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# Can ethical leadership inhibit workplace bullying across East and West: Exploring cross-cultural interactional justice as a mediating mechanism

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## ABSTRACT

While workplace bullying is recognised as a serious issue for management concern around the world, the literature on approaches to prevent and manage it in international settings is sparse. This paper advances knowledge on managing workplace bullying by reporting an investigation of how and why ethical leadership may be an effective management style to address this issue across cultures. It draws on Social Learning and Social Exchange Theories to conceptualise interactional justice as a possible mediating mechanism by which workplace bullying can be reduced in the presence of ethical leadership.

The researcher surveyed 636 employees working in an equivalent job context in Australia ( $N = 306$ ) and Pakistan ( $N = 330$ ) to determine the cross-cultural effectiveness of ethical leadership-based framing. Through the examination of direct and indirect effects (via interactional justice) of ethical leadership on workplace bullying, the findings indicated that employee exposure to such behaviour is significantly reduced because ethical leaders foster justice at work. This study has implications for improving international management practice in regard to workplace bullying.

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## 1. Introduction

Workplace bullying commonly refers to a situation in which one or more employees of weaker power are regularly and repeatedly exposed to unethical and unreasonable behaviours at work which they find difficult to escape or defend themselves against (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Harvey, Treadway, Heames, & Duke, 2009). According to reliable international estimates, up to 18% of the global workforce is exposed to bullying at work (see Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010 for a review). Research has also shown detrimental implications of workplace bullying on those exposed to it, in the form of elevated stress levels and increased sickness absenteeism, leading to a decline in organisational productivity and, ultimately, economic output (Bonde et al., 2016; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Samnani & Singh, 2012). The prevalent nature and serious implications of workplace bullying warrant research that advances understanding of the management of such behaviour (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Nielsen, 2014; Nielsen et al., 2010). A recent study

observed: “Such persistence and harm suggests a challenge for organisational leadership to tackle the issue proactively and initiate a cultural change driven by moral norms and enforcement of ethical standards” (Ahmad & Sheehan, 2017, p. 21).

Knowledge on the prevention and management of workplace bullying is recognised as a ‘black box’ in the literature (Einarsen, Skogstad, Rørvik, Lande, & Nielsen, 2016, Nielsen, 2014); however, specifically in regard to leadership, ethical leadership style has emerged as a critical inhibiting factor (Stouten et al., 2010; Yamada, 2008). Ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). This leadership style is particularly associated with the regulation of moral norms and enforcement of ethical standards at work (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). Furthermore, Einarsen et al. (2016, p. 8) have emphasised that “it is of the utmost importance for both exposed individuals and organisations that we seek knowledge on preventive measures against bullying and how the effectiveness of these measures may, or may not, vary between national cultures”. The purpose of this paper is

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therefore to advance the understanding of why and how workplace bullying can be effectively addressed across cultures through ethical leadership.

While considerable progress has been made in understanding the role of leadership in workplace bullying, research has maintained a primary focus on those leadership styles that trigger and escalate this behaviour (Einarsen, Skogstad, & Glasø, 2013, pp. 129–154; Nielsen, 2013). This has been restated by Warszewska-Makuch, Bedyńska, and Żoźniarczyk-Zreda (2015, p. 130): “there is little research into the positive role of leadership in reducing pathological phenomena such as workplace bullying in organisations.” Moreover, extant research has been predominantly conducted in Western countries (Francioli et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2013), where cultures drastically differ from those in Eastern countries; a notable example of these differences is the higher individualistic values prevailing in the West (Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Viewing such cultural differences in the light of contemporary trends towards internationally connected workplaces, the significance of research that examines the effectiveness of leadership style(s) in managing employee behaviour across Eastern and Western contexts becomes apparent (see House et al., 2004). Workplace bullying is internationally recognised as representing unacceptable conduct, because it violates moral norms of respect and dignity at work (Bolton, 2007; Harvey et al., 2009; Samnani & Singh, 2012). Yet it is prevalent across cultures around the world (Nielsen et al., 2010; Power et al., 2013). This is because, beyond socio-cultural contexts, a negative work environment is identified as a major cause of workplace bullying (Einarsen, 1999; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Leymann, 1996; Salin, 2008).

This notion was advanced through research, widely acknowledged as ‘the work environment hypothesis’ (Francioli et al., 2015; Leymann, 1996; Salin, 2003), which showed workplace bullying is a complex process, enabled by a range of contextual and work factors, such as organisational cultures, climate, structures and leadership styles. Furthermore, there is ample evidence to support the destructive role played by leaders in creating a negative environment, and hence providing a breeding ground for the occurrence of bullying (Einarsen et al., 2013, pp. 129–154; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Salin & Hoel, 2011; Skogstad, Torsheim, Einarsen, & Hauge, 2011). Unjust treatment at work is common in such an environment (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). Given this backdrop, it is surprising to note a lack of research that advances how injustice and bullying at work can be proactively addressed across East and West through positive leading styles. This is an important research gap, as research conducted in different cultures not only offers greater generalisation of theoretical framing, but also has implications for improved international management practice (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Accordingly, this paper conceptualises an ethical leadership-based framing for addressing workplace bullying in international settings and tests it in the Western context of Australia and the Eastern context of Pakistan, which have widely known cultural differences (see also Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In so doing, this paper makes several contributions to the literature.

First, in response to the recognition that workplace bullying literature is largely ‘atheoretical’ (Branch et al., 2013), this paper expands the literature by drawing on Social Learning Theory (SLT; Bandura, 1977) and Social Exchange Theory (SET; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) to advance understanding of a process for addressing this issue through ethical leadership. Past research has demonstrated the significance of leadership in workplace bullying situations, but it largely examined those leadership styles which escalate such behaviour (see e.g., Einarsen et al., 2013, pp. 129–154; Nielsen, 2013; Salin & Hoel, 2011). By contrast, this paper addresses

the recommendations of Einarsen et al. (2016) and Warszewska-Makuch et al. (2015) in examining the effectiveness of a preventive approach for workplace bullying in different cultures by investigating a positive leadership style. Second, researchers have acknowledged a substantial limitation in understanding the mechanisms through which leadership impacts bullying at work (see Nielsen, 2014; Stouten et al., 2010). To address that limitation, this paper advances understanding of a justice-based mechanism associated with the workings of ethical leadership which may help in the prevention of workplace bullying. Third, since both ethical leadership and workplace bullying have been predominantly studied in Western countries (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Nielsen et al., 2010), this paper extends the international organisational behaviour literature by investigating the relationship between these in Pakistan, a context hitherto under-researched.

In the following sections, a review of literature is presented that sets the stage for an ethical leadership-driven approach to subsequent hypothesis development. The study’s design and data collection method are then detailed and data findings interpreted. Following this, the findings are discussed and practice implications provided. Finally, the paper concludes with an outline of new research directions arising from the present study. It is hoped that this paper will mark a further step towards the creation of positive work environments across cultures by advancing knowledge on the prevention of workplace bullying in two countries.

### 1.1. The literature review

The most widely applied definition of workplace bullying in international literature comes from Einarsen et al. (2011):

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction, or process, it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying is an escalated process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts.

This definition asserts that workplace bullying encompasses frequent, persistent and escalating negative social behaviour in the power relationship between one or more perpetrators and one or more of their targets. The power differences have been linked to the inability of the targeted persons to escape or defend themselves due to being in a position of inferior power. It is also widely agreed that workplace bullying is a misuse of power by its holder (Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011).

The power differences in a work environment, although not limited to a hierarchical power base, are nevertheless formalised in the boss-subordinate relationship. While workplace bullying can occur at any hierarchical level within a work environment (Branch et al., 2013), research indicates that it is commonly a downward process, with supervisors and managers as typical perpetrators in up to 80% of bullying cases (Hoel et al., 2010). In fact, research has established that leadership style is a key predictor of bullying within a work environment (Einarsen et al., 2013, pp. 129–154; Francioli et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2013). Leymann (1996), Einarsen (1999) and Salin (2003) argued that workplace bullying persists mainly because the leadership permits the behaviour, either directly by engaging in it, or indirectly by failing to punish those who perpetrate it. As Einarsen, Raknes, and Matthiesen (1994) noted, workplace bullying is a sign of ineffective leadership even in the absence of downward bullying. Salin (2003) concurred with

this perspective, arguing that perpetrators' perceived costs for engaging in bullying, such as receiving a reprimand, being coerced or being terminated from the job, are reduced in the presence of weak and dysfunctional leaders at work.

In particular, dysfunctional leadership styles such as *laissez-faire* and destructive leadership fail to punish perpetrators and miscarry the norms of appropriate behaviours at work (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Nielsen, 2013; Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). *Laissez-faire* leadership specifically refers to inactive and avoidant behaviour of leaders who evade their assigned responsibilities, put in minimal effort to get work done, and show little concern for employee needs (Einarsen et al., 2007). Einarsen et al. (2007) and Skogstad et al. (2007) demonstrated that a higher incidence of workplace bullying in the presence of *laissez-faire* leaders was mainly because of their avoidant response and ineffective intervention in such behaviour. Similarly, destructive leadership is positively associated with workplace bullying because it exhibits unfair and unethical behaviour towards followers (Einarsen et al., 1994, 2007; Nielsen, 2013; Salin, 2003). This paper draws on Bandura's (1977) SLT to explain the higher incidence of workplace bullying in the presence of destructive and *laissez-faire* leadership. According to this theory, individuals learn vicariously by observing behaviours and consequences of the observed behaviours from their social environment. SLT further suggests that individuals mimic the behaviours of credible role models in a social environment.

Leaders and managers act as such credible behavioural role models in the workplace. Their position and visibility in the workplace hierarchy readily catch followers' attention. Leaders also possess legitimate power which can be used to reward or punish followers and to guide their subsequent behaviour at work (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown et al., 2005). For example, if an employee is promoted by taking credit for work done by others, then such a promotional reward signals to those observing that behaviour that taking credit for another's work is an acceptable means of advancing one's career. Research by Salin (2003, p. 1221) has found that "individuals who operate in a [negative] work environment where others are rewarded for aggressive behaviour are more likely to engage in similar acts themselves". In other words, bullying behaviour can be learned vicariously in a work environment in the presence of dysfunctional leadership. The literature on leadership has termed such dysfunctional and destructive leading styles 'unethical leadership' (see also Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Ünal, Warren, & Chen, 2012).

Research continues to reflect the notion that ethical lapses in leaders' behaviour increase workplace bullying. Apart from extensive empirical research underpinning the notion that workplace bullying is caused by unethical leadership (see e.g., Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2009; Nielsen, 2013; Skogstad et al., 2007), in-depth qualitative studies also strengthen the idea that workplace bullying is attributable to leadership's ethical failure (see Ahmad & Sheehan, 2017; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott's (2011, p. 355) in-depth qualitative study found that those who were bullied

... believed bullying was primarily due to the failures of organizational authorities (n = 227, 92.3%). A central theme was upper management's reluctance to stop abuse and punish actors [perpetrators], actions, most participants expected from upper management. They explained bullying by claiming that upper management maintained employee-abusive cultures, bullied to cover up inadequacies, used aggression as an HR tool, and feared or had personal relationships with actors.

Yamada (2008) has discussed an ethical dilemma faced by human resource management (HRM) when dealing with bullying,

where the perpetrator is a power holder in the workplace, prodigious in business dealings with industry, and able to generate excess revenue: will he or she be punished? He emphasised that such situations call for ethical decision makers at the top level, mainly because the perpetrators are likely to be more powerful than the targets in organisations, and power dynamics tend to favour the stronger party.

For the prevention of such negative behaviour, although anti-bullying policies act as a key approach, research by Salin (2008) and Woodrow and Guest (2014) showed that such policies were not credibly enforced by HRM. Yamada (2008) asserted that the moral character and ethical values of leadership would improve HRM practice towards effective implementation of espoused policies. Building on these insights on lack of effective enforcement of anti-bullying policies and ineffectiveness of HRM in workplace bullying (see also Cowan, 2011; Duffy, 2009; Woodrow & Guest, 2014), this paper has framed the significance of ethical leadership as a positive means of addressing workplace bullying.

The literature on leadership, in particular, provides evidence of fair implementation of policies, setting enforceable standards of ethical behaviour and effective punishment of unethical behaviour by ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2012). While there are other positive leadership styles besides ethical leadership (e.g., transformational leadership), as Brown et al. (2005, p. 117) noted, the "ethical dimension of leadership represents a small component that falls within the nexus of inspiring, stimulating and visionary leader behaviors that make up transformational and charismatic leadership". However, they reported that such leaders (e.g., transformational) can act in unethical ways too. Accordingly, Brown et al. (2005) conceptualised ethical leadership as a distinct construct with a core focus on behavioural ethics, and called for theory-driven investigations to determine the unique potential of this particular leadership style in regulating followers' moral conduct. The present study therefore undertook a focused examination of Brown et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of ethical leadership from the vantage point of addressing workplace bullying.

## 1.2. Theory and hypotheses development

This paper has drawn on SLT to frame the potential of ethical leadership for the prevention of workplace bullying. Ethical leaders are virtuous, fair and trustworthy leaders who effectively communicate the importance of right ways of behaving, and are credible sources to model positive behaviours at work (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown et al., 2005). Through an empirical inquiry, Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, and Salvador (2009) demonstrated that the presence of ethical leadership in organisations moved from one hierarchical level to the next through a behavioural role modelling process that integrated rewards and punishments. Research has also shown that followers working under ethical leadership aligned their behaviour with the ethical codes communicated to them and exhibited morally sound behaviour (Mayer et al., 2009; Mayer et al., 2012). This discouraged the occurrence of negative behaviour and encouraged positive and ethical behaviour in the workplace (Mayer et al., 2009). It can therefore be argued that employees working under ethical leadership are less likely to be exposed to workplace bullying.

Although national cultural differences sometimes pose a challenge for organisational leadership from a behavioural management standpoint, because a leadership style found effective in one country or culture may be ineffective in another (see e.g., Dickson, Castaño, Magomaeva, & Den Hartog, 2012). However, Resick, Hanges, Dickson, and Mitchelson (2006) and Resick et al. (2011) lend support to cross-cultural convergence in the notion of ethical leadership by demonstrating that its core behavioural



attributes – integrity, character, morality and accountability – are universally endorsed qualities of effective leaders. SLT and the cross-cultural endorsement of ethical leadership, when considered together, lead to the first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Perceived ethical leadership will lower employee exposure to workplace bullying across cultures.

Apart from regulating employee behaviour, ethical leadership also has a potential to develop a positive work environment. Stouten et al. (2010) have advanced the idea that ethical leadership creates a positive work environment by improving its design through appropriate workload and better working conditions. Since workplace bullying is caused by a negative work environment (Einarsen et al., 1994; Hauge et al., 2007), Stouten et al. (2010) empirically showed that bullying is discouraged in the presence of ethical leadership because this brings significant improvements in the design of work environment. The present study moves beyond the design of the work environment to advance an alternative mechanism through which ethical leadership may aid the prevention of workplace bullying.

Building on the previously postulated notion that bullying behaviour is inherently attributable to unjust work environments (see e.g., Parzefall & Salin, 2010), it is argued that ethical leadership may foster workplace justice. Workplace justice relates to the aspects of ‘distributive’, ‘procedural’ and ‘interactional justice’ perceptions in organisations (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Cohen-Charash and Spector (2001, p. 280) defined *distributive justice* as the “perceived fairness of outcomes”, *procedural justice* as “the fairness of the process by which outcomes are determined” and *interactional justice* as an extension of procedural justice that “pertains to the human side of organisational practices, that is, to the way the management (or those controlling rewards and resources) is behaving toward the recipient of justice” (p. 281). According to Parzefall and Salin (2010), of these three dimensions, analysis of the relationship between interactional justice and workplace bullying is of vital importance. This is because workplace bullying is an interpersonal issue that violates the norms of mutual respect at work, and, in order to understand the management of interpersonal misbehaviour, the prime focus needs to be on the interactional dimension. Parzefall and Salin (2010) have called for an empirical inquiry to ascertain the nature of the relationship between interactional justice and workplace bullying.

### 1.3. Interactional justice and workplace bullying

Interactional justice refers to “the interpersonal treatment and communication by management to employees” (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001, p. 279). The present study has drawn on SET (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) to explicate the relationship between interactional justice and workplace bullying. The underlying premise of SET is that organisations provide a platform for transactions (e.g., exchange of work for pay) that generally involve interactions between management representatives and employees (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). These interactions generate mutual and reciprocal obligations in a social relationship (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Employees develop perceptions of fairness and justice during this social exchange process that guide their subsequent behaviour (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). Within a work environment, this social exchange relationship naturally exists between an employee and his or her direct supervisor (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). That is, interactional justice represents fairness perceptions relating to one’s interaction with a direct supervisor (Cropanzano, Prehar, & Chen, 2002).

This means that interactional injustice occurs when the supervisor fails to treat a subordinate politely and respectfully, and does

not justify decisions impacting the latter (Bies & Moag, 1986; Burton, Sablinski, & Sekiguchi, 2008; Greenberg, 1990). Workplace bullying is generally associated with regular and frequent unfair treatment by supervisors (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Neuman, 2004). It is also documented that the immediate supervisor perpetrated workplace bullying in up to 70% of reported cases in Australia, for example (Hanley & O’Rourke, 2016). Studies have shown that interactional justice impacts employee behaviour, and that interactional injustice increases aggression, conflict and bullying at work (Cropanzano & Baron, 1991; Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Neuman & Baron, 2011; Neuman, 2004). For example, Tepper (2007) and Hoobler and Hu (2013) demonstrated that interactional justice predicted ‘abusive supervision’ (a top-down and most common form of workplace bullying). Interactional justice has already been generalized and validated in many cross-cultural contexts, hence implying that key justice attributes are constant across cultures (Greenberg, 1990; Wu, Huang, Li, & Liu, 2012). This leads to the second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** Perceived interactional justice will be negatively related to employee exposure to workplace bullying across cultures.

Having discussed the effects of ethical leadership and interactional justice on workplace bullying, it is next postulated that interactional justice may mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee exposure to workplace bullying.

### 1.4. The mediating role of interactional justice

According to Brown et al. (2005), ethical leaders “create a just work environment by making decisions that are perceived by employees to be fair” (p. 119). Research is suggestive of a profound impact of ethical leadership on interpersonal dynamics at work (Mayer et al., 2012). As Holtz and Harold, (2013, p. 496) note, “a leader who treats employees with respect, shows concern for employees, and communicates with employees in a friendly manner should likely foster favourable perceptions of interactional justice”. From a social learning perspective, the influence of ethical leadership is likely to shape the behaviour of supervisors towards those working under them on moral and ethical dimensions and this behavioural improvement may be visible in their subsequent interactions with subordinates.

Research has also shown that perceived interactional justice is strongly associated with a positive evaluation of organisational leadership (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2002). From a social exchange perspective, this would imply that supervisors working under ethical leaders have positive perceptions of their leader’s fairness and integrity, and they feel obligated to reciprocate by themselves engaging in similar behaviour towards subordinates. Accordingly, positive judgments of supervisors’ actions and decisions may be induced among employees and perceptions of injustice diminished. Further, there are suggestions that employee perceptions of interactional justice can mediate the effect of a leadership style on their subsequent behaviour (Burton, Taylor, & Barber, 2014; Tepper, 2007). This leads to the following expectation:

**Hypothesis 3.** Perceived interactional justice will mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee exposure to workplace bullying across cultures.

### 1.5. The design of present study

This study’s hypotheses were tested through a cross-cultural

fieldwork in Australia and Pakistan. The design recommendations for cross-cultural research underscore the selection of countries with contrasting cultures, alignment of within-country research settings, equivalence of samples, data and measurement (see for example Hult et al., 2008; Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). Extensive research on social and cross-cultural psychology has revealed noticeable differences between South Asian and Western cultures (see Hofstede et al., 2010; House et al., 2004). Francioli et al. (2015) therefore specifically called for comparative research between individualistic and collectivistic societies for cross-cultural generalisation of the leadership's influence on workplace bullying. Australia has a highly individualistic culture, whereas Pakistani culture is largely collectivist (see also Hofstede et al., 2010).

In order to align work settings and to obtain equivalent samples from Australia and Pakistan, the researcher surveyed academics in universities only, since workplace bullying is reportedly higher in academia internationally (Ahmad, Kalim, & Kaleem, 2017; McKay, Arnold, Fratzi, & Thomas, 2008). Equivalence of samples was predicted on the basis of academics' engagement in similar jobs. This study prioritised voluntary participation and obtained employee perceptions via surveys which were administered concurrently between November 2014 and March 2015 in fifteen universities located in different states/territories/provincial regions within each country. Table 1 provides detailed information on the demographic characteristics of the samples from Australia and Pakistan.

Of the 306 Australian respondents, 102 were male and 179 female, compared with 196 male and 118 female in the 330 Pakistani respondents. The difference in totals is accounted for by non-disclosure (Table 1). Most respondents in both countries (Australia = 29.1%, Pakistan = 42.1%) were aged between 30 and 39 years. The majority of Australian (67.3%) and Pakistani (87%) respondents worked full-time, with 47.1% of the Australians and 61.5% of the Pakistanis having continuing work engagement.

## 1.6. Measures

### 1.6.1. Ethical leadership

The employees reported the ethical leadership style of their head of academic unit through a 10-item measure adopted from Brown et al. (2005). An example item is: "My head of department sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics". A 5-point scale was applied (with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the Australians were 0.95 and for Pakistanis were 0.92, hence demonstrating internal reliability of this measure in both countries as according to Nunnally's (1978) cut-off criterion of above 0.8 (cf. Lance, Butts, & Michels, 2006).

### 1.6.2. Exposure to workplace bullying

Building on Nielsen (2013), exposure to workplace bullying was measured by deriving items from the Negative Acts Questionnaire Revised (NAQ-R; Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009). International research has provided sound psychometric support for both original and derived versions of NAQ-R (see Giorgi, Leon-Perez, & Arenas, 2015; Nielsen, 2013). Through this measure, the respondents reported the frequency with which they had experienced commonly perceived negative behaviours at work during past six months. The response options were: 1 = "Never"; 2 = "Now and then"; 3 = "Monthly"; 4 = "Weekly" and 5 = "Daily". Examples of specific items include: "Persistent criticism of your work and effort" and "Someone withholding information which affects your performance". In line with recent studies (Giorgi et al., 2015; Glambek, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2016), all items were included to form a continuous scale to operationalise respondents' exposure to workplace bullying. In the present cross-national contexts, the measure demonstrated sound internal consistency, with Cronbach alpha of 0.89 for the Australian sample, and 0.86 for the Pakistani sample.

**Table 1**  
Demographic information of Australian and Pakistani respondents.

		Australia		Pakistan	
		N	%	N	%
Gender	Male	102	33.3	196	59.4
	Female	179	58.5	118	35.8
	Not disclosed	25	8.2	16	4.8
Age (in years)	Under 20	1	0.3	0	0
	20–29	35	11.4	79	23.9
	30–39	89	29.1	139	42.1
	40–49	61	19.9	61	18.5
	50–59	72	23.5	23	7
	Over 60	21	6.9	11	3.3
	Not disclosed	27	8.8	17	5.2
Designation	Lecturer	66	21.6	81	24.5
	Senior Lecturer/Assistant Professor	43	14.1	130	39.4
	Associate Professor	28	9.2	27	8.2
	Professor	25	8.2	20	6.1
	Teaching Associate	24	7.8	13	3.9
	Research Associate	50	16.3	21	6.4
	Other	45	14.7	23	7
	Not disclosed	25	8.2	15	4.5
	Qualification	Bachelor Degree	22	7.2	12
Honours Degree	23	7.5	12	3.6	
Master/MPhil	55	18	175	53	
PhD	157	51.3	85	25.8	
Post-Doctorate	17	5.6	11	3.3	
Other	7	2.3	18	5.5	
Employment Basis	Not disclosed	25	8.2	17	5.2
	Full-Time	206	67.3	287	87
	Part-time	71	23.2	19	5.8
Employment Status	Not disclosed	29	9.5	24	7.3
	Contractual/Fixed-term	132	43.1	110	33.3
	Ongoing	146	47.1	203	61.5
	Not disclosed	28	9.2	17	5.2

### 1.6.3. Interactional justice

This study used a 6-item interactional justice measure developed by Moorman (1991). Specific items included “Your supervisor treats you with kindness and consideration” and “Your supervisor takes steps to deal with you in a truthful manner.” All responses were tapped on a 5 point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.94 for Australia and 0.90 for Pakistan.

An additional measure of collectivism from the cultural values scale proposed by Yoo, Donthu, and Lenartowicz (2011) was included in the survey to cross-validate this study’s assumption regarding Australia and Pakistan’s cultural differences. This scale comprised six items (e.g., “Group success is more important than individual success”). All items were measured on a 7-point scale with 1 corresponding to strongly disagree and 7 to strongly agree. Cronbach’s alpha for collectivism measure was 0.85 for Australia and 0.89 for Pakistan.

The survey design and administration followed Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff’s (2012) procedural remedies to minimise potential sources of common method variance (CMV) by using different scale anchoring formats for independent and dependent variables as well as by assuring anonymity and confidentiality of respondents. CMV is expected when study’s independent and dependent variables are reported by the same respondent during the same timeframe.

### 1.7. Control variables

In line with previous research (e.g., Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Salin, & Morante, 2008; Zapf, Escartín, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2011), this study controlled for participant gender, age-group and academic designation, because these can confound with exposure to workplace bullying.

### 1.8. Analytical strategies and results

Given this study’s assumption of cross-cultural differences between Australia and Pakistan, data analysis was conducted separately for each country and results compared to address the research question. The reason for not combining the two data sets for analysis was findings from previous research revealing cross-country differences in employee perceptions of both workplace bullying (see Escartín, Zapf, Arrieta, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011; Loh, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2010; Power et al., 2013) and ethical leadership (Resick et al., 2011). For example, Loh et al. (2010) showed that there was a higher expectation of workplace bullying in Asian culture in contrast to the West. Therefore, through hypothesis testing, it could be determined whether the expected reduction in employee exposure to workplace bullying through perceived ethical leadership is simultaneously supported across the cultures of Australia and Pakistan (Hypotheses 1-3). The study cross-checked the assumption of cultural differences on the basis of respondents’ data on collectivist orientation and found significant mean differences through the Mann-Whitney *U* test ( $U = 63474$ ,  $z = -11.508$ ,  $p < .005$ ) between Australians and Pakistanis. Consistent with Hofstede’s (2001) initial findings, the results supported that Pakistanis were significantly more collectivist than Australians.

To ensure the equivalence of data and measurement (Hult et al., 2008), the study followed Vandenberg and Lance’s (2000) guidelines and utilised a two-step analytical approach. In the first step, a three-factor measurement model, with ethical leadership, interactional justice and workplace bullying as latent factors, was tested separately for Australian and Pakistani datasets through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The fitness of the model was assessed using the chi-square value ( $\chi^2$ ), normed chi-square ( $\chi^2/df$ ), root

mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), Comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), (Kline, 2011). The results revealed an acceptable model fit for the Australian data ( $\chi^2 = 741.19$ ,  $df = 296$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.50$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.07$ ,  $TLI = 0.913$ ,  $CFI = 0.927$ ). The three factor model also provided a good fit for data for Pakistani data ( $\chi^2 = 642.66$ ,  $df = 296$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.17$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $TLI = 0.914$ ,  $CFI = 0.927$ ).

In the second step, this three-factor model was tested using multi-group CFA (Kline, 2011) to ensure equivalence of Australians’ and Pakistanis’ interpretation of the research questions on ethical leadership, interactional justice and workplace bullying. The fit indices of an unconstrained or baseline measurement model were compared to fit indices of a constrained model (i.e., with equal item loadings onto their respective factors). According to Vandenberg and Lance (2000), cross-cultural measurement equivalence is generally supported when both constrained and unconstrained models indicate acceptable model-fit indices. Since the results of both the unconstrained model ( $\chi^2 = 1381.49$ ,  $df = 640$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.16$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.04$ ,  $TLI = 0.929$ ,  $CFI = 0.935$ ) and the constrained model ( $\chi^2 = 1477.99$ ,  $df = 667$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.22$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.04$ ,  $TLI = 0.925$ ,  $CFI = 0.929$ ) indicated acceptable fit indices, measurement equivalence was supported in the cross-national contexts. This finding implied similarity in the meanings of ethical leadership, workplace bullying and interactional justice in Australia and Pakistan (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000).

This three-factor (baseline) model was also compared against two alternative models: 1) a two-factor model with items for ethical leadership and interactional loading onto a same factor and items for workplace bullying loading onto a different factor; 2) a one-factor model with items of ethical leadership, workplace bullying and interactional justice, all loading onto a single factor. However, in both these instances the model fit was found poor through the estimates of the two-factor model ( $\chi^2 = 2470$ ,  $df = 644$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 3.835$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.067$ ,  $TLI = 0.825$ ,  $CFI = 0.84$ ), and the one-factor model ( $\chi^2 = 3901$ ,  $df = 646$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 6.01$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.089$ ,  $TLI = 0.70$ ,  $CFI = 0.72$ ). A variant of the one-factor model is Harman’s Single Factor Test, which helps to detect the issue of CMV (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). This test was performed by fixating all measured items as one factor in the Principal Component Factor analysis procedure. According to Podsakoff et al. (2012), CMV is a problem when this single factor explains more than 50% of total variation in data. In this study, the results of Harman’s Test showed that a single factor explained only 36% of total variance in Australia and less than 30% of total variance in Pakistan. Based on the findings of these single-factor statistical procedures, CMV was not deemed a problematic issue here (see also Podsakoff et al., 2012). The study then proceeded with further analysis to test the hypothesised relationships.

Fig. 1 recapitulates study’s Hypotheses as the research model of ethical leadership, perceived interactional justice and exposure to workplace bullying. The direct effect hypotheses are shown as path c’ (Hypothesis 1) and path b (Hypothesis 2) in Fig. 1.

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations of variables for Australians (in the lower left diagonal of Table 2) and the Pakistani participants (in the upper right diagonal of Table 2). The study variables were created by averaging their respective scale items. Consistent with Loh et al. (2010), the Pakistani mean exposure to workplace bullying was higher than for Australians. Further, Australians rated higher perceptions of interactional justice and ethical leadership than Pakistanis. In particular, perceived ethical leadership was significantly negatively correlated with employee exposure to workplace bullying in Australia ( $r = -0.523$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and Pakistan ( $r = -0.441$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and positively correlated with perceived interactional justice in both Australia ( $r = 0.641$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and Pakistan ( $r = 0.711$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

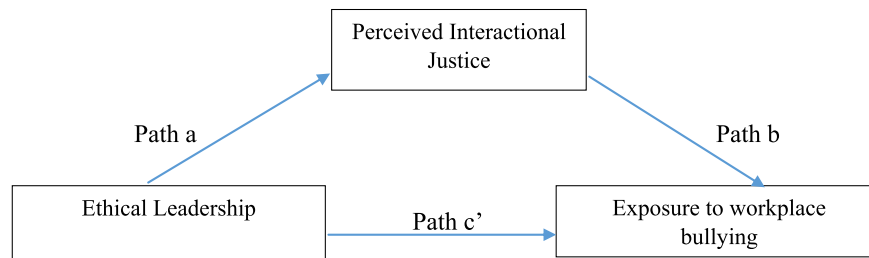


Fig. 1. Research model.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	SD
1. Gender	1.64	0.462	–	-.221 <sup>a</sup>	-.194 <sup>a</sup>	–0.087	0.008	–0.044	–0.091	1.38	0.474
2. Age group	3.84	1.115	–0.059	–	.305 <sup>a</sup>	–0.01	0.049	0.085	–0.029	3.18	0.972
3. Designation	3.82	2.147	–0.032	–.295 <sup>a</sup>	–	0.11	0.019	.119 <sup>b</sup>	–0.015	2.72	1.806
4. Collectivism	3.9953	1.07957	–0.092	0.06	0.01	–	0.013	0.11	–0.011	5.1183	1.1972
5. Ethical Leadership	3.5101	0.85002	0.016	–0.023	–0.008	0.086	–	.711 <sup>a</sup>	–.441 <sup>a</sup>	3.4513	0.85035
6. Interactional Justice	3.6554	0.94058	0.083	–0.117	.119 <sup>b</sup>	0.072	.641 <sup>a</sup>	–	–.489 <sup>a</sup>	3.4153	0.84974
7. Exposure to Bullying	1.5352	0.58315	–0.02	0.005	–0.062	0.006	–.523 <sup>a</sup>	–.578 <sup>a</sup>	–	1.7804	0.60412

Notes: Australian findings on the lower diagonal and Pakistani findings on the upper diagonal; SD = Standard Deviation.

<sup>a</sup> Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).<sup>b</sup> Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Similarly, perceived interactional justice was significantly negatively correlated with exposure to workplace bullying in Australia ( $r = -0.578$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and Pakistan ( $r = -0.489$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Overall, the results were consistent with the theoretical predictions. However, gender, age group, designation and collectivist orientation were neither significantly correlated with ethical leadership nor with workplace bullying in Australia or Pakistan.

To test the research model (Fig. 1) of direct and indirect (via interactional justice) effects of perceived ethical leadership on employee exposure to workplace bullying, Hayes' (2013) mediation bootstrapping procedure (Model 4) was applied. This procedure is robust, with high statistical power, free of data-distributional assumptions, and has simplified the implementation of mediation testing in organisational behaviour research (Hayes, Montoya, & Rockwood, 2017). This procedure provides bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals to calculate effect sizes which makes the distribution of data free of skewness (Hayes, 2013). Consistent with previous research (Baillien, Notelaers, De Witte, & Matthiesen, 2011), the distribution of workplace bullying data was skewed. Therefore, a sampling distribution of the indirect effect was created with bootstrapping by randomly resampling 5000 times with replacement from the same country data set. Table 3 depicts the results of simple mediation model testing (Fig. 1) conducted with Hayes' (2013) 'macro' script (available at: [www.processmacro.org](http://www.processmacro.org)).

Hypothesis 1 predicted that perceived ethical leadership will be associated with lower employee exposure to workplace bullying in different national cultural contexts. The results showed that perceived ethical leadership had a direct effect on perceived exposure to workplace bullying in Australia ( $B = -0.208$ ;  $t(276) = -4.28$ ;  $p = .000$ ) and Pakistan ( $B = -0.1204$ ;  $t(296) = -2.034$ ;  $p = .0428$ ). This direct effect of ethical leadership on workplace bullying was also statistically significant in Australia ( $F(5, 276) = 36.67$ ;  $R^2 = 0.3992$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and Pakistan ( $F(5, 296) = 22.90$ ;  $R^2 = 0.2790$ ,  $p = .000$ ) after controlling for gender, age and designation. Taken together, these results supported Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, Table 3 shows that there was a strong positive relationship between ethical leadership and interactional justice in Australia ( $B = 0.7890$ ;  $t(277) = 18.63$ ;  $p = .000$ ), and in

Pakistan ( $B = 0.7895$ ;  $t(297) = 22.85$ ;  $p = .000$ ). There was also a significant negative influence of perceived interactional justice on employee exposure to workplace bullying in Australia ( $B = -0.2733$ ;  $t(276) = -5.213$ ;  $p = .000$ ) and in Pakistan ( $B = -0.2733$ ;  $t(296) = -4.567$ ;  $p = .000$ ). Taken together, these results implied support for Hypothesis 2.

Furthermore, the mediation of perceived interactional justice in the research model (Fig. 1) was operationalised as the indirect effect of ethical leadership on employee exposure to workplace bullying. Results showed that the standardised indirect effect of ethical leadership on workplace bullying via interactional justice was  $-0.1891$  (95% Confidence Interval ranges from  $-0.2813$  to  $-0.1013$ ) in Australia, and  $-0.2158$  (95% Confidence interval ranging from  $-0.3239$  to  $-0.1218$ ) in Pakistan (Fig. 2). Results from the Normal theory tests (Sobel tests) further indicated that the indirect effects of perceived ethical leadership on employee exposure workplace bullying were  $-0.1891$ , statistically significant in Australia ( $Z = -5.014$ ,  $p = .000$ ), and  $-0.2158$ , also statistically significant, in Pakistan ( $Z = -4.47$ ,  $p = .000$ ). The Australian and Pakistani data findings when considered together implied support for Hypothesis 3. Further inspection of results revealed no significant differences between the two country samples in terms of the effects of age and designation on employee exposure to workplace bullying, and only a marginally significant effect of gender on exposure to workplace bullying in Pakistan.

Since Hypothesis 1 predicted a direct influence of ethical leadership on employee exposure to workplace bullying, and in the absence of perceived interactional justice, the relationship between these two was statistically significant. Therefore, perceived interactional justice has emerged as a partial mediator in the research model (Fig. 1) from the present cross-national findings. Fig. 2 summarises the study's findings by showing the significant direct and indirect effects of perceived ethical leadership on exposure to workplace bullying in Australia and Pakistan.

## 2. Discussion

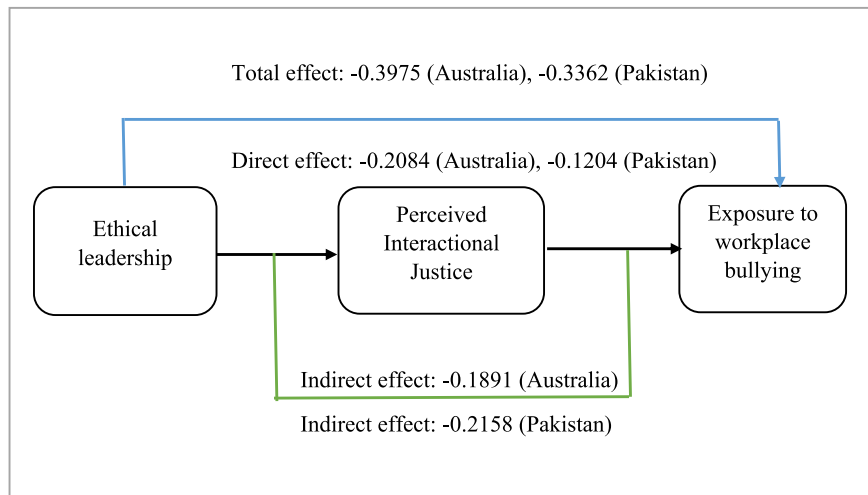
Workplace bullying is internationally recognised as a



**Table 3**  
Multiple linear regression testing of direct, indirect (via interactional justice) and total effects of ethical leadership on exposure to workplace bullying for Australia and Pakistan.

Variables	Mediator Variable: Perceived Interactional Justice		Dependent Variable: Exposure to Workplace Bullying				INDIRECT EFFECT (path a × b)		Bootstrapped 95% Confidence Intervals (CI)	
	DIRECT EFFECT (path a)		TOTAL EFFECT (path c)		DIRECT EFFECTS (paths c' and b)				Lower Limit CI	Upper Limit CI
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE		
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>										
Gender	0.0493	0.0820	-0.0161	0.0657	0.0034	0.0629				
Age	-0.0233	0.0349	0.0090	0.0279	-0.0003	0.0268				
Designation	.0546*	0.0182	-0.0215	0.0145	-0.0094	0.0141				
Ethical Leadership Interactional Justice	0.789**	0.0423	-0.397**	0.0339	-0.213**	0.0486	-0.1891**	0.045	-0.281	-0.101
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>		<b>.5694**</b>		<b>0.340**</b>		<b>0.3992**</b>				
<b>PAKISTAN</b>										
Gender	-0.0748	0.0642	-0.1151	0.0683	-0.135*	0.0672				
Age	0.0063	0.0307	-0.0251	0.0328	-0.0234	0.0317				
Designation	0.0314	0.0164	0.0080	0.0175	0.0166	0.0171				
Ethical Leadership Interactional Justice	.7895**	0.0345	-0.336**	0.0368	-0.1204*	0.0592	-0.216**	0.050	-0.324	-0.122
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>		<b>.6428**</b>		<b>.2282**</b>		<b>0.2790**</b>				

Notes: B = Unstandardized Beta Coefficient; SE = Standard Error; \*\*p, 0.001; \*p < .05.



**Fig. 2.** Direct and indirect (via perceived interactional justice mediated) association between perceived ethical leadership and exposure to workplace bullying. Notes: Unstandardized Beta coefficients controlled for gender, age, and designation.

challenging issue for management. Over two decades of international research provides ample evidence of the toxic effects of workplace bullying for employees exposed to it and for their employing organisations (Ahmad & Sheehan, 2017; Appelbaum, Semerjian, & Mohan, 2012; Einarsen & Nielsen, 2015; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Samnani & Singh, 2012). Yet the prevention and management of workplace is acknowledged to be a ‘black box’ (see e.g., Nielsen, 2014). This paper sought to open this black box by initiating an evidence-based conversation of how and why ethical leadership, across two cultures, may be an effective management style to prevent the occurrence of workplace bullying internationally.

Building on extensive research revealing workplace bullying as a consequence of dysfunctional, destructive or unethical leadership in the workplace (see Einarsen et al., 2013, pp. 129–154; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Nielsen, 2013; Skogstad et al., 2007, 2014), this paper predicted that ethical leadership would lessen employee exposure to such behaviour. This prediction was framed by SLT, which emphasises behavioural learning within a social

context from credible sources of influence (Bandura, 1977). This framing was applied in Australia and Pakistan to enhance the cross-cultural generalisation of findings on the utility of ethical leadership in discouraging workplace bullying. The results of Hypothesis 1 supported the notion that workplace bullying across cultures can be lessened by cultivating ethical style of leadership.

This paper has broadened the ethical leadership and workplace bullying literature, largely contextualised in Europe and North America (see e.g., Francioli et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2013; Stouten et al., 2010), by providing cross-cultural evidence of the former’s significant influence on the latter from Australia and Pakistan. Despite different cultures, the support for Hypothesis 1 in an international setting reinforces the significance of positive and ethical role modelling by legitimate sources of influence within a work environment to address bullying behaviour. Given that bullying is unethical conduct, as it shows an absence of dignified treatment by violating normative standards of ethical behaviour at work (Ahmad & Sheehan, 2017; Stouten et al., 2010), the study’s results showed that ethical leadership discouraged such



behaviour in the workplace (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño & Brown, 2005). These results are consistent with SLT (Bandura, 1977), and also align with Stouten et al.'s (2010) findings, which were limited to a single European country (Belgium). This seemingly implied the potential of ethical leadership to inhibit employee exposure to bullying across cultures from Europe (Stouten et al., 2010) to Asia and to Australia. All in all, such findings clearly underscore the significance of ethical role modelling by power holders for lessening workplace bullying.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that workplace bullying could be a consequence of interactional injustice, in that those who perceived they were unfairly treated by supervisors would report higher exposure to workplace bullying across cultures. The cross-cultural empirical evidence from Australia and Pakistan lends support to Hypothesis 2. This finding is consistent with Parzefall and Salin's (2010) suggestion that interactional injustice can intensify the occurrence of workplace bullying; however, their study did not provide empirical support to this proposition, whereas the present research findings provide evidence from real work and international settings. Although Hypotheses 1 and 2 were framed by different theoretical lenses, SLT (Bandura, 1977) and SET (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), they both explain the same behavioural outcome, workplace bullying, and thus allow for a deeper insight into the intricacies surrounding the behavioural influences on the occurrence of bullying from varied power sources at the workplace. By synthesising these two for the formulation of Hypothesis 3, this paper has deepened the understanding of the working of ethical leadership from the vantage point of addressing workplace bullying by advancing the mediating role of interactional justice. To date, only a handful of studies have looked into potential mediators in the relationship between leadership and bullying from a work environment perspective (see for exceptions Francioli et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2013; Stouten et al., 2010). For example, Stouten et al. (2010) examined "how ethical leaders design jobs in terms of workload and working conditions in order to shape a work environment that decreases the occurrence of bullying" (p. 18). This paper extends their perspective by focusing on how ethical leaders create a just work environment that discourages perceptions of workplace bullying. The support of Hypothesis 3 from Australian and Pakistani working employee samples implied that ethical leadership lessened employee exposure to bullying by fostering an important dimension of justice in a work environment.

### 2.1. Theoretical contributions

This paper makes a theoretical advance in understanding the phenomenon of addressing workplace bullying by integrating two theories, SLT and SET, to explain how such a process is prompted by ethical leadership. By bringing these two theories together to relate ethical leadership, interactional justice and workplace bullying, this paper sought to understand a black box in the workplace bullying literature. Indeed, studying these theories together has allowed us to better understand the phenomenon of addressing workplace bullying through ethical leadership's role in fostering justice at work. Although this paper's conceptualization is primarily grounded in Western theories, the findings from Australia and Pakistan imply cross-cultural transferability of this framing.

Furthermore, this paper adds to the ethical leadership literature by showing that ethical leadership improves perceptions of workplace justice and reduces employee exposure to bullying in the different cultures of Australia and Pakistan. Examining effectiveness of a leadership style in different cultures is accepted as a step forward in improved international management practice (House et al., 2004). The findings also contribute to workplace bullying

literature by lending cross-cultural credence to the influential work environment hypothesis, contextualised in West (Salin, 2003; Skogstad et al., 2011) by demonstrating a significant influence of a leadership style on employee exposure to bullying in Pakistani workplaces. Importantly, this paper has answered many calls for further research: a call from Nielsen (2014) to understand a mechanism through which leadership influence workplace bullying, from Einarsen et al. (2016) to determine the effectiveness of a preventive measures against bullying in different national cultures, from Francioli et al. (2015) to examine the influence of leadership on workplace bullying in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures, and from Parzefall and Salin (2010) for empirical findings to corroborate whether interactional injustice bears a positive impact on workplace bullying.

### 3. Practice implications

The significance of the findings of an ethical leadership-driven model in lessening employee exposure to bullying from Australia and Pakistan clearly depicts its potential for the management of bullying in workplaces around the world. Although many Western countries (e.g., Australia and Sweden) are tackling workplace bullying with legislative means, the effectiveness of such means in lessening the occurrence of bullying within workplaces is questioned (see also Hanley & O'Rourke, 2016; Hoel & Einarsen, 2010). For example, Hanley and O'Rourke (2016, p. 362) reported:

[T]he [legal] remedies offered to victims are problematic. They may not bestow the justice sought by sufferers of workplace bullying as unfortunately the FWC [Fair Work Commission] cannot award damages, impose a fine or order reinstatement where an employee has been dismissed. The law only allows the FWC to make any order it considers appropriate to prevent the worker from being bullied. The range of orders include that: individuals or groups stop certain behaviour; regular monitoring of behaviour by the employer be conducted; that an individual or group comply with an employer's anti-bullying policy.

Moreover, Ahmad and Sheehan (2017) showed that legal costs created financial stress amongst targets in Australia. However, judicial developments in Eastern countries like Pakistan are rare (Ahmad et al., 2017). On the basis of this study's findings, the policy makers in organisations, in the East or the West, are recommended to hire and train ethical leaders in order to tackle bullying at work.

This can be achieved by placing greater emphasis on behavioural ethics during leadership selection and development processes and their evaluation programs. Further, the findings convey the vital importance of interactional justice to address bullying at work. Therefore, organisations should also emphasise ethical training of supervisor-level staff so that their treatment of direct reports is respectful. Particular emphasis should be laid on the communication of ethical codes incorporated during a decision making process in order to lessen perceptions of injustice at work (Holtz & Harold, 2013), because it is the employer's responsibility to provide a safe and healthy work environment to the workforce in line with international occupational health and safety standards. Given that workplace bullying is a risk to health and safety at work (Holten, Hancock, Persson, Hansen, & Høgh, 2016), and also costs billions to the wider economy through higher healthcare and litigation costs (Hanley & O'Rourke, 2016), an ethical leadership-based model could be a proactive means for the management of workplace bullying. Indeed, this is foundational for the development of healthy and bullying-free workplaces.

### 3.1. Limitations and future research avenues

Despite making noteworthy contributions, there are limitations associated with the design of the present study. First, the research hypotheses and associated model were tested with data collected through a cross-sectional survey, which means that the causality implied in the relationships cannot be tested. Tharenou, Donohue, and Cooper (2007) argue that causality is often difficult to establish in management research, especially when there are multiple causes of the same problem. This is the case with workplace bullying, because research on the work environment hypothesis clearly conveys that such behaviour is a consequence of complex and dynamic interplay of a wide range of contextual factors including, but not limited to, leadership (e.g., job design, organisational culture and climate) (Salin, 2003). Therefore, the results were discussed in light of prior research findings (e.g., Stouten et al., 2010). However, the confidence in the study's findings can be established in terms of its theoretical underpinnings (SLT and SET – both are widely tested theories in organisational research), together with cross-national support using the primary data of employees who were socialised in entirely different cultures.

Second, employee perceptions stem from self-reported data, which is associated with the CMV problem. The study therefore followed Podsakoff et al.'s (2012) suggestions and addressed CMV by ensuring respondent anonymity and deploying different scale anchoring labels for independent and dependent variables (ethical leadership and workplace bullying) (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Further, the results of Harman's Single Factor Test showed that CMV was not a problematic issue here.

Third, the data from both countries were collected during a single time period; hence it was not possible to capture lessening of employee exposure to workplace bullying over time. In order to overcome these limitations, this study needs to be replicated using a longitudinal design for stronger inferences. For example, ethical leadership can be measured at an earlier time period, interactional justice and exposure to workplace bullying at later time periods through a three wave cross-lagged panel design to fully ascertain causality in relationships.

Finally, other limitations are acknowledged here because they provide useful directions for future studies and may spur even deeper insight into this important line of inquiry. While scholars such as Nielsen (2013) and Stouten et al. (2010) examined the impact of leadership on workplace bullying at the individual level, because employees working under the same leader often differ in their perceptions of his or her leading style, future research could replicate the present findings by examining both ethical leadership and workplace bullying at a work group level. Similarly, to overcome CMV, data can be obtained from multiple sources (Podsakoff et al., 2012). For example, data sourced from both targets and perpetrators of workplace bullying in a longitudinal design setting would yield stronger inferences in regard to ethical leaders' ability in not only lessening employee exposure to workplace bullying but also in shaping perpetrators' subsequent behaviour. Moreover, future research could look into other aspects of the work environment (e.g., organisational climates such as ethical climate, see also Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2010), and in particular other dimensions of workplace justice. For example, this study's framing can be applied to examining how ethical leaders promote procedural and distributive justice in a work environment.

Importantly, the evidence of the differing strengths in the effects of ethical leadership on workplace bullying between Australia and Pakistan, as evident from Fig. 2, opens up exciting research avenues. While subtle variations in the strength of assessed effects on workplace bullying between Eastern and Western societies are consistent with the earlier views that leadership's influence on

followers' behaviour is partially contingent on national culture (Brown & Treviño, 2006; House et al., 2004), future researchers are encouraged to expand this study's model (Fig. 1) by incorporating the national culture as a moderator. This would enable further understanding of the interaction of national cultures with ethical leadership in order to explain its stronger direct effect on workplace bullying and interactional justice in one country (Australia) than in another (Pakistan). To exemplify, while the present study's finding of higher mean exposure to workplace bullying in an Eastern society (Pakistan) than a Western society (Australia) is in line with Loh et al. (2010), the authors investigated the interaction of national culture with workplace bullying. Specifically, Loh et al.'s (2010) research has informed that national culture moderated the impact of workplace bullying on outcome variables because the notion of power difference is partially shaped by it (please see *power distance*, in Hofstede, 2001 for example). In a similar vein, further investigation of the interaction of national culture (via its norms such as individualism collectivism, power distance) with both ethical leadership and workplace justice is noteworthy and warranted.

In summary, notwithstanding many limitations, of significance is the support of the study's hypothesised model (Fig. 1) from both individualistic and collectivist societies. The model underscores the significance of ethical sources of hierarchical influence to address and manage workplace bullying. The findings thus provide a proactive strategy by conveying that remedial of workplace bullying requires ethical leadership, because it promotes justice at work.

### Ethical approval

The ethical approval for research was obtained from Monash University (Project Number: CF14/3032–2014001681) as per the guidelines set out in the 'National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research'. The return of an anonymous survey implied participants' consent.

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