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Ethical Infrastructure and Successful Handling of Workplace Bullying

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ABSTRACT

Antecedents and consequences of workplace bullying are well documented. However, the measures taken against workplace bullying, and the effectiveness of such measures, have received less attention. This study addresses this knowledge gap by exploring the role of ethical infrastructure in perceived successful handling of reported workplace bullying. Ethical infrastructure refers to formal and informal systems that enable ethical behavior and disable unethical behavior in organizations. A survey was sent to HR managers and elected head safety representatives (HSRs) in all Norwegian municipality organizations. Overall, 216 organizations responded (response rate = 50.2 percent). The ethical infrastructure accounted for 39.4% of the variance in perceived successful handling of workplace bullying. Formal sanctions were the only unique and significant contributor to the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying. The results substantiate the argument that organizations' ethical infrastructure relate to the HR managers and HSRs' perceptions regarding their organizations' handling of workplace bullying.

KEY WORDS

Business ethics / ethical infrastructure / formal systems / informal systems / workplace bullying

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Introductionss

Workplace bullying takes place when an employee is subjected to negative acts by another organizational member or members, frequently and over a long period of time, in such a way that the target is not able to defend himself or herself against these actions or to escape the situation (Einarsen, 1999; see also Olweus, 1991).

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Although illegal in many countries, workplace bullying is a prevalent problem in contemporary working life (Yamada, 2011), with prevalence rates found to be as high as 19% in some studies (Nielsen et al., 2010). Exposure to such highly unethical behavior has been shown to be related to a range of negative consequences at both the individual and the organizational levels (Einarsen et al., 2011; Hoel et al., 2011; Hogh et al., 2011; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Salin & Hoel, 2011). To combat such unethical behavior, most studies have focused on the interventions tailored at *preventing* workplace bullying (Escartin, 2016; Hodgins et al., 2014; Mikkelsen, 2011; Saam, 2010; Salin, 2009). However, as Hodgins (2014) argued, employees experiencing bullying are frustrated by their organization`s poor response and inability to handle such misdeeds. To our knowledge, no study has demonstrated the extent to which *the handling* of workplace bullying is perceived as successful. The theoretical framework of ethical infrastructure is one way to study such handling of workplace bullying, which is the scope of this study. Ethical infrastructure, defined as 'elements that contribute to an organization's ethical effectiveness' (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003, p. 285), comprises formal and informal ethical systems. Together, these systems are supposed to guide organizational members' choices and actions when facing challenging ethical issues (Lincoln & Holmes, 2010). However, empirical research on such ethical infrastructure has to date been modest (Treviño et al., 2014; Trevino et al., 2006), particularly in relation to workplace bullying.

Considering workplace bullying as a form of unethical behavior, this study investigated the degree to which the different elements of formal and informal systems relate to the successful handling of cases of workplace bullying, as perceived by the key actors in the organization. These key actors included human resource managers (HR managers) and elected head safety representatives (HSRs). They play various roles in all parts of the organization, including the handling of cases of workplace bullying and the development of practices devoted to the prevention and management of these problems. Hence, it is reasonable to expect that these organizational members have the most accurate knowledge of any implemented systems and organizational practices regarding the prevention and handling of workplace bullying, including having a good overview of the prevailing norms and practices for conflict management in the organization, here denoted as climate for conflict management.

The justification of this study is based on the devastating effects of workplace bullying and the novelty of applying an ethical infrastructure perspective to analyze the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying.

Ethical Infrastructure

Establishing ethical infrastructure is an organizational response to the challenges that most organizations face when coping with corporate wrongdoing (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003), also called unethical workplace behavior (Trevino et al., 2006). Thus, one purpose of implementing ethical infrastructure in organizations is to achieve behavioral control of employees' ethically related behaviors (Weaver & Treviño, 1999) as well as to handle the problems in the organization. Ethical infrastructure can 'communicate and reinforce the ethical principles to which organizational members will be held' (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003, p. 286), in this case, ethical principles regarding workplace bullying. Organizations employ ethical infrastructure to generate predictable behaviors among

organizational members that are in line with organizational missions, goals, and expectations concerning ethical issues (Treviño & Weaver, 2003).

Formal ethical systems are elements that are observable both within and outside the organization (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003). They consist of standardized procedures and documentation, such as codes of ethics, written procedures for handling complaints, formal training programs, the use of formal sanctions against unethical behavior, recurrent communication of policies, and formal surveillance of the social work environment. In an organization with a strong formal ethical system, organizational members may have knowledge of how to act if bullying occurs in the work environment. They may have this knowledge because they are acquainted with organizational policies and procedures or because they have been trained to handle such incidents. Organizational members may also engage in formal discussions at staff meetings to clarify the organizations' stand on bullying, for example, following a formal awareness-raising campaign against bullying. In the present study, a formal ethical system is defined as the existence of policies, recurrent communication, formal surveillance, formal training, and the use of formal sanctions in relation to cases of workplace bullying.

Informal ethical systems, on the other hand, are implicit messages and directions about how to behave in situations in which unethical behavior could occur (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). These systems comprise informal signals about the organization's values, beliefs, and traditions (Falkenberg & Herremans, 1995; Tenbrunsel et al., 2003), which are transferred through conversation, observation, socialization, and other forms of social learning (Smith-Crowe et al., 2014). Simply by being a part of an organization, members often gain knowledge of expected behavior. Thus, norms, rituals, myths, and stories become of great importance to organizational members when deciding on how to approach ethical issues (Weaver & Treviño, 1999). In the present study, we will include a conflict management climate measure as a relevant proxy for such an informal system.

Climate refers to the shared *perceptions* of practices and procedures of organizational members as well as their shared observations of the behaviors that are rewarded and expected in the organization (Schneider et al., 2013). Depending on the context, various climates, for instance, safety climate or climate for innovation, can characterize organizations, depending on what aspect of the organization we direct our focus (Schneider et al., 2013). Namie et al. (2011) argued that in a chaotic workplace climate characterized by low security, lack of organizational coherence, and token accountability, it is easier for opportunistic abusers of authority to harm others. Furthermore, interpersonal conflicts are inevitable in the workplace, as almost all jobs involve some degree of interaction with others (Chung-Yan & Moeller, 2010). Such conflicts are recognized as prominent causes of workplace stress (De Raeve et al., 2008) as well as strong correlates of and important precursors to workplace bullying (Hauge et al., 2007). Thus, it is important for the organization to handle interpersonal conflict in a constructive manner to reduce stress and prevent situations from escalating into episodes of bullying (Einarsen et al., 2016). In this study, informal ethical systems in the context of workplace bullying refer to the extent to which the climate fosters proper conflict management. A conflict management climate may therefore be defined as *perceptions* of policies, practices, and procedures that relate specifically to conflict and dispute resolution and the handling of situations that may involve interpersonal conflict, including bullying and harassment (see Einarsen et al., 2016).

According to Tenbrunsel et al. (2003), formal systems are weaker and less internalized by organizational members compared to informal systems; thus, formal systems may have less influence on individual behaviors. Informal ethical systems may also interact with formal systems to direct organizational members to the desired ethical behaviors. Hence, the systems may act not only to reduce the occurrence of workplace bullying but also to enable the organization to manage incidents of bullying more effectively. Thus, relatively strong formal and informal systems within the ethical infrastructure probably contribute to better handling of workplace bullying cases in organizations.

Most studies have thus far addressed only single elements within the formal or the informal systems of the ethical infrastructure (e.g., Belak & Milfelner, 2011, Rottig et al., 2011). However, by concentrating on a single element, the relation between formal and informal elements has not been established as well as the nature of their relationships with regard to actual unethical behaviors. The present study therefore first addressed the degree to which different elements within the formal and informal ethical systems are related. We also investigated the extent to which formal ethical systems are related to the conflict management climate. Second, we addressed the extent to which ethical infrastructure (formal and informal systems) is related to perceived successful handling of workplace bullying, that is, (1) the extent to which formal ethical systems are related to the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying cases and (2) the extent to which the informal ethical system (conflict management climate) is related to the perceived successful handling of cases of bullying over and above the effects of the elements within the formal system.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The study used an internet-based survey to collect the data. All Norwegian municipalities (N = 429, hereinafter called 'organizations') were chosen as the organizations of interest, as they are spread across the country, and they are homogeneous in nature while being heterogeneous in size and in respect to the variables in the present study. Having identical missions, types of employees, organizational structure, technical solutions employed, and legal environments, these organizations employ from less than a hundred to several thousand employees, and they exist in both rural and urban environments. The respondents were HR managers and elected HSRs in each organization. According to the Norwegian working environment legislation, all employers are obligated to prevent and handle cases of workplace bullying. In interpersonal conflicts and work life disputes, such as cases of workplace bullying, the HSRs and the HR department are involved or at least well updated on any adverse events, having first-hand information on any implemented formal systems as well as the prevailing climate. Prior research has shown that organizations usually place the responsibility for the management of conflicts and workplace bullying on the HR departments (Cowan, 2013; Woodrow & Guest, 2013). HSRs may be involved in such bullying cases by either the employer or the employee, as well as when any formal system are designed and implemented. Thus, based on these notions, this study perceived HR managers and HSRs as the most suitable respondents.

The organizations were contacted by phone to obtain respondents' e-mail addresses, and the respondents received emailed information about the survey and a link to the online survey. The questionnaire was developed and extended based on a previous Finnish study (Salin, 2008), and the study was carried out with two reminders.

The responses were received from 216 organizations (response rate = 50.2). A selection criterion was based on the question 'Do you know of specific cases regarding bullying, harassment, or other improper conduct in your municipality after 1 January 2008?' Only those aware of any bullying cases were included in the analysis concerning perceived successful handling of bullying cases. In 21 cases, both the HR manger and the HSR from the same organization responded, and in those instances, one of the respondents was removed at random. Thus, each organization was represented in the sample only once, by either the HR manager or the HSR. The final sample included 150 organizations where the respondents claimed knowledge of specific cases of bullying. Forty-five respondents who were not aware of any reported cases of workplace bullying were excluded. Among the respondents, 56.7% were HR managers, 43.3% were HRSs, and 54% were males. Most respondents belonged to the 41–50 years age group (51.2%), while 37.7% were younger, and 67.3% had a Bachelor-level education or above.

Municipalities with between 2000 and 9999 inhabitants accounted for 46.8% of the sample (Tab. 1). The study measured organizational size according to the municipality inhabitants rather than employees. This was done for several reasons. First, the number of inhabitants of the municipality reflects the size of the municipality organization. Second, by having the information about inhabitants of the municipality, we may compare the distribution of the sample with government information about all municipalities in Norway, thereby making it possible determine whether the sample reflects the population. As summarized in Tab. 1, the distribution of the sample reflects the population well.[1]

Table 1 Comparison of the distribution of sample and population measured by the numbers of municipality inhabitants

Numbers of inhabitants	Sample		Population	
	%	(n)	%	(n)
Less than 1999	12.9	(30)	22.4	(96)
2000–4999	27.9	(65)	29.6	(127)
5000–9999	18.9	(44)	20.7	(89)
10 000–19 999	13.7	(32)	13.5	(58)
20 000–49 999	12	(28)	9.3	(40)
50 000–99 999	2.1	(5)	2.8	(12)
More than 100 000	1.7	(4)	0.9	(4)
Missing System	3.7	(8)	0.7	(3)
Total1	00	(216)	100	(429)

Measures

The questionnaire assessed the organizational characteristics and types of measures implemented to combat and prevent unethical behaviors and establish a bullying-free work environment, as well as the handling of reported cases. The independent and dependent indicators are described below.

Policies were measured by asking the respondents about the existence of formal written organizational policies. Five items were used to capture the domains of formal policies regarding bullying: policies on conflict management, bullying, sexual harassment, racial and ethnic harassment, and discrimination. Originally, the items were coded as 0 for 'no policies', 1 for 'policies in place', and 2 for 'no policy in place, but such a policy is currently being planned'. This scale was used for descriptive purposes in this paper. However, for the regression analysis, the third value (2 = 'no policy in place, but such a policy is currently being planned') was summed with the value 'no policies' (value = 0) and given a value of 0, while 'policies in place' was given a value of 1. Next, a sum-score for the number of policies was computed. Cronbach's alpha for policies was 0.80.

Recurrent communications measure included three items, specifically attitude campaigns, well-being campaigns, and systematic work to build an anti-bullying culture within the organization, which together conceptually defined the construct. The respondents were asked to rate how much effort the organization had put into these activities on a scale from 1 (very low degree of effort) to 5 (very high degree of effort). Cronbach's alpha for *recurrent communication* was 0.65.

Training in conflict management was measured by two items, 'Has the HR manager received formal training in conflict management?' and 'Has the HSR received formal training in conflict management?' These indicators were dichotomous and were answered with either 'No formal training' (0) or 'Yes, formal training' (1). Next, a sum score of the two indicators was computed, yielding three possible values, (1) Neither HR manager *nor* HSR have received any training, (2) one of the two (HR manager *or* HSR) has received training, and (3) HR manager *and* HSR have received training. Cronbach's alpha for training was 0.63, which is acceptable for a measure with only three items.

Formal surveillance included one item, assessing whether the organization had follow-up safety, health, and environment (SHE) systems, as required by the Norwegian Work Environment Act. The respondents were asked to rate the question on a scale from 1 (very low degree) to 5 (very high degree).

The use of formal sanctions as a reaction to cases of workplace bullying was measured using a single item 'A warning is given to a person who bullies or harasses another'. The statement was measured on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (extremely likely).

Conflict management climate was measured using nine items adopted from Rivlin (2001) and tailored to the context of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2016). The scale was designed to measure the perceived quality of organizational procedures and managers' abilities to handle interpersonal conflicts, bullying, and harassment. This scale includes statements such as, 'Employees who have a serious dispute with someone at work know who they can contact within the organization to get help' and 'Employees feel free to consult with the organization's HR advisors if they feel they are treated unfairly in their jobs'. The items were measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1

(completely false) to 7 (completely true). A sum-score was computed and labeled conflict management climate. Cronbach's alpha was 0.91, and KMO was 0.89.

Perceived successful handling of workplace bullying was measured with a single item that asked, 'Do you know of one or more cases of bullying, harassment, or other improper behaviors that you consider have been appropriately handled?' This response was assessed on a dichotomous variable ('no' = 1, 'yes' = 2). Furthermore, the respondents had an option to answer an open-ended follow-up question 'You said you knew of one or more cases of bullying, harassment, or other improper behaviors that you considered had been appropriately handled. Can you please elaborate on how the case(s) was handled?' This question was included to gain additional information about what the respondents considered as 'appropriately handled'.

Finally, a single item, 'Do you know of specific cases regarding bullying, harassment, or other improper conduct in your municipality after 1 January 2008?,' was used as a selection variable. This response was a dichotomous variable ('no' = 2, 'yes' = 1).

For statistical analyses, SPSS Version 21 was used. Frequency analyses and mean values with standard deviations were computed to describe the variables and sum-scores. The correlations were analyzed using Pearson's product moment correlations. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to estimate the effects of the independent variables (policies, recurrent communication, formal surveillance, training, and formal sanctions) on the dependent variable (conflict management climate). Finally, a hierarchical logistic regression analysis was used to analyze whether the respondents perceived handling of bullying as successful. The independent variables representing formal systems, that is, policies, recurrent communication, formal surveillance, training in conflict management, and sanctions, were entered in the first step, while the informal system variables, that is, conflict management climate, were entered in the second. The responses to the follow-up question 'Can you please elaborate on how the case(s) was handled?' were analyzed by identifying the actual ways in which specific cases of bullying were handled, as reported by participants. First, the methods were coded as meeting separately with the victim and the bully, meetings between the parties with attempts at mediation, and larger formal processes. Sanctions were coded as warnings or termination of employment and the use of external agencies registered by category. The findings were then reported by the percentage of cases in each category and, when feasible, according to the ways in which the handling attempts developed from a lower and informal level to a higher and formal level.

Results

Few organizations included policies on all bullying-related domains in this survey (Tab. 2). Actually, close to 37% of the organizations did not have policies in any of the five selected domains while 14.6% reported having policies in one domain, 19.7% in two domains, 10.3% in three domains, 9.0% in four domains, and 9.4% in all five domains. Table 2 provides an overview of the findings regarding the five domains. Approximately half of the organizations had policies on bullying and conflict management. However, within sexual harassment, racial and ethnic harassment, and discrimination domains, no more than a quarter of respondents reported having policies on such issues. Of the respondents, 47.2% of HR managers and 53.2% of HSRs had received information about proper conflict management methods, while 27.5% and 22.3%, respectively, had

received full training in this domain. Overall, 150 respondents reported to know of specific cases of bullying, harassment, or other improper conduct in their organization. Of those 150 respondents, 116 respondents reported knowledge of reported cases that had been handled in a successful manner, whereas 34 had not.

Table 2 Frequencies of domains included in the organizations' policies

Policy domain	No, but policies are being planned at the moment*	Yes, we have policies*
Conflict management	11.7 (25)	54.1 (126)
Bullying	11.6 (27)	48.5 (113)
Sexual harassment	6.0 (14)	21.5 (50)
Racial and ethnic harassment	7.7 (18)	20.2 (47)
Discrimination	4.7 (11)	24.0 (56)

*Percentage of sample (n).

All organizations are represented in the table (n = 216).

Overall, 119 respondents presented brief explanations on how they handled reported cases of bullying in their organization. A common intervention was to conduct more or less informal talks with the bullies and their victims. In 58% of the cases, such talks led to meetings between the bully and the victim with attempts at mediation. Such talks or meetings were most often organized and led by the HR manager, the line manager, the HSE, or the work union's representative. Most of these cases were solved at this lower level in the organization. In 8% of these cases, it was evident that the organization applied some structured method to mediate between the parties and solve the problem. However, in some cases, the meetings and attempts at mediation were followed by more profound and formal processes, including written agreements and repeated scheduled meetings with HR manager, the line manager, the HSE, and/or the worker union's representative, which might involve external experts mainly from the Occupational Health Service (OHS). Altogether, 46% of the respondents mentioned that formal procedures, often including written agreements, plans, and follow-up procedures, were applied. Sanctions were also applied to some extent, as warnings were given in 8% of the cases and the bully was relocated or discharged in 14% of the cases. Reorganizing was mentioned in two cases, and a broader approach to improve the general working environment was applied in nine cases.

A correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between the elements within the ethical infrastructure. All of the elements within the formal and informal systems of the ethical infrastructure were significantly and positively correlated, with few exceptions. The use of sanctions did not correlate significantly with policies, recurrent communication, formal surveillance, or training in conflict management (Tab. 3). However, as an important conceptual part of the formal ethical infrastructure, this element was included in the following regression analyses. Conflict management climate correlated significantly with all formal elements, with correlations ranging from 0.21 for policies, 0.37 for formal sanctions, 0.42 for formal surveillance, 0.46

Table 3 Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables included in the multiple regression analysis and the hierarchical logistic regression analysis

	M	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Policies	1.83	1.65	147						
2 Recurrent communication	3.07	0.78	143	.200*					
3 Training	1.16	0.84	146	.300**	.432**				
4 Formal surveillance	3.60	0.92	148	.137	.512**	.352**			
5 Formal sanctions	2.94	1.20	142	.068	.164	.081	.070		
6 Conflict climate management	5.24	1.00	145	.210*	.458**	.491**	.417**	.373**	
7 Perceived successful handling of workplace bullying			150	.218**	.332**	.334**	.287**	.348**	.483**

*p<0.05, **p<0.01.

Only respondents being aware of any reported cases of workplace bullying are represented in the table (n = 150).

Table 4 Relationships between the independent variables of the formal systems and the dependent variable of conflict management climate: Multiple regression analysis

	Std Coeff.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	Beta	Lower	Upper
Policies	0.036	–0.062	0.106
Training	0.316**	0.194	0.556
Recurrent communication	0.164*	0.002	0.422
Formal surveillance	0.196*	0.044	0.381
Formal sanctions	0.304**	0.143	0.366

$R^2 = 0.433$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.411$.

*p<0.05, **p<0.01.

Pairwise exclusion of missing values (n = 142–148).

for recurrent communication, and 0.49 for training. The strongest correlations existed between formal surveillance and recurrent communication (0.51). Additionally, conflict management climate had a particularly strong correlation with the dependent variable of perceived successful handling of workplace bullying (0.48).

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the extent to which the elements within the formal ethical system (policies, recurrent communication, formal surveillance, training in conflict management, and sanctions) were statistically related to the conflict management climate as a measure of the informal ethical systems. The model explained 41.1% of the variance in the conflict management climate. All elements, except policies, made a statistically significant unique contribution (Tab. 4). Among them, training had the strongest relationship [sd $\beta = 0.316$, $p = 0.000$, confidence interval (CI) 0.194–0.556], followed by formal sanctions (sd $\beta = 0.304$, $p = 0.000$, CI 0.143–0.366), formal surveillance (sd $\beta = 0.196$, $p = 0.014$, 0.044–0.381), and recurrent communication

(sd β = 0.164, p = 0.048, CI 0.002–0.422). As can be seen in the table and the brackets, the CIs are quite wide, indicating some uncertainty about the exact contribution of each factor. Yet, the results showed that if many aspects of a formal ethical infrastructure exist, the respondents described a stronger informal conflict management climate.

Finally, a hierarchical logistic multiple regression analysis was used to investigate the extent to which formal and informal ethical systems, respectively, were statistically related to perceived successful handling of identified cases of bullying. More precisely, the analysis was used to investigate (1) the variance in the dependent variable of perceived successful handling of workplace bullying that is accounted for by the elements within the formal systems and (2) the variance in the dependent variable accounted for by the informal ethical systems, that is, climate for conflict management. The elements of the formal ethical system were entered in Step 1, and conflict management climate was entered in Step 2 (Tab. 5). The formal elements in the model explained 33.7% of the variance in perceived successful handling of bullying, and the informal ethical system explained an additional 5.7%. Referring to the standardized beta coefficients, formal surveillance and sanctions contributed significantly to perceived successful handling of bullying (odds ratio = 1.91 and odds ratio = 2.25, respectively) in Step 1, while sanctions were significant in step 2 (odds ratio = 1.94) that included the informal system of conflict management climate. Even though formal surveillance was significant in step one, a closer look at the CIs shows that the lower end is close to one, indicating that its potential unique contribution is rather small. Yet again, the CIs are quite wide, with some elements approaching 1 at

Table 5 Relationships between the independent variables of the formal and informal systems and the dependent variable of perceived successful handling of workplace bullying: Hierarchical logistic regression (n = 126)

			95% C.I. for EXP (B)	
		Exp(B)	Lower	Upper
Formal systems[1]	Policies	1.156	0.821	1.629
	Training	1.278	0.583	2.798
	Recurrent communication	1.845	0.936	3.636
	Formal surveillance	1.912*	1.018	3.592
	Formal sanctions	2.251**	1.372	3.693
Formal and informal systems[2]	Policies	1.153	0.811	1.640
	Training	1.065	0.461	2.457
	Recurrent communication	1.502	0.721	3.130
	Formal surveillance	1.768	0.912	3.428
	Formal sanctions	1.941*	1.161	3.247
	Conflict management climate	1.786	0.956	3.336

[1]Nagelnerke R^2 = 0.337.

[2]Nagelnerke R^2 = 0.394.

*p<0.05, **p<0.01.

the lower end while approaching 3 at the higher end, which may indicate that the true effect is significant and quite strong.

Discussion

In this study, we analyzed the relationships between elements of formal and informal systems inherent in the ethical infrastructure against workplace bullying to explore the extent to which such elements tend to coexist in organizations, in this case Norwegian municipality organizations. The informants were HR managers and HSRs. The study also investigated whether formal systems are related to the informal system, operationalized as a conflict management climate. Finally, the study analyzed how different elements of formal and informal systems relate to the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying cases.

All *elements* within the measured ethical infrastructure against workplace bullying were related, as shown by the correlation analysis. However, the sanctions element was related only to the informal element of the infrastructure. Thus, the relation between the formal elements may indicate that they tend to coexist in organizations, except for the use of sanctions. For example, if an organization has implemented training against workplace bullying, it has most likely also implemented other elements, such as policies and formal surveillance. While some organizations tend to have a plethora of elements within their ethical infrastructure against bullying, others have few or none. Sanctions, on the other hand, are primarily a reactive measure, and the use of such reactive measures seems to function somewhat independently from the remaining formal ethical systems. This may indicate that the use of sanctions is somewhat arbitrary.

Furthermore, the *formal ethical systems significantly relate to the informal system of conflict management climate*, collectively explaining 41.1% of the variance in conflict management climate. It appears that when a range of formal ethical systems are developed, the informal element conflict management climate is likely to be perceived as strong, acting in concerto offering unique, additive, or interactional effects. The implementation of all of the formal elements, except for the existence of policies, was significantly related to the perceived conflict management climate. Several mechanisms may explain this relationship. For instance, Rottig et al. (2011) argued that sanction systems make individuals more sensitive and alert to ethical situations. They concluded that establishing sanction systems as an element of a formal ethical system will motivate organizations to create and maintain a 'healthy ethical climate' (Rottig et al., p. 195). This study suggests that similar effects may be achieved through recurrent communication, formal surveillance, and training. In particular, sanctions and training appear to have the strongest relationships with conflict management climate, which may be regarded as an important base for the prevention of bullying and its negative outcomes (Einarsen et al., 2016; Salin, 2013).

Finally, the study explored the degree to which formal and informal ethical systems were related to the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying cases. While few significant individual relationships were identified, the overall model explained 33.7% of the variance in step one (formal ethical systems) and 39.4% in step two (both formal and informal ethical systems), thus illustrating their joint statistical effect. Those organizations, having a relatively strong and varied ethical infrastructure, also tend to

handle the reported cases of workplace bullying to their own satisfaction. The formal ethical systems in general and formal surveillance as well as sanctions in particular were found to be uniquely related to the perceived successful handling of bullying. Furthermore, the element of informal systems, operationalized as conflict management climate, augmented the amount of explained variance explained by the formal ethical systems. Consequently, one may argue that formal and informal systems, separately as well as simultaneously, contribute to the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying. Thus, the findings provide useful stimuli and incentives for organizations to further develop both formal and informal systems addressing workplace bullying. This finding supports Kaptein and Schwartz's (2008) argument that to achieve optimal ethical behaviors, a system should never be implemented as a single measure; instead, it should be complemented with several other related measures to combat unethical behavior.

Only the sanctions within the formal systems variable were significantly and uniquely related to perceived successful handling of workplace bullying when adding both formal and informal elements to the regression. One could argue that sanctions may in themselves be a part of successful handling of bullying, hence creating an endogeneity problem in the data. However, such a finding is still a new and valuable contribution to our understanding of successful handling of workplace bullying. Furthermore, sanctions did not correlate with the other formal elements. This may explain why, in statistical terms, it turned out to be the only independent variable that uniquely contributed to the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying. Although the remaining independent variables correlated with the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying, they did not contribute significantly to this dependent variable. The question about handling bullying assumes that the unethical behavior has already occurred. Therefore, this result may also be a consequence of the characteristics of the ethical infrastructure being twofold. First, ethical infrastructure against workplace bullying has preventive characteristics or characteristics on 'how to proceed' if the organizational members are exposed to, or see other exposed to, workplace bullying. Second, when workplace bullying is already present, the ethical infrastructure takes on disciplinary and signaling properties. This result may indicate the importance of showing, through words and deeds as well as through sanctions, that bullying is not acceptable. Formal sanctions, such as relocating the bully or providing written warnings, may also offer a better solution. Finally, the informal ethical system, conflict management climate, contributed to the explained variance in perceived successful handling of bullying. The results highlight the relevance of the conflict management climate as an element in combating workplace bullying, which is in line with theoretical notions in bullying research (Einarsen et al., 2014).

In general, this study contributes to our understanding of how organizations may combat bullying by applying the theoretical lenses of ethical infrastructure. The results show that the elements of the ethical infrastructure tend to coexist, that there is a relationship between the formal systems and informal system, and finally that the elements of the ethical infrastructure are related to the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying cases. Thus, the study shows that studying only the implementation of formal elements is not sufficient. In fact, the results of the study showed that conflict management climate explained some of the variance in the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying beyond the formal elements. Therefore, the organization also has to address informal systems, such as conflict management climate, when planning measures that contribute to the ethical effectiveness of organization regarding workplace

bullying. The findings of this study support the argument of Tenbrunsel et al. (2003) that 'one must look at the elements of the ethical infrastructure in conjunction with one another, for it is really the interplay among them that is critical' (p. 304). Thus, the concept of ethical infrastructure includes multiple elements that allow for a broad and holistic analysis, as illustrated in this study. Hence, one may argue that the interplay between formal and informal systems constitutes the key issue learned from the business ethics field. The results illustrate that applying relevant insights from two different fields, such as business ethics and workplace bullying, which have so far developed separately, may provide reciprocal learning opportunities.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The study has some limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, this study assumed that HR managers and HSRs in general play an active role in reporting and handling of workplace bullying by the organization. Therefore, the results must be interpreted with caution, as the respondents may not have all information about the formal and informal systems within the organization that contribute to combating workplace bullying. Future studies on the perceptions of the handling of workplace bullying in relation to the ethical infrastructure should include all managers at all levels of the organization, thereby ensuring as much knowledge as possible about the formal and informal systems within the organization. Furthermore, as the respondents were HR managers and HSRs, their responses reflect, to some extent, their own abilities to handle these cases, as doing so is part of their job. If the informants are also the implementers, the choosers, and/or the users of the workplace bullying preventions and/or interventions used, they may be biased toward reporting successful handling of bullying. However, other studies have also used HR managers as respondents (Harrington, 2010). Harrington (2010) discussed the potential problems with the validity of the HR managers' responses. She acknowledged the weaknesses in the willingness of the HR managers to define unethical behavior, such as bullying. Nevertheless, the HR managers and the HSRs in this study admitted that bullying is taking place in their organization and even described the method used to handle this issue. Thus, we would claim that the study has a high level of validity. One should also notice that the Harrington study was conducted in the UK context, while this study was conducted in a Scandinavian context, which is regarded as one of the most conscientious work environments with respect to tolerance of workplace bullying (Van de Vliert et al., 2013).

Despite the above-mentioned weaknesses, the information obtained from this group of respondents may give an indication of how ethical infrastructure relates to the handling of reported workplace bullying in organizations. To gain information on how the organization perceives the handling of such cases by surveying all organizational members would give an even more nuanced picture. This way, the organizational members could be asked to evaluate the organization's ability to handle cases of bullying, and these perceptions could then be compared across the different groups. Thus, future research should include other groups of respondents.

Second, as this is a cross-sectional study, conclusions about causality cannot be drawn. Any reference to such causality in the present study is based only on the theory and formulated in statistical terms. This study is one of the first to investigate the

perceived handling of the workplace bullying by organizations; therefore, it should be viewed as the first attempt to research the organizations' handling of such unethical behavior by applying the theoretical framework of ethical infrastructure. Future studies should employ longitudinal as well as quasi-experimental designs to gain more knowledge about the relationship between the ethical infrastructure and the handling of workplace bullying.

Third, this study is one of the first to address several measures simultaneously, presented as ethical infrastructure, to combat workplace bullying. As a result, some elements of the formal systems were measured using partly self-composed single questions, while other elements were assessed using multiple item scales. Thus, the items and scales used in this study should be elaborated and refined in future studies to enhance their validity over and above their rather clear face. Moreover, as the number of the respondents was relatively low, future research should include a higher number of respondents, which would provide data with greater statistical power.

Finally, this study focused on the ethical infrastructure's relationship with the handling of the reported bullying cases. However, it would be just as important to investigate any relations between ethical infrastructure and prevalence rates of workplace bullying. Ideally, having an ethical infrastructure should reduce the risk of bullying occurring in the first place. Thus, this study calls for research on the relationship between ethical infrastructure and the prevalence of workplace bullying in organizations.

Practical Implications

The findings and conclusions of this study have implications for managers and other organizational practitioners. As the elements of ethical infrastructure are interrelated and in combination explain a high degree of the successful handling of workplace bullying, we have an indication that organizations may build an overall stronger ethical infrastructure against workplace bullying. Furthermore, organizations may benefit from a broader approach when planning a strategy to combat workplace bullying. In previous studies, scholars have argued that for ethical infrastructure to be operative, the elements (e.g., policies, training, recurrent communications, formal surveillance, and sanctions) are more likely to be effective if they are integrated simultaneously (Salin, 2008, 2013; Tenbrunsel et al., 2003), a notion supported by the present study. Therefore, by focusing on workplace bullying as an unacceptable behavior through these elements, managers may be able to reduce the behavior and thus deal better with actual incidents of bullying.

Furthermore, the results in this study showed that the informal elements are associated with the perceived successful handling of workplace bullying, which also highlights the relevance of informal systems, such as conflict management climate. Thus, managers must not underestimate the importance of their position as role models. Instead, they have to be aware of the informal signals they communicate through conversations and attitudes toward conflict resolution and bullying, thereby contributing to the climate of the organization. Additionally, the relation of the formal elements with the conflict management climate may indicate that implementing such elements may strengthen such a climate.

Policies stood out as the element that did not significantly relate to the informal system of conflict management climate in the analyses. However, it should be noted that

this study has only looked at the presence of such policies and not their quality; thus, policies should not be underestimated as important measures against bullying. Moreover, Scandinavian organizations have traditionally been more inclined to handle bullying cases informally and have little experience in developing and implementing such measures (Cicerali & Cicerali, 2015). While the mere existence of policies may have a little effect, they clarify the ideas to be communicated through training, and they provide the organization with needed background to act upon transgressions. The study of the general codes of ethics, such as value-based and compliance-based codes, shows that the content of the codes must be carefully constructed and supported by other means in order for them to be effective (Weaver & Treviño, 1999).

Conclusions

This study explored the perceived success in the handling of workplace bullying in relation to existence of ethical infrastructure in the organization, and is thus unique. Related research on workplace bullying has so far focused on the interventions against and preventions of workplace bullying, and their success has been measured by evaluating the reduction in prevalence rates (Escartin, 2016; Hodgins, 2014). Recommendations have often been based on research findings regarding the antecedents and correlates of workplace bullying (Hodgins et al., 2014; Mikkelsen, 2011; Saam, 2010; Salin, 2009). However, only few studies have addressed the effects of such measures on workplace bullying (Hodgins et al., 2014; Mikkelsen, 2011; Saam, 2010). This study showed that the elements of the formal and informal systems inherent in the ethical infrastructure against workplace bullying are interrelated. Furthermore, the elements of the formal system were related to the element of the informal system (conflict management climate). The study also showed that the existence of such infrastructure is related to the successful handling of workplace bullying cases, as perceived by HR managers and HSRs. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate organizational actions to handle workplace bullying; thus, it sheds light on the relation between the ethical infrastructure appropriate handling of workplace bullying.

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Note

[1] The data of the Norwegian municipality population were retrieved from Statistics Norway (https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/statistikker/folkemengde/aar-per-1-januar/2016-02-19?fane=tabell&sort=nummer&tabell=256001) retrieved September 26, 2016. The numbers used are for the year of 2015.