analysis included the lodged complaint form for the case (the main element of which was a summary of the complaint) plus a range of accompanying materials, such as written evidence provided by the complainant (e.g., the initial complaint to their employer organization); email communications

(i.e., between the complainant, SafeWork SA, and the organization); transcripts of mediated meetings; diary entries detailing the dates, times, places, and events involved; evidence of impact on health and safety (e.g., statements from medical professionals); and records, results, and outcome correspondence for the internal and external (SafeWork SA) investigation processes. Demographic characteristics were also recorded (e.g., gender of the complainant, industry, and whether the complainant had left the organization). This diverse array of documentary evidence enabled the research team to “triangulate” data from different sources (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989). The complete data set consisted of over 5,500 pages of single-spaced case-related information.

### **Case Summary Information**

Table 2 shows the gender, industry, and work status of complainants within the Study 1 sample. Responsible for 59.7% of the complaints, female employees were overrepresented in the sample compared with male employees with respect to the composition of the South Australian labor force (wherein women comprise approximately 45.7% of the workforce; see <http://stat.abs.gov.au>). The three industries with the highest number of complaints were health and community services, property and business services, and retail trade, which together were

**Table 2**

*Study 1: Summary of Workplace Bullying Complaint Characteristics (Sample 1)*

Complainant characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Complainant gender		
Male	137	40.1
Female	198	57.9
Unknown	7	2.0
Complainant industry		
Health and community services	73	21.3
Property and business services	49	14.4
Retail trade	47	13.7
Manufacturing	34	9.9
Accommodation, cafes, and restaurants	25	7.3
Education	23	6.7
Finance and insurance	18	5.3
Personal and other services	18	5.3
Construction	17	5.0
Other	14	4.1
Wholesale	10	3.0
Cultural and recreational services	6	1.7
Transport and storage	6	1.7
Unknown	2	0.6
Complainant employment status		
Complainant still at the organization at the time of complaint	186	54.4
Complainant had exited the organization at the time of the complaint	131	38.3
Unknown	25	7.3

represented in half (49.4%) of the complaints. Most employees remained employed in the organization at the time of the complaint, although a sizeable proportion (38.3%) had left the organization at the time of or soon after lodging the complaint.

### Data Analysis

The transcribed documents were imported into the qualitative data-analysis software, *NVivo* Version 10.0 (QSR International, 2010). The analytic method used for coding the transcripts was guided by an interpretivist inductive methodology (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Schilling, 2006), which reflects a coding paradigm that emphasizes subjectivity, interpretation, and reflexivity, and rejects the possibility of an objective “truth” (often adopted in positivist approaches) that researchers can assess reliability through a well-articulated coding protocol (Syed & Nelson, 2015, p. 3). Specifically, we were guided by the inductive analysis process specified by Schilling (2006) in our systematic, stepped framework for undertaking quality content analysis. Key features and phenomena in the data were analyzed following Levels 2–5 of Schilling’s content analysis spiral.

First, an initial review of 50 randomly selected cases was conducted by four members of the author team, combined with information gathered from 1-hr interviews with SafeWork SA inspectors, to identify the dimensions in focus within the data set. This review also allowed researchers to describe the data set (i.e., where key information lies within case files), and define meaningful units of analysis (in this instance, short paragraphs; see Locke, 2002).

In the next step, the textual data from all 342 cases were submitted to “structuring content analysis” (Schilling, 2006, p. 32), whereby

an exhaustive qualitative coding process was conducted by two authors (the primary coders) working together to create a preliminary category system that represented meaningful elements of the data by asking the question “what organizational conditions and factors are connected to the perceptions of bullying within the case?” The preliminary category system was represented by five core subjects: misuse of human resource management procedures (67.4% of cases), communication (64.1%), supervision process (58.9%), role clarification (52.2%), and performance management (34.8%).

Third, the primary coders then revisited and refined each of the five subjects to identify specific risk contexts associated with bullying perceptions and complaints (marking a jump from the preliminary category system to coded protocols; Schilling, 2006). For example, a category for the risk context *managing under-performance* was created because a review of the performance management subject node revealed that many employees felt mistreated when they were subject to performance management processes (i.e., poor representation, failure to provide guidance on how to improve performance). Overall, this process resulted in the identification of 11 risk contexts associated with perceptions of bullying in the sample of complaint records (see Table 3), reflecting different aspects of people management. Segments of raw text were allocated to each risk context, with an open discussion between the primary coders and, where necessary, the other authors to resolve ambiguous text or create new categories. These risk contexts were modified in an iterative process according to the researchers’ evolving understanding (cf. Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017) of the contexts in which perceptions of bullying arise.

Fourth, categories for the risk contexts were further broken down into practice subcategories by two additional authors (secondary coders). Using two different pairs of coders ensured rigor and trustworthiness of the coding scheme (as per Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). The secondary coders revisited the raw text associated with each risk context to identify information about the practices involved by asking the question “what practices are being performed within the risk contexts when the perception of bullying occurs?” In the two-level data structure generated in this step, each category represents a risk context (e.g., *rostering, scheduling, arranging, and compensating working hours*), and contains a number of subcategories which each refers to a specific people management practice within the risk context (e.g., *assigns employees to work on days they have indicated as being unavailable or provides insufficient consultation about rostering changes*). The secondary coders worked closely together and discussed the refinement of categories and subcategories with other authors in an iterative process of resolving differences through consensus.

After the data were exhaustively sorted into categories and subcategories, the authors systematically explored the similarities and differences in categories, links among categories, and connections to relevant literature to develop a higher order conceptual interpretation of the coded protocols (as per Schilling, 2006). In this step, the research team repeatedly consulted the literature on management competencies to aid interpretation of the findings, and iteratively revisited the literature, higher order dimensions, categories, subcategories, and raw data. This step produced a coherent data structure with three levels: 92 people management practice subcategories categorized in 11 risk context categories, organized into three conceptual dimensions.

**Table 3***Study 1: Risk Contexts for Workplace Bullying Evident in the Complaints (Sample 1)*

Risk contexts for workplace bullying	No. of sources	No. of unique references	No. of cases	% of all cases	% of cases within risk contexts
Coordinating and administrating working hours	187	400	160	46.8	
Rostering, scheduling, arranging, and compensating working hours	100	309	87	25.4	54.4
Administering leave and entitlements	129	231	118	34.3	73.8
Managing work performance	390	1,410	282	82.5	
Clarifying and defining job roles	203	529	160	46.8	56.7
Guiding, directing, and motivating employees	83	146	78	22.8	27.7
Providing training, development, and personal growth	89	278	81	23.7	28.7
Appraising and rewarding job performance	205	585	178	52.0	63.1
Managing tasks and workload	169	569	138	40.4	48.9
Managing underperformance	195	776	144	42.1	51.1
Shaping relationships and work environment	263	689	223	65.2	
Respecting, valuing, and involving individual employees	180	332	162	47.4	72.6
Leading the work unit	114	226	104	30.4	46.6
Maintaining a safe environment	81	167	69	20.2	30.9

Note. Total number of cases = 342. Total number of source documents across all cases = 803. The number of references reflects unique references across all sources, documents, and cases.

Finally, to ensure trustworthiness and rigor the authors conducted “member checks” (see Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017) by presenting the data structure to representatives from SafeWork SA who were familiar with the complaint files; several academic scholars in the field; and key contacts in employee unions, employer organizations, regulators, and industry association bodies. The member checks revealed widespread endorsement of the three-tiered framework, which they described as reflecting their perspectives of how bullying arises within dynamic organizational systems. Through these discussions minor adjustments were made to the data structure, mainly reflecting phrasing issues.

## Results and Discussion

### *Risk Contexts for Workplace Bullying*

Our analysis of the 342 case records revealed that perceptions of workplace bullying arise in three broad dimensions of people management: (a) coordinating and administrating working hours, focused on day-to-day administrative duties relating to work arrangements and schedules; (b) managing work performance, focused on the quality of subordinate job performance; and (c) shaping relationships and the work environment, focused on healthy and effective relationships with and among subordinates, and workplace safety. As shown in Table 3, just under half (46.8%) of the complaints involved matters relating to how working hours are coordinated and administrated (the first category). A majority (82.5%) of the 342 complaints involved some aspects of managing work performance (the second category). Finally, in two-thirds of cases (65.2%), there were issues regarding the way that relationships were managed (with individuals, or when leading the work unit more broadly) and ensuring a safe working environment (the third category).

More detailed information is presented in Tables 4–6 regarding the people management practices associated with the perception of bullying in each of the risk contexts. In the first dimension

(Table 4), analysis of the complaints showed that when supervisors are involved in *rostering, scheduling, arranging, and compensating working hours*, perceptions of bullying were linked to ineffective people management practices such as underrostering, underpayment, and inadequate input into and control over work schedules. In terms of *administering leave and entitlements*, the complaints revealed ineffective people management practices such as unequal and inefficient access to leave, breaks, and other entitlements.

As shown in Table 5, the second dimension is comprised of various risk contexts regarding how work performance is managed: (a) *clarifying, defining, and assigning job roles*, involving ineffective people management practices such as changing details of the role description without consultation; (b) *guiding, directing, and motivating employees*, including practices such as undermining the work of subordinates and misusing the position of authority; (c) *providing training, development, and personal growth*, incorporating practices such as providing insufficient training to undertake the role and blocking further development by denying training requests; (d) *managing tasks and workload*, for instance enforcing unmanageable workloads and unreasonable deadlines; (e) *appraising and rewarding job performance*, including excessive monitoring of work, and neglecting to provide appropriate reward or recognition for performance; and, finally, (f) *managing underperformance* (represented in around half of the cases in this dimension) encompassing practices such as using the formal performance management process to intimidate subordinates, and not conducting formal performance management in a prompt, clear, and legitimate manner.

Finally, in the third dimension, we found that a major concern relates to *respecting, valuing, and involving individual employees*, conveyed in nearly three-quarters (72.6% in) of the cases (refer to Table 3). The ineffective people management practices associated with perceptions of bullying (see Table 6) include not responding to communication or making (false) accusations about inappropriate

**Table 4***Study 1: Risks Related to Coordinating and Adminstrating Working Hours (Sample 1)*

Risk context	Illustrative people management practices	Illustrative quotes
Rostering, scheduling, arranging, and compensating working hours: functions reflecting the management of work shifts, rosters, and working hours and administration of income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Underrosters employees</li> <li>• Underpays employees for hours worked</li> <li>• Provides insufficient consultation about rostering changes</li> <li>• Denies requests for extra shifts, more hours, overtime, or shift swaps</li> <li>• Assigns employees to work on days they have indicated as being unavailable</li> </ul>	<p>“‘I am the boss’ he said. ‘I will tell you now there is no work for you at the moment’ (I am full time). He wasn’t willing to not have a casual not come in.”</p> <p>“[Manager] also forced me to only work 9–5 shifts on weekdays indefinitely . . . This has also had the beneficial affect [<i>sic</i>] for him of taking away my penalty shifts, thus significantly reducing my income.”</p> <p>“[My] wages varying from week to week when doing same hours 40 hours every week”</p>
Administering leave and entitlements: functions related to matters of employee leave, breaks, and other entitlements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reacts negatively toward requests to access entitlements</li> <li>• Denies employees access to their entitlements</li> <li>• Makes the process difficult for employees to access entitlements</li> <li>• Expects employees to complete work while on leave or outside of work hours</li> <li>• Forces employees to take leave</li> </ul>	<p>“She has never given me a verbal or written warning but recently threatened me that if I do not take maternity leave immediately she will give me a poor review at performance time and terminate my employment.”</p> <p>“I have received phone calls while on leave (knowing I was on leave) asking me to provide work information. I was given deadlines that required me to work while on leave.”</p> <p>“I phoned [Manager] and explained the situation to him only to have him make me feel horrible for even considering taking time off.”</p>

behavior. Also evident was perceived mistreatment in the way that relationships with employees within the work unit were handled collectively when *leading the work unit*, such as excluding or isolating employees and using different rules, and concerns related to *maintaining a safe environment*, for instance by ignoring safety concerns and safety-related complaints.

## Study 2

In Study 1, we developed a set of 11 contexts in which workplace bullying manifests, all reflecting the use of people management practices. Said another way, when people management practices are used ineffectively or unreasonably in these 11 contexts, there is a risk that employees will feel bullied. In contrast, the implementation of effective people management practices in these contexts should lower the risk of bullying at work.

The risk contexts identified in Study 1 shed new light on where and how the risk of bullying arises from a work environment perspective. Our second study sought to apply the BARS technique to construct a behaviorally based measure of effective and ineffective people management practices in the risk contexts and then investigate (in Study 3) whether the effectiveness of those people management practices is associated with self-reported exposure to bullying. The BARS technique facilitates information processing and can reduce subjectivity and errors in ratings (Campbell et al., 1973). Construction of the BARS in Study 2 first involved the identification of specific behavioral examples of people management practices in each risk context, at varying levels of effectiveness. We utilized the set of people management practices coded in Study 1, described by employees as part of their experiences of (perceived) bullying when making a bullying complaint, together with additional interview data (collected in Study 2) to translate the risk contexts into concrete, specific behavioral indicators of

effective and ineffective people management practices. Once a comprehensive set of indicators was identified, following the approach used by Landy et al. (1991), two validation techniques were employed to convert the indicators into the BARS: retranslating the indicators into the corresponding risk context and rating each indicator according to effectiveness in order to scale them.

Archival data (such as we analyzed in Study 1) are useful for avoiding inadvertent biases that can be introduced by researchers when studying a sensitive topic like workplace bullying. However, sampling only cases of alleged bullying (in the complaints) gives rise to the possibility of a different kind of bias. Employees who feel mistreated may form a negatively skewed view of how the organization operates, raising questions about the validity of the work environment factors that emerge as salient in their accounts. Further, even if all targets of bullying report similar organizational risk factors, it must still be established whether those factors are also present in cases wherein bullying does not occur. To overcome the potential for this type of bias and create a valid measurement instrument, the focus on alleged bullying associated with ineffective people management practices was countered in Study 2 by conducting critical incident interviews with diverse stakeholders to collect examples of both effective and ineffective behavior while executing people management in each risk context.

## Method and Results

Research ethics approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of South Australia prior to commencing the research.

### *Behavioral Anchor Development*

As described in Study 1, 92 people management practices were identified in the workplace bullying complaint files, reflecting *ineffective*



**Table 5***Study 1: Risks Related to Managing Work Performance (Sample 1)*

Risk context	Illustrative people management practices	Illustrative quotes
Clarifying, defining, and assigning job roles: functions addressing the clarity and accessibility of information about employee job descriptions and responsibilities as well as the assignment of job roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alters employee job roles without consultation or due process</li> <li>• Fails to provide clear information about job roles and expectations</li> <li>• Forces employees to work in a role they do not want to perform</li> <li>• Fails to check if role-related information is understood</li> <li>• Fails to give timely instructions about job role and expectations</li> </ul>	<p>“Upon the announcement of the restructure, [Manager] told me that he didn’t believe there was a role for me except in a lesser capacity.”</p> <p>“To this date, I have had no formal or informal acknowledgement that my duties have changed and the scope of what I will be required to do has changed.”</p> <p>“[Manager] has a problem remembering what she has told me (and others) to do, or simply changes her mind a lot about how things should be done, but then argues with you and insinuates that you are stupid.”</p>
Guiding, directing, and motivating employees: functions referring to the provision of guidance, direction, and support regarding performance objectives and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undermines the work of employees</li> <li>• Fails to give employees guidance and direction to perform their jobs</li> <li>• Uses authority position to intimidate employees</li> <li>• Uses authority position to justify inappropriate behaviors</li> <li>• Fails to provide clear performance objectives and expectations</li> </ul>	<p>“You are my employee and you have to do everything and anything I want and if I don’t like it then you can ‘f*** off.’”</p> <p>“We were constantly told if we played up we would be replaced instantly . . . we were disposable.”</p> <p>“Nothing I did was right. I was continually criticised or given the cold shoulder and not spoken to, information relevant to my job was not passed on to me, I was accused of not wanting my job, not knowing how to sell any more, etc.”</p>
Providing training, development, and personal growth: functions involving the identification of staff training needs, and provision of learning, coaching, and mentoring opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides insufficient training for role and duties</li> <li>• Denies reasonable requests for training</li> <li>• Fails to provide upward mobility in the job</li> <li>• Is unsupportive of opportunities for growth and development beyond the role</li> <li>• Inequitably distributes training and development opportunities</li> </ul>	<p>“Very little training is given to new staff a member, at least that’s what happened in my case.”</p> <p>“[Manager] has also deliberately excluded me from receiving training directly relevant to my job.”</p> <p>“[Manager] asked [Alleged Perpetrator] to show me how to complete a ‘Form A.’ He then left the office and [Alleged Perpetrator] said ‘I can’t be f***d showing you how to do this, you can sit here and watch but I don’t give a s*** if you do anything or not.’”</p>
Managing tasks and workload: functions regarding the management of work resources and allocation and coordination of tasks and workloads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enforces unmanageable workloads</li> <li>• Enforces unreasonable deadlines</li> <li>• Allocates non-work-related tasks to employees</li> <li>• Delegates tasks outside of employee competencies</li> <li>• Expects employees to perform tasks outside their job scope</li> </ul>	<p>“On this particular occasion he demanded that this staff member do his work for him as well as her own. This staff member came to me in tears telling me that she didn’t have time to do his work as well as her own.”</p> <p>“Again I believe [Managers] failed in their duty of care because they were aware it was, in my opinion, too much work for us to do, we told them how stressed we were but they did nothing.”</p> <p>“Being put on the spot to make decisions without having all the facts on hand (e.g., make decisions about staffing and changes to the program I was hired to run after two weeks in the position)”</p>
Appraising and rewarding job performance: functions related to the evaluation of employee performance, and the provision of feedback, recognition, and rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excessively monitors employee performance</li> <li>• Focuses on trivial performance issues when appraising employees</li> <li>• Only provides negative feedback</li> <li>• Neglects to provide appropriate reward or recognition for performance</li> <li>• Threatens employees about their performance</li> </ul>	<p>“Yelling and berating me publicly when I made a mistake in the computer system, even though no-one trained me or offered me help when I asked.”</p> <p>“I think often with nursing, you get no feedback at all unless you’ve done something wrong.”</p> <p>“I told them both that in the time I had been at [Company] I had never received any positive feedback, and I only knew how I was performing when [Manager] ‘had a go at me’ about the mistakes I made.”</p>

*(table continues)*

**Table 5** (continued)

Risk context	Illustrative people management practices	Illustrative quotes
Managing underperformance: functions addressing issues of employee underperformance in the workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fails to conduct the formal performance management process in a prompt, clear, and legitimate manner</li> <li>• Uses the formal performance management process to intimidate employees</li> <li>• Denies access to support or representation during the formal performance management process</li> <li>• Fails to provide guidance to employees regarding how to address underperformance</li> <li>• Sets unachievable targets or goals for performance-managed employees</li> </ul>	<p>“I feel I have most recently received persistent and unjustified criticisms, often about petty, irrelevant and insignificant matters.”</p> <p>“I believe that a campaign to terminate me unfairly is underway. They have used the performance program as a way to bully and intimidate me.”</p> <p>“They demanded I give a presentation . . . and then announced I would be on a performance program. They have made the performance program unachievable, untimely and linked to termination . . . I have been set up to fail.”</p> <p>“ . . . hauling me into his office just about every day . . . conduct extra supervision that I did not want or need and then to discuss how he would formally performance manage me . . . ”</p>

people management in the 11 risk contexts for workplace bullying. To identify behavioral indicators of *effective* people management, 44 critical incident interviews with workers ( $n = 22$ ), managers ( $n = 19$ ), and work health and safety representatives ( $n = 3$ ; referred to collectively as Sample 2; see Table 1) from a range of industries in Australia were conducted. Participants were recruited by sending an

email invitation through the professional networks of the research team, including representatives from regular industry partners (e.g., health and safety regulators, industrial unions), to ensure that people experienced in the risks areas had an opportunity to participate.

During the interviews, which lasted 45 min on average, interviewees were asked to identify “critical” experiences, describing

**Table 6***Study 1: Risks Related to Shaping Relationships and the Work Environment (Sample 1)*

Risk context	Illustrative people management practices	Illustrative quotes
Respecting, valuing, and involving individual employees: functions related to the involvement, respect, and trust of employees, and associated communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is not responsive to employee attempts to communicate</li> <li>• Behaves disrespectfully toward employees</li> <li>• Is unreceptive to feedback or new ideas from employees</li> <li>• Accuses employees of engaging in fraudulent or dishonest behavior</li> <li>• Pressures employees not to make internal or external claim or complaint</li> </ul>	<p>“That whatever suggestions we offered, whatever strategies we had, which were good nursing strategies. There was nothing wrong with them; he would just shut them down.”</p> <p>“At a number of occasions I witnessed vulgar and offensive behavior performed by the complex manager toward teen female members of staff. He spoke in a similar tone to my partner when I was present. He acted in a way that seemed to suggest that what he was saying was funny and that I should not find it out of the ordinary.”</p> <p>“At the conclusion of this meeting [Manager] said he had received emails from a number of staff suggesting I was not always at work. I asked to see these emails and was told ‘no mate, do you think I am going to dob people in?’ At no time did he permit me to explain my absences.”</p>
Leading the work unit: functions supporting the smooth functioning of the work unit, resolving conflict, promoting teamwork, and protecting employee equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has different rules for certain employees</li> <li>• Makes decisions based on relationships not merit</li> </ul>	<p>“What makes it all the worse is that management has always supported [Alleged Perpetrator] and even when I and others have complained and asked for help, there has been none forthcoming.”</p> <p>“Yeah, I think the organization that I work for, particularly upper management, they show a lot of favoritism. If you’ve got the right look, then you’re likely to get promotions . . . But if you’re not the look or the kind of person that they want, then they’ll just overlook you.”</p> <p>“I have solely been singled out in my region even though my performance was better than others.”</p>

(table continues)

**Table 6** (continued)

Risk context	Illustrative people management practices	Illustrative quotes
Maintaining a safe environment: <i>functions</i> that enhance or diminish a safe workplace environment for employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignores safety concerns and best practice</li> <li>• Ignores reports of workplace bullying</li> <li>• Pressures employees to work in unsafe conditions</li> </ul>	<p>“Weekend staff (including one deaf girl) work alone on weekends and have no access to a phone unless they have reception on their own mobile).”</p> <p>“My employer followed no reasonable process . . . in addressing the complaints lodged. The bullying continued.”</p>

what occurred and why it was significant (Hughes, 2008). Specifically, participants were asked to recount detailed examples of their experiences of effective and ineffective people management in each of the 11 risk contexts. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed by a professional transcription service, and imported into NVivo Version 10.0 for analysis.

The interview data were analyzed following the same systematic approach to content analysis outlined in Study 1 (see Schilling, 2006), guided by the question “what practices are being executed by the supervisor within the risk contexts when the perception of workplace bullying arises?” The two secondary coders from Study 1 completed the analysis independently and, in the event of disagreement, reached consensus through discussion with another two co-authors. This coding process resulted in the identification of 138 behavioral indicators of people management practices, 72 of which overlapped with those identified in the bullying complaint files and 66 of which were unique. The unique behaviors predominantly represented those at the effective end of the spectrum. For example, for the risk context related to *providing training, development, and personal growth*, the people

management practice *denying request for training without justification* was identified in Study 1, while the practice *providing sufficient training for role and duties* was derived from the interview data. Additional examples of effective practices arising from the interviews are provided in Table 7. In total, the content analysis, of the interviews, together with the analysis of the 342 workplace bullying complaints reported in Study 1, generated a total of 159 behavioral indicators of people management practices nested in the original 11 risk contexts.

### **Behavioral Anchor Retranslation**

Following Landy et al. (1991), the 159 indicators were presented to an independent sample of 132 participants (Sample 3) to see if each could be accurately retranslated into the originally coded risk context. Participants were recruited via email through the professional networks of the research team with support from industry partners in advertising the study to their employees and/or member organizations. Sample 3 consisted of 28 males and 100 females (four participants did not provide gender information), who were

**Table 7**

*Study 2: Examples of Effective Behavioral Indicators Generated in the Critical Incident Interviews for Each of the Risk Contexts (Sample 2)*

Risk context	Examples of effective behavioral indicators of people management practices
Rostering, scheduling, and working hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows employees meaningful input into their rosters</li> <li>• Provides rosters regularly and in advance of shifts</li> </ul>
Administering leave and entitlements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodates reasonable leave and break requests</li> <li>• Implements clear and reasonable guidelines or systems for taking leave</li> </ul>
Clarifying and defining job roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides clear information about job roles and expectations</li> <li>• Reviews job descriptions in consultation with employees</li> </ul>
Guiding, directing, and motivating employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides clear performance objectives and expectations</li> <li>• Supports employees to manage difficult work situations</li> </ul>
Providing training, development, and personal growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodates reasonable training requests</li> <li>• Provides sufficient training for the job role and duties</li> </ul>
Appraising and rewarding job performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivers performance feedback privately and respectfully</li> <li>• Provides meaningful performance feedback</li> </ul>
Managing tasks and workload	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensures employees have the necessary resources to complete their tasks and workload</li> <li>• Ensures there are sufficient personnel to handle the workload</li> </ul>
Managing underperformance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides guidance and training to employees regarding how to address underperformance</li> <li>• Addresses underperformance issues in a clear and legitimate manner</li> </ul>
Managing interpersonal and team relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treats employees in an honest and upfront way</li> <li>• Treats employees in a warm and friendly way</li> </ul>
Leading the work unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses and resolves issues of inappropriate and disrespectful behavior</li> <li>• Holds regular team meetings to solve problems and discuss issues</li> </ul>
Maintaining a safe environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotes safety in the workplace</li> <li>• Assesses and reviews safety issues in the workplace</li> </ul>

*Note.* The people management practices were developed in Study 1 and refined in Study 2.

employed in 11 different industries (10 participants did not specify industry) in Australia. The average age of participants was 28.08 ( $SD = 13.19$ ). Most participants ( $n = 102, 77.27\%$ ) had been employed in their current position for more than 2 years.

Data were collected using the online survey platform *Qualtrics*. Upon commencing the survey, each participant was allocated a random selection of 40 behavioral indicators from the pool of 159. Below each indicator was a drop-down list of the 11 risk contexts. Participants were asked to sort each indicator into the single-risk context that they felt best represented the people management practice in question, in a forced-choice scenario. Each indicator was rated at least 25 times across the sample ( $M = 27.36, SD = 2.91$ ), with a total of 4,350 ratings.

Next, each of the 4,350 responses was classified as representing a correct or incorrect retranslation into the original risk context category. A threshold of 60% correct retranslation for an indicator across the sample was then applied to retain behavioral indicators for the BARS. In typical BARS studies, percentage criteria for retranslation range from 60% to 90% (Hauenstein & Foti, 1989), representing clear agreement about the dimension to which the indicator belongs (Burke & Dunlap, 2002). Altogether, 83 (52%) of the 159 behavioral indicators met the threshold. During this process, due to a lack of agreement across participants in retranslating the relevant indicators, two original risk contexts—*guiding, directing, and motivating employees* and *leading the work unit*—were deleted, and some of the corresponding indicators were included in the remaining nine risk contexts.

### **Behavioral Anchor Scaling**

In the scaling phase, each of the 83 indicators retained in the retranslation process was rated by an independent sample of participants in terms of effectiveness (Sample 4). These participants were recruited through the professional networks of the research team, intranet advertisements, and emails administered by regular industry partners. The sample was made up of 74 participants (18 males, 56 females) employed in 12 different industries (6 participants did not specify industry) in Australia. The average age of participants was 25.59 ( $SD = 13.08$ ). About three-quarters of participants ( $n = 56, 75.68\%$ ) had worked for more than 2 years in their current position at the time of the study.

Again using the *Qualtrics* platform, participants were randomly allocated five risk contexts and asked to rate each indicator from within that context on a scale of 1 = *least effective* to 10 = *most effective* for carrying out people management within the particular context. For example, for the risk context of *appraising and rewarding job performance*, participants rated indicators such as *neglects to provide appropriate reward or recognition* and *delivers performance feedback privately and respectfully* in terms of their level of effectiveness. A score of 1 meant that the indicator represented a very ineffective people management practice, while a score of 10 signified that it was considered a very effective practice. By design, each survey contained both effective and ineffective indicators in order to generate a spectrum of indicators for each risk context. Each indicator was rated by at least 38 participants ( $M = 43.72, SD = 2.86$ ), with a total of 3,629 ratings.

The means and standard deviations for the ratings of each behavioral indicator were calculated. This process revealed that, within each risk context, the indicators consistently fell into two distinct groups rather than being spread evenly over the 10-point scale—one group of

indicators at the higher end of the scale (representing more effective indicators) and one group at the lower end of the scale (representing less effective indicators). Accordingly, indicators from the upper grouping were retained if the mean rating for each was outside of the 95% confidence interval of the mean ratings of all indicators within the lower grouping, and vice versa for items from the lower grouping. In this way, the ratings for each group of items did not significantly overlap. A total of 75 items met this threshold and were utilized in the BARS.

Thus, the final risk audit tool consisted of 75 behavioral indicators of people management practices across nine risk contexts. The set of nine final risk contexts is as follows: *clarifying and defining job roles, providing training, development and personal growth, appraising and rewarding job performance, managing tasks and workload, managing underperformance, managing interpersonal and team relationships, maintaining a safe work environment, administering leave and entitlements, and working hours and rostering and scheduling*. The behavioral indicators were placed as anchors onto a graphical rating scale—one graphical scale for each risk context—according to their mean effectiveness ratings.

### **Study 3**

The creation of a behaviorally anchored risk audit tool in Study 2 enabled us to test, in our third study, whether perceptions of ineffective people management practices within the risk contexts are associated with increased exposure to workplace bullying. We collected multi-source and multilevel data from 25 hospital teams (Samples 5 and 6) using the newly constructed risk audit tool and linked these data at the group level with existing data collected independently from the same hospital teams (Sample 7). Using this linked data set, we examined whether people management practices within the risk contexts (operationalized by the risk audit tool score from Sample 6): (a) at individual level, predicted concurrent exposure to workplace bullying in Sample 6 beyond established organizational antecedents of bullying (role clarity, role conflict, role overload, and job autonomy; as per the meta-analysis of Bowling & Beehr, 2006) while taking account of the nonindependence of the observations; (b) at group level, predicted concurrent exposure to workplace bullying measured using multi-source reports from Samples 5, 6, and 7, beyond organizational psychosocial safety climate reported by Sample 7 (a facet-specific component of organizational climate relating to senior management commitment, support, organizational communication, and participation in relation to psychological health and safety, established as a leading indicator of bullying; Law et al., 2011). To establish the validity for aggregating scores on the risk audit tool to the group level, we also explored: (a) the extent to which scores differ systematically between work units in Sample 6; and (b) the level of agreement on tool scores across staff working in the unit in Sample 6.

### **Method**

Prior to commencing the research, approval was granted from the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee and the Southern Adelaide Clinical Human Research Ethics Committee.

#### **Survey Participants and Procedure**

The research team approached 32 work units (teams, primarily clinical wards) across three hospital sites located within

metropolitan South Australia, from a sample of 63 teams that had recently finished participating in a 3-year research project on physical and psychosocial safety climate. Four teams did not respond to multiple requests for a meeting, and a further two teams were in the process of decommissioning at the time of the study, leaving 26 teams. Following an initial meeting with participating teams to describe the nature of the research project, hard-copy surveys were distributed to staff members and team supervisors for completion. All surveys were marked with a two-digit numerical code, to enable researchers to match responses within each team while maintaining the confidentiality of individual participant information. Completed surveys were placed in a sealed box for collection by the researchers. At that stage, data from one team were excluded from analysis because only one participant had responded.

Responses were received from 62 supervisors and managers (Sample 5) and 145 healthcare staff (Sample 6) nested within 25 teams, primarily clinical wards. As described below, data analysis was primarily performed using Sample 6 data. For this sample, 121 respondents identified as female (84.6%), 22 identified as male (15.4%), and two respondents did not indicate gender. The average team size was 6.02 ( $SD = 4.05$ ). Half of the respondents were employed on a full-time basis ( $n = 66$ ) and about 48.3% worked part-time ( $n = 70$ ). The majority were aged between 21 and 59 ( $n = 134$ , 93.7%). About 78.5% ( $n = 113$ ) had worked in the hospital for at least 2 years. For information, the demographic characteristics of Sample 5 are overviewed briefly in Table 1.

### Survey Measures

Each team member in Sample 6 completed the risk audit tool (the BARS created in Study 2); responded to measures of four organizational antecedents of workplace bullying established within the scholarly evidence base (see the meta-analysis by Bowling & Beehr, 2006)—role clarity, role conflict, role overload, and job autonomy; and rated their exposure to workplace bullying from supervisors and coworkers. Team supervisors (Sample 5) completed the same survey measures including the risk audit tool, except that they rated the frequency and duration of bullying they experienced from subordinates. Unless noted, the following measures were assessed on a 7-point rating scale for which we specified 1 = *very false*, 3 = *neither true nor false*, and 7 = *very true*. The reliability (coefficient  $\alpha$ ) for each reflective scale is reported in Table 8.

The *risk audit tool* contains nine graphical scales reflecting people management practices in the refined set of nine risk contexts (refer to the Appendix, for an illustrative graphical scale and example worked response). For each graphical scale, a definition was provided regarding the risk context in question. Participants were then instructed to place a tick next to the practices (the behavioral indicators) typically performed in the risk context<sup>1</sup> and, using the indicators as a guide, place a cross at the position on the vertical arrow that most accurately represents, overall, how effectively or ineffectively activities in the risk context are managed in their work unit. The position of the cross is associated with a score ranging from 0 to 10, with 10 representing the highest level of effectiveness. Although numerals are not shown on the graphical scale, the bottom of the arrow represents 0; the top of the arrow represents 10; and there are nine markers in between spaced 2-cm apart (giving a total scale length of 20 cm). The overall score was calculated by measuring the distance along the axis at which the cross was placed, noting that 2 cm on the scale is equivalent to 1 scoring unit. A measurement of

14.2 cm is thus equivalent to a score of 7.1. Scores were rounded to one decimal place and ranged from 0.0 to 10.0 across the nine risk contexts.

We conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) via principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation using the supervisor ratings (Sample 5). The subject-to-variable ratio was 7:1, above the generally accepted minimum ratio of 5:1 for reaching a stable factor structure (Ferguson & Cox, 1993). The EFA resulted in a one-factor structure that accounted for 53.23% of the variance. Both Kaiser 1 and parallel analysis confirmed the one-factor structure. The average of the scores across the nine risk contexts was calculated, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .93 for this composite scale.

We then ran confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the team member ratings (Sample 6) via Mplus with "Type = Complex" selected to take into account the nonindependence of observations and correct the standard errors for clustering. We ran a three-factor model reflecting the three conceptual dimensions identified in Study 1, which fit the data well:  $\chi^2(24) = 37.40$ ;  $p < .01$ , comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .97, standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .03, and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .07. The three factors were, however, highly correlated ( $r = .68-.79$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Following Chen et al.'s (2006) recommendation, we thus assessed a second-order factor model wherein the factors were loaded onto a higher order factor as "an alternative approach for representing general constructs comprised of several highly related domains" (p. 189). Because the number of estimated endogenous relationships and the degrees of freedom are the same for the second-order factor model and the three-factor model, the fit statistics of the second-order factor model indicate the same good fit with the data.

The second-order factor model was compared to two alternative models: (a) a single-factor model with all nine indicators loaded onto the same factor and (b) a three-factor model with no correlations among the three factors. As shown in Table 9, the second-order model showed superior fit relative to both alternative models, based on the  $\chi^2$  difference test for the nested model and  $\Delta CFI$  cut-off values of .002 (Meade et al., 2008). Finally, following Credé and Harms' (2015) recommendation, the average variance extracted (AVE; Fornell & Larcker, 1981) was computed to assess the ability of the second-order factor to explain variation in the first-order factors. The AVE value of .96 was above the .70 threshold recommended by Johnson et al. (2011). The second-order factor was also found to explain an average of 62% of the variance in the nine risk contexts, well above the percentage reported in previous studies that supported a higher order factor structure (e.g., 22% in Hoffman et al., 2010). These results together suggest that the three conceptual dimensions identified in Study 1 are indicative of a broader concept that reflects the overall effectiveness of people management practices. To account for this second-order structure, we used the mean score across the three dimensions for data analysis (rather than across the nine risk contexts).

**Exposure to Workplace Bullying.** Participants were first provided with a definition of bullying (from Lindström et al., 2000) used in national monitoring of workplace bullying rates within Australia (Potter et al., 2016):

<sup>1</sup> While the indicator data were not used in Study 3, going through the rating process focuses participants on the indicators to inform the overall rating. Separately, the behavioral indicators may have utility in an applied context to inform understanding of the challenges and guide potential interventions.

**Table 8***Study 3: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of the Study Variables at Individual Level (Sample 6)*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Severity of bullying from supervisors and coworkers	1.31	2.42	—	—	—	—	—
2. Role clarity	5.74	.81	-.16	(.87)	—	—	—
3. Role conflict	2.93	1.19	.38**	-.38**	(.93)	—	—
4. Role overload	4.17	1.64	.07	-.22*	.34**	(.97)	—
5. Job autonomy	4.73	1.31	-.15	.20*	-.04	-.07	(.85)
6. Risk audit tool (individual score)	6.40	1.70	-.32**	.25**	-.48**	-.24**	-.01

Note. The correlations do not take account of the nonindependence of observations.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Bullying is a problem at some workplaces and for some workers. To label something as bullying, the offensive behaviour has to occur repeatedly over a period of time, and the person confronted has to experience difficulties defending him or herself. The behaviour is not bullying if two parties of approximate equal 'strength' are in conflict or the incident is an isolated event.

Participants were then asked to rate the frequency to which they had been subjected to workplace bullying from their supervisors or coworkers respectively over the past 6 months (i.e., *never, now and then, monthly, weekly, daily*) and the duration they had been subjected to workplace bullying overall (i.e., *less than 1 month, 1–6 months, 7–12 months, 1–2 years, 2+ years*). To mirror the existing measure of workplace bullying exposure from the independent linked data (Sample 7, see below), bullying severity indexes were computed by multiplying the frequency and duration scores for exposure to bullying from supervisors or coworkers.

**Role Clarity and Role Conflict.** Using the scales from scale Rizzo et al. (1970), participants were asked to rate how clear and certain they were of their job role as well as the extent of incongruence or incompatibility in the requirements of their job role, via six and eight statements respectively. Example items are "I have clear, planned goals and objectives for my job" for role clarity and "I receive incompatible requests from two or more people" for role conflict.

**Role Overload.** Participants were asked to rate three items from Bolino and Turnley (2005) regarding the extent to which they feel too many responsibilities or activities are expected of them in light of the time available, their abilities, and other constraints. An example item is "I never seem to have enough time to get everything done at work."

**Job Autonomy.** Following Courtright et al. (2016), participants were asked to rate the amount of control they hold over their work in response to three statements, such as "I decide on my own how to go about doing my work."

### Linkage of Independent Data

We linked the survey data collected in Study 3 (Samples 5 and 6) at the group level with data from an earlier survey completed by 193 clinical healthcare staff (Sample 7) working in the same teams (see Table 1, for an overview of Sample 7). Data from this independent survey included measures of psychosocial safety climate and workplace bullying severity, among a range of other psychosocial work environment factors. Psychosocial safety climate assessed the extent to which employees collectively perceive that policies, practices, and procedures that protect workers psychological health and safety are prioritized in the work unit, using the 12-item scale (Hall et al., 2010). An example item is "In my team, management clearly considers the psychological health of employees to be of great importance." Workplace bullying severity was rated in response to the same definition of bullying described above, assessed as the interaction of self-reported frequency (i.e., *never, rarely, at least once per month, at least once per week, daily*) and duration (i.e., *less than 1 year, 2–4 years, 5–7 years, 8–10 years and more than 10 years*) of exposure to bullying from supervisors or coworkers, aggregated at the group level.

### Analysis

We analyzed the risk audit tool data in four ways. First, a multilevel regression analysis was performed to assess the relationship between people management practices (rated on the risk audit tool) and bullying exposure at the individual level, controlling for the four organizational antecedents of bullying collected by the same survey (Sample 6). We performed the analysis using multi-level random coefficient modeling specifying the intercept as random (i.e., allowing teams to differ in their mean level on the dependent variable) to take account of the nonindependence of the data (i.e., nesting of participants in teams). The analysis was

**Table 9***Study 3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results (Sample 6)*

Models	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta$ CFI
Second-order factor	37.40	24	<.05	.98	.97	.07	.03		
Single-factor model	56.45	27	<.01	.95	.93	.09	.04	19.05	.03
Three-factor model with no correlations among the three factors	219.04	27	<.01	.67	.56	.24	.41	181.64	.31

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual.

performed using Mplus 8.7 with robust maximum-likelihood estimation (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) because it is robust to nonnormality and nonindependence of observations. In Model 1, the four organizational antecedents of bullying were entered as predictors; in Model 2, the risk audit tool score was added as a predictor. All predictors were grand mean centered (cf. González-Romá & Hernández, 2022). The outcome variables were severity of workplace bullying from supervisors and coworkers, as collected in the survey. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for bullying severity was .07, indicating that 7% of the variance could be explained by team membership, and also supporting the use of multilevel modeling.

Next, the nested nature of our data contains means that respondents from the same team are likely to share similar perceptions of people management practices, while respondents from different teams are more likely to vary in their scores. Thus, a second analysis, in which both between-group variability and within-group interrater agreement were evaluated, was conducted to establish whether or not the risk audit tool scores can be aggregated and used as a team-level construct using Sample 6.

Third, at the team level, a regression analysis was performed in SPSS with shared perceptions of psychosocial safety climate and shared perceptions of the risk audit tool entered as predictors, and three bullying severity measures as outcome variables. As explained previously, Study 3 collected employee-reported risk audit tool scores, employee-reported bullying severity from coworkers and supervisors (Sample 6), as well as supervisor-reported bullying severity from subordinates (Sample 5). Psychosocial safety climate and bullying severity (self-reported bullying from managers, supervisors, or colleagues) data were collected in an independent study (Sample 7).

## Results

### *Predictive Capacity of the Risk Audit Tool at Individual Level*

Table 8 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables of interest. The majority of respondents had never been exposed to bullying behaviors from supervisors (76.7%) nor coworkers (67.6%) in the last 6 months. However, up to one-third of participants had been exposed to bullying, with a frequency ranging from “now and then” to “daily.” As shown in Table 10, at the individual-level scores on the risk audit tool significantly negatively predicted the severity of workplace bullying from supervisors and coworkers, after controlling for four established antecedents of bullying. The tool explained an additional 4.1% variance in bullying severity beyond these factors, with a total of 20.2% of variance explained by all predictors. Following Liu et al. (2014), we calculated the Pratt index to examine the relative importance of the predictor variables. The Pratt index is calculated as the product of the standardized regression coefficient and the Pearson correlation, divided by the total  $R^2$  at either the within or between level. It indicates how much each predictor accounts for the explained variance in the outcome variable at a given level in a multilevel structure. The Pratt index showed that the risk audit tool explained 28.4% of the explained variance of bullying severity at the individual level, only lower than role conflict (69.0%). This pattern of findings indicates that the risk audit tool (which measures

**Table 10**

*Study 3: Model Statistics for Work Bullying Predicted by Psychosocial Antecedents and the Individual Score for the Risk Audit Tool (Sample 6)*

Severity of bullying from supervisors and coworkers	Estimate <sup>a</sup>	SE	Within-level $R^2$	Pratt index
Model 1			16.10%	
Role clarity	-.10	.30		
Role conflict	.75**	.25		
Role overload	-.03	.10		
Job autonomy	-.14	.12		
Model 2			20.20%	
Role clarity	.01	.27		.00
Role conflict	.69**	.23		.690
Role overload	-.08	.10		.00
Job autonomy	-.21	.14		.057
Risk audit tool	-.27*	.11		.284

Note. SE = standard error.  $N = 145$  employees.

<sup>a</sup> Unstandardized path coefficients were provided.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

the effectiveness of people management practices) is a valid predictor of concurrent exposure to workplace bullying when controlling for known antecedents.

### *Justification for the Risk Audit Tool as a Group-Level Construct*

To support the aggregation of team members' ratings on the risk audit tool as a team-level construct, average interrater agreement indices  $r_{wg(j)}$  and ICC were calculated using Sample 6. Median  $r_{wg(j)}$  was .82 and ICC was .26, well above the recommended levels in prior research for aggregation of measures (James, 1982; Ostroff & Schmitt, 1993), thereby justifying the aggregation of individual ratings on the risk audit tool into a team score.

### *Predictive Capacity of the Risk Audit Tool at Team Level*

We first examined if scores on the risk audit tool could predict workplace bullying beyond psychosocial safety climate. Table 11 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables of interest. Team-level scores on the risk audit tool (Sample 6) were significantly negatively related to three bullying severity measures aggregated at the team level (Samples 5, 6, and 7;  $r = -.53, p < .01$ ;  $r = -.76, p < .01$  and  $r = -.51, p < .05$ ), while psychosocial safety climate was only negatively related to bullying severity in the same sample (Sample 7;  $r = -.45, p < .05$ ). As shown in Table 12, at the team level, the risk audit tool significantly negatively predicted all three workplace bullying severity measures, while controlling for psychosocial safety climate, with an increase in  $R^2$  ranging from .16 to .47. In contrast, psychosocial safety climate was not a significant predictor of bullying. We performed relative weight analysis (RWA; Johnson, 2000; Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2011) using RWA Web (Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2015) to determine the unique variance contributed by each predictor to the explained variance. Confidence intervals [95% CIs] for the relative weights of each predictor and the significance

**Table 11***Study 3: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of the Study Variables at Team Level (Samples 5, 6, and 7)*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Severity of bullying (Sample 7)	4.22	2.40	—			
2. Severity of bullying from supervisors and coworkers (Sample 6)	1.37	1.36	.54**	—		
3. Severity of bullying from subordinates (Sample 5)	1.00	2.38	.61**	.59**	—	
4. Psychosocial safety climate (Sample 7)	3.45	.62	-.45*	-.32	-.28	—
5. Risk audit tool (Sample 6)	6.15	1.30	-.53**	-.76**	-.51*	-.36

Note. *N* = 25 teams.

\* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .001.

tests were based on bootstrapping with 10,000 replications. According to the rescaled relative weights reported in Table 12, the risk audit tool accounted for a major portion (60.7%–90.7%) of the explained variance of bullying severity across three measures. This indicates that the risk audit tool adds unique variance to the prediction of bullying exposure at the group level, over and above psychosocial safety climate.

### General Discussion

In this research, we aimed to uncover the organizational contexts in which perceptions of bullying arise, recognizing the powerful influence of such contexts on behavioral phenomena within organizations. Through analyzing a series of 342 real-life alleged cases of workplace bullying, we discovered 11 risk contexts for bullying at work that reflect different aspects of people management (Study 1). The description of people management practices used in the risk contexts was enriched through reanalysis of the complaints together with 44 critical incident interviews (Study 2), then translated using sorting and rating methods into a behaviorally based measurement tool comprising effective and ineffective people management practices implemented by supervisors in a set of nine refined contexts (Study 2). The risk audit tool was used in the final study (Study 3) to predict individual-level workplace bullying exposure beyond established organizational antecedents, and team-level workplace bullying exposure beyond leading indicator, psychosocial safety climate.

Overall, our findings support the conclusion that ineffective people management practices used by supervisors in nine risk contexts (such as managing underperformance, clarifying and defining job roles, and managing interpersonal and team relationships) represent areas of organizational functioning ripe for the development of workplace bullying. Demonstrating the bullying risk in particular contexts of people management has important implications for the understanding of this form of workplace mistreatment conceptually and, together with the risk audit tool created in our research, for preventing it in practice.

### Theoretical Contributions

Our research set out to explore the contexts of organizational functioning that hold increased risk of bullying. Our first discovery is that the risk contexts for bullying are directly connected to people management. Rather than emphasizing the spectrum of people management within organizations, our research addresses people management practices implemented by supervisors within nine risk contexts for bullying, reflecting the role of supervisors in

coordinating working hours and entitlements, managing work performance, and cultivating workplace relationships and safe working conditions. Surprisingly, in the literature to date, bullying antecedents (chiefly, job characteristics, leadership styles, and organizational climate) have not been integrated with the practices used to guide and direct employees to act in ways that benefit the financial and operational objectives of the organization. In contrast, the central finding of our series of studies is that the risk of employees feeling bullied increases when frontline supervisors implement people management practices in ineffective ways, repeatedly and regularly, in the pursuit of organizational goals.

From a theoretical perspective, these results enrich knowledge of workplace bullying as an organizational problem. The work environment hypothesis proposes that a stressful psychosocial work environment is the underlying precursor for workplace bullying (Skogstad et al., 2011). Our research leads the way in examining how supervisors implement people management as part of the work environment picture of bullying. Based on our findings, the conceptual lens for understanding workplace bullying as an organizational issue needs to be expanded to take into account these pressure points for bullying at work. Our findings shine a spotlight on supervisor–subordinate interactions that take place throughout the process of people management and can inform effective bullying prevention strategies.

Examining the implementation of people management practices by supervisors offers a deeper layer of understanding regarding how the work environment hypothesis might function to enable bullying—an understanding that is more closely aligned with the conceptualization of bullying as a product of organizational systems. For instance, in addition to demonstrating that role stressors are associated with greater bullying exposure (as illustrated in the line of research on psychosocial job characteristic antecedents), our research sheds light on how and when such stressors may enable bullying; according to our results, this might occur through people management practices used for clarifying and defining job roles, appraising and rewarding job performance, and/or managing tasks and workload. Likewise, our findings highlight some of the ways in which leadership may offer protective effects against bullying (as per the line of research on leadership antecedents); for example, specific people management practices used by leaders to appraise and reward job performance, manage tasks and workload, and/or manage interpersonal and team relationships. Additionally, our research addresses key limitations inherent to current conceptualizations of the organizational climate—bullying relationship. While organizational climate is often oriented toward senior managers, the risk contexts represent how broader policies



**Table 12**  
**Study 3: Model Statistics for Work Bullying Predicted by Psychosocial Safety Climate and the Risk Audit Tool at the Team Level (Samples 5, 6, and 7)**

Predictors	Severity of bullying (Sample 7)			Severity of bullying from supervisors and coworkers (Sample 6)			Severity of bullying from subordinates (Sample 5)				
	Step 1	Step 2	Rescaled RW (%)	Step 1	Step 2	Raw RW [CI]	Rescaled RW (%)	Step 1	Step 2	Raw RW [CI]	
Psychosocial safety climate (Sample 7)	-1.75 (.72)	-1.16 (.70)	.14[.01,.35]	-0.71 (.43)	-.13 (.33)	.05 [.00, .24]	9.29	-1.04 (.79)	-.43 (.76)	.04[.00, .17]	15.76
Risk audit tool (Sample 6)		-.78* (.34)	.22[.02, .59]	.10	-.77** (.16)	.52[.23, .78]	90.71	.08	-.85 (.36)	.23[.00, .68]	84.24
R <sup>2</sup>	.21	.36		.07	.57			.06	.28		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.17	.30		.07	.53			.06	.20		
Change in R <sup>2</sup>		.16			.47				.20		
F	5.96*	6.24**		2.66	14.78**			1.74	3.79*		

Note. RW = relative weight. CI = 95% confidence interval of raw weight. Table entries in columns of Step 1 and Step 2 are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

are translated and enacted in practice via daily interactions between subordinates and supervisors. Repositioning the lens to shared perceptions of practices at the unit level explicitly aligns with robust findings in the bullying literature identifying supervisors are the most common (perceived) perpetrators of bullying behavior (Hauge et al., 2009). Additionally, the risk audit tool assesses ineffective and effective people management practices in the eyes of staff, rather than policies, procedures, and practices to deter hostile behaviors or protect psychological health and safety directly, as captured by psychosocial safety climate. Indeed, Study 3 demonstrated that the risk contexts explain variance in bullying exposure beyond shared perceptions of psychosocial safety climate. It would be valuable in future research to examine connections between the people management practices discovered here and other organizational antecedents to enhance the robustness of the work environment hypothesis as a conceptual frame for bullying.

It is important to keep in mind that supervisors involved in (alleged) bullying may also be working in a challenging environment. A study involving interviews with 24 managers accused of bullying gives a rare insight into their experiences (Jenkins et al., 2012). The findings highlighted that although all managers agreed they had used unreasonable behaviors at work, they saw those behaviors as tightly connected to their managerial role. The managers also described how the difficult psychosocial working conditions they faced (e.g., work pressure, role overload, role conflict, role ambiguity), together with a lack of personal coping resources, contributed to the alleged bullying behavior. They called out the potential for reasonable managerial action to be interpreted as bullying and reported being held accountable for organizational practices for which they were not personally responsible. Finally, the managers described working in an environment in which numerous staff used inappropriate workplace behaviors. These findings reinforce the value of understanding bullying as an organizational issue, revealing antecedents very similar to those experienced by targets but from a different organizational level. Drawing on these findings, it would be useful in future research to examine the extent to which the people management practices linked to bullying uncovered here are shaped by the workings of the organizational system, and to seek out both supervisor and subordinate perspectives on the interplay of these factors.

Importantly, our findings linking people management practices within the risk contexts to workplace bullying exposure are valid at individual and group levels. A recent systematic review (Gupta et al., 2020) indicated that although work environment factors have been frequently investigated as bullying antecedents, most studies have fallen short of examining organizational (as compared with individual) effects. In other words, group- and organizational-level antecedents and consequences have received scant attention as compared with individual-level perceptions. Through group-level analyses in our research, we explicitly looked at the effects of shared perceptions of people management practices on bullying exposure aggregated at group level. We observed that the effectiveness of people management practices within a work unit affects individuals and collectively impacts teams. Our regression analyses were performed with bullying exposure data reported by both supervisors and employees, indicating widespread effects of poor people management practices in fostering bullying at multiple levels. Overall, paying attention to how people management practices within work

units are typically performed, where a work unit could be a team, department, branch, or a whole organization, positions the risk audit tool to identify healthy or unhealthy work units as group-level antecedents of bullying and capture how the group-level context shapes individual and team experiences at work.

Finally, our research makes a significant contribution to the field through the development and validation of a behaviorally anchored measurement tool for assessing the people management practices linked to bullying at work. The tool was grounded in data from real-life workplace bullying complaints and critical incident interviews, refined using the BARS method, and validated at individual and group levels using multilevel multisource data. Creating a valid measurement instrument opens a pathway to continue building the core knowledge base by exploring a range of research questions regarding the role of people management practices in the genesis of workplace bullying, solely and together with other antecedents at organization, team, and individual levels. In addition to validating the tool prospectively in a wider range of occupational settings, investigating the mechanisms through which people management practices interact with leadership styles, job characteristics, and organizational climate to enable bullying would be a valuable next step.

### Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

The official case records of bullying complaints analyzed in our first study represent a unique data source in the field of workplace bullying research; a data source enriched by the vivid lived experiences of many people working in diverse industries, unconstrained by any theoretical lens. Information in the records was, however, confined by the purpose and format of the regulatory framework and documents, restricted to the level of detail provided by complainants, and unable to be verified. Potential biases in the data were offset in our second and third studies by focusing on effective, as well as ineffective, behavioral indicators in the interviews; sampling teams in the validation survey; and integrating multiple data sources within and across studies. Nonetheless, it is possible that some relevant people management practices may be missing from the risk audit tool.

Another important limitation to consider is the cross-sectional validation data. Based on our findings across the three studies, we concluded that ineffective people management practices in certain contexts contribute to bullying risk. It is also possible, however, that workers who feel victimized may evaluate the work environment and, specifically, supervisory behavior more negatively than workers who do not feel bullied. In other words, the relationship between people management and bullying flows in the other direction. Examining this issue more directly, Agervold and Mikkelsen (2004) found that when bullied employees were removed from the analyses, departments with high, medium, and low levels of bullying could be differentiated only based on levels of job demands and management style. This finding corroborates the conclusion that people management practices play an antecedent role in the bullying process. Longitudinal studies are, however, needed to establish support for the causal direction of the relationship. Longitudinal studies would also be useful on a practical front; while our results support the concurrent and discriminant validity of the risk audit tool, it will be important to establish predictive validity over

time to increase confidence in using the tool to isolate focal points for prevention and intervention.

Further, though we were able to link data at the group level in Study 3 to provide a comprehensive assessment of validity, we acknowledge the relatively small sample size at this level ( $N = 25$  teams). A larger number of teams would enhance statistical power for the multilevel analysis. For example, a sample size of 30/5 (teams/individuals) has been recommended by Arend and Schäfer (2019). Although we recruited a relatively small number of teams, we collected data from more than the required number of individuals per team ( $N = 5.8$  employees per team), which may counterbalance concerns about the small number of teams to some degree. Moreover, published multilevel research (e.g., Hirst et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2014) has reported significant relationships in studies with a similar sample size ( $N = 25$ ). Finally, future research with larger sample sizes could use multilevel CFA to establish the factor structure of the risk audit tool at both individual and team levels.

### Practical Implications

The findings of our study underpin a powerful bullying prevention opportunity. Recommendations within the existing body of literature on the work environment causes of bullying have emphasized the selection or training of supervisors for certain leadership styles (e.g., Laschinger et al., 2012), redesigning psychosocial job characteristics to reduce demands and increase resources (e.g., Li et al., 2019), supporting employees to change their experience of their jobs (e.g., Baillien et al., 2011), or improving the overall work environment (e.g., Hauge et al., 2011). Despite these recommendations, a major barrier to effectively addressing bullying at work is that common approaches treat bullying as an behavioral problem between staff members rather than as an organizational issue (Salin et al., 2020; Tuckey et al., 2019). Widely used strategies such as antibullying policies, bullying awareness training, incident reporting, and investigating complaints (see Caponecchia et al., 2019) focus directly on the behavior that takes place between individuals, overlooking the root causes of the behavior in the organizational system.

Our research stemmed from an interest in uncovering contexts in which systematic errors in organizational functioning increase the risk of bullying. We discovered that these contexts relate to people management, which offers a new avenue for bridging the gap between what we know about the causes of workplace bullying as an organizational phenomenon and what can be done to prevent it. Specifically, people management practices represent a concrete focal point for the proactive risk management of bullying as an occupational health hazard. Organizations, work health and safety regulators, and other stakeholders (e.g., unions, professional associations) can use the risk audit tool designed and validated in our studies to identify which contexts of people management should be the focus of workplace bullying risk mitigation efforts. The tool can be used to guide interventions in a targeted, intelligence-led way, including by highlighting effective ways of managing people in the core risk areas for bullying.

Based on our findings, prevention-focused interventions for workplace bullying should involve shared participation from supervisors and team members in improving the implementation of people management practices within work teams, as indicated by

best practice principles for organizational interventions (e.g., Nielsen & Christensen, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2010). Though supervisors must play a critical role, interventions should illuminate effective people management from the view of team members as well and bring together staff at all levels to enhance how people management is carried out. When designing and implementing interventions, team members, supervisors, and senior managers could be supported to collaborate on solutions that shape what supervisors and team members do in the pursuit of organizational goals, and surface new ideas for driving changes in formal (higher level) organizational policies related to people management.

Finally, when seeking to prevent bullying through cultivating more effective people management practices, it will be important to pay attention to how different sets of practices operate together and in relation to other functions within the organization. For instance, to consider how changes in one risk context might impact the others, and how processes such as recruitment, selection, and training might need to be changed to support more effective people management in the risk contexts identified here.

### Conclusion

In this study, we highlight the crucial role of people management practices in bullying at work. Research on the work environment origins of bullying has primarily focused on psychosocial job characteristics, leadership styles, and organizational climate. Our contribution expands the conceptual understanding of bullying as an organizational phenomenon by identifying the risk arising from day-to-day practices used to manage people in organizations. When these practices are not carried out effectively, there is an increased risk of bullying exposure at individual and team levels. To combat workplace bullying and its negative effects, prevention efforts should focus on optimizing the ways in which supervisors and team members manage and coordinate working hours and entitlements, work performance, workplace relationships, and issues regarding physical and psychological safety. Toward this end, the risk audit tool generated and validated in our studies can be used to guide intelligence-led changes in people management practices, targeting the risk contexts for bullying for specific teams, departments, branches, or organizations.

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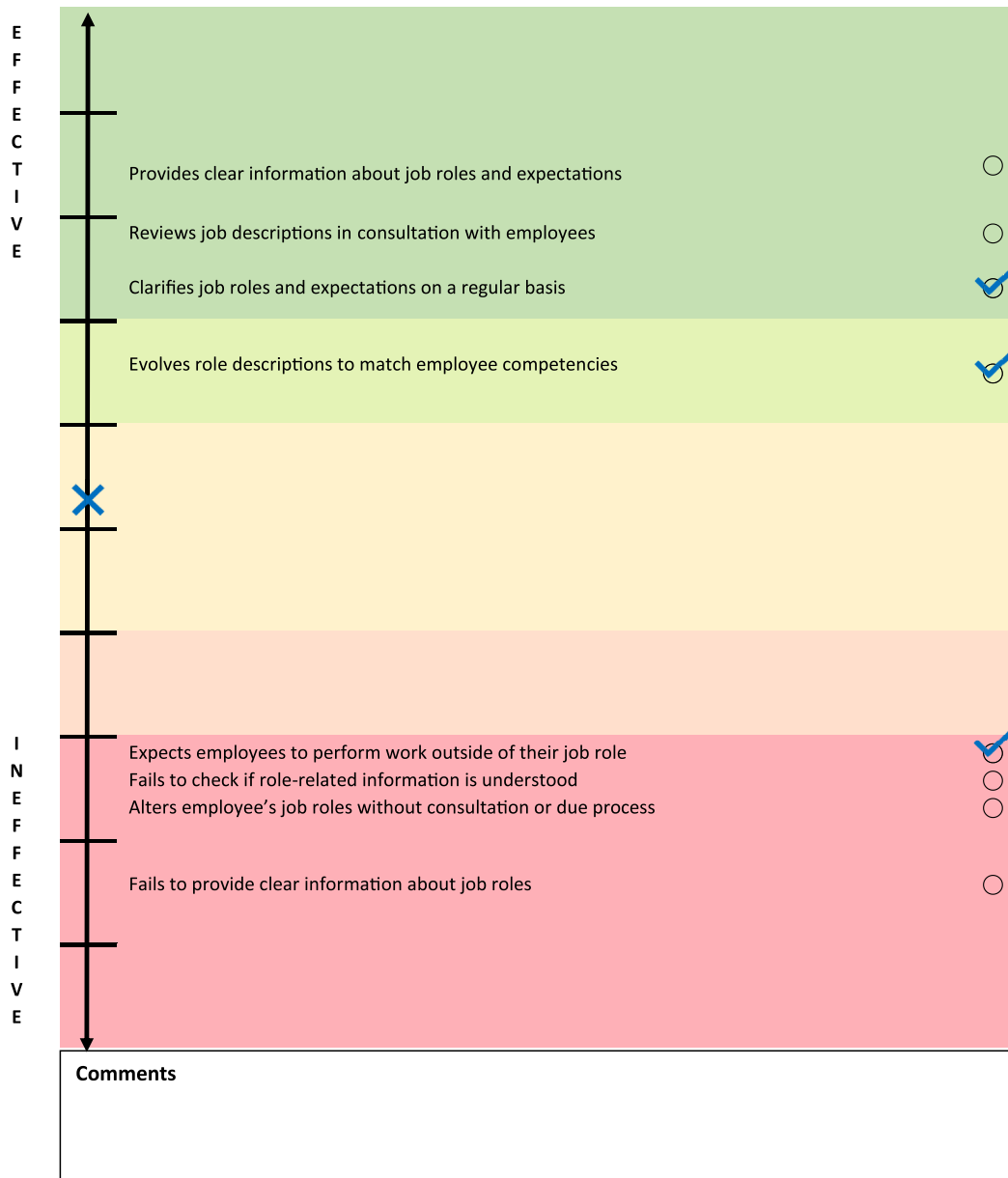
(Appendix follows)

**Appendix**

**Example Graphical Rating Scale and Illustrative Response on the Risk Audit Tool**

**CLARIFYING AND DEFINING JOB ROLES:** the assignment of employee job roles and the clarity of information about employee job descriptions, responsibilities, and role expectations.  
To complete this scale:

- 1) In the circles on the right-hand side, please place a tick ✓ next to **ALL** of the behaviours that are typically performed in your workplace or work unit when the job activity of **clarifying and defining job roles** is carried out.
- 2) On the arrow on the left-hand side, please place a cross ✗ at the position on the arrow that most accurately represents, overall, how effectively or ineffectively **clarifying and defining job roles is managed in your workplace or work unit**. Remember, the behaviours should only be used as a guide to help you decide the level of effectiveness or ineffectiveness with which this job activity is performed **as a whole**.



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

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