

## Workplace bullying phenomenon: A review of explaining theories and models

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**Abstract:** The aim of the present theoretical article is to review the main theories and models explaining the appearance and manifestations of bullying behaviours in workplace contexts. A number of 63 articles were reviewed and several theories have been extracted. Among them we can mention the *theory of escalated conflict* (Glasl, 1982), workplace bullying process according to *frustration-aggression theory* (Berkowitz, 1989; Fox & Spector, 1999), *the general model of aggressive affectivity* (Anderson, Anderson & Deuser, 1996), *social-interactionist theory of aggression* (Felson, 1992; Felson & Tedeschi, 1993), *the nervousness breakdown theory as a consequence of abusive behaviour* (Wilkie, 1996), *the theory of stress-emotions factors* (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001), *theory of mutual influences of three categories of situational factors* (Salin, 2003), *the scheme of cognitive –explicative model of aggression* (Beugre, 2005) and *the rule violation theory* (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). All of these theories explain workplace bullying acts from different points of view such as the point of view of personality of aggressors and victims, the point of view of external, environmental factors, the point of view of different organizational behaviors and not in the final round from the point of view of different interactionist factors. The present paper can stand at the basis of different future empirical studies designed to investigate the role of different factors in appearance and manifestation of workplace bullying behaviors.

**Keywords:** workplace bullying, explicative theories, explicative models, definitions, workplace bullying incidence

### Introduction

*“Many of us forget and, when they happen to be treated with respect for personal dignity, at work, they almost get gratitude, as if the essential right has become a favor that is given to them”* (Cramaruc & Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015, p. 3).

Promoting human dignity in the professional context is not a luxury made to the employee, who is seen, most of the time, as a "tool" for achieving the final

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purpose of the organization for which he works, but it is an indicator of an evolved and open society for development.

Bullying manifested in the workplace context is a phenomenon studied for more than thirty years, as shown by studies conducted by Brodsky in 1986 and Thylefors in 1987. However, awareness of the destructive effects has been realized much later since the first studies by Leymann (1990). These consequences have an impact not only on the employees, but also on the image and the smooth functioning of the entire organization.

In the last decades there have been many changes in the Romanian work environment such as work schedule, type of employment contract, nature of work tasks and relationship with work colleagues (Cramaruc & Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2015), changes that have led to the emergence of stress factors that replaced the traditional ones (a single type of employment contract, focusing on professional tasks and less on interpersonal relationships). Such a stress factor is the phenomenon of bullying manifested in a professional context (Cramaruc & Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2015).

According to Cramaruc and Maidaniuc-Chirila (2015), when a person is the target of negative, persistent, systematic behaviors, for a longer period of time the person finds himself unable to defend himself (i.e. the person begins to perceive an imbalance of power in to his detriment), one can state that he is a target of the acts of workplace bullying. This phenomenon does not refer to isolated incidents of aggressive acts but to those acts persistent over time.

The incidence of workplace bullying has increased with the changes emerged within workplace bullying settings. The global competition has led to greater flexibility of employees and greater adaptability to the demands of different working environments, but also to a higher uncertainty and tougher requirements regarding efficiency. The accent should be put on the pressure that employees feel in order to be more flexible and adaptable.

These changes were reflected both in the level of risk to which employees are exposed and in the level of conceptualization of what represents a good workplace climate (Cramaruc & Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015).

For example, while traditional occupational risks consist of accidents at work, in the last 30 years, they have decreased by 70%, their place being taken by psychosocial risk factors (Kauppinen et al., 2000). The new risks are represented by aspects such as increased time pressure, information overload and increased interactions between employees and beneficiaries. In addition, violence and the threat of violence have begun to be perceived as risk factors in most sectors, particularly in the areas of health, education, penitentiaries, social work and services (Pirainen et al., 2000). Due to the large number of areas in which the phenomenon can occur, researchers in the field of social psychology and organizational psychology have begun to pay increasing attention to it.

Nowadays, the psychosocial risk factors are studied under the label of workplace bullying's predictors. According to Zapf and Einarsen (2011), in the literature, the two dominant explanations for the occurrence of bullying are the work environment hypothesis and the individual-dispositions hypothesis. Nielsen and Einarsen (2018) stated that in support of the work environment hypothesis, a systematic review of work stressors showed that role conflict, workload, role ambiguity, job insecurity and cognitive demands were the most significant predictors of being a target of workplace bullying. An association between work stressors and bullying was also substantiated by longitudinal evidence as four out five prospective studies have found that exposure to work stressors such as workload, job insecurity, and role conflict increase the subsequent risk of workplace bullying (Van den Brande, Bailliant, De Witte, Elst, & Godderis, 2016).

Most studies on the individual dispositions hypothesis have examined personality traits as risk factors for workplace bullying in cross-sectional data. In a meta-analysis of the Five Factor Model of personality and general workplace harassment, which also provided separate analyses for bullying, extraversion ( $r = -0.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and neuroticism ( $r = 0.31$ ;  $p < .001$ ) emerged as the only significant correlates of bullying (Nielsen, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2017).

Interestingly, conscientiousness emerged as the only significant predictor of later victimization from bullying, after adjusting for role conflict and role ambiguity, thus indicating the importance of work factors in predicting bullying. In tests of reverse associations, victimization from bullying at baseline was significantly related to being less agreeable, less conscientious, and less open to new experiences at follow-up (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

It is important to note that the work environment hypothesis and the individual dispositions hypothesis are not mutually exclusive, findings in support of one explanation do not go against the other (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Rather, it may actually be that workplace bullying results from an interaction between situational and individual factors (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). This suggests that work factors and dispositional factors should be examined in conjunction rather than separately. With regard to the existing evidence, the findings from studies on the potential antecedents of workplace bullying provide support for both the work-environment and the individual disposition hypotheses, in that both work factors and dispositions are associated with increased risk of bullying. However, some findings point to bullying as both a predictor and an outcome with regard to personality and work environment factors (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

Regarding the prevalence rates, based on meta-analysis of prevalence rates, it has been estimated that about 15% of employees on a global basis are exposed to some level of workplace bullying (Nielsen, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). However, rates vary extensively depending on methodological factors

and geographical origin of the studies. In their meta-analysis, Nielsen, Matthiesen and Einarsen, (2010) found a difference in prevalence rates of 8.7 percentage points between studies employing probability as opposed to non-probability samples. In addition, type of measurement method was found to be especially important. While behavioral experience studies provided an average rate of 14.8%, studies investigating self-labeled victimization from bullying based on a given definition of the concept had an average rate of 11.3%. A rate of 18.1% was found for self-labeling studies without a given definition. An explanation for the divergence in estimate between the two self-labeling methods is that laypersons perceive bullying differently from the scientific understanding of the workplace bullying construct (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

Eurostat statistics show that 4.4% of all incidents reported to the Health and Safety Agency (HSA) were associated with violent behavior (322/7179).

The sectors in which violent behaviors occurred in the professional context, in 2009, are the ones presented below in the table:

**Table 1.** The sectors of high risk of bullying exposure, Eurostat Statistics (2009)

Sectors of activity	Total number of behaviors	% from the reported behaviors
Public administration, social security	148	46%
Social and humanitarian activities, health	113	35.1%
Financial and assurance fields	16	5%
Services	14	4.3%
Transports	11	3.4%

### **Defining workplace bullying phenomenon**

In the course of only a few decades, workplace bullying has moved from being a taboo subject in organizational life and a non-existent topic in the scientific literature to becoming a well-established and highly recognized social stressor in both research and in legislation (Samnani & Singh, 2012). While the bullying phenomenon was described as early as the mid-1970s in Carroll M. Brodsky's (1976) seminal book "The harassed worker", the first peer reviewed scientific paper that explicitly referred to the concept of workplace bullying was an article in Norwegian language appearing as late as 1989 (Matthiesen, Raknes, & Røkkum, 1989 apud Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). The first English language article in an international peer reviewed journal was published in 1990 (Leymann, 1990).

There has been research that has shown that workplace bullying is a major stress factor that has negative effects on health and well-being for both victims

and observers (Bjorkvist, Osterman & Hjelt-Back, 1994; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Niedl, 1996; O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire, L. & Smith, 1998; Vartia, 2001; Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996).

Over time, several phrases have been used to define the same phenomenon.

In the scientific literature, exposure to psychological aggression at the workplace has been conceptualized with a variety of labels such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007), incivility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), bullying/mobbing (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011), harassment (Nielsen, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2017), victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009), interpersonal deviance (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007), emotional abuse (Keashly, 1998), ostracism (Williams, 2007), and social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002).

The term *harassment* is used by Brodsky (1976) to describe the phenomenon through persistent behaviors of demoralizing, frustrating, and intimidating a person. The phrase of *scapegoat* is preferred by Thylefors (1987) when it comes to capturing the component of the phenomenon by which a culprit is found for unfolding events with a negative connotation.

Leymann (1990) studies the phenomenon under the name of *mobbing*, him being the first researcher to highlight in the international literature the fact that the abused people reach a lower position, a position from which they can no longer defend themselves. According to the author, this is the main characteristic after which the situation of workplace bullying can be differentiated from the classic case of interpersonal conflict.

One year later, Wilson (1991) talks about *workplace trauma*, a phrase that hides a process of disintegrating the employee's ego as a consequence of frequent confrontation with negative acts from the hierarchical superior.

Olweus (1993) reported that the first time *bullying* was used the '80s. This is understood to be repeated exposure to a series of negative behaviors that do nothing but intentionally cause discomfort. In the same line of ideas, Bjorkvist, Osterman and Hjelt-Back (1994), using the expression of *harassment in the workplace*, highlights the negative content of repeated workplace bullying behaviors that have a negative impact on the employee's physical and mental well-being.

Leymann (1996) defines workplace bullying as a social stress factor, a form of social stress that has dangerous effects on members of the organization as a whole. Similarly, Zapf, Knorz and Kulla, (1996) defined workplace bullying as a social stress factor that has as subcomponents behaviors of subtle psychological harassment produced almost daily.

In general, most definitions capture a set of common elements: workplace bullying manifests itself through a number of negative behaviors that are systematically repeated over time, intended and can be seen as techniques for

manipulating the victim's reputation, performance and quality of professional life. Workplace bullying can't be considered a behavior with negative valence that occurred accidentally or randomly in the workplace. Only those behaviors that appear systematically, frequently (i.e., frequency of weekly occurrence) and last for about six months, can be considered acts of workplace bullying.

In line with the latter perspective, the characteristics of workplace bullying clearly highlight bullying as a unique, and especially detrimental, form of aggression at the workplace. Some forms of workplace aggression, such as incivility and social undermining, is defined as deviant, but low in intensity and happening infrequently and occasionally, typically involving behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Workplace bullying, however, is defined as situations where an employee repeatedly and over a prolonged time period is exposed to harassing behavior from one or more colleagues (including subordinates and leaders) and where the targeted person is unable to defend him-/herself against this systematic mistreatment (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

A definition offered in recent years in the Romanian space is the one of Chirilă and Constantin (2013): *“Bullying in a professional context describes a situation in which one or more people perceive themselves as being exposed, persistently, to several actions negative, actions from one or more persons especially, in the situation where, the target of these actions can't be defended. These actions are negative not only for the employees themselves but for the entire organization.”*

From a scientific perspective, this definition suggests that there are three main characteristics of workplace bullying. First, an employee becomes the target of systematic negative and unwanted social behaviors in the workplace. Secondly, the exposure occurs over a long timeperiod. Thirdly, the target experiences that he or she cannot easily escape the situation, nor stop the unwanted treatment (Olweus, 1991, 1993, apud Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

### **Models and theories of workplace bullying phenomenon**

A theory is a set of analytical principles or statements designed to structure our observations, understanding and explanations of the world (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Theories are therefore an important basis and guide in research as they provide suggestions for reasonable questions and explanations for how and why specific relationships may lead to specific events. However, because the scientific study of workplace bullying seems to have arisen from a need to address an important social problem rather than as the result of purely academic and theoretical interest, theories guiding workplace bullying research are therefore relatively few and far between (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

A consequence of this lack of theory is that research findings on workplace bullying is difficult to translate into practice and there is a shortage of explanations for how and when bullying is related to other variables. In order to move the field forward it is necessary to further integrate established theories for adjacent research fields and to develop and establish new theoretical models that specifically integrate the unique characteristics of the phenomena of workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

One way of providing a theoretical basis for research on workplace bullying would be to build on well-established theoretical models in social psychology (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

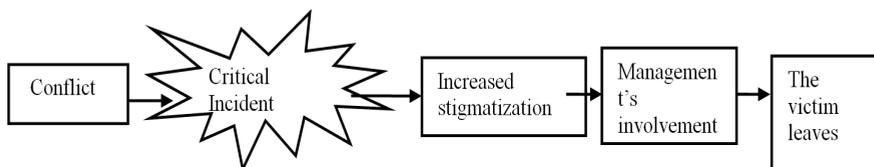
Over time, the literature has highlighted a number of explanatory theories of the phenomenon of workplace bullying, among which we recall the escalating conflict theory (Glasl, 1982), the frustration-aggression theory (Berkowitz, 1989; Fox & Spector, 1999), social-interactionist theory (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993), nervous breakdown theory (Wilkie, 1996), stress-emotion factor theory (Fox, Spector & Miles, 2001) and the cognitive-explanatory model of workplace aggression (Beugre, 2005) and social rules theory (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). All of these theories are related to each other by the way they explain the appearance of workplace aggressive behaviors. A part of these theories sustain the existence of an exterior factor that triggers aggressive behaviors and another part emphasize the existence of an internal factor generating bullying in the workplace meaning that theories can be grouped in two main categories: (1) environmental theories and (2) personality theories. In the literature, the two dominant explanations for the occurrence of bullying are (1) the work environment hypothesis and (2) the individual-dispositions hypothesis (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). Building on the work of Leymann (1992, 1996), the work environment hypothesis claims that bullying is a consequence of the prevailing job design and social environment within organizations. As a contrast, the individual disposition hypothesis highlights individual characteristics such as personality traits as potential precursors of bullying and claims that specific characteristics scores, or combinations of characteristics, increase the risk of being exposed to bullying or for exposing others to bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). In support of the work environment hypothesis, a systematic review of work stressors showed that role conflict, workload, role ambiguity, job insecurity and cognitive demands were the most significant predictors of being a target of workplace bullying (Van den Brande, Baillient, De Witte, Elst, & Godderis, L. 2016). An association between work stressors and bullying was also substantiated by longitudinal evidence as four out five prospective studies have found that exposure to work stressors such as work load, job insecurity, and role conflict increase the subsequent risk of workplace bullying (Van den Brande, Baillient, De Witte, Elst, & Godderis, L. 2016). Interestingly, in two prospective studies that failed to identify any significant relationships between role stressors

and subsequent exposure to workplace bullying it was found that prior exposure to workplace bullying accounted for subsequent variation in role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, thus questioning conclusions regarding causality made in other studies (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010). On the other hand, a study with a true prospective design based on a heterogeneous sample of 2800 Norwegian workers, showed that role stressors at baseline predicted new cases of workplace bullying two years on (Reknes, Einarsen, Knardahl & Lau, 2014).

Furthermore, these theories are similar because they explain workplace bullying behaviors as a process not as a final behavior. There are some stages a person should follow in order to say that she is exposed to workplace bullying behaviors.

Of all the models presented above, to date, Beugre's (2005) model is the most comprehensive explanatory model of workplace bullying.

*The theory of escalated conflict* (Glasl, 1982) explains the occurrence and manifestation of psychological aggression, assuming the existence of three different stages. The first stage is represented by the stages of rationalization (rationality) and attempt to solve the differences arising (problem solving). Through these stages, the victim tries to solve the differences arising through the method of solving the problem and through rational discussions (rational thinking). The second stage is marked by the worsening of social relations when the conflict escalates. At this stage the first feelings of distrust appear in the aggressor's innocent intentions, the manifestation of disrespect and hostility towards the aggressor. The third stage consists in the concrete manifestation of the aggression by the aggressor so that the targeted person feels the pressure to leave his current job.



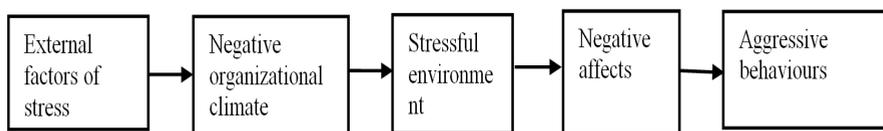
**Figure 1.** The stages of escalated conflict theory (Glasl, 1982)

*Frustration-aggression theory* (Berkowitz, 1989; Fox & Spector, 1999) highlights the role of external circumstances in generating aggression as a result of the negative state felt by the individual. The presence of various stressors in the context of the workplace leads, of course, to the worsening of the organizational climate, transforming it into a stressful workplace climate. This stressful environment induces employees to experience negative feelings such as psychological discomfort and blocking of professional goals. At the same time, this stressful environment can trigger the emergence of aggressive behaviors by the fact that, they induce employees' negative affect, these being the indicators

of the occurrence of future aggressive behaviors in the workplace. The occurrence of these aggressive behaviors turns employees into aggressors of their colleagues or subordinates.

The stressful working environments (characterized by a high number of environmental factors with facilitation role) predict a high rate of manifestation of both the acts of psychological aggression and the acts of harassment, by their effect on the aggressive behaviors.

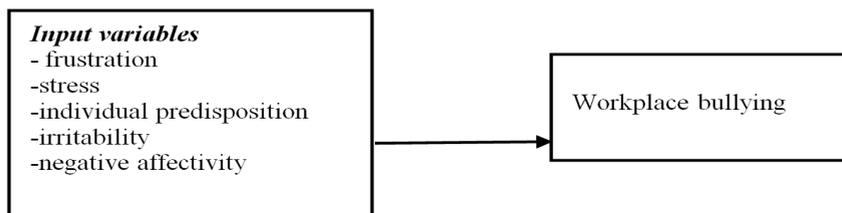
When a person fails to achieve his goal, he feels a state of frustration which, according to this theory, turns into aggressive acts directed at existing persons around that person. Most often, this theory explains the predator-type workplace bullying, and the victim is accidentally near the aggressor who is in the process of anger and discharges this feeling to the victim.



**Figure 2.** Phases of psycholocial aggression process according to frustration-aggression theory(Berkowitz, 1989; Fox & Spector, 1999)

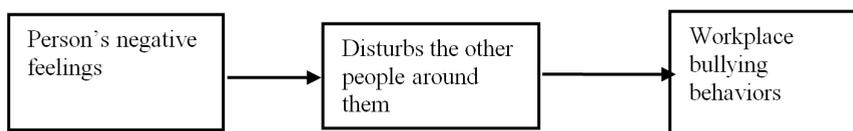
*The general pattern of aggressive affectivity* (Anderson, Anderson & Deuser, 1996) represents a more modern perspective of workplace bullying. According to this model, workplace bullying is triggered by a variety of input variables. These variables are composed of aspects of the current situation such as frustration, challenge, stress and / or tendencies or predispositions of individuals exercised in a certain context, high irritability and negative affectivity.

The model suggests that situational variables and those of individual differences lead to the manifestation of workplace bullying through their own impact on three basic processes: physiological reactivity, negative affectivity and hostile cognitions. This model oversimplifies the causes of workplace bullying but it still manages to explain the phenomenon.



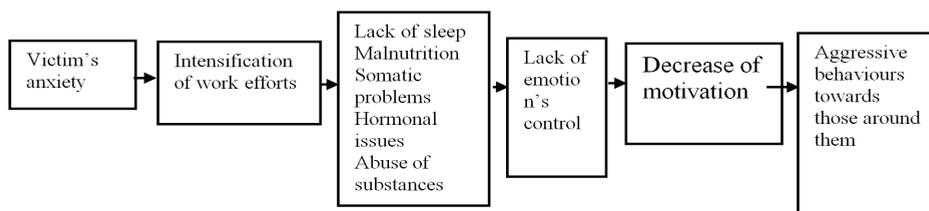
**Figure 3.** The General Model of aggressive affectivity (Anderson, Anderson & Deuser, 1996)

*The social-interactionist theory of aggression* (Felson, 1992; Felson & Tedeschi, 1993) explains psychological aggression in the professional context by positioning environmental factors as factors preceding workplace bullying. This approach claims that stressful events are those that indirectly affect bullying through their effect on the victim's behavior. Stressful events and the workplace environment can cause people to behave in a way that would cause their colleagues to attack them. According to this model, a person dissatisfied with the stressful conditions at the workplace can be perceived as disturbing by the co-workers, causing the formers to behave hostile or even aggressive towards him. The model suggests that the person's own behavior is responsible for the occurrence and manifestation of psychological aggression in the workplace.



**Figure 4.** Social-Interactionist Theory of aggression (Felson, 1992; Felson & Tedeschi, 1993)

*The theory of nervous breakdown as a consequence of abusive behavior* (Wilkie, 1996) explains the emergence of workplace bullying phenomenon in two stages: In the first phase, the victims feel the first effects by experiencing a mild state of anxiety. Experiencing anxiety is characterized by the fact that individuals tend to intensify their work efforts, tend to solve multiple tasks at the same time, or seek professional challenges far beyond their actual coping skills. At this stage, the targeted persons go through insomnia, poor nutrition, various somatic diseases, hormonal imbalances and the use of various chemical stimulants. In the second stage, the targeted people no longer manage to keep their emotions under control and lose their motivation to work and they no longer have the resources to self-motivate. Later, they feel overwhelmed by their emotions. After they have lost control of their emotions, the first aggressive tendencies towards others around them appear, both at work and outside the work context (the first behavioral indicators of the presence of frustration).

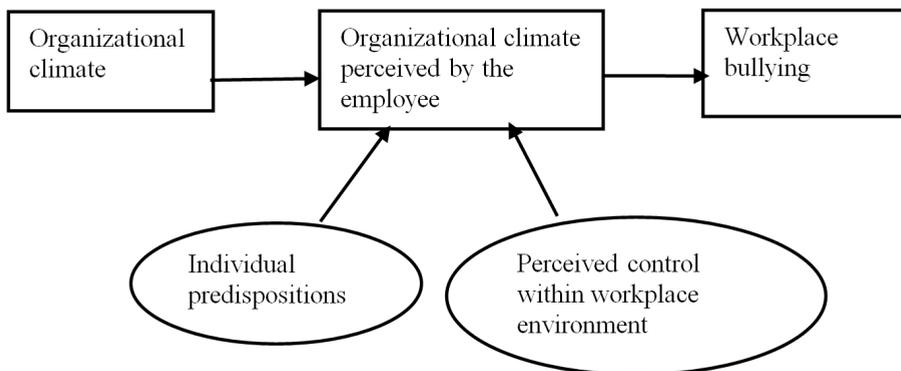


**Figure 5.** The nervousness breakdown theory as a consequence of abusive behaviour (Wilkie, 1996)

*The theory of stress-emotion factors* (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001) is, in fact, a refining of the frustration-aggression theory. This theory proposes to understand workplace bullying's behaviors as employees' emotional responses to the stressful conditions of the workplace. This theory is based on the idea that each employee perceives the climate at work differently, depending on the individual characteristics (individual provisions) and according to the perceived control of the workplace.

Workplace events are evaluated based on the subjective severity criterion felt by each affected individual, in part. The evaluation of these events is also made according to the threatening potential of the subjective well-being. If the threatening potential is high, this induces negative emotional reactions (e.g. anger, anxiety) to the employee. Finally, the results of this process are made up of three types of tensions felt by the individual:

- (1) psychological strain (e.g. low job satisfaction);
- (2) physical strain (e.g. somatic symptoms);
- (3) behavioral strain (e.g. aggressive behavior).

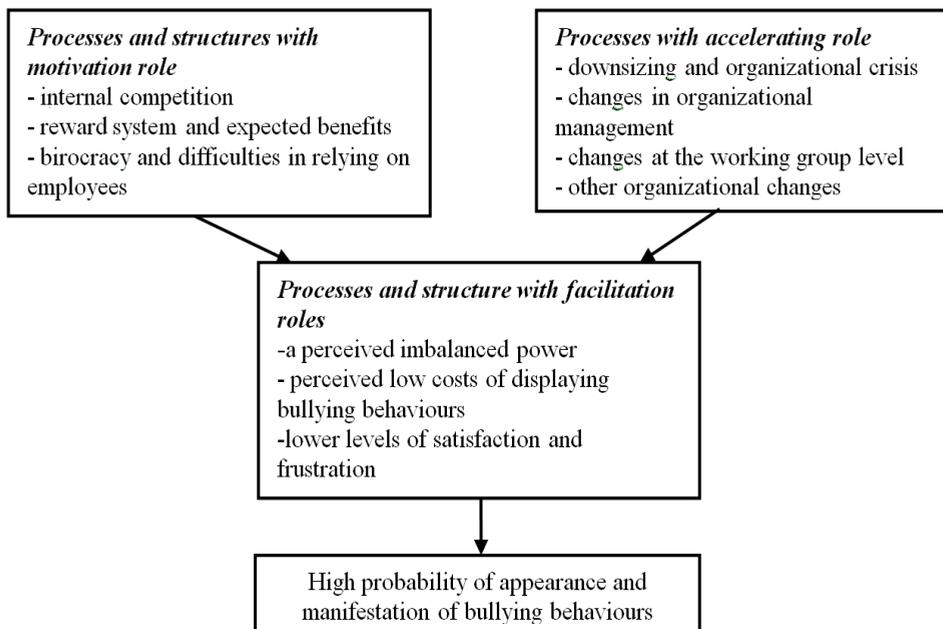


**Figure 6.** The theory of stress-emotions factors (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001)

*The theory of mutual influence of three categories of situational factors* (Salin, 2003). According to this theory, the occurrence of psychological aggression in the workplace is due to the existence and mutual influence of three categories of factors such as

- (1) the group of processes and structures with motivational role;
- (2) the group of processes and structures with the role of precipitation and
- (3) the group of processes and structures with facilitating role.

*The cognitive model of perceived injustice as a result of aggressive acts* (Beugre, 2005) argues that an aggressive response followed by perceived injustice does not occur spontaneously, but proceeds on a continuum starting with several stages. The first stage is the appearance of the particular event and the last stage consists of the very aggressive response itself.



**Figure 7.** Theory of mutual influences of three categories of situational factors (Salin, 2003)

This model only considers aggression followed by perceived injustice and may not explain other forms of aggressive acts such as theft or other aggressive actions that do not intend to restore justice.

The model identifies seven stages that precede the occurrence of the particular event. Thus, the occurrence of a particular event (Stage 1), such as the occurrence of a result, a meeting with a co-worker or supervisor can trigger a process of establishing the correctness of the particular event.

The occurrence of the unique event is followed by an establishment of its correctness or incorrectness (Stage 2). This assessment depends on the system of values held by the person. If an event appears to be correct then there is no aggressive response

If the event is judged to be incorrect then the individual evaluates the magnitude of the incorrectness (stage 3). Assessing the magnitude of the incorrectness experienced is important because it determines whether the individual continues to take revenge on the aggressor or decides to forgive him. The model claims that when the magnitude of the event is perceived as low, the victim will forgive the aggressor. However, when the magnitude is increased, the victim goes to stage 4 of the model, namely to the assignment stage.

Individual factors such as negative affectivity, hostility attribution error, disaster attribution error and dysphoric thinking can influence stages three and four.

Negative affectivity is the tendency of the individual to perceive events that occurred in a negative manner. People with high negative affectivity tend to ruminate on their own mistakes, disappointments and shortcomings, and focus more on the negative aspects of the world in general (Watson & Clark, 1984). To the extent that individuals tend to view events in a negative way, they tend to amplify the magnitude of perceived wrongdoing and build revenge. The same holds true for people who have a high error in attributing hostility.

Hostility attribution error refers to people's tendency to explain ambiguous situations in terms of hostile aggression intentions (Dodge, 1980; Dodge, Price, Bachorowski & Newman, 1990).

Since people with high scores on the attribution of hostility error see the evil in the actions of others (Beugre, 1998), they are more likely to attribute hostile intentions to potential actors of the actions evaluated as incorrect. Instead of seeing the situation objectively, people with hostility errors will try to convince themselves that their supervisor is against their own interests. People with a high attribution error will rarely blame their own doubts on other people (Folger & Baron, 1996). In explaining the wrongness, these people will blame the perpetrators, offering a way to unleash the vengeance of cognitions.

Both the error attribution of the claim and the dysphoric thinking (Kramer, 1994) will also influence the process of attribution and develop the cognitions with aggressive content.

When individuals over-attribute the disaster and the evil motives to the actions of others, they may perceive malicious intent and believe that they are underestimated even in the most innocent social gatherings (Bies, Tripp & Kramer, 1997). Greenberg and Alge (1998) and Skarlicki and Folger (1997) observed that when people are dealing with an incorrect situation, it is possible to use dysphoric thinking, which means the negative framing of information in a way that threatens self-esteem, self and perceived control.

Framing a particular situation, in a negative way, as being incorrect tends to increase the level of doubt about one's own person and reduce one's ability to solve one's own problems. Because people with dysphoric tendencies tend to focus on their own person, it is very likely to overestimate the magnitude of the harm they feel when dealing with a situation with perceived unfairness and then they will develop strong cognitions with aggressive content.

If the victim considers the situation incorrect as a result of the aggressor's intentions, it will be all the more likely to develop abusive content cognitions (Stage 5). When a person experiences an unjust event, it may very well turn to him, to wonder why he appeared, what was the offender's true intent and what

measures to take. Indeed, the attribution of guilt can feed the cognitions with a revengeful content (Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997).

If the attribution is internal, the victim will develop cognitions with aggressive content on the aggressor, if the attribution is external, beyond the conscious control of the aggressor, the victim will not develop these cognitions with aggressive content. The reprisals imply the existence of a target on which to directly address the aggressive acts. Thus, the victim will store all the information in what is called the repertoire of perceived injustice. In fact, this repertoire represents an accumulation of perceived unfair facts.

Although attribution of guilt may lead to aggressively content cognitions, the cognitive model argues that these cognitions will only trigger an aggressive response when they are compatible with the individual's value system and personal standards (Stage 6).

The model identifies two types of images: self-image and projected image that can influence the relationship between injustice and aggression. The self-image refers to the set of personal values and goals and to the ethical standards held by the potential aggressor. The self-projected image refers to the impression the person wants to make in the company.

People, in general, hold on to their reputation and image in social contexts. To accomplish this goal, they will refrain from engaging in behaviors that betray this image. Although the act of responding aggressively to an unfair situation may be consistent with the self-image, the individual's desire to protect their projected image will result in obstruction behavior as a form of aggression. In this way the person who responds aggressively to an unfair situation can reconcile his own identity by the fact that there is no discrepancy between self-esteem and projected self-esteem.

At this level, perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) is very important in conducting aggressive behaviors or responses. From the perspective of the cognitive model, self-efficacy refers to the extent to which the individual feels he or she may display aggressive behaviors.

In order for an individual to respond to an unfair situation through an aggressive response, he or she must be sure of their positive consequences. Even in this case, although these consequences can be positive, the person needs to evaluate the degree to which they are effective.

The cognitive model predicts the occurrence of aggressive behaviors only if the self-efficacy is high, but does not explain the case of the occurrence of the aggressive behaviors when the self-efficacy is low. If self-efficacy is low, then the individual will refrain from responding aggressively to an unfair situation.

Another explanatory factor of the cognitive model refers to the role of past experiences in conducting aggressive behaviors today. If in the past, a person has responded aggressively to an unfair situation and this behavior has had positive consequences, the person will continue to respond aggressively to

future situations assessed as unfair to restore the injustice. This compatibility test: unfair situation-aggressive behavior follows a stage of the evaluation of costs and benefits.

Stage seven of the Cognitive Model states that before displaying an aggressive response to an unfair situation, the potential risks and benefits are evaluated. If the benefits are predominant then aggressive behavior will occur. Benefits can be of two types: tangible or intangible.

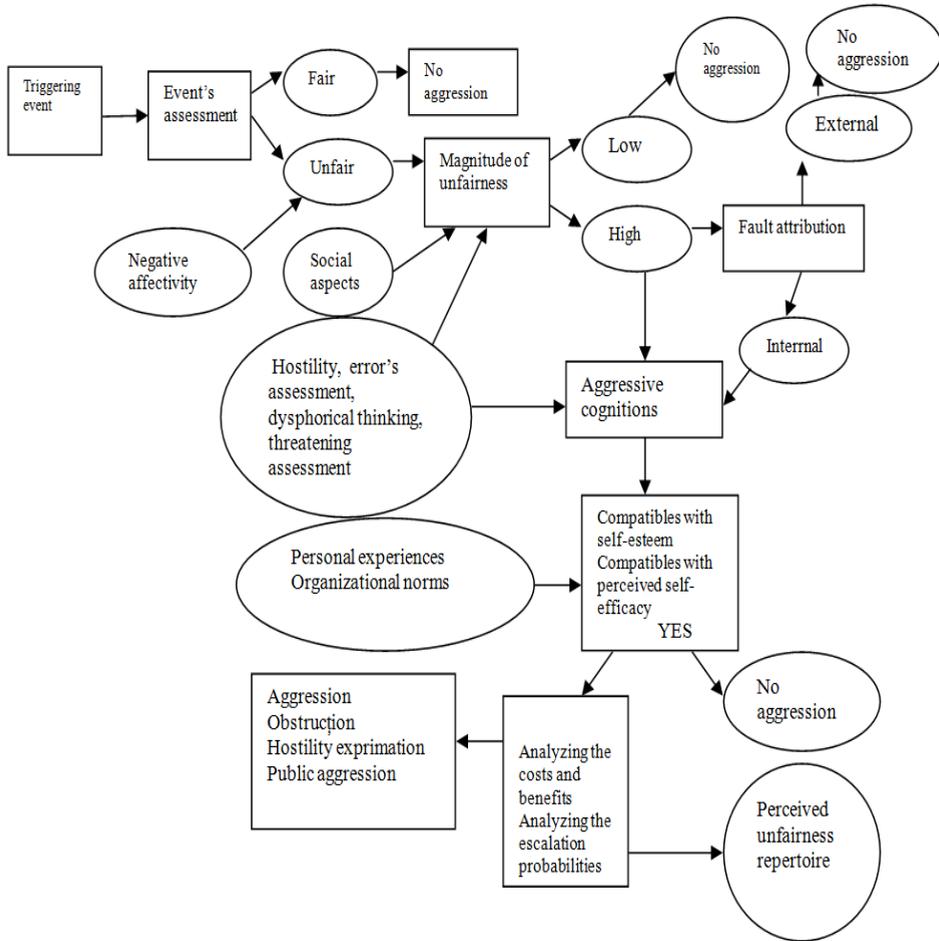
An unfair act or situation can be explained by the actor's intentions: He obviously has the desire to fulfill a number of purposes:

- (1) balancing the situation (he, himself, was the victim of an unjust act);
- (2) wishes to set the tone of unjust acts in the place where his professional activity is carried out;
- (3) it wants to obtain some advantages (tangible or intangible).

The stage of the analysis of costs and benefits predicts that the fear of reprisals is what leads to the appearance of a discouraging attitude felt by the victim. According to this model if a series of reprisals are anticipated then the individual will refrain from performing a series of aggressive behaviors. If the reprisals have a low probability of occurrence, then the victim will behave aggressively to respond to the unfair situation.

Argyle, Fumham and Graham, (1981) stated that according to social rules theory, social rules are expectations about behavior that should or should not be performed in a particular social situation, and shared by members of a group. In this sense, rules are normative forces and are often easily recognized when they are broken (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

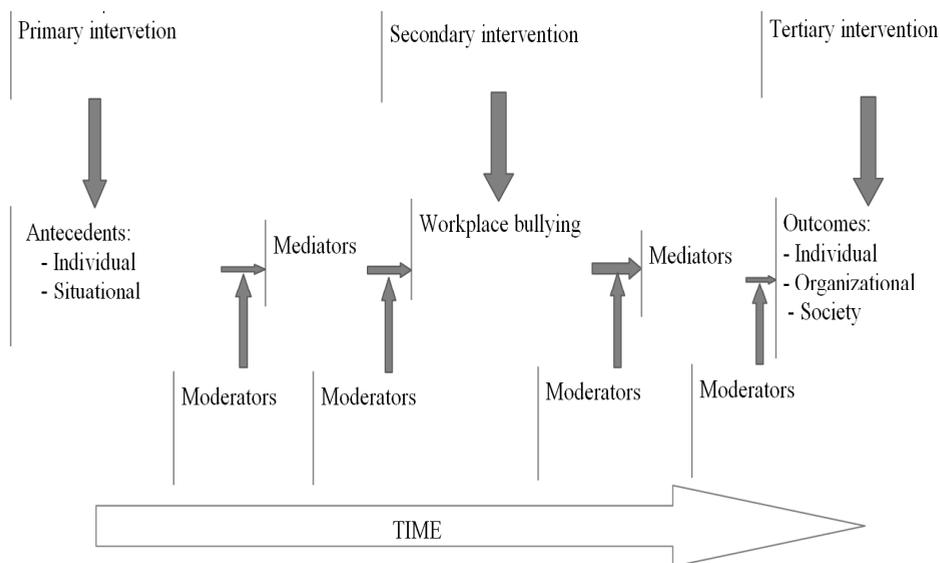
Ramsay, Troth, and Branch, (2011) concluded that workplace bullying are essentially of a rule-breaking nature as it involve negative acts against others with less power to defend and a social rule perspective could therefore be beneficial with regard to understanding how bullying arise, develops, and are handled in organizations. Social identity is the portion of an individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group (Tajfel, 1974). Hence, in light of social identity theory, workplace bullying may be understood as a relational process where the marginalization experienced by the target is caused by an experience of being hidden or devalued by the preferred in-group. "We understand ourselves and our lives in relation to others and this understanding is assessed and evaluated against notions of sameness and difference" (Ward, 2009, p. 243).



**Figure 8.** The scheme of cognitiv –explicative model of workplace aggression (Beugre, 2005)

Van de Vliert în 2011 concluded that, in terms of conflict theory, bullying involves two conflict parties who are involved in a prolonged conflict process. This suggests that bullying can be considered as an unsolved social conflict having reached a high level of escalation and involving an imbalance of power between the parties (Zapf & Gross, 2001). A conflict perspective on bullying could therefore be highly beneficial due to the insights on conflicts development, escalation, and conflict resolution that has described in the conflict literature (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & DeCuyper, 2009; Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999; Keashly & Nowell, 2003). Hence, by examining conflict dynamics and conflict management both within smaller groups and in organizations it may be possible to gain a better understanding of variables that affect the causes, dynamics, and

outcomes of bullying. One promising concept here is that of conflict management climate in organizations, and how such a climate may act to prevent both bullying and its outcomes (Einarsen, Skogstad, Rorvik, Lande, & Nielsen, 2016). It should be noted that although there are conceptual similarities between conflict and bullying, making the assumption that bullying is just another conflict would be a mistake (Van de Vliert, 2011). In a study which investigates the defining features that distinguish workplace bullying from interpersonal conflict it was concluded that bullying could be regarded as part of the wide definition of interpersonal conflicts because victims of bullying are confronted with interpersonal conflict incidents, but that due to its nature, workplace bullying as a particular concept should be distinguished from a prototypical interpersonal conflict (Baillien, Escartin, Gross, & Zapf, 2017).



**Figure 9.** The workplace bullying model as proposed by Nielsen and Einarsen (2018) - Theoretical model for the development and outcomes of workplace bullying.

## Conclusions

Bullying is a complex social phenomenon that can stem from a wide range of antecedents and develop through multiple pathways. Knowledge about how bullying is causally related to other variables is therefore highly important with regard to both the development of theoretical models and for creating effective interventions. For instance, an understanding of whether it is specific factors in the work environment that causes bullying, whether it is the occurrence of bullying that leads to changes in the work environment, or whether the association between work environment is reciprocal and dynamic,

can be used to shape prevention strategies and interventions (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

Research on workplace bullying has grown, matured, and developed extensively in a relatively short amount of time and bullying is now considered as a one of the most detrimental stressors in contemporary working life (Niedhammer, Chastang, Sultan-Taieb, Vermeylen, & Parent-Thirion, 2013 apud Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

The present theoretical work aimed at presenting the characteristic aspects of bullying in a professional context, presenting the psychological theories that can explain this phenomenon and, last but not least, the way in which it can cope with the situation arising from prolonged stress.

This phenomenon is different from the interpersonal conflict in that it is prolonged as manifestation time (its manifestation is felt for at least six months in the organization), it has a systematic occurrence frequency (at least weekly), implies the perception of an imbalance of power (usually the affected person feels helpless) and a worsening of the psychological well-being of the affected employee.

The phenomenon of workplace bullying occurs more frequently in organizations that have undergone recent organizational changes, within large organizations, with a diffuse organizational culture and a rigid organizational climate.

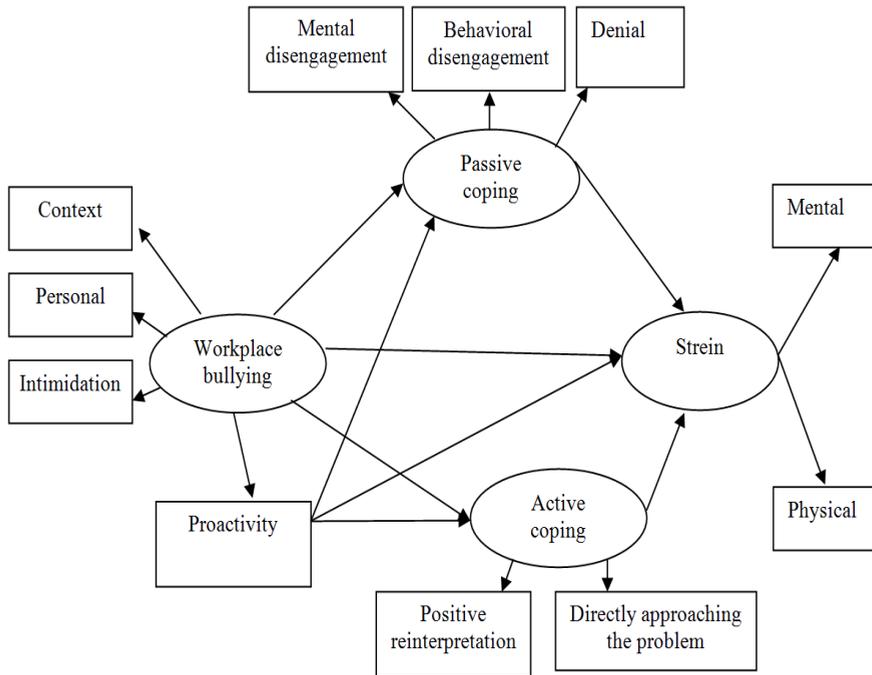
To date, there is no law in Romania to sanction workplace bullying. For this reason, the legal sanction of this phenomenon is impossible or partially possible by assimilating the phenomenon to various forms of discrimination or psychological harassment.

The work in question brings a contribution to the evolution of research in the field by introducing the phenomenon among the local publications creating a clearer picture on the phenomenon and its forms of manifestation, presents the most vulnerable sectors of activity, summarizes the main triggers and its main consequences. In the last part, a series of explanatory psychological theories of the phenomenon are presented synthetically and promote the most effective strategies of survival in the face of the phenomenon of psychological aggression in the workplace.

During my previous studies I have based my research on workplace bullying on a theoretical model which is presented above. This model studies workplace bullying phenomenon in its relationship with victim's coping strategies and their outcomes on victim's well-being (i.e. the levels of physical and mental strain).

The above mentioned theory explain workplace bullying in its relationship with the victim's coping strategies, her inner level of proactivity and the outcomes at personal well-being levels. It is important to know the impact of workplace bullying phenomenon so that we can improve the intervention

developed during training sessions. Further research should take into consideration this model while explaining the causes and consequences of workplace bullying behavior.



**Figure 10.** The complex model of workplace bullying proposed in my personal previous studies developed during the period of time between 2011 and 2019.

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