

## The prevalence of ill-treatment and bullying at work in Ireland

### Abstract

#### Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the prevalence of ill-treatment and bullying experienced by Irish workers and to explore individual and organisational predictors. The most recent national figures available are specific to bullying and pre-date the economic recession; therefore this study is timely and investigates a broader range of negative behaviours.

#### Design/Methodology/Approach

A questionnaire survey study on a national probability sample of Irish employees was conducted (N= 1764). The study design replicated the methodology employed in the British Workplace Behaviour Study.

#### Findings

The results showed that 43% of Irish workers had experienced ill-treatment at work over the past two years, with 9% meeting the criteria for experiencing workplace bullying. A number of individual and organisational factors were found to be significantly associated with the experience of ill-treatment at work.

#### Research limitations/implications

This study provides national level data on workplace ill-treatment and bullying that is directly comparable to British study findings.

#### Practical implications

The findings indicate that a significant number of Irish workers experience ill-treatment at work and that workplace bullying does not appear to have decreased since the last national study was conducted in Ireland.

#### Social implications

This study is of use to the Irish regulator and persons responsible for managing workplace bullying cases as it identifies high risk work situations and contributing individual factors.

#### Originality/value

This study provides national Irish data on workplace behaviour and ill-treatment following a severe economic recession.

**Keywords:** Workplace bullying, workplace ill-treatment, unreasonable management, workplace violence, workplace incivility.

**Article Classification:** Research Paper

## Introduction

Research to date has established that workplace bullying is pervasive and has overwhelmingly negative impacts on organisations and their employees (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Branch et al., 2013). The negative effects associated with bullying have been well-researched, with clear evidence of deleterious effects on health and well-being (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). Workplace bullying has been described as a severe stressor (Hauge et al., 2010), with Zapf et al. (2003) stating that being bullied in the workplace is a more crippling problem for workers than all other kinds of stress combined. Outcomes are not limited to individuals who directly experience bullying at work; bystanders can also be affected almost to the same extent as the target (Mayhew et al., 2004; Niedhammer et al., 2006). The organisational outcomes associated with workplace bullying include higher levels of occupational stress, intentions to leave and job dissatisfaction (de Wet, 2010; Quine, 1999). Bullying has been associated with self-reported sickness absence (Janssens, *et al.*, 2014; Kivimaki, *et al.*, 2000; Niedhammer, *et al.*, 2013; Niedhammer, *et al.*, 2008), with one meta-analysis demonstrating that bullying increases the risk of sickness absence by 58% (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). Therefore, workplace bullying is problematic for many stakeholders, including managers, workplace health and safety and human resources practitioners and researchers who are faced with the need to design and implement suitable means of prevention, policies and interventions.

Workplace bullying tends to co-occur with other forms of negative behaviour such as incivility (Herscovis, 2011; Hodgins et al., 2014). Workplace incivility is defined as low-intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect (Anderssen & Pearson, 1999). Uncivil behaviour includes, but is not limited to rudeness, mocking, sarcasm, belittling or exclusion (Pearson & Porath, 2005). Workplace incivility may act as a precursor to aggression including purposeful harm (Pearson & Porath, 2005) which then may lead on to bullying or harassment (Lim & Cortina, 2005). Because of this propensity for co-occurrence of different types of negative behaviour, the scope of this study includes both bullying and other forms of ill-treatment in the workplace. Ill-treatment refers to a broad range of abuses and insults that workers may be exposed to at work (Hodgins et al., 2014). It includes unreasonable treatment in the form of demeaning, offensive or undermining management practices and procedures, incivility as defined above and physical violence.

To date, an agreed definition of workplace bullying has not been achieved (Branch et al., 2013). In Ireland, specific workplace bullying legislation has not been developed, therefore, no legal definition of bullying is available (Connolly & Quinlivan, 2016). For this reason, the generally

accepted definition of bullying in the Irish context is the definition generated by the Irish Government Task Force into Workplace Bullying (2004), Bullying is defined as 'repeated inappropriate behaviour, direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical or otherwise, conducted by one or more persons against another or others, at the place of work and/or in the course of employment, which could reasonably be regarded as undermining the individual's right to dignity at work' (2004, p. 11). This definition has been included in the 2007 Code of Practice on the Prevention and Resolution of Bullying at Work (Health and Safety Authority) and the 2002 Code of Practice on Procedures for Addressing Workplace Bullying (Labour Relations Commission, 2002), and is adhered to in legal cases taken for personal injuries related to workplace bullying (Connolly & Quinlivan, 2016). This definition partly resembles Matthiesen & Einarsen's (2007, p.735) widely adopted definition of workplace bullying "... a situation in which one or more persons systematically and over a long period of time perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative treatment on the part of one or more persons, in a situation which the person(s) exposed to the treatment has difficulty defending themselves against this treatment".

Comparison of prevalence rates of workplace bullying across countries can be difficult due to variations in methodological design and operationalisation of the bullying construct (Bentley et al., 2012; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001a). Prevalence estimates vary considerably both within and between countries (Nielsen et al., 2010). A general average of 15% is offered by Nielsen and Einarsen (2018) although rates vary and can be as low as 3% (Escartin et al., 2013). Cultural and societal factors (Salin et al., 2018) may contribute to variation, as well as documented methodological differences such as instrument and sampling method (Nielsen et al., 2009). For example, studies from Scandinavian countries tend to report lower rates of bullying than other European countries (Nielsen et al., 2010). Mikkelsen & Einarsen (2001) reported a self-reported bullying prevalence rate of 2-4%. However, in the same study when an operational definition of bullying was applied, that is the experience of two negative acts weekly for at least six months, the prevalence rate increased to 2.7-8%. Similar discrepancies in prevalence rates due to methodological factors have also been reported in American studies, where the overall bullying prevalence rates tend to be higher. Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) reported a bullying prevalence rate of 9.4% using a self-labelling approach with American workers, however, this increased to 28% when the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) was employed. Prevalence rates from sector specific studies are also available, for example, Bentley et al. (2012) reported that 11% of hospitality workers experienced bullying in New Zealand using an operational definition, which decreased to 1.5% using a self-labelling definition. Nielsen et al., argue that both self-labelling and behavioural checklists are capturing relevant but different features of bullying and both

have validity (Nielsen et al., 2010). However caution in comparing prevalence rates is required and like should only be compared with like.

With regard to Ireland, three national studies have been undertaken measuring bullying, consistently demonstrate relatively low prevalence. The first two studies report prevalence rates of 7% (Task Force on the Prevention of Workplace Bullying, 2004) and 7.9% (O'Connell et al., 2007), with both studies drawing on national samples and employing a self-labelling method in which respondents were asked, following the presentation of a definition to state whether or not they have been bullied in the past six months. The third study, a national survey employing a similar method, targeted employees in both the public and private sectors aged fifteen years or over found a prevalence rate of 7.4% (O'Connell et al., 2009). These rates for Ireland are slightly lower than those recorded in most other European studies, where the prevalence rates have generally been between 10-15% (Branch et al., 2013; Zapf et al., 2011). The average prevalence rate for self-labelling with a definition is 11.3% (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). There have been no national Irish studies employing a behavioural checklist.

A number of contextual factors make a new Irish workplace bullying and ill-treatment survey timely. Firstly, accessing national prevalence data on workplace bullying in Ireland is circuitous as, unlike in the case of acute work-related injuries, employers are not legally required to inform the national regulator if a case of workplace bullying resulting in harm has been identified. Therefore, assessing the extent of workplace bullying as an occupational hazard has been reliant on national studies and sector specific studies, none of which are scheduled on a rolling basis. Furthermore workplace bullying is not included in rolling national data collection initiatives such as the Quarterly National Household Survey. In addition, Ireland is emerging from a severe economic recession. Following on from a period of unprecedented economic growth in the 1990s, by 2009, Ireland experienced a severe economic recession and labour market crisis, the worst recession since the foundation of the state (Russell & McGinnity, 2014). This led to record unemployment levels, increases in underemployment, precarious employment, pay cuts, reduced working hours and organisational restructuring (Social Justice Ireland, 2015; Russell & McGinnity, 2014). The scale of the recession was evident in the national employment statistics, with the total unemployment rate dropping from 4.6% in 2007 to 14.7% at the peak of the recession (CSO, 2016).

Given that economic recession is associated with increases in psychosocial hazards (Houdmont et al., 2012; Mucci et al., 2016) such as increased work-pressure and responsibility (Russell & McGinnity, 2014), one might reasonably expect concomitant changes in workplace bullying (Spagnoli et al., 2017). Stressors such as increased work-load in conjunction with job insecurity

may heighten the risk of workplace bullying (Spagnoli & Balducci, 2016). However, it could also be the case that negative experiences in work are less likely to be reported during a recession. This could be due to either the possibility that those most vulnerable are not in the workforce, or because workers may be less likely to report experiences such as stress or depression if their perspective and expectation may be altered by the economic environment, or a combination of these factors. There is some evidence of the latter. Russell et al., (2016) using QNHS data, mapped rates of rates of work-related illness in Ireland to changes in economic climate and found a pro-cyclical effect; rates of musculoskeletal disorders, and stress anxiety or depression (measured with one item) were seen to increase during economic growth (2002 – 2007), decrease during recession (2008-2011) and rise again as the economy recovered (2012-2013). The relationship was present but less pronounced for SAD than MSD.

Another important change in Irish society in recent years is the shift to multi-racial society. In part due to economic growth at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Ireland has seen very significant changes in population diversity. Historically a country of emigration, the percentage of foreign-born people increased from 6% in 2002 to just over 16% in 2014 (McGinnety, 2017). In 2016, 14.9% of the workforce was foreign-born (McGinnety, 2017).

Consequently, this study examines workplace bullying trends in Ireland in the context of economic upheaval and societal change. The principal aim of this study was to estimate levels of ill-treatment and bullying by Irish workers by employing a behavioural checklist methodology. The broader issue of ill-treatment within Irish workplaces is explored as it has become apparent that the construct of 'bullying' may be too narrow to adequately examine negative interpersonal behaviour. This primary aim was achieved by replicating the study design employed in the BWBS (2008), that is, by using the same concept, questionnaire and sampling methodology, in a nationally representative sample of Irish employees.

While national prevalence rates of bullying allow broad comparisons to be made with other countries, within country variation in bullying prevalence is also evident when sectoral and occupational factors are considered (Fevre et al., 2012). The public sector, large organisations and male dominated organisations report higher levels of bullying, while the healthcare sector, public administration and education sector have also been identified as higher risk (Zapf et al., 2003; Zapf et al., 2011). The national studies previously conducted in Ireland also found sectoral patterns. Both found elevated levels of bullying in the public sector, and in public administration, education and health and social work (O'Connell, *et al.*, 2007; Task Force on the Prevention of Workplace Bullying, 2001). Whether these patterns persist using the expanded

measure of ill-treatment is not known, and to establish this is the second aim of the current study.

Finally, in line with previous Irish national studies on workplace bullying, the third aim of this study was to examine the extent to which individual and organisational factors were associated with ill-treatment at work. Organisational factors such as culture and the presence of stressors are related to workplace bullying, with supporting theoretical and empirical evidence (Hodgins et al., 2013; Samnani & Singh, 2012). Spagnoli & Balducci (2017) note that work-related stress theories such as the Demand-Control-Support Model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) and the Job-Demands-Resources Theory (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) underpin the relationship between the presence of stressors at work and the potential for workplace bullying, with pressurised work environments potentially stimulating bullying behaviour. Furthermore, research suggests that organisational cultures that normalise competitive or abusive behaviour may encourage bullying. Research examining individual level antecedents has identified factors relating to both victims and perpetrators (Samnani & Singh, 2012), with considerable focus given to personality factors and demographic characteristics. The BWBS, for example, reported significant risks for ill-treatment at work associated with demographic factors, in particular, younger workers, those with a disability or a long term chronic health condition, and lesbian, gay and bisexual workers were found to be higher risk for ill-treatment when other factors were held constant. Therefore, examining demographic and cultural factors which may increase the risk of bullying in Ireland was considered a prerequisite for this study. While this paper focuses on the experience of ill-treatment by employees in Irish workplaces, the findings presented here form part of a larger study which also investigated the witnessing and perpetration of ill-treatment in Irish workplaces. See Hodgins et al. (2018) for more details.

## **Methods**

### *Sample and procedure*

As no national register of people living in Ireland is available, this study made use of the GeoDirectory, which lists all addresses in Ireland with an identifier for residential addresses. A national probability sample was achieved through the use of clusters of addresses and random route methodology. Further details on the national probability sampling strategy employed are available<sup>1</sup>. The inclusion criteria for this study required that participants be aged 18 or over and currently working or had worked as employees in the previous two years. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in participants' homes. Selection of one individual for interview in

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<sup>1</sup> See Hodgins et al. (2018)

the houses visited was conducted randomly. All fieldwork was conducted by a market research company between May – September 2015.

Out of the gross sample of 3200 addresses calculated, interviews were completed at 1764 homes. The response rate was defined by the percentage of eligible addresses where an interview was conducted. Two adjustments were made in order to calculate the response rate. First, to adjust for vacant addresses and second to adjust for cases of unknown eligibility e.g. no contact made or language barrier encountered. A completed sample size of 1,500 was achieved and this was supplemented with an additional 200 non-Irish national participants and 64 participants with a disability, giving an overall response rate of 74%. The supplemental sampling was conducted to ensure sufficient numbers within sub-groups for statistical analysis. Therefore, the overall sample size was 1,764 persons.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the National University of Ireland Galway Research Ethics Committee prior to the study beginning.

### *Measures*

**Sociodemographic:** Questions pertaining to gender, ethnicity, age, religion, educational attainment, disability, and income were asked. In addition, a number of questions related to work were also asked including: sector, type of organisation (i.e. public versus private sector) organisational size, and presence of a trade union.

**BWBS Scale:** A modified version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire (Einarsen et al., 2009), previously employed in the British Workplace Behaviour Survey (Fevre et al., 2011) was employed. The scale was comprised of 21 questions describing various types of ill-treatment at work, for example having your opinions and views ignored or being treated in a disrespectful or rude way. Respondents were asked if they had experienced any of the 21 items within the last two years from people they worked with or from clients or customers. Responses were answered using a five point Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'daily'. During data collection, the 21 BWBS ill-treatment items were presented and participants responded initially using the Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'daily'. Later during the interview the same 21 items were again presented and participants were asked to confirm their experience of the items they had initially selected using a yes/no response option. A reduction in response on confirmation was shown for all items and the average reduction was 35%.

The BWBS (Fevre et al., 2011) reported that the 21 items could be categorised into three factors based on factor analysis. These were unreasonable management (8 items), incivility and disrespect (11 items) and violence and injury (2 items). A factor analysis was conducted on the Irish data and a three factor structure, as in the BWBS (Fevre et al., 2011), was confirmed. Internal consistency was analysed for the unreasonable management and the incivility and disrespect subscale items, resulting in Chronbach alphas of .828 and .890 respectively. A Chronbach alpha was not computed for the measures with two items or less, i.e. the violence items.

Three levels of ill-treatment at work were also devised using the BWBS scale items. The confirmed experience of one item on the BWBS scale was used in this study as the indicator of

experience of ill-treatment at work. The reported experience of at least two items weekly was taken as the indicator of bullying, in line with Mikkelsen & Einarsen (2001b). The experience of at least two items daily was taken as the indicator of experience of severe bullying.

Workplace Culture: Three items from the Fair Treatment at Work Study (Fevre et al., 2009) were also employed. The items asked respondents to think about their workplace over the last year and using a yes/no response format, indicate which are applicable. For example, 'You have to compromise your principles'. The FARE items as they are known were also used in the BWBS (Fevre et al., 2011). Seven other work factors were also examined for example, job control, work intensity, and quality standards. A yes/no response format was also employed for these items.

### *Statistics*

Prior to analysis the survey data was re-weighted to compensate for any potential bias that may have occurred due to sampling error or differential response rates among sub-groups of the population. The re-weighting of the data in line with the Quarterly National Household Survey results, (Quarter 2, 2015) revealed that the sample characteristics were very close to the national figures. In order to develop a sample profile, frequency data for nominal variables was computed using un-weighted data. Statistical analysis consisting of Chi<sup>2</sup>, correlation and logistic regression were conducted using weighted data in order to conduct sub-group analysis. Logistic regression analyses were conducted with experience of ill-treatment as the dependent variable and gender, age, ethnicity, region, sector, workplace size, workforce composition and the workplace culture items as the independent variables.

### **Results**

The survey yielded a response rate of 74%. The sample profile was very close to national figures. Of 50 demographic categories, only seven differed by 5 or more percentage points. The sample comprised 51.5% males and 48.5% females, was predominantly Christian (84%) and of white ethnicity (89%). The next largest ethnic group was of Asian background (6.2%). Among both males and females, 6% reported having a disability, slightly above national figures (4%), as a result of the boost applied to permit subgroup analysis. Over half of the sample was between 25-44 years of age (56.6%). Over half of the respondents had completed third level education (54.6%). Table 1 presents the sample profile for this study.

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Insert Table 1

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The Venn diagram in Figure 1 shows the percentages of respondents who experienced each of the ill-treatment factors as well as the overlap between factors, where individuals reported experiencing different types of ill-treatment at work. Overall, 43% of respondents reported that they had experienced at least one item of ill-treatment in the previous two years while at work. Unreasonable management was reported by 37%, with 31% reporting incivility or disrespect. Another 2.6% reported experiencing violence or injury. Considerable overlap between the ill-treatment factors is evident, particularly between unreasonable management and incivility and disrespect (25%). Experience of all three categories of ill-treatment was reported by 2% of respondents. The types of ill-treatment most frequently reported (see Table 2) were having opinions and views ignored, followed by being given impossible deadlines or unmanageable workloads and being treated in a rude or disrespectful way. Experiencing the ill-treatment items 'now and then' was most frequently selected by participants, with smaller proportions reporting more frequent experiences.

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Insert Figure 1

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Insert Table 2

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Summary tables for experience of the ill-treatment factors by demographic variables and work-related variables are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Table 3 shows that white workers reported lower levels of all three factors in comparison to Asian workers and Black/mixed race workers. The highest levels of unreasonable management were experienced by Black/mixed race workers, while Asian workers reported the highest levels of incivility and violence. Differences by age category are also observed, with younger workers reporting higher levels of unreasonable management and incivility/disrespect, while workers aged 35-44 years reported higher levels of violence or injury. Workers with third level education also reported higher levels of violence than those with primary/secondary education only. There were no effects for workers with a disability.

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Insert Table 3

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Differences in the experience of ill-treatment were analysed in relation to work-related factors, with a number of statistically significant relationships observed (See Table 4). Individuals working in the voluntary/other sectors reported a higher percentage of unreasonable management and experience of at least one item of ill-treatment, while workers in the public sector reported a significantly higher percentage of violence ( $p < 0.05$ , Pearson's chi square). Experience of ill-treatment across the three factors and at least one item, all differed

significantly with regard to organisational size. Unreasonable management and incivility and disrespect were experienced at a higher level in smaller organisations. Violence was experienced to a higher degree in larger organisations. Where trade unions were present, reported levels of unreasonable management, violence and experience of at least one item of ill-treatment were all significantly higher. Significantly higher percentages of unreasonable management (42.2%) and incivility (36.5%) were reported by those with non-permanent jobs. However, higher reporting of violence among those in permanent positions (2.8%) was not significant. Consistently health and social services had highest or second highest level of all factors and all levels of ill-treatment with the agricultural sector consistently the lowest.

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Insert Table 4

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### *Bullying*

The rate of bullying within the sample was calculated at 8.96%, using the experience of at least two items weekly indicator (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2001). The only individual variable related to experience of bullying, as shown in Table 3 was age, with younger workers significantly more likely to experience bullying at work. Experience of bullying differed significantly with regard to organisational size. Severe bullying was calculated at 2%. A significant gender difference was observed (see Table 3), with a greater number of female workers (2.7%) experiencing severe bullying in the workplace than male workers (1.3%). As can be seen in Table 3, workers aged 25-34 were also significantly more likely to experience severe bullying at work. Table 4 shows that bullying was experienced to a higher degree by individuals working in organisations employing between 50-249 people. A higher proportion of those having managerial or supervisory duties were classified as having a significantly greater experience of workplace bullying (12.3%).

Table 5 presents the results of the logistic regression analyses. The table presents odds ratios and their 95% confidence intervals. Five of the workplace culture items were positively associated with the experience of one item of ill-treatment with only the item 'people are treated as individuals' found to be negatively associated. The experience of unreasonable management was also significantly, positively predicted by region, employment in the public sector and small organisations. Five of the workplace culture items also were found to positively predict unreasonable management with only the items 'people being treated as individuals' and 'deciding on the quality standards of your work' negatively associated with unreasonable management. Workplace composition was also significant, with workplaces with higher proportions of females and younger workers associated with lower levels of unreasonable management. Experiencing incivility and disrespect was only positively predicted by three of the workplace culture items. However, being aged between 45-54 years of age and working with a workforce with a higher proportion of younger workers was associated with lower levels

of incivility and disrespect at work. Two of the workplace culture items; 'people being treated as individuals' and 'deciding on the quality standards of your work' were also negatively associated with experiencing incivility and disrespect at work. Experiencing violence at work was significantly more likely for workers of Asian ethnicity and for those working in the public sector. Having to compromise your principles and increasing pace of work were positively associated with experiencing violence ( $p < .05$ ).

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Insert Table 5

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## Discussion

The main aim of this study was to estimate the level of ill-treatment and bullying occurring in Irish workplaces through the use of a behavioural checklist methodology. The response rate was high for survey of this nature, comparing favourably with other national surveys on workplace ill treatment or bullying. For example, two previous Irish studies had response rates of 55% and 36% (O'Connell et al., 2007; Task Force on the Prevention of Workplace Bullying, 2001), while similar UK-based studies had rates of 57% and 43% (Fevre, *et al.*, 2011; Hoel and Cooper, 2000). The overall level of ill-treatment ascertained by employing this method was 43%, with unreasonable management and incivility and disrespect the most dominant forms of ill-treatment, and only a minority reporting workplace violence.

The results of the study provide original data for Ireland on prevalence of workplace ill-treatment, as measured by behavioural checklist. Meaningful comparisons are only possible where methodological moderators are considered, that is, with identical or similar instruments, and with the same sampling method (Nielsen et al., 2010). Differences, if found can then be attributed to cultural or economic factors. Therefore, comparing with the BWBS which utilized the same instrument and the same sampling method, the Irish data show that overall level of ill-treatment in this study, at 43%, is lower than the level of ill-treatment reported in the BWBS where a 54% prevalence rate was observed (Fevre et al., 2011). This indicates a more favourable picture overall. The same pattern of prevalence was seen across the three factors, each lower than the BWBS; unreasonable management 37% compared to 47%, incivility and disrespect 31% compared to 40% and physical violence 3% compared to 6% (Fevre et al., 2011).

The differences between the BWBS and IWBS on the three factors may possibly be attributed to a combination of cultural and contextual factors. For instance, Ireland differs from the UK in that the workforce is considerably smaller, the majority of businesses are SMEs, and there are differences in national employment rates and employment rates across economic sectors. For example, Ireland's agriculture sector accounts for approximately 8.5% of national employment (Teagasc, 2018) versus 1.2% in the UK (National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2017), and the agricultural sector typically has low rates of bullying (O'Connell et al., 2007).

Ireland also has a lower public sector employment compared to the UK (18.3% vs. 20%) (Office of National Statistics, 2016), and both ill-treatment (Fevre et al., 2011; Hodgins, *et al.*, 2018) and bullying rates are typically higher in the public sector (Zapf, et al., 2011).

To date, relatively little research has been conducted examining differences across national cultures in perceptions of bullying (Salin et al., 2018), however, qualitative studies have indicated that differences are apparent across countries in how work-related negative acts and social exclusion are interpreted, which may be as a result of legal, economic, institutional, organisational and cultural factors (i.e. performance orientation, power distance, and in-group orientation) (Salin et al., 2018). Cross-cultural comparative workplace bullying research has demonstrated variation in the interpretation of what constitutes bullying (Salin et al., 2018) and acceptability of bullying (Power et al., 2013) across countries. Although Ireland and the UK may be considered culturally similar as two Anglo countries (House et al., 2004), Ashkanasy et al. (2002) have noted distinct perceptual differences between Anglo countries with regards to leadership and organisational behaviour. Therefore, potential cultural differences in the perception of what constitutes bullying should not be discounted.

While the prevalence of the ill-treatment factors in this study was lower than in the BWBS, the contours of experience are similar. For example, unreasonable management is the factor in both studies that had the highest prevalence (47% in the UK versus 37% in Ireland), followed by incivility and disrespect (40% in the UK versus 31% in Ireland). Similarly, at the item level for both unreasonable management and incivility and disrespect, there was consistency across both the studies, in the most frequently reported negative workplace behaviours experienced. The BWBS data was collected in 2008, at the start of the economic recession, while the Irish data was collected in 2015/2016, just at Ireland commenced recovery from austerity. The similarity in the contours of ill-treatment suggest economic factors may be at play, however further research is needed to establish whether the lower levels reported in Ireland are a function of prolonged exposure to austerity and the concomitant lower expectation and tolerance of negative behavior, or are in fact cultural differences.

Based on the criterion for bullying used in this study (at least two items weekly), its prevalence was estimated to be 9%. This estimate is higher than the 2007 finding of 7.9% (O'Connell et al., 2007) and the prior estimate of 7% (Report of the Task Force on the Prevention of Workplace Bullying, 2004), both of which used a self-labeling method with a definition provided. Because of the methodological differences between this study and previous Irish studies, we cannot conclude that the level of bullying has increased over time, as the observed increase may be a result of measurement differences between studies. However it can be noted that the previously reported prevalence is lower than the average prevalence for self-labeling with a definition of 11% (Nielsen et al., 2010), and the current estimate of 9% is also lower than the average prevalence of 15% for a behavioral checklist (Nielsen et al., 2010), from which we can at least infer that bullying has not increased across the time periods. While this is not sufficient to draw any firm conclusion about the influence of the economic environment on workplace ill-treatment or bullying, it does indicate that a straightforward rise based on the hardships created by austerity is unlikely to be an accurate reflection of the situation.

The prevalence of severe bullying (i.e. experience of two items daily), at 2% is consistent with other estimates of severe bullying (Zapf et al, 2011; Nielsen et al, 2011). If the bullying and

severe bullying prevalence rates are extrapolated to the 1,958,700 Irish workers (Central Statistics Office, 2016) it equates to approximately 175,000 workers being bullied and almost 4,000 severely so.

When reported ill-treatment was compared among subgroups based on demographic factors, a number of significant differences were observed in this study. Generally, these demographic trends were broadly consistent with other studies (age, educational level); however the findings regarding disability status and ethnicity are of note. In the BWBS it was found that having a disability was significantly associated with ill-treatment at work. Although the proportion of persons with a disability in this study was quite high at 6%, a similar trend was not observed. A possible explanation for this contrasting finding could be the different rates of employment and unemployment within both labour forces of people with disabilities. Specifically, the employment rate for persons with a disability in the UK was 45% in 2013 (Department of Work and Pensions, 2013) while in Ireland in 2013 the employment rate for disabled was 28.6% (CSO, 2017) suggesting a possible selection effect. However, further detailed analysis is required, as differences in sectoral employment for persons with disabilities may be relevant.

The IWBS is the first Irish study to investigate the relationship between ill-treatment at work and ethnicity, pertinent given the increased ethnic diversity in Ireland since 1990. Equal status legislation has been in place since 2000. In this study, the experience of ill-treatment at work varied with regards to ethnic status. Those of black or mixed ethnicity experienced the highest risk for unreasonable management, while Asian workers were more likely to experience incivility and disrespect as well as violence in the workplace. Asian workers were seven times more likely to experience violence in comparison with other ethnic groups. While the ethnicity findings contrast with the BWBS findings (Fevre et al., 2011), where workers of white ethnicity were found to be at greater risk, the findings are consistent with other Irish studies on experiences at work. In 2008, non-national Irish were twice as likely to report discrimination in both seeking work and in the workplace (Russell, Quinn, O'Rian, & McGinnity, 2008). By 2018, the situation for ethnic minority workers does not appear to have improved; both skin colour and ethnicity matter in the Irish workplace. Black non-Irish respondents reported lower employment rates, were less likely to hold managerial positions, were 2.7 times more likely to experience discrimination in work and 5 times more likely to experience discrimination seeking work. Asian non-Irish fared a little better with similar employment rates to White Irish, but were less likely to secure top jobs (McGinnity, *et al.*, 2018). Clearly, from this study, Asians are also more likely to experience violence and incivility, although numbers were insufficient to explore the role of position or sector. These findings are of interest in the context of the theory of selective incivility as a 'modern' manifestation of racism in the workplace (Cortina, *et al.*, 2013).

Gender differences across the three ill-treatment factors were not observed in this study. Therefore, this study adds to the accumulating evidence that larger scale, representative studies are less likely to report gender differences across the working population (Salin, *in press*). It should be noted that the study did not employ a self-labeling method, which usually reflects greater gender differences (i.e.) women are more likely than men to label negative experiences as bullying (Salin & Hoel, 2013). However, it is concerning that women in this study were more likely to meet the criteria for experiencing severe bullying in the workplace.

Consistent with previous Irish studies (O'Connell et al., 2007; Report of the Task Force on the Prevention of Workplace Bullying, 2004), the BWBS (Fevre et al., 2011) and the literature generally (Zapf et al., 2011), ill-treatment was generally more common in the voluntary and in the public sector in the forms of unreasonable management and physical violence. Violence in particular, was almost five times more likely to be experienced in the public sector. Many public sector jobs due to their nature are associated with a higher risk of violence (EU-OSHA, 2010). Most cases of violence arise during the course of legitimate business between the service provider and the customer. For example, in America, 93% of worker assaults are attributed to customers or patients in the health and social care setting (Phillips, 2016). Notably, in this study the only sectoral difference observed was for the health and social services sector with a high risk of all forms of ill-treatment. This again is consistent with the previous Irish studies. Higher rates of bullying within the health and social services sector have been attributed to the nature of the job itself, with a high degree of emotional labour and a requirement for a high level of personal involvement, in contrast to job requirements in for example the manufacturing sector (Zapf et al, 2011), and the findings indicate that despite awareness of the increased risk, it is still an issue in the sector.

The results of the logistic regression model underscore the importance of the working environment as a determinant of workplace bullying (Salin & Hoel, 2011). Five of the workplace culture items (FARE items, in Table 5) were positively associated with and predicted the experience of unreasonable management, with 'the needs of the organisation always coming first' having the strongest impact. Conversely, being treated as an individual in the workplace and deciding on the quality standards of your work were negatively associated with unreasonable management. Other factors associated with lower levels of unreasonable management included having a greater number of females and younger workers within the workforce. Similarly, incivility and disrespect at work was more likely in organisations where the needs of the organisation always come first, and where employees have to compromise their principles, and again less likely in organisations where people were treated as individuals and could decide on the quality standards of their work. As with previous studies, workplace violence was more likely to occur in the public sector and where the pace of work has increased and employees have to compromise their principles. These findings reinforce the work environment hypothesis (Salin and Hoel, 2011) that the way the organisation treats people is very important and that the organisation plays a key role in fostering the right kind of culture.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

With respect to the current study, a number of limitations must be noted. Firstly, the study is not directly comparable to the previous Irish studies on workplace bullying due to methodological differences. Previous Irish studies have employed self-labelling methodologies, whereas this study employed a behavioural checklist. The behavioural checklist method tends to provide higher estimates of prevalence than the self-labelling approach as it avoids people having to label themselves as victims of bullying and may be more conducive to reporting negative experiences (Nielsen et al., 2010). In hindsight, it would have been useful to include outcome measures associated with workplace bullying in the questionnaire e.g. stress, anxiety. However, these were not included at the time to avoid questionnaire completion becoming onerous. In addition, because participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of negative behaviour over the past two years in the workplace, there may have been potential for recall

bias. Finally, all data is cross-sectional and self-reported measures alone were used, although this is common to most studies on workplace bullying

Notwithstanding the study limitations, there are several strengths associated with this study. This study employed a rigorous methodological design which is directly comparable to the BWBS (Fevre et al., 2011). Based on previous research findings, Nielsen et al. (2010) have cautioned that non-random sampling gives rise to higher prevalence estimates of bullying and harassment when compared to random sampling techniques. Therefore, the sampling approach employed here resulted in a national probability sample covering the whole of the country, yielding valuable information on trends in ill-treatment and bullying at work. The response rate to the study was 74%, which is far in excess of the previous Irish studies, where response rates of 23%, 36% and 55% have been reported (O'Connell et al., 2007; O'Moore et al., 1998; Report of the Task Force on the prevention of Workplace Bullying, 2004). The study findings support the robust nature of the BWBS instrument, with comparable factor analysis results reported in both the BWBS study and this study (Hodgins et al., 2018). Furthermore, the incivility/disrespect factor subscale and the unreasonable management subscale displayed strong Chronbach alphas. Finally, this study has collected data on previously under-researched factors and has examined the relationship of this factor with ill-treatment at work in the Irish context.

### *Conclusion*

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of workplace ill-treatment in Ireland, broadening the scope of examination from a narrow focus on bullying alone. The results show that just under half of Irish workers have experienced negative treatment at work within the past two years. When ill-treatment was examined at the factor level, rates of unreasonable management, incivility/disrespect and violence/injury at work compare favourably to those found in the British Workplace Behaviour Study (Fevre et al., 2011). The study suggests that aspects of the measurement of workplace ill-treatment may be culturally sensitive and prevalence needs to be interpreted in this light. The present study also provides strong evidence that the work environment is an important determinant of ill-treatment and therefore, organisations need to be cognisant of the importance of positive treatment as an aspect of overall culture.

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