

Competition and Workplace Bullying. The moderating role of passive avoidant leadership style.

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Introduction

It has been argued that an organizational climate that is characterized by competition and envy increases workplace bullying (Salin, 2003, 2015; Vartia, 1996). Employees may be tempted to gain a relative advantage over their colleagues by bullying (Kohn, 1992; Ng, 2017, Salin, 2003). This should be especially true, when relevant supervisors exhibit passive avoidant leadership styles. That is, when supervisors are physically in post but fail to carry out their duties (Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010). Indeed, research found that “the victims of bullying felt that envy, a weak superior, competition for tasks or advancement, and competition for the supervisor’s favor and approval were the most common reasons for bullying” (Vartia, 1996, p. 203). Therefore, the aim of our study was to test whether competition is a potential risk factor for workplace bullying and whether this association depends on individual differences in supervisors’ passive avoidant leadership style.

Method

Data Collection. Participants were recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an open online marketplace where individuals from all over the world can register as “workers” to complete Human Intelligence Tasks (HITs) for payment or as “requesters” to offer tasks (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

Participants. The effective sample consisted of 1,411 respondents (56.6% females, $n = 798$). Respondent age ranged from 20 to 73 years ($M = 37.3$; $SD = 10.4$). Employees tenure in their organization ranged from less than one year to 51 years ($M = 6.2$; $SD = 6.7$). Most of them had a permanent work contract (87.6%, $n = 1,236$) and no supervisor responsibility (68.0%, $n = 960$). On average respondents worked 39.2 hours per week ($SD = 8.8$).

Measures. *Competition* was assessed with the four-item coworker competition scale from Fletcher and Nusbaum (2010). *Passive avoidant leadership style* was assessed with the five-item scale from Barling and Frone (2016). *Workplace bullying victimization* was assessed with the nine-item Short-Negative Acts Questionnaire (S-NAQ; Notelaers & Einarsen, 2008) and the self-labeling approach. *Workplace bullying perpetration* was measured by the same nine items of the S-NAQ; however, it was slightly adapted to an active formulation on respondent side (e.g., “withholding information”; see Baillien et al., 2011). Moreover perpetration was also assessed with the self-labeling approach.

Results

Competition and passive avoidant leadership were important predictors of workplace bullying victimization (WBV) and perpetration (WBP) as well as self-labeled victimization (SWBV) and perpetration (SWBP). Furthermore, passive avoidant leadership moderated the relationship between competition and WBV as well as SWBV. In case of perpetration, passive avoidant leadership only moderated the relationship between competition and SWBP but not the relationship between competition and WBP. As the S-NAQ has not been validated as an instrument of workplace bullying perpetration, this might be an issue of construct validity.

Table 1. Intercorrelations.

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Competition	3.5	1.5	.91				
(2) Passive avoidant leadership style	3.0	1.5	.23	.90			
(3) WBV	1.7	0.7	.38	.49	.91		
(4) WBP	1.3	0.5	.23	.31	.57	.91	
(5) SWBV	1.3	0.6	.25	.36	.68	.44	
(6) SWBP	1.1	0.5	.21	.24	.46	.53	.63

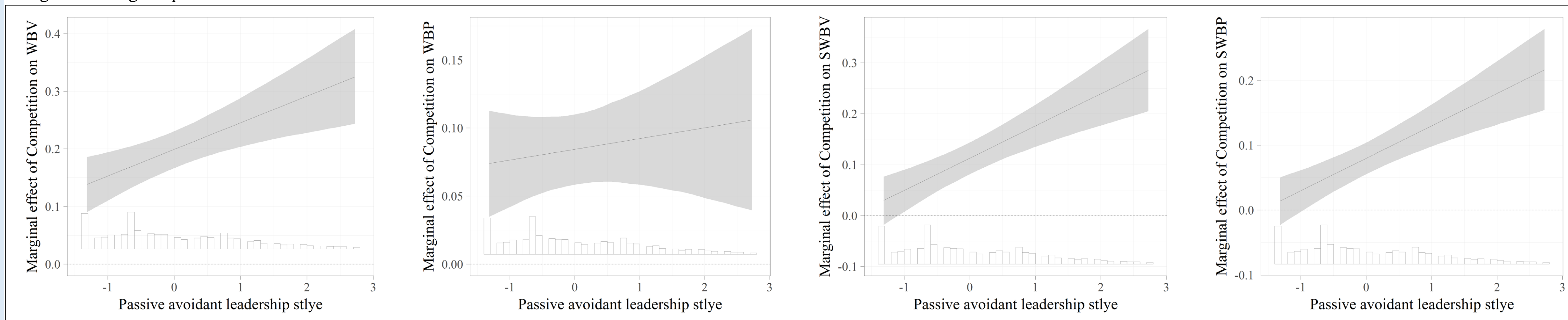
Notes. All corr. significant at $p < .001$; McDonald’s ω in the diagonal.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression model for workplace bullying victimization and perpetration.

	WBV		WBP	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Competition	.20*** [.17; .23]	.20*** [.17; .23]	.08*** [.06; .11]	.08*** [.06; .11]
Passive avoidant leadership style	.30*** [.27; .33]	.30*** [.26; .33]	.14*** [.12; .17]	.14*** [.11; .17]
Competition x Passive avoidant leadership style		.05** [.02; .07]		.01 [-.01; .03]
R^2	.309	.315	.123	.124
ΔR^2	.309***	.006**	.123***	.001
f^2		.007		.000
	SWBV		SWBP	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Competition	.11*** [.08; .14]	.11*** [.08; .14]	.08*** [.05; .10]	.08*** [.06; .10]
Passive avoidant leadership style	.21*** [.17; .24]	.20*** [.16; .23]	.09*** [.07; .12]	.09*** [.06; .11]
Competition x Passive avoidant leadership style		.06*** [.04; .09]		.05*** [.03; .07]
R^2	.159	.171	.081	.096
ΔR^2	.159***	.012***	.081***	.015***
f^2		.015		.016

Notes. Standardized regression coefficients are shown; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; CI95 in parentheses.

Figure 1. Marginal plots.



Discussion

The present study further contributed to this literature and showed that passive avoidant leadership could not only unfold negative effects through increasing role conflict, role ambiguity, conflicts, (Skogstad et al., 2007) and role overload (Barling & Frone, 2016) but also because passive avoidant leaders avoid enforcing rules when competition is in place. As a result, it may be more likely that competition will lead to unfair behavior, promote rivalry, and unethical behavior, with a higher level of workplace bullying victimization and perpetration as a consequence. This study shows that competition needs to be embedded within a leadership style that is especially sensitive to the detection of and taking action against workplace bullying phenomena and points to the necessity that workplace bullying intervention strategies have to consider not only the individual/dyadic but also the group and organization levels (Saam, 2010).

Literature

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