

## Acceptability of workplace bullying: A comparative study on six continents

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Power, J. L., Brotheridge, C. M., Blenkinsopp, J., Bowes-Sperry, L., Bozionelos, N., Buzády, Z., Chuang, A., Drnevich, D., Garzon-Vico, A., Leighton, C., Madero, S.M., Mak, W.-M., Mathew, R., Monserrat, S.I., Mujtaba, B.G., Olivas-Lujan, M.R., Polycroniou, P., Sprigg, C.A., Axtell, C., Holman, D., Ruiz-Gutiérrez, J.A., & Nnedumm, A.U.O. (2013). Acceptability of workplace bullying: A comparative study on six continents. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(3), 374-380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.08.018>



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### **Abstract:**

This paper is the first to explore the impact of culture on the acceptability of workplace bullying and to do so across a wide range of countries. Physically intimidating bullying is less acceptable than work related bullying both within groups of similar cultures and globally. Cultures with high performance orientation find bullying to be more acceptable while those with high future orientation find bullying to be less acceptable. A high humane orientation is associated with finding work related bullying to be less acceptable. Confucian Asia finds work-related bullying to be more acceptable than the Anglo, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa country clusters and finds physically intimidating bullying to be more acceptable than the Anglo and Latin America country clusters. The differences in the acceptability of bullying with respect to these cultures are partially explained in terms of cultural dimensions.

**Keywords:** workplace bullying | cross-cultural differences | performance orientation | future orientation | humane orientation

### **Article:**

#### **1. Introduction**

This article reports the findings of a 14-country study exploring cultural differences in the acceptability of workplace bullying. Victims of workplace bullying are repeatedly exposed to negative behaviors at work leading them to feel threatened and humiliated (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004). Most early studies as well as current work focus on the negative effects on the physical and psychological health of victims (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). Victims tend to report lower well-being and job satisfaction and greater stress than other employees who are not bullied (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Studies in Ireland, Germany, and Austria find that

victims report greater depression, irritability, and anxiety than other employees (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). In addition, workplace bullying is associated with health problems, including cardiovascular disease (Kivimäki et al., 2003). Although bullying is distressing in many cultures (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003), culture may influence the degree of distress experienced and the type of bullying that causes the most distress (Sidle, 2010). For example, Chinese employees seem to react more negatively to indirect conflict than American employees, and to experience more negative physical symptoms as a result (Liu, Nauta, Spector, & Li, 2008).

Bullying contributes to negative organizational outcomes such as higher absenteeism (O'Connell, Calvert, & Watson, 2007) and greater voluntary turnover (Tepper, 2000). The costs associated with turnover can be extensive as both victims and witnesses of bullying are affected negatively and are motivated to resign (Rayner and Keashly, 2005, Vartia, 2001). Bullying may signal to employees that they are not valued and respected (Sidle, 2010), which consequently affects employee engagement. In fact, higher levels of bullying and incivility are associated with lower levels of employee engagement in various countries (Loh et al., 2010, Yeung and Griffin, 2008). Employers should be motivated to reduce bullying as employee engagement is associated with higher profits, higher self-rated performance, and greater organizational citizenship (Medlin and Green, 2009, Saks, 2006, Schneider et al., 2009).

The present study is the first to examine the acceptability of workplace bullying behaviors using a sample of 14 different countries. An understanding of the cultural factors that influence the acceptance of bullying behaviors in the workplace can help international organizations develop policies and training programs to reduce bullying. Organizations that become international in scope need to be aware of the acceptability of behaviors and to develop their own codes of acceptable behaviors. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), which represents over 250,000 members in more than 140 countries, is campaigning for the adoption of global standards for human resource policies and practices as well as for a universal code of business ethics (Gurchiek, 2010). This push for global standards of acceptable behavior underscores the importance of understanding cultural differences in the acceptance of bullying behaviors.

## **2. Hypothesis development**

### **2.1. Culture**

A large proportion of cross-cultural management research has traditionally focused on values and beliefs, rather than practices. Hofstede's (1980) study of IBM employees, based upon more than 116,000 questionnaires from over 50 countries, presents a set of national work-related values. In the current century, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research program study updates Hofstede's findings using a more comprehensive sample and expands the study of cultural dimensions (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). The GLOBE study of 62 societies, roughly corresponding to countries, is a collaborative study involving 170 researchers with data from 17,000 middle managers working in telecommunications, food processing, and finance in 951 organizations (House et al., 2004). GLOBE defines culture as "shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations and meanings of significant events that result from common experiences" which are handed down from one generation to the next generation (Brodbeck, Chhokar, & House, 2008, p. 1025). The

GLOBE study not only measures the values that employees feel their culture should possess (values), but also the practices, policies, and behaviors that employees perceive in their culture (practices). The current study focuses on three of the GLOBE perceived practices that theoretically most closely align with bullying behaviors: humane orientation, performance orientation, and future orientation.

Countries with high humane orientation practices encourage individuals to be “fair, generous, caring, and kind to others” while countries with low humane orientation are believed to have more formal and standardized relationships between employees as reflected in a higher rate of unionization (House & Javidan, 2004, p. 30). House and Javidan (2004) believe that the tendency of economically developed countries to have a lower humane orientation than other countries indicates that individuals in economically developed countries see less need for help from other members of society than do individuals from less developed countries. As high humane-oriented cultures emphasize the need for those in authority to be supportive and caring in their relationships with subordinates (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2004), such cultures will more likely disapprove of bullying. Consequently, H1 states:

**H1.** Humane orientation is negatively related to the acceptability of bullying.

High performance orientation societies tend to have motivational practices in place that encourage improvements in performance and “emphasize results rather than people” (Javidan, 2004, p. 245). The prevailing belief in such societies is that anyone can succeed if they try hard enough, an attitude that, according to the fundamental attribution error (Jones and Harris, 1967, Ross, 1977), may direct supervisors to hold employees personally responsible for factors beyond their control (Miller, 1984). In contrast, low performance orientation is associated with valuing relationships, loyalty, and belongingness as well as cooperation, sympathy, and subtlety in communication. High performance orientation societies value accomplishments, a sense of urgency, and direct and explicit communication and may tolerate bullying behaviors such as shouting at subordinates if these behaviors are believed to lead to better results. H2 can then be stated as:

**H2.** Performance orientation is positively related to the acceptability of bullying.

Countries with a high future orientation believe that current behavior influences the future, and value delaying gratification to invest in the future in addition to developing and maintaining long-term relationships (Ashkanasy, Gupta, Mayfield, & Trevor-Roberts, 2004). As an example, countries with high future orientation place greater emphasis on diversity programs for disabled people, older workers, and ethnic minorities (Alas, Kaarelson, & Niglas, 2008). Fu and Yukl (2000) report that managers in future oriented China prefer relationship-oriented influence tactics such as gift giving and personal appeals in contrast to the short-term oriented tactics that American managers sometimes employ. Since bullying is disruptive to future relationships with employees, as indicated by high rates of turnover (Rayner & Keashly, 2005), a high future orientation is consistent with avoidance of bullying. Thus H3 states:

**H3.** Future orientation is negatively related to the acceptability of bullying.

Based on past research, GLOBE researchers segmented their sample into regional clusters, the members of which are significantly similar to each other and statistically different from other cultures on several cultural dimensions (Javidan, 2004). Three of these clusters—Confucian Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa—demonstrate substantial contrasts in humane orientation, performance orientation, and future orientation (House et al., 2004). Confucian Asia has a high performance orientation and values working together as members of an organization (institutional collectivism) or in-group (in-group collectivism). The Confucian tradition of respect for hierarchy and loyalty to superiors (Rarick, 2009) may predispose employees to accept bullying behaviors when directed by superiors towards subordinates. Further, the high institutional collectivism of Confucian Asia may render employees willing to endure unpleasant work practices if they perceive a benefit to the group. Countries in the Latin American and Sub-Saharan African clusters on the other hand, score lower than Confucian Asia on performance orientation. Further, although these two clusters also value loyalty to the family and working together in small groups, they are less inclined than Confucian Asians towards loyalty to the organization. Latin Americans believe in personalism in which employers are expected to have a personal connection with employees and to avoid direct affronts to employees' dignity while Sub-Saharan Africans have a higher humane orientation than either the Confucian Asians or the Latin Americans (Javidan, 2004). Thus, H4, H5 state:

**H4.** Employees in Confucian Asia find bullying to be more acceptable than employees in Latin America.

**H5.** Employees in Confucian Asia find bullying to be more acceptable than employees in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## 2.2. Bullying

Researching bullying across cultures is not an easy task as individuals in different countries may have different interpretations of the specific actions that researchers have identified as bullying or harassing. Therefore, a common measurement framework is necessary to better understand this phenomenon around the world. Einarsen and colleagues' Negative Act Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) is the most commonly used measure of bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaersa, 2009). This questionnaire asks respondents if they have experienced various behaviors without asking them to label themselves as victims or using words such as bully or bullied. This behavioral approach follows recommendations for the study of sexual harassment in which victims often prefer not to label themselves as victims (Munson, Miner, & Hulin, 2001). Indeed, one research study finds that “one of the more puzzling aspects of sexual harassment is the finding that large numbers of women who have experienced relatively blatant instances of such behavior fail to recognize and label their experiences as such” (Fitzgerald et al., 1988, p. 43). Individuals may avoid labeling themselves as being sexually harassed because they feel ashamed to identify themselves as victims (Munson et al., 2001), a tendency which may also be present in bullying. Einarsen et al.'s (2009) article on the NAQ-R, which provides evidence of reliability and validity of the NAQ-R, divides the scale into subscales, two of which are the focus of this study: work related bullying (WRB) and physically intimidating bullying (PIB). WRB includes behaviors such as giving tasks with unreasonable deadlines and exposing workers to an unreasonable workload, while PIB includes behaviors such as shouting or spontaneous anger.

Few studies compare attitudes towards bullying across cultures. Even those studies that do make this comparison often confound cultural differences with respect to the behaviors labeled as bullying and the differences in the incidence rates of these behaviors across cultures (Escartín, Zapf, Arrieta, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011). A recent study comparing bullying in Europe illustrates the difficulty of interpreting results when employees are asked to label themselves as victims of bullying. The study asks paid employees if they have been bullied or harassed and finds wide variations in the percentage of employees who label themselves as bullied, ranging from 17% in Finland and 12% in the Netherlands to 2% in Italy and Bulgaria (Parent-Thirion, Fernández Macías, Hurley, & Vermeylen, 2007). These differences may reflect, among other things, actual differences in levels of bullying behavior or cultural differences with respect to the cultural acceptability of certain behaviors. Different cultures define bullying as encompassing different behaviors. In a comparison of definitions from employees in Costa Rica and Spain, Costa Rican employees are more likely than Spanish employees to include physical bullying in their definition (Escartín et al., 2011).

One method to reduce the number of confounds is to use a behaviorally based scale such as NAQ-R which allows for a focus on the acceptability of behaviors. For example, a comparison of the reports of bullying by full-time employees in Australia and Singapore uses a modified version of the NAQ-R (Loh et al., 2010). In this study, Australians report lower overall levels of bullying behaviors than Singaporeans. Had this study asked respondents to self-label as victims, the reader might conclude that Australians are less sensitive to bullying than Singaporeans, and are consequently less likely to classify behaviors as bullying. The use of behavioral measures and the tendency of Australians to report lower overall levels of bullying than Singaporeans, suggests that bullying is less common in Australia than in Singapore.

The more physically threatening form of bullying, PIB, is likely to be considered more serious than WRB. More physical forms of violence are considered less acceptable than less physical forms of violence (Collyer, Johnson, de Mesquita, Palazzo, & Jordan, 2010). For example, shoving is ranked as more severe than exploitation and grabbing and these actions are ranked as being more severe than vandalism (Collyer et al., 2010). Similarly, PIB is a more physically intimidating form of abuse than WRB, and thus is likely to be less acceptable. This attitude is believed to be universal so PIB is likely to be less acceptable than WRB within each culture. Thus H6, H7 state:

**H6.** Physically intimidating bullying (PIB) is less acceptable than work related bullying (WRB) globally.

**H7.** Physically intimidating bullying (PIB) is less acceptable than work related bullying (WRB) within each culture.

Finally, attitudes about the acceptability of one type of bullying are likely to be closely related to attitudes about other types of bullying. As the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance explains, people feel uncomfortable with inconsistent attitudes and beliefs (Festinger, 1957). Consequently, those who feel that one form of bullying is acceptable must be more likely to find other types of bullying to be acceptable as well. H8 thus states:

**H8.** The acceptability of work related bullying (WRB) is positively related to the acceptability of physically intimidating bullying (PIB).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Sample and data collection

The study employs questionnaire responses from 1484 alumni and current MBA students from 14 countries on six continents. Participation was voluntary and anonymous and respondents either completed questionnaires in the classroom or took the questionnaires to complete on their own time. Of the 2140 questionnaires that were initially distributed 1613 (76%) were returned, of which 8% were unusable (incomplete or spoiled). Hence, the rate of responses analyzed to the number of questionnaires originally distributed is 69%.

The mean age of respondents was 32.68 years ( $SD = 8.6$ ). The gender split was 60.7% male and 39.3% female. Just over half of the participants worked in managerial or executive positions, with the remainder working in professional, clerical, or operational occupations. Respondents worked an average of 4.90 years ( $SD = 5.4$ ) with their current employer. Respondents who were not currently working answered the questions in relation to their most recent work experience.

Respondents are from the following countries: Argentina ( $n = 89$ ), Australia ( $n = 94$ ), Colombia ( $n = 135$ ), England ( $n = 104$ ), Greece ( $n = 104$ ), Hong Kong ( $n = 104$ ), Hungary ( $n = 99$ ), India ( $n = 115$ ), Mexico ( $n = 118$ ), Nigeria ( $n = 105$ ), Singapore ( $n = 100$ ), Taiwan ( $n = 117$ ), Poland ( $n = 104$ ), and United States ( $n = 96$ ). GLOBE categorizes these countries as belonging to six country clusters: Southern Asia (India;  $n = 115$ ), Anglo (England, United States, Australia;  $n = 294$ ), Confucian Asia (Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong;  $n = 321$ ), Latin America (Colombia, Argentina, Mexico;  $n = 342$ ), Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria;  $n = 105$ ), and Eastern Europe (Greece, Poland, Hungary;  $n = 307$ ).

#### 3.2. Bullying behavior measures

The acceptability of WRB and PIB are measured with a modified version of the NAQ-R (Einarsen et al., 2009). The modified questionnaire asks respondents to rate the relative acceptability of a list of bullying behaviors. Response categories range from “completely unacceptable” (1) to “completely acceptable” (5). The acceptability of WRB subscale contains nine items. An example is, “greater than average monitoring of work”. The acceptability of PIB subscale was modified slightly by splitting one item that apparently measures a number of behaviors into two separate items. The original item “intimidating behavior such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, and blocking/barring the way” is split into two separate items: “intimidating behavior such as finger-pointing” and “intimidating behavior such as invasion of personal space, shoving, and blocking/barring the way”. The resulting acceptability of PIB subscale contains four items.

Mean scores for acceptability of WRB and PIB ranged from a high of 20.4 and 7.7 (respectively) for Poland to a low of 12.6 and 5.3 (respectively) for Mexico. Both the acceptability of WRB and

PIB showed satisfactory reliabilities ( $\alpha = 0.76$  for acceptability of WRB;  $\alpha = 0.84$  for acceptability of PIB). For the acceptability of WRB, the reliabilities for each country range from 0.86 (Argentina) to 0.62 (Singapore) with only Singapore falling below 0.70. For the acceptability of PIB, the reliabilities for each country range from 0.86 (Australia) to 0.56 (England) with four countries (England, India, Singapore, and United States) falling below 0.70.

### 3.3. Cultural dimensions and GLOBE country cluster measures

Humane orientation, performance orientation, and future orientation are measured using GLOBE's aggregate level measures for culture (House et al., 2004). Practice measures, which consider actual values held by cultures, were selected rather than value measures that measure the values to which cultures aspire. GLOBE bands represent groups of countries based on significant differences in cultural dimensions. The countries included in this study represent all three of the three bands for performance orientation and all four of the four bands for future orientation. For humane orientation, the countries selected represent three of the four bands that include 90% of the GLOBE countries. The sample in the present study, though limited to 14 countries, offers a test in which the major theoretical considerations have adequate variability.

### 3.4. Control variables

This study employs gender, age, and minority ethnic group membership as control variables. Age is measured in years. Gender is coded as one for males and two for females. Minority ethnic group membership is identified by asking respondents to assign themselves to a particular ethnic group. Respondents are classified as belonging to an ethnic minority based on the country in which they currently reside. For example, respondents who identify themselves as being Chinese and who live in England are classified as belonging to an ethnic minority.

## 4. Findings

Two separate hierarchical regressions determine the percentage of variance in bullying explained by cultural dimensions beyond that explained by the control variables. The virtue of hierarchical regression is that this technique allows a clear comparison of variance explained between the groups of variables entered in each step. The regression analyses test the contributions of humane orientation, performance orientation, and future orientation to the acceptability of WRB and PIB. In step one, the control variables (gender, age, and ethnic minority status) are entered, followed by the three cultural dimensions in step two, and either the acceptability of WRB or PIB in step three. When the dependent variable is acceptability of WRB, acceptability of PIB is entered in step three (and vice versa). As indicated in Table 1, both regressions were significant at  $p < 0.001$  (acceptability of WRB,  $F(7, 1144) = 108.43, p < .001, \text{adjusted } R^2 = 0.40$ ; acceptability of PIB,  $F(7, 1144) = 101.88, p < .001, \text{adjusted } R^2 = 0.38$ ).

Men find PIB to be more acceptable than women ( $\beta = -0.06, p < .05$ ) which may reflect genetic differences with respect to a tolerance for violence (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Younger people find WRB to be less acceptable than those who are older ( $\beta = -0.07, p < .05$ ) and people who are members of ethnic minorities find both WRB and PIB to be less acceptable than did people who were not members of ethnic minorities (acceptability of WRB,  $\beta = -0.15, p < .001$ ;

acceptability of PIB,  $\beta = -0.13, p < .001$ ). Minorities and younger people are likely to be bullied more often than others (Lewis et al., 2010, Schat et al., 2006). Consequently, members of ethnic minorities and younger employees may find bullying to be less acceptable, in part because they fear that they are at risk for bullying.

**Table 1.** Hierarchical multiple regressions: acceptability of work-related bullying (acceptability of WRB) and acceptability of physically-intimidating bullying (acceptability of PIB).

Independent variables	Acceptability of WRB	Acceptability of PIB
Gender	-.04	-.06*
Age	-.07*	-.05
Ethnic minority	-.15***	-.13***
$\Delta R^2$	.03***	.02***
Humane orientation	-.06*	-.02
Performance orientation	.24***	.15**
Future orientation	-.20***	-.16**
$\Delta R^2$	.03***	.01***
Acceptability of WRB		.61***
Acceptability of PIB	.60***	
$\Delta R^2$	.34***	.35***
F	108.44***	101.88***
Total adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.40***	.38***

Note: The coefficients are standardized estimates.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

#### 4.1. Cultural dimensions

H1, H2, H3 concern the relationship between humane orientation, performance orientation, and future orientation and the acceptability of bullying behaviors. After controlling for demographic variables, the three cultural dimensions show significant associations with both acceptability of WRB and PIB in the anticipated direction with one exception. As Table 1 shows, humane orientation is negatively associated with the acceptability of bullying for WRB, ( $\beta = -0.06, p < .05$ ) as predicted, but not for acceptability of PIB, ( $\beta = -0.02, p = .50$ ). Not surprisingly, possessing the value of kindness and consideration for others leads employees to reject bullying. Those who do not have a high humane orientation consider PIB to be unacceptable; consequently, PIB may be such an extreme behavior that humane orientation is not a factor in acceptability. Performance orientation is positively associated with the acceptance of bullying such that valuing performance and being results driven make both WRB and PIB more acceptable (acceptability of WRB,  $\beta = 0.24, p < .001$ ; acceptability of PIB,  $\beta = 0.15, p < .01$ ). Bullying seems to be an acceptable trade off in the pursuit of results. Finally, as predicted, future orientation is negatively associated with the acceptability of bullying (acceptability of WRB,  $\beta = -0.20, p < .001$ ; acceptability of PIB,  $\beta = -0.16, p < .01$ ). Those who focus on the future and value long term relationships with their employees may recognize that bullying is associated with consequences such as turnover and absenteeism (O'Connell et al., 2007, Tepper, 2000). Therefore, H2, H3 are fully supported, while H1 is partly supported.

#### 4.2. GLOBE country clusters

H4, H5 predict that employees in Confucian Asia consider bullying to be more acceptable than employees in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. These hypotheses are tested by comparing means in a one-way ANOVA using Bonferroni post hoc tests for multiple comparisons. Confucian Asia scores higher than the other GLOBE country clusters for the acceptability of both WRB and PIB (acceptability of WRB,  $F(5,1470) = 28.21, p < .001$ ; acceptability of PIB,  $F(5,1478) = 14.43, p < .001$ ). Further, Confucian Asia scores higher than Latin America on the acceptability of both WRB and PIB (acceptability of WRB, mean 18.00 and 13.96, respectively, SD 5.08,  $p < .001$ ; acceptability of PIB, mean 7.02 and 5.65, respectively, SD 2.43,  $p < .001$ ) and higher than Sub-Saharan Africa on acceptability of WRB (mean 15.98, SD 5.48,  $p < .01$ ). Table 2 presents post hoc results for all clusters. For Confucian Asia, which has a higher performance orientation than Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, bullying may be seen as an acceptable price to pay for performance. The value Latin America holds for personal connections with employees and the higher humane orientation of Sub-Saharan Africa may help to explain their distaste for bullying. Thus, H4 is fully supported and H5 is partly supported.

**Table 2.** One-Way ANOVA post hoc comparisons: acceptability of work-related bullying (acceptability of WRB) and acceptability of physically intimidating bullying (acceptability of PIB).

		Mean (SD)
<i>Acceptability of WRB comparisons</i>		
Confucian Asia	South Asia	16.5 (5.0)
	Anglo	15.7 (4.4)**
	Latin America	14.0 (5.1)**
	Sub-Saharan Africa	16.0 (5.5)*
	Eastern Europe	17.5 (5.3)
<i>Acceptability of PIB comparisons</i>		
Confucian Asia	South Asia	6.5 (2.2)
	Anglo	5.9 (2.4)**
	Latin America	5.7 (2.4)**
	Sub-Saharan Africa	7.0 (3.2)
	Eastern Europe	6.8 (2.8)

Post hoc tests using Bonferroni test for multiple comparisons.

Mean acceptability of WRB for Confucian Asia, 18.00; mean acceptability of PIB for Confucian Asia, 7.02.

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

The Anglo cluster scores lower in acceptability of WRB (mean 15.7, SD 4.4,  $p < .001$ ) and acceptability of PIB (mean 5.9, SD 2.4,  $p < .001$ ) than Confucian Asia. This study did not find significant differences in humane orientation, performance orientation, or future orientation between the Confucian Asia and Anglo clusters (Gupta & Hanges, 2004) so future studies may need to look elsewhere for explanations. Anglos' lack of acceptance of bullying may reflect a greater concern for fairness than other countries that may be encouraged by legal systems that, at least in theory, are predicated on impartial justice (Cotterrell, 2006, Gardiner et al., 1997).

### 4.3. Bullying behaviors

H6, H7 seek to determine whether PIB is less acceptable than WRB globally and within each culture. These hypotheses are tested using paired-samples  $t$ -tests that control for the lack of independence in acceptability of WRB and PIB as these variables are drawn from the same

cultures. First, a paired-samples *t*-test on the entire sample indicates that PIB is less acceptable than WRB ( $t(1465) = 44.28, p < .001$ ), regardless of culture. A second paired-samples *t*-test on the GLOBE country clusters reveals that, in every cluster, respondents find PIB less acceptable than WRB (Table 3). This finding likely reflects the more physical and intimate nature of PIB. Thus, H6 and H7 are clearly supported. Interestingly, despite the general distaste for PIB, countries with a high performance orientation do find PIB to be more acceptable than other countries, suggesting that employees with this orientation may view PIB as justifiable in order to obtain results (Table 2).

**Table 3.** Paired *t*-tests for GLOBE country cluster: acceptability of work-related bullying (acceptability of WRB) – acceptability of physically intimidating bullying (acceptability of PIB).

Country cluster	(Acceptability of WRB – Acceptability of PIB)			<i>t</i> -test
	Mean	Standard deviation	Degrees of freedom	
South Asia	00.7	0.7	113	11.8***
Anglo	0.8	0.6	287	22.6***
Latin America	0.6	0.5	338	19.4***
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.5	0.7	104	8.0***
Eastern Europe	0.8	0.7	302	20.7***
Confucian Asia	0.8	0.6	317	23.4***

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

As predicted in H8, perceptions of the acceptability of WRB and PIB are positively related ( $r = .60, p < .001$ ). In addition, as indicated in Table 1, acceptability of PIB explained 34% of the variance in acceptability of WRB, and acceptability of WRB explained 35% of the variance in acceptability of PIBRB. Consequently, those who feel that one form of bullying is acceptable are more likely to find the other form of bullying to be acceptable. Therefore, H8 is supported.

## 5. Discussion

This study finds global consistencies as well as cultural differences in the acceptance of bullying. PIB is less acceptable than WRB on a global level and within each culture. However, differences in the acceptability of bullying across GLOBE country clusters, and differences in the influence of cultural dimensions on the acceptance of bullying, point to cultural differences in the acceptance of bullying. The high performance orientation of Confucian Asia, relative to Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, paired with a greater tolerance for bullying, suggests that high performance orientation renders bullying more acceptable. Similarly, bullying is less acceptable for cultures with high humane orientation and future orientation.

Culture specific approaches in educating organizational agents and employees may be effective in reducing bullying. In high performance orientation countries, performance related arguments could be utilized emphasizing that bullying behaviors are in fact detrimental to performance rather than beneficial. Dispelling the myth that bullying is associated with greater performance may be helpful and could be done by reviewing the empirical evidence that links bullying to lower levels of performance and greater costs to organizations (Hoel et al., 2003, Rayner and Keashly, 2005). Bullying may also reduce the creative energy of staff. Norwegian restaurants whose employees report higher bullying are rated as less creative than restaurants with lower levels of bullying (Mathisen, Einarsen, & Mykletun, 2008).

Future orientation relates to lower acceptance of WRB and PIB. In cultures that score high on future orientation, arguments that point out the loss to the company of valuable employees due to turnover may be the most persuasive. Reducing bullying in countries that adopt a short-term orientation may be challenging and intervention approaches might emphasize the tendency of these societies to enjoy the present. Bullying not only has negative consequences in the future, but also poisons the experience of the present. Reducing bullying can improve the quality of work-life for current employees, a result that should appeal to low future-orientation societies.

A higher humane orientation is associated with a disapproval of work related bullying. Apparently, physical bullying is not acceptable even in societies that show a low inclination towards humane values. Non-physical forms of bullying also have serious psychological and physical consequences for victims (Høgh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2010). In encouraging societies with a low humane orientation to reject bullying, policy makers could consider the emphasis that weak humane orientation societies place on formality in relationships between employees (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2004). A potential route for intervention might be to stress the importance of adhering to formal codes of conduct in interactions with subordinates.

Some authors advocate global human resource standards to help international companies develop consistent standards, to provide common benchmarks for performance, and to encourage companies to improve their standards with respect to managing employees (Gurchiek, 2010). The universal distaste for PIB suggests that, despite their differences, cultures share common ground with respect to some employee behaviors. Common standards may therefore be possible at least at a high level. As this study reports, however, there are cultural differences in the acceptability of bullying in the workplace which complicate the push for global standards. Fortunately, companies can still choose to attract and retain employees who share their values even if these values are not widely shared in each country in which the firm operates. Employees seek out organizations that fit their individual values even if these values are not shared by the country at large (Gerhart & Rynes, 2003). Indeed, the positions of countries on cultural dimensions only represent the average scores of people in these countries. Within-country variance is substantial as is the overlap between countries on cultural values (e.g., Hofstede, 2001). The values of employees have been found to be similar across countries despite cultural differences in values within countries with respect to the international automobile and telecommunications industries (Katz & Darbshire, 2000). These similarities in values suggest that these industries have developed their own cultures, which have a higher influence than the culture of the individual countries in which each branch of the organization is situated. In fact, Gerhart and Fang (2005) found that differences in culture were greater within countries than between countries suggesting that employers can attract a pool of employees who have attitudes that reflect the employer's values.

## **6. Research limitations and directions for future research**

The respondents in this study are students and alumni of MBA programs around the world. Such a sample allows insight into the attitudes of future managers. In addition, this population has been selected because of commonalities that should make any cultural influences more easily identifiable (e.g., Hofstede & Bond, 1988). For example, MBA studies are similar in subject and approach across the globe, and MBA students tend to be relatively uniform in terms of motives

and aspirations. Furthermore, most MBA programs around the world are taught in English, which becomes another common denominator. Despite the advantages of this sample, this group is not typical of the general working population in some respects. For example, MBA students are generally younger than the general population. Younger employees are more likely to be bullied than older employees (Zapf et al., 2003), and this potential exposure to bullying may make their judgment of the acceptability of bullying a conservative test. Therefore, additional cross-cultural studies are needed to further consolidate the present findings.

Additional cross-cultural studies may also provide information with respect to the effects of other cultural dimensions that may help to predict attitudes towards bullying. The correlations with respect to the cultural dimensions used in this study were somewhat small, suggesting that other cultural dimensions play a part in explaining the acceptability of bullying. Cultures with high power-distance, the belief that those in high power positions are entitled to greater rewards, may permit higher ranking employees to bully their subordinates. Those in assertive cultures may find harsh language to subordinates to be acceptable while collectivist cultures may find rudeness to coworkers to be disruptive to the harmony of the group. It would also be interesting to examine the cultural dimensions that predict the greater acceptance of bullying in Confucian Asia versus a number of other clusters. The relatively high levels of performance orientation, collectivism, and power distance in Confucian Asia may help to explain their greater acceptance of bullying.

All measures have been taken at the same point in time which generally imposes issues with the interpretation of causality. However, the nature of the variables in the study is such that they allow causal assertions, such as the conclusion that culture affects acceptability of workplace bullying and not vice versa. Cultural values are much more deeply entrenched than attitudes (i.e., acceptability of bullying), which makes it most likely that the former influences the latter (e.g., Davis, 1985).

Another issue of importance is the reaction of individuals across cultures when they are bullied and when they witness bullying. The current study finds cultural differences in the acceptability of workplace bullying, but does not provide information on how employees in the various countries react in cases of bullying. The negative longer term consequences of bullying are known (e.g., voluntary turnover), but not the process that leads to these consequences. Cultural factors must play a role in these processes. For example, culture may relate to whether employees who are bullied seek assistance, publicize their plight, or suffer in silence. Differences within victims' behaviors across cultures are also a very important issue because of the implications for potential interventions. Presumably different organizational interventions are needed in cultures whose values render bullying more acceptable than in countries where cultural values render bullying unacceptable and socially sanctioned.

Further research with respect to which behaviors are considered to be bullying would help international organizations develop standards for employee conduct. Such research would also assist organizations in providing policies that would ease the transition of employees who are transferring from parts of an international organization to another. A greater knowledge of the range of acceptable behaviors by culture would help firms provide training for managers

working in different countries. The push for global human resource standards will increase the need to understand the limits of acceptable behavior by culture.

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