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# Immigrants and natives at work: exposure to workplace bullying

Barbara Bergbom and Maarit Vartia-Vaananen

*Centre of Expertise: Development of Work and Organizations,  
Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Helsinki, Finland, and*

Ulla Kinnunen

*School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Tampere,  
Tampere, Finland*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether immigrants, when in the minority, are more exposed to bullying at work than natives, and whether immigrants' cultural distance from the host culture increases the risk of being bullied.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study was conducted as a cross-sectional survey. The participants were immigrant ( $N = 183$ ) and native ( $N = 186$ ) employees in a transport company in Finland.

**Findings** – Whereas immigrants on average were more likely than natives to label themselves as being bullied, the culturally least distant group of immigrants did not differ in this regard from natives. Compared to natives, the risk of being bullied was nearly three times higher in the intermediate distance group of immigrants and nearly eight times higher in the culturally most distant group. The primary type of negative act immigrants were subjected to was social exclusion.

**Research limitations/implications** – It would be advisable for future research investigating immigrants' exposure to bullying to use quasi-objective measures along with a self-labelling measure, and to apply qualitative methods.

**Practical implications** – The heightened risk of culturally distant immigrants to being exposed to bullying might be reduced by improving employees' cross-cultural communication skills and by promoting an atmosphere of acceptance of cultural diversity.

**Originality/value** – The study is an addition to the still scarce literature on immigrants' exposure to workplace bullying, and takes into particular account immigrants' cultural distance from their host culture.

**Keywords** Cultural distance, Immigrants, Cultural diversity, Migrant workers, Harassment, Workplace bullying

**Paper type** Research paper

Workplace bullying is a serious social problem that may have highly detrimental effects on the targets' well-being and health (see Hogh *et al.*, 2011a; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012, for reviews). Bullying may be defined as repeated, regular, aggressive and negative treatment directed at an employee (or several employees) by one or several co-workers and/or superiors in a situation where the target finds it difficult to defend him/herself (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011). The negative treatment can take different forms – such as social exclusion, humiliation and verbal abuse – the common denominator being that the treatment is experienced as unpleasant, offensive and humiliating by the target (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011).

Workplace bullying is viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon, which can have multiple and often simultaneous causes (Branch *et al.*, 2013; Salin, 2003; Zapf, 1999).

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It has, however, been proposed that minority groups that differ from the majority may be especially socially exposed and more likely to become targets of bullying (Lindroth and Leymann, 1993; Schuster, 1996). It has been reported that the victims of bullying themselves perceive their dissimilarity to others as one (Vartia, 1996) or the main (Strandmark and Hallberg, 2007) cause of bullying. The first aim of this study was to examine whether immigrants that constitute a minority in a workplace are at greater risk of exposure to bullying than natives. Our second aim was to investigate whether immigrants' cultural distance (i.e. dissimilarity) from natives increases the risk of becoming bullied.

### **Dissimilarity from the majority as a risk factor for immigrants' exposure to bullying: theoretical approaches and empirical results**

According to the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), people build their social identity by classifying themselves and others into social categories that are salient in a certain social context, such as those of gender and ethnicity. Individuals generally perceive their own group (the in-group) in a more favourable light, and those who are dissimilar and categorized into an out-group more negatively. Immigrant status is likely, due to several reasons – such as for instance different appearance and a foreign accent – to be an especially salient characteristic to use as a basis for categorization into an out-group. Immigrants could thus more easily become targets of bullying, as they may “provoke” more negative attitudes in the majority group to begin with.

The social interactionist approach (Felson, 1992; Felson and Tedeschi, 1993) offers yet another perspective to why dissimilarity to others may increase the likelihood of bullying. According to this approach, aggression may be interpreted as instrumental behaviour. Violations of rules and norms are likely to provoke aggressive interactions as a means of socially controlling and inhibiting deviant behaviour. As social behaviour is guided by internalized objective and subjective elements of culture (Triandis, 1994), immigrants are likely to deviate and break the culturally based rules of natives, and thus be subjected to punishment, i.e. aggression by natives. Cultural distance, i.e. cultural dissimilarity, between interacting individuals is also likely to hamper smooth interaction and increase the probability of misunderstandings and conflicts (Triandis, 1994, 2000; Triandis *et al.*, 1994). Accordingly, the larger the cultural distance, the more likely it is that conflicts and problems will arise. Thus, conflicts based on communication problems and misunderstandings are more likely to arise between natives and immigrants and between immigrants originating from different cultures. These conflicts in turn, if repeated, may escalate into bullying.

So far only a few studies have compared immigrants' or ethnic minority members' exposure to workplace bullying with that of natives or ethnic majority members. In this context, it is worth noting that the terms “immigrant” and “ethnic minority member” are conceptually different, even if the literature sometimes uses them interchangeably, without providing any definitions. In this study, by immigrants we mean all those who are foreign born and of foreign descent. Ethnic minority members may be – but are not necessarily – immigrants or descendants of people with immigrant backgrounds. While immigrants, as well as well-established ethnic minorities within a country, differ from the majority as regards cultural heritage, immigrants' situations differ in many respects from those of non-immigrants. Well-established ethnic minority groups in a country may be more or less knowledgeable of the culture and language of the majority, while immigrants usually face a completely new situation as regards culture

and language. Moreover, established ethnic minorities may be regarded as part of the social texture of a society, while immigrants are newcomers, and as such are more likely to be regarded as outsiders.

In a study conducted in the nursing industry in Denmark (Hogh *et al.*, 2011b), non-western immigrants – but not western immigrants – were significantly more often bullied at work than natives. They were significantly more often bullied by co-workers, but not by superiors. In a Finnish study by Aalto *et al.* (2013), immigrant nurses reported being bullied by co-workers – but not by supervisors – more often than natives did. One study conducted in the UK found that ethnic minority members labelled themselves as being bullied at work more often by both colleagues and line managers than the (white) majority members (Lewis and Gunn, 2007). Fox and Stallworth (2005) compared three ethnic/racial (Asian, African-American and Hispanic/Latino) minority groups' exposure to general and racial bullying with that of whites. While the only group difference as regards general bullying was that Hispanic/Latino minority members were more often bullied than whites, all ethnic/minority groups more often reported being targets of racial/ethnic bullying (i.e. bullying referring specifically to race or ethnicity) than whites.

These prior studies thus indicate that while immigrants and ethnic minority groups may be more exposed to bullying at work, there may be group differences: some of the groups are at a higher risk of exposure to bullying while others are not. Furthermore, the bullying of immigrants and/or ethnic minorities may occur through different types of behaviours than those directed towards the majority group. However, none of these previously mentioned studies were conducted in companies in which both immigrants and natives (or ethnic minority and majority members) worked in similar jobs. Therefore, such work-related factors as high workload and low job autonomy (Baillien *et al.*, 2011) or lack of constructive leadership (Hauge *et al.*, 2011), which have been shown to increase bullying behaviours at work, were not controlled for. If organizations with poorer working conditions recruit more immigrants (or ethnic minority members) because they have difficulties in attaining native (or majority group) employees, immigrants' and ethnic minority members' higher exposure to bullying could in fact be more a reflection of working conditions rather than immigrant or ethnic minority status per se. Thus in order to rule out these possible alternative explanations, it is important to compare the exposure of immigrants and natives working in the same workplaces, in the same jobs.

### **The present study**

Immigration into Finland has increased considerably in the last 20 years. However, even though the number of immigrants has multiplied during this time period, the proportion of people of foreign origin in the population (5.3 per cent in 2013, Statistics Finland, 2014) remains one of the lowest in Europe. This study was conducted in an urban bus transportation company in the Helsinki capital region, in which about 30 per cent of bus drivers and somewhat < 10 per cent of mechanics were first generation immigrants (i.e. foreign born and of foreign descent). Although the number of immigrants in Finland is still small, they already make up a substantial portion of the employees in some sectors, such as bus transportation. Bus driving tends to be an occupation into which employees are recruited from a wide variety of ethnicities also in other countries (Evans and Johansson, 1998). From this perspective, a bus driving company seems particularly suitable for examining immigrants' and natives' social relationships at work.

Bus driving is, however, a socially isolating job, with limited opportunities for interaction with co-workers and superiors (Evans and Johansson, 1998; Tse *et al.*, 2006). Despite this, as Glasø *et al.* (2011) point out, bus drivers are interdependent with respect to connections and the swapping of vehicles. In addition, depending on how the break areas are planned, bus drivers may also spend time together during breaks at depots and common rest stops, as was the case in the company in which our study was conducted. Hence, bus drivers do interact with each other and bullying may occur, even if it could be assumed that the socially isolated nature of bus driving would diminish the probability of this. In fact Glasø *et al.* (2011) found in their study conducted among bus drivers in a large public transportation company in Norway, that as many as 11.6 per cent labelled themselves as victims of bullying. This prevalence rate is high in comparison to that of a representative study of the Norwegian workforce (Nielsen *et al.*, 2009), which yielded a prevalence rate of 4.6 per cent using the same measure. The study by Glasø and colleagues thus highlights that although bus drivers mainly work alone, bullying at work does occur, and bus driving may even be a high-risk job with regards to exposure to bullying.

Based on the theoretical approaches and empirical studies presented above, we formed the two following hypotheses. When immigrants are in the minority at work:

- H1. Immigrants are more often bullied than natives.
- H2. Culturally more distant immigrants are bullied more often than culturally closer immigrants.

In addition, we examined by whom immigrants are bullied and through what negative acts. We pose no hypotheses to these questions, as they are descriptive by nature.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

Data were collected through questionnaires in a large bus company. Those working in administrative (or with supervisory) tasks were excluded from the study, as there were no immigrants among them. All the employees participating in the study worked as either bus drivers (93 per cent) or mechanics (7 per cent). The research project was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. Questionnaires and pre-paid return envelopes were mailed to the home addresses of every other randomly chosen Finnish-born employee ( $n = 409$ ) and all employees of immigrant background ( $n = 426$ ) (for a more detailed description of procedures, see Bergbom and Kinnunen, 2014). A total of 189 natives and 185 immigrants returned the questionnaire, constituting a response rate of 45 per cent (natives 46 per cent; immigrants 43 per cent). Five of the questionnaires were incompletely filled and therefore excluded from the analyses. Thus the remaining actual subject group of this research consisted of 186 natives and 183 immigrants.

The majority of the respondents were male (90 per cent), their average age was 45.1 years ( $SD = 9.1$ , range 24-63) and they had worked in the company for an average of 7.7 years ( $SD = 8.0$ , range 0.1-35). Almost all (97 per cent) of the respondents had a permanent employment contract and two out of three (67 per cent) reported that their current work corresponded with their education at least rather well. The immigrant employees differed from their native colleagues in that they were somewhat younger

( $t(347) = 2.84, p < 0.01$ ) and had worked in the company for a shorter time ( $t(219,576) = 10.97, p < 0.001$ ). There were also fewer women among the immigrants than among the native employees (6 per cent vs 15 per cent,  $\chi^2(1) = 8.38, p < 0.01$ ).

*Attrition analysis.* An attrition analysis showed that respondents differed from non-respondents with regard to age and sex. The respondents were older (on average 2.6 years,  $p < 0.001$ ) than the non-respondents, and women responded more often than men (61 vs 39 per cent,  $p < 0.01$ ). Respondents and non-respondents did not differ with regard to type of employment contract (permanent/temporary), length of employment or immigrant status (i.e. native vs immigrant).

### *Measures*

Two questionnaires, one for immigrants and one for natives, were created in Finnish. They included identical items, but the questionnaire for immigrants also had immigration-specific items. The Finnish questionnaire was translated by bilingual translators into the three most spoken languages among Finnish immigrants, namely Russian, Estonian and Somali, and also into English. The procedures for ensuring the cultural validity and equivalence of the questionnaire items, and for ensuring that the questions would be understood by our prospective respondents, are described in more detail in a study by Bergbom and Kinnunen (2014). Immigrants received the questionnaire in at least Finnish and English, and, depending on the assumed ethnicity, in other languages.

Exposure to bullying was measured with one item, preceded by the following definition of bullying: "Bullying and harassment at the workplace is repeated, persistent and continuous negative behaviour. It may be subjugation or insulting treatment. The bully may be a co-worker, supervisor or subordinate". The definition was followed by the question: "Do you feel that you are subjected to this kind of bullying at the workplace?" (1 = no; 2 = yes). This self-labelling method to measure exposure to bullying with a single item and a definition has been considered to have good face validity, and construct validity (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010, 2011).

The perpetrator's work role and immigrant vs native status was elicited by one further question, worded: "Who subjects you to this kind of bullying?" (response alternatives: 0 = I am not a target of bullying; 1 = one or more Finnish co-workers; 2 = one or more immigrant co-workers; 3 = immediate supervisor or foreman; 4 = other supervisor; 5 = subordinate). The response alternatives concerning the perpetrator were not mutually exclusive, i.e. it was possible to tick more than one alternative.

Exposure to negative acts, i.e. specific bullying behaviours, was assessed by one question in checklist form: "How often have you experienced the following situations at work?" The question was followed by a list of seven negative acts (e.g. "Rumours and gossip being spread about you"). (All the items of negative acts are depicted in Table IV.) The response alternatives were 1 = never; 2 = sometimes; and 3 = often. In analyses, response alternatives 2 and 3 were collapsed together. Because of space limitations in the questionnaire, it was not possible to include complete master lists of negative acts of existing measures (e.g. NAQ-R; Einarsen *et al.*, 2009; LIPT; Leymann, 1990). The seven items were chosen so that unnecessary duplication would be avoided.

Immigrants were asked to indicate their country of origin. The immigrants came from 32 different countries (all except for one individual indicated country of origin); 71 per cent originated from Europe and 29 per cent from outside Europe. Immigrants'

cultural distance from the host country culture was determined by country of origin and the native language(s) of that country (see Triandis *et al.*, 1994, for measurement of cultural distance). Immigrants were grouped into three groups based on their cultural distance from the Finnish culture and language.

Estonian-speaking Estonians and one immigrant from Sweden were grouped together into the culturally closest group ( $N = 69$ ) to Finland. Estonia and Sweden are neighbouring countries to Finland and share many cultural similarities to it. In addition, Estonian and Finnish are cognate languages, belonging to the Finno-Ugric language group and are very different from the Indo-European languages that are spoken in most other European countries. Estonian-speaking Estonians (as opposed to Russian-speaking Estonians) were considered culturally the closest to the host culture, in addition to those coming from Sweden (the only Scandinavian country immigrants came from). Sweden and Finland have historical bonds and have had extensive cultural exchange over the centuries.

Sub-Saharan Africa was considered culturally the most distant region from Finland, and those from this region were grouped together with those from North Africa or other countries outside Europe (who were mainly from the Middle East) into the culturally most distant group ( $N = 53$ ). The majority of the respondents in this group were immigrants originating from Sub-Saharan Africa (43 per cent, the largest single group being Somalis) and from North Africa (23 per cent).

The rest of the immigrants, who came from Europe, were grouped into the intermediate group ( $N = 60$ ) as regards cultural distance from Finland. As the Russian-speaking Estonians resemble Russians more than Estonian-speaking Estonians in cultural terms (Aasland and Fløtten, 2001; van Ham and Tammaru, 2011), it was considered appropriate to group Russian-speaking Estonians ( $n = 7$ ) into this intermediate group, which for the most part consisted of Russians and those from the Former Yugoslavia.

*Background factors and control variables.* Of the demographic and other background variables we took sex (1 = male, 2 = female) (see, e.g. Eriksen and Einarsen, 2004), age (in years) (see Samnani and Singh, 2012), type of employment contract (1 = permanent, 2 = temporary) and length of employment (in years and months) into account in our analyses for their potential confounding effects. Over-qualification, that is, working in occupations below one's educational level or acquired skills, is common among immigrants (Chen *et al.*, 2010), and could be a source of deviance from other co-workers. We therefore measured education-related over-qualification or mismatch in order to control for its effects on exposure to bullying. The correspondence of job with education was measured using one item (1 = very well; 5 = not at all).

*Immigration-related potential confounders.* As immigrants acculturate to varying degrees over time (Berry, 1997), which may influence actual/present cultural distance, length of residence in Finland (in years) was measured. There is no prior empirical research on whether immigrants' host national language proficiency is related to their experiences of exposure to workplace bullying. However, we reasoned that immigrants' Finnish proficiency could increase misunderstandings and conflicts with natives – which in turn could be related to bullying. Immigrant respondents rated their Finnish proficiency with regard to ability to speak, understand speech, read and write Finnish on a scale ranging from 1 (= very poorly) to 5 (= very well) (e.g. "How well do you think you can understand spoken Finnish?"). The internal consistence (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of the four-item scale was 0.85 in the whole immigrant sample and ranged between 0.74 and 0.89 in the three immigrant groups.

*Statistical analyses*

Logistic (binomial) regression analysis (LRA) was used as the primary method of analysis. *H1-H2* were tested with LRA (with and without controls; see Spector and Brannick, 2011). Control variables were categorized into two to four classes while trying to ensure that the number of respondents in each class would be sufficient. The association between categorized potential control variables and exposure to bullying was tested with cross-tabulation and  $\chi^2$ -tests and finally only those control variables that were related to exposure to bullying were chosen as controls when testing the hypotheses. The further research questions were explored descriptively with frequency distributions as well as LRA.

**Results***Exposure to bullying: descriptive results*

Out of 359 respondents, 52 indicated (14.5 per cent) that they were bullied at work (ten individuals did not answer the question). Of the seven different negative acts asked about, the most commonly experienced was the spreading of rumours and gossip: 25.4 per cent of the respondents reported having experienced this either sometimes or often. The least often reported negative form of behaviour was insulting and offensive remarks, which 11.9 per cent of respondents reported to have experienced at least sometimes. The perpetrators of bullying were most often reported to be a co-worker or several co-workers (41 per cent), a supervisor (39 per cent) or from more than one of the categories of employees offered as options (17 per cent). Even though none of the respondents were formally supervisors, two of the bullied persons (3 per cent) reported that the perpetrator was a subordinate. When indicating that the perpetrator was one or several co-workers, both natives and immigrants reported that the perpetrators were natives (83; 83 per cent) more often than immigrants (17; 17 per cent). It may be noted that when responding to the question about the perpetrator, a somewhat higher share of respondents indicated they were bullied than when they were asked about bullying using the self-labelling measure (17.3 per cent (59 out of 341) vs 14.5 per cent).

Of the potential control variables, only (shorter) length of employment and (poor) correspondence of work with education were significantly associated with exposure to bullying (Table I), and thus chosen as covariates when testing *H1*. Of the two immigration-related background variables, Finnish proficiency was associated with exposure to bullying, and taken as an additional covariate when testing *H2*.

*Testing H1 and H2: risk of being bullied among natives and immigrants*

When comparing immigrants on average with natives, immigrants' risk of exposure to bullying at work was three times higher (OR = 3.10, 95 per cent CI = 1.38-6.95,  $p < 0.01$ ), also after adjustment for length of employment and correspondence of work with education (Table II). Thus, *H1* seemed to receive support when immigrants were treated as one group. However, when immigrants were broken down by their cultural distance from the host culture into three groups, the risk of being bullied in the culturally closest group of immigrants did not differ from that of natives (Table II). The risk of exposure to bullying was nearly three times higher among immigrants in the intermediate group (OR = 2.81, 95 per cent CI = 1.06-7.47,  $p < 0.05$ ) and nearly eight times higher among immigrants in the most distant group (OR = 7.77, 95 per cent CI = 2.88-20.90,  $p < 0.001$ ) than that of natives, when adjusted for the two control



Background variable	Not bullied ( <i>n</i> = 307) <i>n</i> (%)	Bullied ( <i>n</i> = 52) <i>n</i> (%)	$\chi^2$	Immigrants and natives at work
<i>Sex</i>			0.09 <sup>ns</sup>	
Female	31 (83.8)	6 (16.2)		
Male	274 (85.6)	46 (14.4)		
<i>Age (in years)</i>			6.22 <sup>ns</sup>	<b>165</b>
24-36	45 (77.6)	13 (22.4)		
37-46	106 (86.2)	17 (13.8)		
47-54	89 (90.8)	9 (9.2)		
55-63	54 (90.0)	6 (10.0)		
<i>Employment contract</i>			0.13 <sup>ns</sup>	
Permanent	295 (85.8)	49 (14.2)		
Temporary	9 (81.8)	2 (18.2)		
<i>Length of employment</i>			7.98*	
– 2 years	59 (85.2)	10 (14.5)		
2 < years ≤ 5	104 (80.0)	26 (20.0)		
5 < years ≤ 10	61 (88.4)	8 (11.6)		
10 < years	82 (93.2)	6 (6.8)		
<i>Correspondence of work with education</i>			11.75**	
Good	215 (89.6)	25 (10.4)		
Neither good nor poor	47 (82.5)	10 (17.5)		
Poor	42 (72.4)	16 (27.6)		
<i>Immigrants' Finnish proficiency<sup>a</sup></i>			8.70*	
Rather poor	24 (77.4)	7 (22.6)		
Neither poor nor good	73 (85.9)	12 (14.1)		
Good	32 (64.0)	18 (36.0)		
<i>Immigrants' length of residence in Finland</i>			4.89 <sup>ns</sup>	
1-5 years	51 (86.4)	8 (13.6)		
6-10 years	42 (79.2)	11 (20.8)		
11 years	36 (69.2)	16 (30.8)		

**Notes:** ns, non significant. <sup>a</sup>Categorization based on the mean of the composite score of Finnish proficiency (possible scores ranging from 1 = very poorly to 5 = very well) as follows: rather poor = below 3.00; neither poor nor good = 3.00-3.75; good = above 3.75; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01

**Table I.**  
Relationship between  
background  
variables and  
exposure to  
bullying at work

variables. Thus, *H2*, stating that culturally more distant immigrants are bullied more often than culturally closer immigrants, seemed to receive support.

*H2* was, however, tested further among immigrants by adjusting for Finnish proficiency in addition to the two previous controls (length of employment and correspondence of work and education). Immigrants in the most distant group were at a four times higher risk of exposure to bullying (OR = 4.22, 95 per cent CI = 1.31-13.63, *p* < 0.05) in comparison to immigrants in the culturally closest (reference) group, but the risk of exposure to bullying did not significantly differ in the intermediate group (OR = 1.97, 95 per cent CI = 0.63-6.20, *p* = 0.25) from that of the closest group. Thus, these results were in line with *H2*, as the most distant group was bullied more often than the culturally closest immigrants.

#### *Perpetrators of bullying and subjection to different forms of negative acts*

Immigrants were significantly more likely to be bullied by native co-workers than were natives (OR = 3.46, 95 per cent CI = 1.23-9.76, *p* < 0.05) (Table III). Immigrants were also more likely than natives to report that they were bullied by people from more than

**Table II.**  
Prevalence of  
bullying at work  
among immigrants  
and natives

Variables	N	n	Prevalence of bullying %	Model 1 <sup>a</sup> OR	95% CI	Model 2 <sup>b</sup> OR	95% CI
<i>Immigrant status</i>							
Natives (reference)	185	14	7.6	1	Reference	1	Reference
Immigrants	174	38	21.8	3.43***	(1.77, 6.56)	3.10**	(1.38, 6.95)
<i>Natives vs immigrants of different cultural distances</i>							
Natives (reference)	185	14	7.6	1	Reference	1	Reference
Culturally closest immigrant group	69	6	8.7	1.16 <sup>ns</sup>	(0.43, 3.16)	1.26 <sup>ns</sup>	(0.41, 3.84)
Culturally distant intermediate group	56	12	21.4	3.33***	(1.44, 7.71)	2.81*	(1.06, 7.47)
Culturally most distant immigrant group	48	19	39.6	8.00***	(3.62, 17.72)	7.77***	(2.88, 20.90)

**Notes:** OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval; ns, non significant. <sup>a</sup>Unadjusted model; <sup>b</sup>adjusted for length of employment and correspondence of work with education. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Perpetrators	<i>n</i>	Prevalence of bullying %	OR	95% CI
<i>Bullying by native co-workers</i>				
Natives (reference)	5	2.8	1	Reference
Immigrants	15	9.1	3.46*	(1.23, 9.76)
<i>Bullying by immigrant co-workers</i>				
Natives (reference)	1	0.6	1	Reference
Immigrants	3	1.8	3.28 <sup>ns</sup>	(0.34, 31.85)
<i>Bullying by supervisors<sup>a</sup></i>				
Natives (reference)	9	5.1	1	Reference
Immigrants	14	8.5	1.74 <sup>ns</sup>	(0.73, 4.14)
<i>Bullying by perpetrators belonging to several categories of employee<sup>b</sup></i>				
Natives (reference)	1	0.6	1	Reference
Immigrant	9	5.5	10.22*	(1.28, 81.57)

**Table III.**Prevalence of bullying by different perpetrators among natives ( $n = 177$ ) and immigrants ( $n = 164$ )

one of the categories of perpetrators offered as options (OR = 10.22, 95 per cent CI = 1.28-81.57,  $p < 0.05$ ). The risk of being bullied “solely” by supervisors or immigrant co-workers did not significantly differ between immigrants and natives (Table III).

When comparing natives’ and immigrants’ risk of being subjected to different forms of negative acts (Table IV), the only difference found was with regard to social exclusion: The risk of social exclusion was twice as high among immigrants than among natives (OR = 2.26, 95 per cent CI = 1.32-3.87,  $p < 0.01$ ).

## Discussion

Our first hypothesis, based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), received support when immigrants were treated as one group, that is, immigrants were more likely to label themselves as targets of bullying than natives. The second hypothesis, which assumed that among immigrants, the culturally most distant immigrant group is at the highest, and the culturally least distant group at the lowest risk of exposure to bullying, also gained support. However, the culturally least distant immigrant group did not differ from natives as regards exposure to bullying. This may imply that natives categorized only those immigrants perceived as differing the most from natives into an out-group, the members of which were treated more negatively than others. The least distant immigrant group consisted nearly exclusively of Estonian-speaking Estonians, who in turn were the most numerous among immigrants. This may suggest that a larger relative size of minority group acts as a protective factor against bullying, while members of smaller minority groups are singled out and are at greater risk of bullying. Even if the relative size of a minority group were an important factor affecting the risk of the minority members’ exposure to bullying, the results pertaining to *H2* would still seem to indicate that cultural distance increases the risk of bullying in line with the cultural distance hypothesis (Triandis, 1994, 2000). As previously stated, this may indicate that when the majority members socially categorize themselves and immigrants into in- and out-groups, immigrants that

**Table IV.**  
Prevalence of  
encountering  
different forms of  
negative acts

Forms of negative acts	N	n	Sometimes or often %	OR	95% CI
<i>Rumours and gossip being spread about you</i>					
Natives (reference)	177	52	29.4	1	Reference (0.40, 1.06)
Immigrants	174	37	21.3	0.65	
<i>You are not talked to, not listened to or are ignored</i>					
Natives (reference)	175	25	14.3	1	Reference (1.32, 3.87)
Immigrants	172	47	27.3	2.26**	
<i>You are repeatedly reminded or your errors and mistakes</i>					
Natives (reference)	172	37	21.5	1	Reference (0.64, 1.77)
Immigrants	173	39	22.5	1.06 <sup>ns</sup>	
<i>Your work and its results are continuously criticized</i>					
Natives (reference)	171	19	11.1	1	Reference (0.83, 2.91)
Immigrants	172	28	16.3	1.56 <sup>ns</sup>	
<i>Insulting or offensive remarks are made about you (e.g. habits and background) or your private life</i>					
Natives (reference)	173	17	9.8	1	Reference (0.77, 2.90)
Immigrants	171	24	14.0	1.50 <sup>ns</sup>	
<i>You are subjected to false allegations</i>					
Natives (reference)	173	27	15.6	1	Reference (0.54, 1.75)
Immigrants	170	26	15.3	0.98 <sup>ns</sup>	
<i>You are given unreasonable or impossible tasks</i>					
Natives (reference)	168	28	16.7	1	Reference (0.50, 1.61)
Immigrants	165	25	15.2	0.89 <sup>ns</sup>	

**Notes:** OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval; ns, non significant. \*\* $p < 0.01$

deviate the most from the majority are categorized into an out-group that provokes the most negative attitudes.

We believe that the results suggest that cultural clashes due to cultural differences are at least partial factors in bullying processes. A Danish study (Hogh *et al.*, 2011b) found that whereas non-western immigrants were more exposed to bullying than natives, western immigrants were not. Hogh and her associates did not use cultural distance from Denmark as the basis for the categorization of immigrants. It seems, however, that on average, those categorized as non-westerners in their study may be regarded as culturally more distant from the Danish host culture, than those who were categorized as westerners. We thus interpret the findings of the study by Hogh and colleagues to be in line with our own.

As cultural distance between interacting persons increases the likelihood of communication problems and misunderstandings (Triandis 1994, 2000), it may be that the more culturally distant that immigrants are from natives, the more conflicts may arise between immigrants and natives, which over time may escalate into bullying. Furthermore, the more culturally distant that immigrants are from natives, the more they are also likely to violate the culturally based norms of natives. Thus it could also be that attacks against and the bullying of immigrants considered to behave “inappropriately” may be used as a means to force immigrants to assimilate into the dominant culture of the majority group. It must, however, be noted that the immigrants in the culturally most distant group originated mainly from Africa, particularly from Sub-Saharan Africa, and their skin colour was the darkest. Thus an alternative, or an additional, explanation to the heightened risk of becoming bullied could be related to physical appearance. That is, the bullying could actually be an expression of racial discrimination.

Immigrants were at a higher risk than natives of becoming bullied by native co-workers. This result is in line with two Nordic studies on immigrant nurses (Aalto *et al.*, 2013; Hogh *et al.*, 2011b), albeit that these studies did not differentiate between the perpetrators’ native vs immigrant status. Immigrants were also much more likely to be bullied by several parties, that is, by both co-workers and superiors. In a previous study on bullying among bus drivers, conducted in Norway (Glasø *et al.*, 2011), co-workers were clearly the most frequently perceived perpetrators of bullying, even if superiors were also perceived as bullies. As already noted, the prevalence of bullying among bus drivers in the study by Glasø and associates was high in comparison to a representative study on workplace bullying (Nielsen *et al.*, 2009) in Norway. Unfortunately, Glasø and associates did not report whether there were immigrants among their respondents. This high prevalence of bullying may be a reflection of the nature of the job or of the working conditions in this sector. However, if it is the case that immigrants are subjected to bullying more often than native employees, the high prevalence could also be a reflection of the fact that, in many countries, immigrants comprise a large proportion of bus drivers.

Glasø *et al.* (2011) point out that as bus drivers mainly work alone, a general feeling of isolation could make them more vulnerable when attacked by others. There may be moments in the job that are especially frustrating and conflict provoking. Failure to adhere to schedule when swapping vehicles has been pointed out as one such moment (Tse *et al.*, 2006). We propose that these critical situations may be affected by values and cultural differences; for example, the degree to which a bus driver prioritizes adhering to schedules or providing good customer service (e.g. waiting for clients who are late). Thus, some situations in the job which highlight the culturally more distant

immigrants' and natives' different values may cause conflicts that escalate into bullying (see Fevre *et al.*, 2012, for the role of values in ill-treatment). The bus company we studied was a public company that had undergone major organizational changes a few years earlier. Despite being a public company, it had to compete with private bus companies in a fiercely competitive market situation. This competition is likely to be reflected in increasingly difficult working conditions. As organizational changes have been shown to be related to an increase in ill-treatment (Fevre *et al.*, 2012), this may also be one cause for the relatively high bullying rates in the company we studied, even if all employees were not at equal risk.

Our study demonstrated that immigrants were on average twice more likely to be socially excluded than natives. Immigrants were, however, not subjected to the other types of negative acts more than natives. As immigrants were on average more than three times more likely to label themselves as bullied, the results taken together indicate that immigrants, when bullied, are subjected to social exclusion in particular, and probably also to other types of negative behaviours that were not measured in our study. Fox and Stallworth (2005) found in their study that ethnic minorities suffered racial/ethnic forms of bullying (i.e. bullying referring specifically to race or ethnicity) in particular. It could thus be that immigrants labelling themselves as bullied were particularly subjected to racial/ethnic bullying not covered by our items of negative acts.

### **Strengths and limitations**

The study has limitations, two of which merit special discussion. First, because of the relatively low response rate, it is possible that respondents have been systematically selected in ways that affect the representativeness of the sample, and thus the generalizability of the results. The response rate is, however, within the average range of voluntary studies conducted in organizations (see Baruch and Holtom, 2008), and as such not exceptionally low. Moreover, immigrants and natives did not differ as regards response rate.

Second, our measure of exposure to bullying does not come without limitations. Self-labelling measures are widely used, and, especially when presented with a definition of bullying, are regarded as valid measures of bullying (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010, 2011). There might, however, be cultural differences as regards the threshold to labelling oneself as a victim/target of bullying and/or as regards what is considered as acceptable interpersonal behaviour. Experiences related to immigration may also affect the threshold. Thus, in future research on culturally diverse populations, it would be advisable to use quasi-objective measures for exposure to bullying (e.g. exposure to specific bullying behaviours using predefined cut-off points) along with a self-labelling measure. The co-use of these two different type of measures has also been recommended as a best practice approach by Nielsen *et al.* (2010). Moreover, even though we have credence in the validity of our self-labelling measure of exposure to bullying, we consider that it would have been better to employ a more widely used self-labelling measure, such as the question in the QPS-Nordic instrument (Dallner *et al.*, 2000). This would have rendered our results more directly comparable with other studies. Another limitation related to our measurement of bullying pertains to the need to understand the kind of behaviours the respondents had experienced that led them to label themselves as being bullied. Ethnic minority and white majority members seem to be bullied through different tactics, particularly when the perpetrators are supervisors, but also when bullied by co-workers (Lewis and Gunn, 2007). Moreover, as

previously noted, it may be that immigrants were particularly exposed to ethnic/racial bullying. Thus, qualitative insights from interviews of participants on their experiences of bullying and ill-treatment would have strengthened the study. Qualitative insights could also have shed some light on why cultural distance was related to exposure to bullying. That is, to what degree the cause lay in cultural clashes or racial discrimination.

One of the major strengths of our study is that it is an addition to the still scarce literature on immigrants' (and ethnic minorities') exposure to workplace bullying. In addition, it is among the first studies to introduce the concept of cultural distance into the bullying literature. A second strength is that the respondents worked in the same workplace and the majority of them in the same job (93 per cent as bus drivers), which reduces the confounding effects of job tasks as well as those of work environment conditions (e.g. quality of leadership). An additional advantage with this company-specific approach is that we know for sure that immigrants were in the minority at the workplace, as well as the exact proportion of immigrants of all employees.

### **Practical applications and future research**

Our study clearly indicates that immigrants, when in the minority and particularly when culturally distant from natives, may be at an increased risk of exposure to workplace bullying. A practical implication of this is that workplaces with native and immigrant employees should take measures in order to prevent bullying. Training aimed to improve employees' cross-cultural communication skills and constructive conflict solving could decrease misunderstandings and conflicts stemming from cultural differences and prevent conflicts escalating into bullying. Investing in creating an accepting atmosphere of cultural diversity may reduce aggressive attempts on the part of the majority to coerce culturally deviating persons to conform to the norms of the majority group. This is not to say that organizations do not need ground rules for accepted behaviour in order to function effectively. Culturally diverse organizations might benefit from conscious reflection on the boundaries between accepted and unaccepted ways of conduct. This should, however, be done in ways that do not unnecessarily highlight perceptions of interpersonal dissimilarity, as a strengthening of dissimilarity perceptions may lead to stronger "them" and "us" categorizations. Focusing on common goals, such as work goals, may lead to the de-categorization of co-workers into in- and out-groups. It is possible that interpersonal dissimilarity is a factor that alone leads to a heightened risk of exposure to bullying. Bullying is, however, often multi-causal and dependent on factors that enable it to take place (Salin, 2003). Thus, promoting zero tolerance of bullying, constructive leadership and decent working conditions is also important in the prevention of bullying (e.g. Baillien *et al.*, 2011; Devonish, 2013; Hauge *et al.*, 2011).

It would be important for future research to shed more light on the mechanisms which place immigrants in the minority at a heightened risk of being bullied. If those in the minority have a higher status and more power than those in the majority, their minority status is unlikely to be accompanied by a heightened risk of exposure to bullying. However, when those in the minority have equal (or less) power and social status, minority status is likely to lead to an increased risk of victimization. The relative size of a minority group – and the relative sizes of different minority groups, such as culturally different immigrant groups – may also be decisive in the group dynamics that influence bullying. Thus, research is also needed on what kind of role minorities' size(s), relative to the majority's size, plays in the bullying processes. It would be

especially valuable to gain knowledge on how to create a socially inclusive organizational culture, in which both immigrants and natives could thrive. Lastly, although workplace bullying, by definition, may be considered as only occurring between members of an organization, employees serving customers may also be exposed to different kinds of harassment and ill-treatment by their customers (see Bishop and Hoel, 2008; Fevre *et al.*, 2012; Yagil, 2008). Especially in jobs where the employees mainly work in isolation from co-workers in tasks that involve intensive customer service, such as bus drivers, repeated ill-treatment by customers may be highly detrimental as regards job satisfaction and health. Thus, future research is also needed on immigrants' (and natives') exposure to ill-treatment by customers in service intensive jobs.

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**About the authors**

Barbara Bergbom works as a Senior Specialist at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. She has a specialist degree in work and organizational psychology. Her research interests include cultural diversity, immigrants, international business travel, social relations and employee well-being. Barbara Bergbom is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: barbara.bergbom@ttl.fi

Dr Maarit Vartia-Vaananen, PhD in Work and Organizational Psychology, works as a Chief Specialist in the Finnish Institute of Occupation Health. Her main research areas include psychosocial work environment, and particularly workplace bullying and harassment.

Ulla Kinnunen is a Professor of Psychology in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Tampere, Finland. At the present her research interests focus on occupational well-being from the perspectives of stress, recovery and burnout, including research on job insecurity and temporary employment, leadership and the work-family interface.

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