

# Predictors for bullying at work in the field of education

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## abstract

The present study tries to analyse the possible relationship between psychological harassment and determined psychosocial factors such as burnout, with its related factors of emotional tiredness, depersonalisation and personal fulfilment, type A behaviour pattern and its factors related to impatience, competitiveness, overload and hostility, psychological wellbeing in the work setting or general stress in social and work settings. Different standardised questionnaires were given to a sample of 220 teachers (93 males and 127 females) so that information could be collected about the aforementioned factors and other epidemiological data. The results revealed the existence of a significant relationship between psychological harassment and most predictive factors. A model able to predict 24.3% of variance regarding psychological harassment, consisting of variables regarding depersonalisation, hostility and stress was also established.

**Key words:** psychological harassment, burnout, stress, type A behaviour pattern, teacher.

## resumen

### Predictores del acoso psicológico en el ámbito educativo

El presente estudio se propone analizar la posible relación existente entre el acoso psicológico y determinados factores psicosociales como el burnout con sus factores cansancio emocional, despersonalización y realización personal, el patrón de conducta tipo A y sus factores impaciencia, competitividad, sobrecarga y hostilidad, el bienestar psicológico en el ambiente de trabajo o el estrés general en el ámbito socio-laboral. Con una muestra de 220 profesores (93 hombres y 127 mujeres) se recoge, mediante diversos cuestionarios estandarizados, información sobre los factores anteriormente descritos y otros datos de tipo epidemiológico. Los resultados muestran la existencia de una relación significativa entre el acoso psicológico y la mayoría de los factores predictores. Además se establece un modelo capaz de predecir el 24,3% de la varianza con respecto al acoso psicológico, compuesto por las variables despersonalización, hostilidad y estrés.

**Palabras clave:** acoso psicológico, burnout, estrés, patrón de conducta tipo A, profesores.

## résumé

Cette étude analyse le rapport potentiel existant entre le harcèlement psychologique et certains facteurs psychosociaux tels que le burnout et les facteurs de fatigue émotionnelle, dépersonnalisation et réalisation personnelle, le modèle de conduite type A et les facteurs d'impatience, compétitivité, surcharge et hostilité, le bien-être psychologique en milieu de travail ou le stress général en milieu socio professionnel. Au moyen d'un échantillon de 220 professeurs (93 hommes et 127 femmes) une information est recueillie par le biais de différents questionnaires standardisés, sur les facteurs décrits précédemment et d'autres données de type épidémiologique. Le résultat montre l'existence d'un rapport significatif entre le harcèlement psychologique et la plupart des facteurs prédictifs. En outre, un modèle est établi avec une capacité de prédiction de 24,3% de variation, en ce qui concerne le harcèlement psychologique, composé des aspects variables de dépersonnalisation, hostilité et stress.

**Mots-clés:** harcèlement psychologique, burnout, stress, modèle de conduite type A, professeurs

## resumo

### Sintomas do assédio psicológico no âmbito educativo

O presente estudo propõe-se a analisar a possível relação existente entre o assédio psicológico e determinados fatores psicossociais como o burnout com seus fatores cansaço emocional, despersonalização e realização pessoal, o padrão de conduta tipo A e seus fatores impaciência, competitividade, sobrecarga e hostilidade, o bem-estar psicológico no ambiente de trabalho ou o estresse geral no âmbito sócio-laboral. Com uma amostra de 220 professores (93 homens e 127 mulheres) coleta-se, mediante diversos questionários padronizados, informação sobre os fatores anteriormente descritos e outros dados de tipo epidemiológico. Os resultados mostram a existência de uma relação significativa entre o assédio psicológico e a maioria dos fatores sintomáticos. Além disso, estabelece-se um modelo capaz de prever 24,3% da variação com respeito ao assédio psicológico, composto pelas variáveis despersonalização, hostilidade e estresse.

**Palavras chave:** assédio psicológico, burnout, estresse, padrão de conduta tipo A, professores.

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## Introduction

Nowadays, bullying at work is becoming a particularly important topic of study, as a possible reflection of the trend towards precariousness and competitiveness in labour markets. The German ethologist Konrad Lorenz spoke of mobbing for the first time in the 1970s, with reference to certain animal behaviour whereby weaker individuals formed an alliance to attack another stronger one. Subsequently Leymann (1990) applied the term to the working environment to define it as a form of systematic psychological violence in the workplace towards another person for a prolonged period. Other similar definitions have arisen in recent years, such as *bullying* (Adams, 1992), *harassment* (Vartia, 1993) or *harcelement* (Hirigoyen, 2001). The concept *bullying at work* was chosen for this study as the most widely used expression in English language literature.

From the scarce literature that exists about the subject in Spain, this phenomenon appears to be present in all sectors of work, although the professions most at risk include teachers, health workers and civil servants or government employees (Fornes, 2003). For this reason, most studies of the topic have focused on health and administrative personnel, although there is a large void when it comes to the teaching profession.

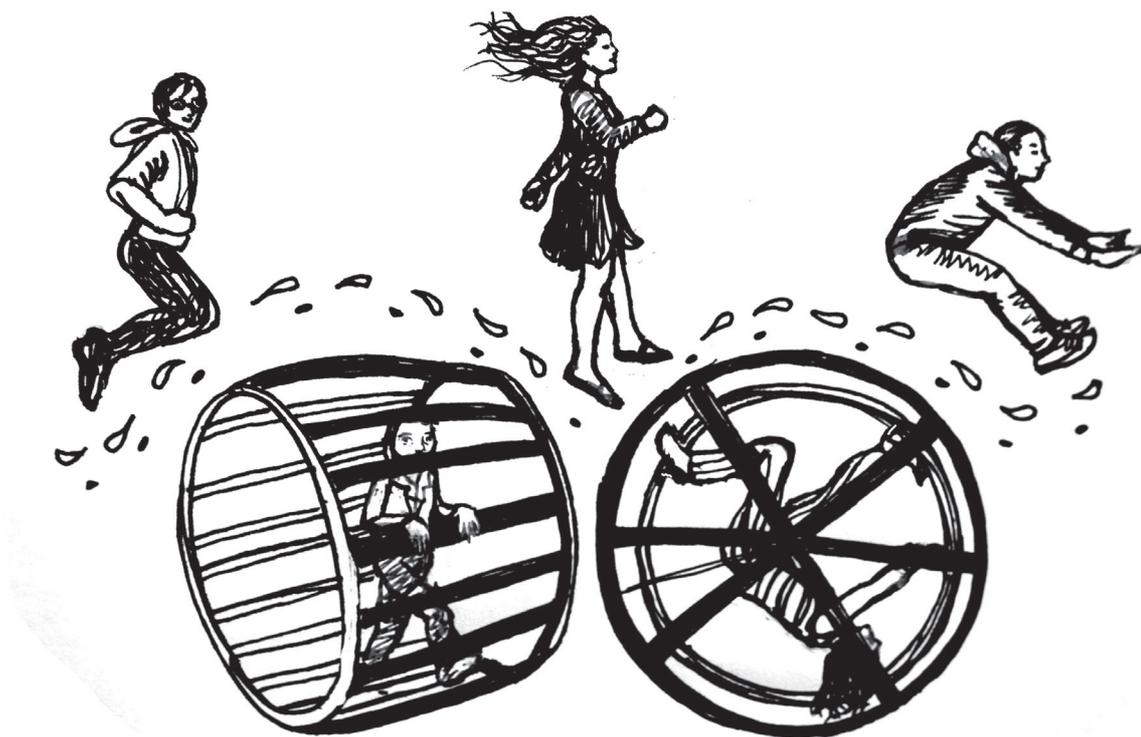
The fact that bullying at work occurs in the working environment and as a consequence of the different interactions between the employees of a business or a public corporation means that this phenomenon can be linked with others which also originate in the workplace or in the relationships established there. Hence, bullying at work can be related to other psychosocial aspects such as burnout, stress or psychological well-being. In this respect, numerous studies have demonstrated the close relationship between bullying at work and stress, given that the experience of different episodes of bullying in the workplace generates similar responses in the individual to those developed when faced with any stressful element (González de Rivera, 2003; Niedl, 1995; Vartia, 2001; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996). Furthermore, being bullied at work for a prolonged period can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (Fidalgo & Piñuel, 2004; Hirigoyen, 2001; Leymann, 1992; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Wilson, 1991).

Along these same lines, some authors (Fidalgo & Piñuel, 2004; Piñuel & Oñate, 2002) have related burnout—a very frequent disorder in the teaching profession (Guerrero, 2003; Moriana & Herruzo, 2005) – to bullying at work. In fact, some of the aspects that comprise burnout, such as work overload, are considered in some fields as a form of bullying at work (Jennifer, Cowie & Ananiadou, 2003).

As far as the psychological problems related to bullying at work are concerned, negative relationships have been found with certain aspects such as mental health and well-being (Einarsen & Raknes 1997). Some psychological characteristics in bullied people have also been described, such as anxiety (Hirigoyen, 2001; Leymann 1990; Olweus, 1978), depression (Hirigoyen, 2001; Leymann, 1990), aggression (Gandolfo, 1995; Olweus, 1978), psychosomatic disorders (Hirigoyen, 2001; Leymann, 1990; Piñuel & Oñate, 2002) or anti-social behaviour and self-inflicted injuries (Barón, Mundate & Blanco, 2003; Rodríguez, 2003).

So far, a broad relationship has been outlined between bullying and certain psychosocial factors and psychological problems that usually appear alongside this occurrence, sometimes as the cause and at others as the consequence, but always as predictors of the same. Furthermore, it is also interesting to bear certain personality traits in mind that could be linked with bullying. Hitherto, some studies such as the one carried out by Baron, Neuman & Geddes (1999) have described the relationship between the type A behaviour pattern and the likelihood of being a bully. However, although some papers have described specific personality traits observed among the victims (such as Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001), practically no studies have attempted to analyse the relationship between bullying and the type A behavioural pattern in these subjects. Bearing in mind that some studies have found a relationship between this behaviour pattern and greater vulnerability to stress (Durán, Extremera & Rey, 2001; Guerrero, 2003; Nagy, 1985) and that links have also been found between the type A behavioural pattern and burnout (Moriana & Herruzo, 2006), there could be a relationship between the features of the type A behavioural pattern and bullying.

We feel it is interesting to extract certain information, based on previous findings, about different psychological factors and their relationship with bullying at work in the field of education with a view to establishing a series of predictors or personal characteristics often present in cases of bullying at work. For this purpose, the following objectives are proposed: to measure the levels of bullying at work and other psychosocial factors such as burnout, psychological well-being in the working environment and general stress in the socio-professional field as well as the degree of identification with the type A behaviour pattern in a sample of teaching staff; and also to examine whether the psychological factors mentioned can act as predictors for bullying at work in the field of education.



## Method

### Participants

Bearing in mind that the educational system and staffing policies are the same throughout Spain, this study focuses on the non-university teaching population in the province of Cordoba in southern Spain, a medium sized province where there are a total of 8,898 teachers (3598 men and 5300 women), of which 5438 are working in Pre-Primary and Primary Education, and 3460 working in Secondary Education. Of the total number of teachers, in which the percentage of permanent staff (civil servants employed by the State) is around 20%, 3915 belong to schools located in the city of Cordoba itself (the province capital), 2373 to schools located in towns with more than 20,000 inhabitants, and 2610 to schools located in towns and villages with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. Of these teachers, a sample of 220 participants was chosen at random, although taking care to ensure that it was representative of the teaching population of Cordoba as a whole.

In terms of the level of education taught, the sample comprised 136 teachers in Pre-Primary and Primary Education, and 84 in Secondary Education. As regards the location of the school, 95 teachers were chosen from schools in the city of Cordoba itself, 61 from towns with more than 20,000 inhabitants, and 64 from towns and villages with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. In terms of gender and contractual status, the sample was also repre-

sentative of the whole teaching population, distributed as follows: 93 men and 127 women, 172 civil servants (permanent staff employed by the State) and 45 supply teachers (3 did not answer). Finally, the average age was 42.26 ( $S=9.81$ ), with an average teaching career of 17.04 years ( $S=10.30$ ). In that matter these last two variables, the sample complied with the condition of normality according to the Kolmogorov – Smirnov test.

### Instruments

To gather the information required, a questionnaire was formulated, designed in such a way as to ensure full confidentiality of the data, as the anonymity of the participants was guaranteed. The instrument was composed of the following three parts:

- A questionnaire formulated for this study gathering demographic data such as sex, age, contractual status, the location of the school and the level of education taught.
- Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorisation (LIPT – 60) adapted by Gonzalez de Rivera and Rodriguez-Abuin (2003), which is a self-administered scaled questionnaire that objectifies and scores 60 bullying at work strategies, derived from Leymann's original dichotomous LIPT comprising 45 items. In this questionnaire, the subject had to rate from 0 to 4 the intensity with which they experienced the situations described in the different items.

- Jenkins Activity Survey, Form H (Krantz, Glass & Zinder, 1974). This is a questionnaire with 32 items and response options varying from 1 to 6 depending on the extent of agreement. It was designed to measure the type A behaviour pattern according to four factors: competitiveness, work overload, impatience and hostility. The Spanish version has been validated by Bermúdez, Pérez-García and Sánchez-Elvira (1991), showing Alpha results between the English and Spanish versions of between 0.75 and 0.88.
- Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson & Schwab, 1997), which aims to find out how different professionals belonging to Human Services view their work and the people to whom they give their services. It comprises 22 items, which are given a value of 0 to 6 according to the frequency with which the feeling expressed is experienced. This questionnaire has been designed to measure burnout according to three factors: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment. As for its reliability, the internal consistency ratios calculated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for a Spanish sample of 1316 subjects are: 0.90 for Emotional exhaustion, 0.79 for Depersonalisation and 0.71 for Personal accomplishment. As for the test-retest procedure, ratios were obtained, with an interval of one year, of between 0.54 and 0.60 on a sample of 248 teaching staff.
- The Psychological Well-Being Scale (Sánchez-Cánovas, 1998), which encompasses four sub-scales to measure subjective and material well-being, and well-being at work and in a couple. For this study, only the 'well-being at work' sub-scale was used, composed of ten items to be rated from 1 to 5 according to the frequency with which the feeling expressed was experienced in each item. In terms of internal consistency, this scale has a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.846.
- Stress Appreciation Scale (Fernández-Seara & Mielgo-Robles, 1992) which consists of four sets aimed at measuring stress in general, stress in old people, in management and in the socio-professional field. This last field was selected for the study. It consists of 50 items, which refer to aspects such as the work itself, the work context or the relationship between the subject and the job. As for its reliability, the consistency ratios are 0.61 for the test-retest correlation and 0.70 with reference to the even-odd correlation.

### Procedure [T3]

After selecting the sample, we contacted the schools whose teachers were to participate in the study. To

make the instrument available the teaching staff, a member of the teaching board (head teacher, director of studies...) was approached and informed about the project, its purpose and the way in which it should be carried out.

The questionnaires were filled out voluntarily by teachers from schools in the province of Cordoba, who were selected according to their location and the education level they taught.

Once the 220 questionnaires were collected from the 24 different schools in 8 locations around the province of Cordoba, including the city of Cordoba itself, an analysis of the data obtained was performed using the statistics package SPSS.

The study was carried out using an ex-post-facto prospective design in which multiple regression analysis was used to obtain the predictive factors of bullying. Hence, the variables used in the study were as follows: Dependent Variable (DV): Global Index of Psychological Harassment (GIPH), obtained by adding the values assigned to each harassment strategy and dividing by the total number of strategies considered (60). The predictive variables (we use the term *predictive variables*, instead of *independent variables*, as they cannot be altered) used were burnout factors (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment), those corresponding to the type A behaviour pattern (competitiveness, work overload, impatience and hostility), and psychological well-being in the workplace and general stress in the socio-professional field.

Bearing in mind that the LIPT-60 had not yet been validated on the Spanish population, reliability calculations were carried out for the sample studied. For this sample, the internal consistency ratio calculated using Cronbach's alpha was 0.98, whereas for the odd-even correlation, a Spearman-Brown quotient of 0.99 was obtained, which indicate excellent reliability ratios.

### Results

The main purpose of this study was to measure levels of bullying at work, burnout, psychological well-being in the workplace and general stress in the socio-professional field, as well as the degree of identification with the type A behaviour pattern in the sample described. As previously indicated, bullying was measured using the GIPH (VD). The average obtained in the sample for this variable was 0.14 ( $S = 0.37$ ), although it should be taken into account that 73 subjects scored 0 and that there were also subjects with quite high scores, the maximum being 3.53.

Table 1: Average and standard deviation values for each of the psychosocial factors measured in the study, and the reference values according to each instrument.

Factors	Study values		Reference values	
	Average Score	Standard Deviation	Average Score	Standard Deviation
Emotional exhaustion	17.78	10.63	20.83	11.30
Depersonalisation	4.88	5.50	7.62	5.81
Personal accomplishment	30.30	8.57	35.71	8.08
Type A behaviour	93.32	23.65	100.00	--
Competitiveness	21.83	8.44	23.00	--
Overload	21.73	6.66	22.00	--
Impatience	14.05	4.89	15.50	--
Hostility	15.69	5.82	18.00	--
Psychological well-being	38.05	5.93	32.76	9.26
Stress	35.79	21.42	57.70	15.60

Table 1 shows the average values and standard deviations, as well as the reference values according to each instrument for the other psychosocial factors measured.

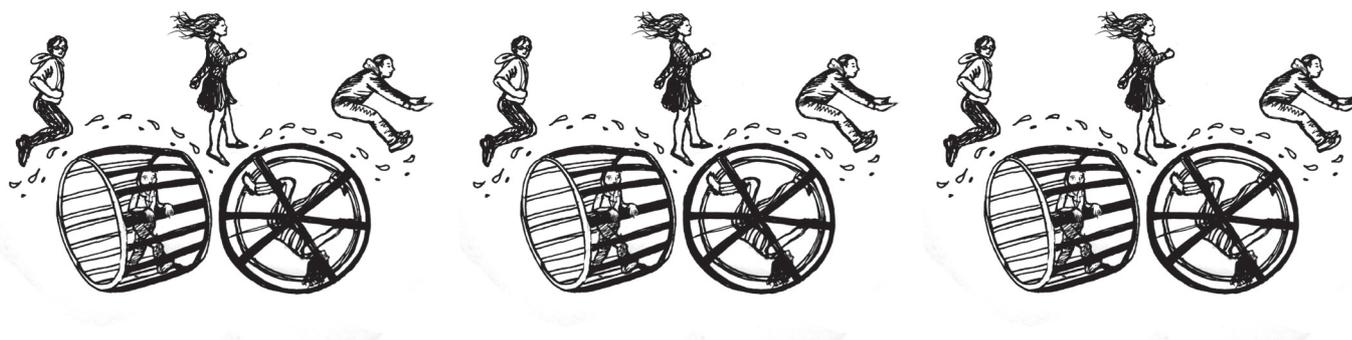
The Pearson correlation coefficient indicates the existence of a direct or inverse relationship between two numerical variables, and so it can be said that two variables that are highly correlated are at the same time highly predictive of one another. With the objective being to identify the variables with a higher predictive power as regards bullying at work, we established correlations among all the variables of the study and the GIPH, obtaining significant results in all cases except for the variables personal accomplishment and overload, although the latter nearly reached significance. All the variables correlated positively with the GIPH excluding psychological well-being in the workplace, which correlated negatively. Table 2 shows the values of the correlations and their significance ratios.

Given that the second aim of this work was to study the predictive character of the psychosocial factors measured with regard to bullying at work, we applied multiple regression analysis in order to obtain a model capable of predicting the possibility of suffering bullying at work.

Table 2: Pearson correlations between different factors and the GIPH.

Factors	Correlation with the GIPH	
	Pearson's r	Sig.
Emotional exhaustion	0.258	0.000
Depersonalisation	0.392	0.000
Personal accomplishment	0.049	0.474
Type A behaviour	0.295	0.000
Competitiveness	0.238	0.000
Overload	0.163	0.016
Impatience	0.251	0.000
Hostility	0.351	0.000
Psychological well-being	-0.246	0.000
Stress	0.234	0.001

The three variables that turned out to be significant predictors of bullying at work were Depersonalisation, Hostility, and Stress, as shown in table 3. All variables entered in the previous steps made an insignificant contribution to the predictive capacity of the model, producing a relatively insignificant change in both  $R^2$  and F. In this step, an  $R^2$  of 0.246 was obtained with which the



**Table 3: Multiple regression in successive steps of the Depersonalisation, Hostility, and Stress variables with regard to the dependent GIPH variable.**

Variable	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> corr.	F	sig.	Change F	sig.	B	t	sig.
Step 1	0.425	0.181	0.177	46.048	0.000	46.048	0.000			
Constant								0.001	0.032	0.975
Deperson.								0.029	6.567	0.000
Step 2	0.471	0.222	0.214	29.641	0.000	11,025	0,001			
Constant								-0.227	-3.424	0.001
Deperson.								0.024	5.137	0.000
Hostility								0.016	3.893	0.000
Step 3	0.493	0.243	0.232	22.141	0.000	5,778	0,017			
Constant								-0.276	-3.975	0.000
Deperson.								0.023	5.131	0.000
Hostility								0.014	3.249	0.001
Stress								0.002	2.184	0.030

variables of depersonalisation, hostility and stress predict 24.6% of the variability in respect of bullying.

Other possible predictor models of bullying tested included, for example: the four factors of the type A behaviour pattern, in which R<sup>2</sup> reached a value of 0.119, where hostility and competitiveness were the main risk factors; the three factors of burnout, where a value of 0.173 was obtained for R<sup>2</sup>, with all three factors acting as risk factors; and the variables stress and psychological well-being, where a value of 0.089 was obtained for R<sup>2</sup>, with stress acting as a risk factor and psychological well-being as a protection factor.

### Conclusions

Bearing in mind that only 76 subjects scored 0 in the GIPH, then two thirds of the sample displayed some of the sixty bullying strategies described. Hence, the ability to predict the possibility of being a victim of bullying at work would provide an important step forward with regard to well-being and health at the workplace and major cost savings in terms of treating the psychological problems caused by bullying. Thus, this study aimed to identify certain psychosocial factors that may be interacting with the teaching staff. In this respect, notwithstanding the accepted limitations of research based on self-reporting, certain elements have been identified that are inherent to professional accomplishment that could act as predictors of bullying such as burnout, stress or psychological well-being and certain personality characteristics such as the different factors that make up the type A behaviour pattern.

Hence, the results obtained indicate a relationship between bullying and burnout, coinciding with the statements of Fidalgo and Piñuel (2004), and Piñuel and Oñate (2002), which identified higher levels of burnout

in subjects who also claimed to suffer bullying to a greater degree. We have also found a link between psychological well-being and GIPH, although it was inverse in this case. In fact, it seems quite logical that the sensation of well-being decreases as a subject begins to feel the effects of bullying at work. This fact supports the affirmations of Barón et al. (2003), Einarsen and Raknes (1997), Hirigoyen (2001), Leymann (1990), Piñuel and Oñate (2002), and Rodríguez (2003), who pointed to major psychological problems in subjects suffering from a higher degree of bullying. Stress in the workplace has a strong relationship with bullying at work, a relationship that can be classified as predictable since the distance between the two concepts is not as great as González de Rivera (2003) or Hirigoyen (2001) state.

With reference to the different factors that make up the type A behaviour pattern, the results obtained are also interesting since bullying at work has a direct correlation with all the different scores obtained through the JASE-H questionnaire, particularly with hostility where a high correlation coefficient was observed. The fact that people who display a higher degree of hostility are also at the same time those who present a higher level of bullying is, undoubtedly, the most significant finding of this study, since it identifies a personality trait with the victim that had always been associated with the aggressor.

Bearing in mind that the coefficients obtained in multiple regression analysis measure the effect of each of the predictors used on the dependent variable, maintaining the other predictors in the model constant, we can say that the level of bullying perceived by a certain subject is higher when their levels of depersonalisation, stress and hostility are higher and therefore, to some extent, these factors can be considered to be highly frequent characteristics in victims of bullying.

These results establish an important direction in the prevention of bullying and in organisational planning, making it easier for a company or institution to study the levels of stress, hostility and depersonalisation in their workers and ascertain the likelihood (higher or lower) that an individual might be more sensitive if she/he is involved in certain altercations with work colleagues. We could interpret this relationship in the other direction if we used these results to point out how a protection factor lowers scores in the aforementioned variables.

These data pave the way for further studies to be carried out with more extensive samples of teaching staff, as well

as other professional sectors, particularly for people affected by bullying at work, so as to obtain more reliable data regarding their characteristics and be able to establish better prediction models.

Furthermore, studies in which information obtained by means of third parties who act as spectators of the phenomenon, and who provide a more objective point of view, should be carried out. In addition, studies aimed at identifying the main strategies of bullying suffered in the workplace, and factors that cause and give rise to the appearance and persistence of bullying behaviour should be performed.

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