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# A darkside of academia: a study of bullying, its prevalence, causes and perpetrators in an academic setting

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**Objective:** Bullying in academia, often characterised by insulting comments, persistent criticism, personal or even physical abuse, and threats, is a persistent issue, with prevalence varying across countries and institutions. Hierarchical structures within higher education institutions create power dynamics that may exacerbate the prevalence and impact of bullying. This study aims to examine the prevalence and causes of bullying among faculty in a Swedish medical university over time, identifying common perpetrators and relationships between targets and perpetrators.

**Methods:** Data were derived from a longitudinal work environment survey conducted at a Swedish medical university, with two data collection points: Time 1 (T1) in 2009 and Time 2 (T2) in 2011. At T1, 2,809 employees responded (68% response rate), and at T2, 3,202 employees responded (66% response rate). Analyses included descriptive statistics and logistic regression. An open-ended question was also included and analyzed using content analysis.

**Results:** Bullying prevalence remained quite stable between T1 and T2. At both time points, women and lecturers reported slightly higher rates of being targets of bullying compared to men and other academic positions. Moreover, 25% of employees reporting bullying at T1 had left the university by T2, and the response rate among those still employed but previously bullied was lower than the total population. Of those bullied at T1, only 34% reported continued bullying at T2, with 119 new cases identified at T2. Sex differences emerged, with women often experiencing sex-related bullying and men encountering ethnicity-related bullying. Managers and co-workers were identified as the primary perpetrators, with women more likely than men to report students as bullies. Key bullying causes included relational conflicts, communication issues, and power imbalances intensified by academia's hierarchical structure.

**Conclusion:** Bullying remains a significant issue in academia, influenced by competitive and hierarchical institutional structures that reinforce power dynamics. Whilst overall prevalence appears stable, underlying shifts, such as turnover among those previously bullied and new instances emerging, reveal a complex and evolving problem. Sex-specific patterns in bullying experiences underscore the importance of tailored interventions. These findings highlight the need for structured, institutional interventions in academia to address and mitigate bullying, ultimately fostering a healthier work environment.

KEYWORDS

bullying, academic setting, medical faculty, sex differences, academic positions, perpetrators

# 1 Introduction

A work environment characterised by insulting or offensive comments, persistent criticism, personal or even physical abuse, and threats is a reality for employees in many organisations (Leymann, 1992) and academia is no exception (Christensen et al., 2020; Keashly and Jagatic, 2011). Individuals exposed to such behaviours systematically and frequently over an extended period can be defined as targets of bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020). Bullying-related behaviours are quite prevalent in academia (Christensen et al., 2020) and several studies have documented a relatively high prevalence of bullying and other forms of workplace hostility within academic institutions (Keashly and Neuman, 2010; Lampman, 2012) with a prevalence of up to 25% (Keashly, 2019). Moreover, there is a widespread belief that universities are breeding grounds for conflict and, by extension, bullying (Barsky, 2002; Twale, 2017), and academics have been labelled as "mean and nasty" (Hiatt, 2008). It has been suggested that the conventional hierarchical structure of higher learning institutions establishes a power dynamic that could intensify the prevalence, significance, and persistence of bullying within the academy (Pheko, 2018). Studies have found that the most frequently reported bullying behaviours in academia include undermining of professional competence, exclusion from social conversations, demanding that co-authors and supervisors receive publication credit and research grants for the work of junior colleagues, spreading rumours, denying promotions, and exhibiting hostile behaviours such as yelling during meetings (Pheko, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2017; Faria et al., 2012; Johnson-Bailey, 2015). However, the prevalence of bullying varies cross-nationally and institutionally, suggesting the influence of sociocultural factors (Keashly, 2019). Scandinavian countries show lower rates of bullying compared to other countries (Keashly, 2019; Einarsen et al., 1996; Meriläinen et al., 2019). A study based on a national survey conducted in Sweden examined the prevalence of harassment and bullying within higher education institutions, which included 8,500 researchers/teachers and 5,256 PhD students, showed that 12% of both researchers/teachers and PhD students reported being targets of bullying (Rudolfsson et al., 2022).

Focusing solely on researchers and PhD students within medical faculties ($N = 737$), data from the same nationally conducted survey in Sweden as presented above showed that 6.1% reported experiencing bullying (Olsson et al., 2025). Whilst no clear evidence suggests a higher prevalence of bullying among academics in medical faculties in Sweden, it has been argued in other countries that medical faculties may be at heightened risk due to structural and cultural factors inherent in the medical profession. Research has shown that hierarchical organisational structures, face-to-face situations with patients, and a culture that normalises endurance of difficult or even abusive situations contribute to increased levels of workplace bullying in medicine (Colenbrander et al., 2020; Crowe et al., 2017; Siad and Rabi, 2021). The notion that medical professionals must tolerate mistreatment as part of their training or role further exacerbates the problem (Siad and Rabi, 2021). Given that medical faculties operate within similar hierarchical and high-pressure environments, it is likely that these dynamics extend into the academic sphere, making medical faculty members particularly vulnerable to bullying and harassment.

Several environmental risk factors related to bullying have been identified in previous research. Workplace factors such as organisational climate, leadership quality, role expectations, and workload have been shown to influence the prevalence of bullying in academic settings (Einarsen et al., 2020). Dysfunctional work environments marked by poor leadership, excessive workloads, and role ambiguity can create conditions where bullying thrives (Leymann, 1996). A Swedish study on bullying among staff in a medical faculty found organisational and psychosocial factors as significant predictors of future bullying exposure (Björklund et al., 2021). These included a lack of managerial and social support, low job control, unclear role demands, poor leadership qualities and a negative organisational climate. Other studies as well have brought up negative organisational climate characterised by workplace stress, inadequate conflict resolution, and a culture of incivility, was also linked to increased bullying risk (Keashly and Neuman, 2010; Salin, 2003). The study presented by Björklund et al. (2021) also highlighted the role of health-related factors in bullying risk. Both high sickness absence and presenteeism (working whilst ill) were associated with an increased likelihood of bullying (Björklund et al., 2021). Employees with frequent sick leave may be perceived as unreliable, whilst presenteeism can lower performance and strain workplace relationships, potentially leading to conflicts and bullying (Conway et al., 2016; Johns, 2010). These findings underscore the importance of a well-functioning organisational environment in preventing workplace bullying within higher education institutions. Additionally, other reported risk factors for bullying include being a women, belonging to an ethnic minority group, being of a younger age, and lacking a doctoral degree (Ahmad et al., 2017; Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Lampman et al., 2016; Misawa, 2015).

In a national Swedish study on harassment and bullying in higher education revealed sex and position differences in experiences of bullying. Among researchers and teachers, 14% of women and 9% of men reported being bullied. Conversely, among PhD students, 15% of men and 9% of women identified as targets of bullying (Rudolfsson et al., 2022). Additionally, 5.43% of students in Sweden reported experiencing bullying, with higher rates among women (6.1%) than men (4.3%) (Mensah et al., 2024). In cases of student-initiated bullying directed at professors, Lampman (2012) reported that 63.3% of women and 50.2% of men experienced serious incidents of bullying, aggression, or unwanted sexual attention from students (Lampman et al., 2016).

The Swedish Research Council's review of sexual harassment in academia concluded that the most prevalent form of harassment or bullying is related to sex or gender. This was found across all disciplines and positions, including doctoral students, researchers, and teachers (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020). Sexual harassment defined as conduct of a sexual nature that violates someone's dignity according to the Swedish Discrimination Act (Swedish Parliament, 2008). Furthermore, a national prevalence study conducted in Sweden demonstrated that approximately 3% of women researchers/teachers, and 2% of men, reported experiencing sexual harassment. The prevalence was comparable amongst PhD students, with 4% of women and 2% of men reporting harassment (Rudolfsson et al., 2022). In another study conducted in a Swedish university found that 24.5% of women staff and 26.8% of women students reported exposure to sexual harassment. The equivalent figures for men staff and students were 7 and 11.3%, respectively. For non-binary individuals amongst staff and students, the figures were 33.3% and 29.4, respectively (Agardh et al., 2022). Gender identity, particularly the expression of a transgender identity, has also been linked to bullying. According to the Human Rights Campaign, one in five transgender employees reports

discrimination in the form of termination of employment or denial of promotion (Luther, 2008). As previously studies show, certain groups are more vulnerable to bullying or harassment. It is vital to identify these groups and analyse bullying as an environmental issue to implement preventative measures within organisations, as well as specifically for these vulnerable groups.

The nature of the relationship between perpetrators and targets is also a concern in bullying. Various perpetrators at different organisational levels and with varying degrees of relative social power engage in bullying. Previous studies have shown that 63.4% of bullying targets identified their colleagues as bullies (Keashly and Neuman, 2010). Similar findings were reported in a Swedish national prevalence study in higher education (Rudolfsson et al., 2022) Another study showed that professors exposed to bullying reported that the perpetrators were primarily their colleagues (Buka, 2013). This differs from other kinds of organisations where managers/supervisors are most frequently identified as the bully (Keashly and Neuman, 2013). It has been suggested that bullying in higher education is about "positional" bullying in academia, where positional power has multiple faces. Academic managers, such as chairs and deans, occupy the most powerful positions and control key resources and desired positions (Dentith et al., 2015) whilst students, as consumers or clients of higher education, are permitted greater behavioural latitude and possess considerable power, contra-power bullying (Cassell, 2011; May and Tenzek, 2018). Among faculty categories, professional rank matters. Studies examining professorial rank within the category of "colleague" reported that perpetrators are more likely to be senior in rank relative to their faculty targets (Beckmann et al., 2013). Another factor to be considered is the faculty members' relevance to the university and the tolerance of unprofessional behaviours by high-performing researchers (who win large grants and produce research) (Twale, 2017).

## 1.1 The purpose of the study

This study aimed to assess the stability of the prevalence and causes of bullying among academics within a Swedish medical faculty over time as well as to identify the most common perpetrators involved. Special attention has been paid to the variables of sex and academic position. To evaluate the stability of bullying reports over time, the study utilised two distinct time points.

The research questions (RQs) address the prevalence, patterns, and perceived causes of workplace bullying in academia over time, with attention to sex, position, and the relationship between targets and perpetrators.

Specific RQs:

1 Does the prevalence of bullying remain stable over time?

   a Are there sex-and position-related differences in the prevalence of bullying over time?

   b To what extent do the same individuals report experiences of bullying at both time points?

2 What is the relationship between bullying targets and their perpetrators in terms of sex and academic position?

3 What are the primary reported causes of bullying, considering both the categories defined by Swedish legislation and the targets' own descriptions (open-ended question), and how do these vary by sex and across the two time points?

By incorporating data from both structured and open-ended questions, the analysis offers a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of bullying, capturing a broader spectrum of contributing factors.

# 2 Materials and methods

## 2.1 Study design and individuals

This is a longitudinal study with two repeated measures, conducted in 2009 and 2011. The subjects were academic staff at the medical faculty of a Swedish university. In this study, the following academic positions were included: *senior researchers* (comprising full professors and other independent researchers); *junior researchers*, who have been awarded doctoral degrees and are engaged in a temporary and defined period of advanced, but not yet fully independent, research (including postdocs and research assistants); *lecturers*, who hold teaching positions; and *PhD students*.

The questionnaire was distributed twice via a web survey, with a 24-month interval between the surveys. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from each participant. The study received approval from the Ethics Review Authority (Dnr 2021-03648).

Time Point 1 (T1), the study population consisted of 2,809 employees, and at Time Point 2 (T2), it increased to 3,202 employees. The response rate was 68% at T1 and 66% at T2. Descriptive data are presented in Table 1.

In addition to Table 1, the sex distribution across professional roles in T1 and T2 followed a similar pattern. In T1, senior researchers comprised 55% men and 45% women, junior researchers 40% men and 60% women, lecturers (teaching positions) 33% men and 67% women, and PhD students 36% men and 64% women. A comparable distribution was observed in T2, with senior researchers at 55% men and 45% women, junior researchers at 44% men and 56% women, lecturers at 30% men and 70% women, and PhD students at 35% men and 65% women.

TABLE 1 Descriptive data at the different time points (T1 and T2).

| Background factors | Baseline (T1) | Follow-up 24 months (T2) |
|---|---|---|
| Total number of respondents | 1,800 | 2,026 |
| Age (Mean) | 41.4 | 41.4 |
| Men, *n* (%) | 787 (44) | 884 (44) |
| Women, *n* (%) | 1,013 (56) | 1,142 (56) |
| *Professions* | | |
| Senior researchers | 767 (43) | 887 (44) |
| Junior researchers | 102 (6) | 131 (6) |
| Lecturer (teaching position) | 276 (15) | 278 (14) |
| PhD student | 655 (36) | 730 (36) |

The number of participants responding to both questionnaires among senior researchers was 506 (57%), junior researchers 75 (57%), lecturers (teaching positions) 202 (73%), and *PhD students* 308 (42%).

## 2.2 Data collection

The present study is part of an employee survey centred on the work environment, encompassing an array of topics pertinent to the social and organisational work environment. The survey was administered by a third party unaffiliated with the university, ensuring complete anonymity for the participants. The questionnaire incorporated queries from the extensively validated QPS^Nordic questionnaire (Dallner et al., 2000).

Demographics, age, sex, and academic position.

Bullying was measured with the question, "Have you been subjected to bullying in the last 6 months?" with the response alternatives: Yes/No. The question specifically focused on workplace contexts.

In the questionnaire, bullying was described as follows: "Bullying is a problem at some workplaces and for some employees. Bullying generally refers to reprehensible behaviour on repeated occasions. However, in very serious cases (e.g., sexual violence), one occasion is sufficient. Bullying, however, should not be confused with temporary conflicts and problems in working relationships.

If the respondent answered "Yes" to the preceding question, they were asked the following:

"What caused the bullying?" The response options were specific causes as predefined in the Swedish Discrimination Act (2008:567), namely: sexual, sex, gender identity or expression, religion or beliefs, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and age.

At T2, respondents who selected "other" in response to this question were given the opportunity to describe in writing the cause of the bullying they experienced (open-ended).

"What was your relationship with the person who bullied you?" The alternatives were: (1) Colleague within the organisation, (2) Colleague outside the organisation, (3) Manager, (4) Supervisor, (5) Student/PhD student, (6) Other.

## 2.3 Statistics and analyses

Descriptive analyses were conducted to investigate the differences between different time points, as well as between men and women and various positions. Logistic regression analyses were used to calculate odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals (CI). The authors had information about who was invited to respond to the web survey at the two time points, which allowed them to identify individuals invited at T1 and T2 who responded to one or both web surveys. In Table 2, T1 and T2 data were used to examine whether reporting bullying at T1 was associated with the probability of responding at T2, with analyses conducted separately for each position category. To increase the number of participants, the two measurements were merged. The analysis regarding the risk of being a target of bullying by profession, controlling for sex and age, is presented in Table 3. Tables 4, 5 present the relationship that the person exposed to bullying has with the perpetrator.

The open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2017) to systematically identify patterns within the data. The process followed six key steps: (1) familiarisation with the data,

(2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. To enhance validity and reliability, two researchers independently coded all responses, identifying key concepts before engaging in discussions to refine and consolidate them into broader themes. This iterative approach ensured that the findings were both coherent and grounded in the data (Nowell et al., 2017). To strengthen the rigour of the analysis, the identified categories were further quantified to explore differences based on sex and professional position. This allowed for a comparative assessment of how these factors shape perspectives and experiences within the study. By integrating qualitative and quantitative elements, the analysis provided a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the findings, enabling a deeper exploration of both individual narratives and broader patterns (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

## 3 Results

### 3.1 The prevalence of bullying (stability)

Table 6 presents data from two different time points. The total prevalence remains somewhat similar over time. However, at T2, respondents reported a generally higher prevalence of bullying. To test whether there is a difference between the two years (T1 and T2) in terms of having been bullied within each subgroup, a logistic regression analysis was conducted. The results in Table 6 indicate that in T2, although not statistically significant, there is a somewhat higher probability of being exposed to bullying, especially for junior researchers, women, and PhD students in comparison to T1. However, the non-significant results indicate that the prevalence of bullying is quite stable over time.

Furthermore, results presented in Table 6 indicate that at both time points, women reported being targets of bullying at somewhat higher rates compared to men. However, an additional analysis, not presented in Table 6, was conducted to examine if there were significant differences between women and men in reported bullying exposure at either time point (T1: 1.12, $p = 0.57$; T2: 1.22, $p = 0.28$), and there were no significant differences. Additionally, at both time points, the academic position most exposed to bullying was lecturer. An analysis was conducted to investigate if there were any significant differences between the positions within the years T1 or T2. The reference group in both analyses comprised senior researchers. The results revealed that in T1, there were no significant differences

TABLE 2 The probability of responding to the second survey dependent on being a target or not in survey 1 for each position.

| Variables | OR | 95% CI | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men (bullied)[a] | 0.42 | 0.22–0.79 | 0.002 |
| Women (bullied)[a] | 0.42 | 0.25–0.72 | 0.007 |
| Senior researchers (bullied)[a] | 0.52 | 0.27–0.99 | 0.05 |
| Junior researchers (bullied)[a] | 0.25 | 0.02–4.2 | 0.33 |
| Lecturer (bullied)[a] | 0.19 | 0.07–0.47 | <0.001 |
| PhD students (bullied)[a] | 0.50 | 0.25–1.0 | 0.051 |

[a]Reference value is not being bullied.
Logistic regression. CI, confidence interval.

TABLE 3 Risk of being a target of bullying by profession, controlling for sex and age.

| Variables | OR | 95% CI | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Senior researchers | 1[a] | 1 | 1 |
| Junior researchers | 1.02 | 0.43–2.42 | 0.96 |
| Lecturer | 1.84 | 1.06–3.20 | 0.03 |
| PhD students | 1.70 | 1.02–2.83 | 0.04 |
| Age | 1.01 | 0.99–1.03 | 0.19 |
| Sex | 0.86 | 0.58–1.25 | 0.42 |

[a]The reference group was the senior researchers.
Number of cases included in the model: 2,724. The two measures were merged in this analysis. CI, confidence interval.

TABLE 4 The relationship that the person exposed to bullying has to the perpetrator.

| Relationship to the perpetrator | Bullied men | Bullied women | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Colleague within the organisation *n*, (%) | 23 (29) | 53 (37) | 76 (33) |
| Colleague outside the organisation *n*, (%) | 4 (4) | 4 (3) | 8 (3) |
| Manager *n*, (%)** | 28 (31) | 36 (25) | 64 (27) |
| Supervisor *n*, (%)*** | 19 (20) | 13 (9) | 32 (14) |
| Student/PhD student *n*, (%) | 8 (9) | 25 (17) | 33 (14) |
| Other *n*, (%) | 7 (7) | 13 (9) | 20 (9) |
| | | | |
| Total *n*, (%) | 89 (100) | 144 (100) | 233 (100) |

The result is divided into men and women. The measurements were merged for T1 and T2*.
*The individuals who participated in both T1 and T2 and reported being bullied; both of their responses are included. **Manager holds a managerial position with responsibility for staff. ***Supervisor refers to a position related supervising students/PhD student.

between senior researchers and the other positions (junior researchers: 0.37, *p* = 0.18; lecturers: 1.54, *p* = 0.13; PhD students: 1.15, *p* = 0.55). In T2, however, significant differences were observed between senior researchers and both lecturers (1.77, *p* = 0.03) and PhD students (1.52, *p*-value = 0.04).

As presented in Table 6, the number of respondents reporting being targets of bullying was *n* = 100 at T1 and *n* = 133 at T2 (24 months later). Of the 100 individuals who reported being bullied at T1, only 75 were still employed and thus eligible to receive the T2 survey. Compared to the overall response rate of 66% at T2, a sub-analysis showed a lower response rate (*n* = 41, 54%) among those who had reported being bullied at T1. Among these 41 respondents, 14 (34%) continued to report being bullied at T2, whilst 27 (66%) no longer did. Additionally, 119 new bullying targets were identified at T2, individuals who had not reported being bullied at T1. Of these, 57 had participated in T1 without reporting bullying, whilst 62 had only participated in T2. Given the lower response rate at follow-up among those previously reporting bullying, we conducted an analysis to examine whether the likelihood of responding at T2 was associated with bullying status at T1 reported in Table 2.

The results presented in Table 2 demonstrate that reporting bullying significantly decreased the probability of responding to the

second assessment (T2) in most of the positions. Although there was a decreased probability among the targets of bullying in the junior researcher group to respond to T2, the result was not significant. This suggests that reporting being bullied, regardless of position, decreases the likelihood of responding to a follow-up questionnaire. Moreover, individuals in teaching roles, particularly lecturers, reported the highest risk of bullying shown in Table 3, followed by PhD students.

## 3.2 The relationship to the perpetrator

The targets of bullying were asked to report their relationship to the perpetrator, reported in Table 4. Responding to this question was optional. In this analysis, the two time points were merged, and the results were divided by sex and positions. The results show that the most common perpetrator reported by the targets of bullying was their co-worker/colleagues at the workplace, followed by managers/leaders shown in Table 4. Men reported supervisors as perpetrators more frequently than women, whilst women reported students/PhD students as perpetrators more frequently than men.

The results show differences between positions shown in Table 5. Both senior and junior researchers reported colleagues within the organisation as the primary perpetrator, followed by managers. Lecturers, on the other hand, reported managers as the primary perpetrator, followed by colleagues and students. For PhD students, supervisors were reported as the primary perpetrators, followed by colleagues and students.

## 3.3 The causes of bullying

The reporting of causes of bullying to which respondents were exposed was optional, and it was possible to select multiple response options. Table 7 presents the different causes of bullying. Overall, the dominant cause of bullying fell under the category of "Other" in both assessments. In T2, the response options were modified, and sexual harassment and harassment based on sex were separated, as were ethnicity and religion or other beliefs. In both measures, women reported a higher incidence of sexual harassment, and in T2, they also reported a higher incidence of being bullied based on sex.

Conversely, men reported a higher incidence of bullying due to ethnicity than women. Age was reported as a cause of being bullied by both men and women. The results showed similar percentages regarding different causes of bullying, although a few differed somewhat, such as being exposed to bullying due to transgender identity or expression. At T1, no one marked this as a cause, whereas at T2, three respondents reported being bullied due to this.

At T2, respondents who selected "Other" as the cause of bullying were given the opportunity to describe the cause in an open-ended response. This question was introduced in T2 to gain deeper insights into the perceived causes of bullying. The resulting open-ended categories (Farman et al., 2006) are presented in Table 8. Of the 72 respondents who chose "Other," 63 provided written explanations describing one or more causes of bullying, 37 were women and 26 men. Doctoral students and senior researchers were more likely than other groups to respond to the open-ended question. Several of the predefined causes listed in the questionnaire Table 7 were also mentioned in these open-ended responses. However, those who wrote about their

TABLE 5 The relationship that the person exposed to bullying has to the perpetrator.

| Relationship to the perpetrator | Position of the target of bullying | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Senior researcher | Junior researcher | Lecturer | PhD student | Total |
| Colleague within the organisation *n*, (%) | 33 (40) | 6 (50) | 13 (29) | 24 (26) | 76 (33) |
| Colleague outside the organisation *n*, (%) | 4 (5) | 1 (8) | 0 | 3 (3) | 8 (3) |
| Manager *n*, (%)** | 26 (31) | 5 (42) | 23 (51) | 10 (11) | 64 (27) |
| Supervisor *n*, (%)*** | 4 (5) | 0 | 0 | 28 (30) | 32 (14) |
| Student/PhD-student *n*, (%) | 7 (8) | 0 | 6 (13) | 20 (21) | 33 (14) |
| Other *n*, (%) | 9 (11) | 0 | 3 (7) | 8 (9) | 20 (9) |
| Total *n*, (%) | 83 (100) | 12 (100) | 45 (100) | 93 (100) | 233 (100) |

The result is divided into different positions. The measurements were merged for T1 and T2*. *The individuals who participated in both T1 and T2 and reported being bullied; both of their responses are included. **Manager holds a managerial position with responsibility for staff. ***Supervisor refers to a position related supervising students/PhD student.

TABLE 6 Point prevalence of targets of bullying at two different time points.

| Variables | T1 (*N* = 1,800) | T2 (*N* = 2,026) | OR (*p*-value)* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total number of targets of bullying/harassment, % (*n*) | 5.6 (100) | 6.6 (133) | |
| Age (Mean) | 41.1 | 41.2 | 0.993 (0.585) |
| Sex | | | |
| Men, % (*n*) | 5.2 (41) | 5.9 (52) | 1.138 (0.528) |
| Women % (*n*) | 5.8 (59) | 7.1 (81) | 1.233 (0.208) |
| Academic positions | | | |
| Senior researchers, % (*n*) | 5.1 (39) | 5.1 (45) | 0.997 (0.991) |
| Junior researchers, % (*n*) | 2 (2) | 6.9 (9) | 3.688 (0.103) |
| Lecturer (teaching position), % (*n*) | 7.6 (21) | 8.6 (24) | 1.147 (0.640) |
| PhD-student (employed), % (*n*) | 5.8 (38) | 7.5 (55) | 1.323 (0.172) |

*The OR and the *p*-value come from logistic regression analysis testing if there is a difference between the 2 years (2009 and 2011) of having been bulled within each subgroup. Clustered robust standard errors were used as several observations were included repeatedly. The difference in age was tested with age*year interaction term. Year was used as a categorical variable in all models.

experiences in the open-ended section selected only "Other" and did not mark any of the predefined alternatives. Eleven overarching themes were identified from the responses, and these themes along with their frequencies are presented in Table 8. Many of the behaviours identified in prior studies concerning bullying (Farman et al., 2006) were present, whilst others were specific to the academic work context (Ahmad et al., 2017). The characteristics of the descriptions of bullying varied, with some more related to the behaviours associated with bullying and others to the causes of the bullying. Therefore, the examples vary across themes, causes, behaviours, etc.

Table 8 show that the most common cause of bullying reported was in the category of relations to others, followed by communication. The less frequent causes of bullying were work conditions and work absence. The themes were also divided by sex and positions. Men reported relations (13% versus 8% women) and ethnicity (1.5% versus 0% women) as the primary causes of bullying to a greater extent.

For women, the most frequent themes were communication (10% versus 5% men), power (9% versus 4% men), competence (9% versus 4% men), and exclusion (9% versus 3% men). Only women reported work conditions and work absence as causes of bullying. PhD students reported personal and relations to others, as well as power, as the primary causes of bullying. Moreover, this group was the only one to report ethnicity. Senior researchers, on the other hand, reported competence and communication as the primary causes of bullying. The lecturer group primarily reported relations to others and

communication as causes of bullying. Finally, the junior researchers, who were very few, reported communication as a cause of bullying.

## 4 Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to investigate the prevalence (stability over time) and causes of bullying in different groups based on sex and academic position, as well as the relationship to perpetrators in a medical faculty from two time points. Including two different time points (T1, T2), the stability over time could be examined regarding the aims mentioned above.

Results indicate that the number of individuals exposed to bullying was relatively stable across the two-year period. No significant differences in prevalence were found in any of the groups between T1 and T2. However, most of the subjects reporting being bullied at T2 were new targets, and of those who reported being bullied at T1, 25% had left the organisation during the follow-up period. Previous studies have suggested that perceived bullying is a predictor of intention to leave among faculty members (Ahmad et al., 2017; Meriläinen et al., 2019) as well as sickness absence (Nielsen et al., 2016).

Furthermore, for those bullied at T1 who were still employed at T2, the response rate was lower than for those not bullied at T1. Thirty-four % remained targets of bullying at follow-up (T2), whilst 66% were no longer targets of bullying. Among the new targets at T2,

| Types of harassments | T1 Total | T1 Men*[3] | T1 Women*[3] | T2 Total | T2 Men | T2 Women |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reported being /harassed bullied % (n) | 100 | 41 (40) | 59 (60) | 133 | 38 (52) | 62 (81) |
| Sexual harassment and harassment due to gender | 8 (8) | 2.4 (1) | 12.0 (7) | 3.8 (5) | 0 | 6.2 (5) |
| Gender*[1] | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | 6.0 (8) | 0 | 10 (8) |
| Ethnicity*[2] | 10 (10) | 19.5 (8) | 3.4 (2) | 8.3 (11) | 11.5 (6) | 6.2 (5) |
| Religion or other belief*[2] | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | 1.5 (2) | 1.9 (1) | 1.2 (1) |
| Sexual orientation | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 (1) | 1.9 (1) | 0 |
| Functional disability | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 (1) | 1.9 (1) | 0 |
| Age | 3.0 (3) | 4.9 (2) | 1.7 (1) | 6.0 (8) | 7.7 (4) | 4.9 (4) |
| Transgender identity or expression | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2.3 (3) | 1,9 (1) | 2.5 (2) |
| Other than above | 65 (65) | 61.0 (25) | 67.8 (40) | 54 (72) | 52.0 (27) | 55.6 (45) |
| More than one type | 8 (8) | 4.9 (2) | 10.2 (6) | 8.3 (11) | 9.6 (5) | 7.4 (6) |
| Missing*[3] | 6 (6) | 3.4 (3) | 5.1 (3) | 7.3 (11) | 6.2 (5) | 11.5 (6) |

*[1]In T2 sexual harassment was divided into sexual harassment and gender. *[2]In T2 ethnicity and religion or other belief was divided. In T1 they were together. *[3]People that has not responded to this question.

57 also participated in T1, whilst 62 participated only in T2. The results show that reporting being a target of bullying decreased the probability of responding to a second survey regarding work situation, especially among the group of lecturers. It should be noted that lecturers also constitute the group most exposed to bullying.

Hence, our results illustrate some of the challenges in measuring sensitive issues such as bullying. Considering the low response rate for targets at T1 in the follow-up (T2) and the fact that most targets at follow-up (T2) were new targets, the true number of bullied targets is likely higher than reported when applying a single assessment. Thus, in surveys, not only is underreporting a well-known fact in sensitive issues, but also the fact that targets who had the courage to report at one survey may fail to respond to additional surveys, indicating the complexity and difficulties in determining the true extent of the bullying problem within organisations. Temporary positions are quite common in academia, and many of the participants at T1 may no longer be employed at T2 (Frølich et al., 2018).

The relationship between bullying targets and perpetrators was also studied. At both time points, approximately 30% of bullied respondents reported that a colleague was the perpetrator. This finding is corroborated by previous studies (Keashly and Neuman, 2010). In this study, the results were also divided by sex and position. It emerged that men reported more frequently that supervisors were the perpetrators, whilst women reported more often that students/ PhD students were the perpetrators. Our results confirm previous studies showing that students were more likely to bully women than men (Lampman, 2012; Cassidy et al., 2016). Moreover, this study found that senior and junior researchers most often reported organisational colleagues as primary perpetrators, followed by managers. In contrast, lecturers identified managers as the primary perpetrators, followed by colleagues and students. PhD students reported supervisors, followed by colleagues and students, as the primary perpetrators. The perceived unequal relationship between PhD students and supervisors and its correlation to bullying has been examined in previous studies (Keashly and Neuman, 2010). A qualitative study exploring PhD students' supervisory bullying experiences identified confusion, unrealistic work demands, criticism, anger, rage, inappropriate attention, and abuse of power as emergent themes (Morris, 2011). A positive relationship with a supervisor is central to a PhD student's success.

The respondents were also asked to report the causes of bullying they had experienced. At both time points, the potential causes were pre-defined according to the Swedish Discrimination Act, with sexual harassment and ethnicity being the most frequently reported. Notably, sex-related bullying was more prevalent among women, whilst men more often reported ethnicity-based bullying, a pattern consistent with previous research indicating that racial and ethnic minorities frequently encounter workplace discrimination, exclusion, and microaggressions (Roscigno et al., 2009). Such bullying often manifests as social isolation, professional undermining, or increased scrutiny, which can contribute to long-term career disadvantages (Misawa, 2015). A further difference observed between the sexes will be discussed subsequently. In addition to the pre-defined causes, respondents could select an "other" option in T2. Interestingly, most respondents subjected to bullying selected "other" over the pre-defined alternatives. At T2, respondents choosing "other" were then asked to specify the bullying cause in an open-ended question. Upon analysis of these open-ended responses, several themes relating to causes of bullying were identified, some of which were general whilst others were more specific to an academic setting.

The most common themes were "relations to others" (e.g., being mistreated by others); "communication" (e.g., receiving degrading comments); "power" (e.g., being suppressed by a manager); and "position/competence" (e.g., possessing a different competence than others). Considering the different themes, most can be linked to various organisational factors. Salin (2003) presented different organisational factors related to bullying, including enabling structures or necessary antecedents for bullying to occur (e.g., perceived power imbalances, and dissatisfaction and frustration), motivating structures or incentives (e.g., internal competition, reward systems, and expected benefits) and precipitating processes or triggering circumstances (e.g., downsizing and restructuring, organisational changes, changes in the composition of the workgroup) (Salin, 2003). These factors could be relevant to a university organisation, particularly factors such as perceived power imbalances, frustration, internal competition, reward systems, expected benefits and frequent changes in workgroup composition.

TABLE 8 An overview of the themes of the types described in an open-ended response question as well as the frequencies of the themes.

| | Themes | Examples | Frequencies N (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Personal factors | Age, personality | 7 (10) |
| 2 | Relations to others | Jealousy due to success, intimidation, lack of respect, open threats, derogatory attitudes from others, exposed to bad rumours | 15 (21) |
| 3 | Publications | Being unfairly denied authorships, delaying submission of manuscripts | 4 (6) |
| 4 | Power | Lack of power, yelled at in front of others | 9 (13) |
| 5 | Origin/ethnicity | Being migrant, nationality | 1 (1) |
| 6 | Working conditions | Work conflict, isolation, rivalry | 1 (1) |
| 7 | Positions and competence | Professional background such as not being a physician, different competence than the others | 9 (13) |
| 8 | Exclusion | Ignored, systematic invisibility, excluded without any explanations, isolated, completely disregarded | 8 (11) |
| 9 | Communication | Condescending jokes, downgrading comments, silence, withholding of important information, constantly questioned | 11 (15) |
| 10 | Legitimate absence from work | Pregnancy, being pregnant, being on sick leave | 1 (1) |
| 11 | Other/unclear | "Other" but not reporting what other are or stating | 6 (8) |

In both assessments, women reported a somewhat higher, albeit not statistically significant, prevalence of bullying than men. Our results, therefore, do not corroborate findings from previous studies that suggest women are more susceptible to bullying than men. However, we did discern a similar trend to that observed in other studies, for instance, see Rosander and Blomberg (2021). Our findings indicate that sex-based sexual harassment as a cause of bullying is more prevalent amongst women. Between 12 and 16.2% of the women who reported being bullied attributed it to their sex/gender. This outcome corroborates other research that determined women are subject to sex/gender-based bullying to a greater degree (Rudolfsson et al., 2022; Agardh et al., 2022) than men. In addition to sex differences, different occupational roles were analysed. In this study, lecturers and subsequently PhD students were the groups most subject to bullying. Similar findings were reported in a study from a Turkish nursing school faculty, where 17% of teachers revealed they had experienced bullying (Yildirim et al., 2007).

## 4.1 Strengths and limitations

A strength of the present study was that its assessment of bullying was embedded in an employee survey about the work environment, covering various topics regarding the social and organisational work environment. Moreover, the survey was conducted by a third party not employed at the university, ensuring complete anonymity for the participants.

There are, however, some limitations to this study. The use of self-reported data may affect the accuracy of the measurements. Self-reported behaviours, in general, are strongly influenced by features of the research instrument, including wording, format, and context. In this study, psychometrically sound and validated questionnaires were used, minimising the risk of measuring incorrect content.

A challenge in measuring bullying is that individuals define it differently. As a result, bullying can be interpreted as, for example, conflict or lack of support. To minimise different interpretations, bullying was explicitly defined in one of the survey questions. Nevertheless, a combination of single-item self-labelling and multi-item behavioural checklists would strengthen a bullying study, as these

two approaches to measuring bullying reflect different aspects of the phenomenon (Keashly, 2019).

Moreover, only one university participated in the study, which limits the generalisability of the results. However, measurements taken at two different time points may have enhanced the validity of the findings. Whilst this study aimed to be descriptive and sought to increase knowledge about harassment in an academic setting, a more comprehensive study involving multiple universities would be preferable. Additionally, to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of bullying in an academic context, the use of qualitative methods, such as personal interviews and focus groups, is recommended for future studies.

Finally, one limitation of this study might be that the data were not collected in recent years. However, the primary aim was not to assess the current prevalence of bullying, but rather to examine stability, reliability, and incidence of self-reported bullying over time. Notably, we had access to information on all individuals who received the questionnaire at both points, regardless of their response status. This allowed us to explore patterns of reporting across time.

This study did not provide a third alternative for respondents to report their sex, offering only 'man' or 'woman' as options. This may introduce uncertainty in the analysis regarding sex, as some employees reported harassment due to "transgender identity or expression." In future research, questions about sex should be defined more inclusively.

## 4.2 Practical implications

Exposure to bullying in academia has severe consequences for individuals, organisations, and society, leading to costs like healthcare expenses and reduced productivity (Aboagye et al., 2021). A study of Swedish higher education institutions found that workplace bullying significantly correlates with increased stress and burnout (Henning et al., 2017). Early social support can help mitigate these effects when bullying is low to moderate; however, this support loses its effectiveness as bullying intensifies (Berglund et al., 2024; Olsson et al., 2025). This highlights the need for timely intervention.

Academia is often described as having a hostile culture, particularly when bullying comes from supervisors (Keashly, 2019).

Despite this, many established institutions have developed policies with zero tolerance for bullying, providing guidelines and support systems for victims. A May 2021 article in *Nature* outlined steps to manage bullying, including recognising it, seeking support, and understanding the complaint process (Gewin, 2021). A recent guideline on managing workplace social health risks, such as victimisation and bullying, further emphasises these steps (Blomberg et al., 2021). Effective preventive measures rely on a systematic work environment management system.

Notably, teaching staff—who engage closely with students, often described as "clients"—are especially vulnerable to bullying, including "contra-power" bullying. This form of bullying, where those in authority roles are harassed by individuals with less formal power, is increasingly relevant as power dynamics shift between students and academics. Lee's (2006) work, *University Students Behaving Badly,* brought attention to academics' challenges with student-initiated bullying, a trend echoed in recent studies of nurse academics in Australia, where contra-power harassment is prevalent (Christensen et al., 2020; Lee, 2006).

## 5 Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that bullying is a pervasive issue in higher education, with certain groups, particularly lecturers, being subjected to it more frequently. Furthermore, the prevalence of bullying appears to remain relatively consistent across different time periods. However, the seemingly shown stability over time hides rather important transformations. Nonetheless, it is vital to acknowledge that surveys conducted amongst employees might underestimate the actual prevalence of bullying. This is because individuals who are targets of such behaviour may not always come forward to report it.

The causes of bullying vary between men and women. Women are subjected to higher rates of sex-related bullying, whereas men more frequently experience bullying due to ethnicity. Moreover, the majority of those who have been bullied identified factors related to the competitive academic environment as causes of bullying, these include disputes over authorship, rights to publication, and professional jealousy. The main perpetrator is often a workplace colleague, closely followed by managers or leaders.

As in other workplaces, bullying in academic settings negatively affects productivity (Aboagye et al., 2021) and has damaging health effects on the targets. It is vital to acknowledge the presence of bullying in these environments too. The experience of bullying in the workplace undoubtedly heightens stress and may, over time, induce targets to switch workplaces. Several interventions have been suggested to prevent bullying (Beckmann et al., 2013). Nonetheless, successful bullying prevention necessitates acknowledging the existence of bullying and developing tailored preventive interventions specific to the organisation (Blomberg et al., 2021).

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

## Author contributions

## Funding

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

## Publisher's note

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