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# Workplace mobbing and bystanders' helping behaviour towards victims: The role of gender, perceived responsibility and anticipated stigma by association

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We examined victims' perceived responsibility and bystanders' anticipated risk of being victimized themselves when others associate them with the victim (stigma by association, SBA) as possible antecedents of bystanders' helping behaviour towards a victim of workplace mobbing, and explored the effects of gender. Guided by the attribution model of social conduct (Weiner, 2006), a  $2 \times 2$  vignette experiment was conducted. Participants were Dutch regional government employees ( $N = 161$ ). Path analyses generally supported the hypotheses, but showed different results for women and men. In the strong (Vs. weak) responsibility condition, women reported less sympathy and more anger and men only more anger, which resulted in lower helping intention. Additionally, for men the results showed an unexpected direct positive effect of responsibility on helping intention. Furthermore, in the strong SBA condition, women and men reported more fear and men, unexpectedly, more anger. Consequently, helping intention decreased. The findings on gender are discussed in the context of social role theory, gender and emotion. Our findings suggest that to prevent and tackle mobbing, organizations and professionals should be aware of the attributional and emotional processes and gender differences in bystanders' helping behaviour.

**Keywords:** Workplace mobbing; Bystanders' behaviour; Gender; Responsibility; Stigma by association.

Research into workplace mobbing reveals that victims and organizations face a wide range of negative consequences of such mobbing. Mobbing influences the victim's well-being and health, causing effects such as psychological and psychosomatic distress (Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011). Mobbing also increases the level of stress and fear in bystanders (Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011) and heightens bystanders' risk of developing depression symptoms within 18 months (Emdad, Alipour, Hagberg, & Jensen, 2012). For organizations, these mobbing effects often lead to negative outcomes such as absenteeism, staff turnover and the costs of grievance procedures (Hoel et al., 2011). Workplace mobbing involves repeated antisocial behaviour directed at a victim who finds it hard to defend himself or herself (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011), and mainly relates to psychological violence (Leymann, 1996).

Workplace mobbing also refers to an evolving process in which the victim is confronted with others' increasingly stigmatizing behaviour (Einarsen et al., 2011; Leymann, 1996). Bystanders are often aware of the situation, but

do not intervene (Salin, 2001). However, they may play an important role in the ongoing mobbing process by giving a supportive context for the bully–victim interaction or by actively contributing to the mobbing process (Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004). This view stresses the importance of insight into the antecedents of bystanders' behaviour.

In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, D'Cruz and Noronha (2011) found that workplace friends tended to help the victim in the early stage of the bullying process. However, when faced with possible negative reactions from the human resources department, workplace friends ceased this helping behaviour. To our knowledge, no other empirical studies and no theoretical models specifically address the antecedents of bystanders' helping behaviour in workplace mobbing. Therefore, research on this matter is needed. Research in related disciplines may be helpful in gaining insights into the factors related to that helping behaviour.

First, in a model on third parties' reactions to mistreatment in organizations, Skarlicki and Kulik (2004)

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pointed to three factors affecting the behaviour of third parties: (1) third parties' characteristics (e.g., personality), (2) cost–benefit analyses (e.g., third parties' assessment of their own vulnerability to mistreatment), and (3) the victim's characteristics (e.g., the victim's deservedness). Second, the attribution model of social conduct (Weiner, 2006) and its extension (see Dijker & Raeijmaekers, 1999) have proved useful in research on helping behaviour (for an overview, see Weiner, 2006). Furthermore, the model focuses on two specific factors of the model on third parties' behaviour (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004), namely, the victim's characteristics (in our study, perceived responsibility) and vulnerability to mistreatment (in our study, anticipated stigma by association, SBA), which we define further on.

We aim to narrow the gap in empirical research on bystanders' behaviour by studying these latter two factors. This article aims to contribute to the knowledge necessary to develop strategies to motivate bystanders to help a victim of workplace mobbing.

The basic attribution model of social conduct (Weiner, 2006) proposes two sequences: (1) Perceived responsibility increases anger and consequently decreases helping intention. (2) Perceived nonresponsibility increases sympathy and thus helping intention. Therefore, when observers consider a person responsible for a given predicament, they will feel less sympathy and more anger towards this person than towards a perceived nonresponsible person, and consequently will be less likely to help him or her. For example, observers will feel sympathy for a hardworking student who is in danger of failing his exam and will consequently react positively to his requests for help. An opposite reaction can be expected for a lazy student who will evoke anger (Weiner, 2006, p. 35). Responsibility implies that the person is assumed to have control over his or her behaviour and could have behaved otherwise, and therefore that the situation can be attributed to this person.

For bystanders of workplace mobbing, the same attribution mechanism may apply. The degree to which bystanders hold the victim of mobbing personally responsible for his or her situation may influence the levels of their sympathy and anger with the victim, and consequently their helping intention towards him or her. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

**H1: Perceived responsibility of the victim of mobbing has a negative effect on bystanders' helping intention towards the victim, though indirectly via two mediation paths, one through sympathy and one through anger. More (Vs. less) perceived responsibility leads to less sympathy and more anger, and each will subsequently result in less helping intention**

An extension of Weiner's (2006) attribution model proposes that threat of contagion (e.g., in the case of

illness) is an additional antecedent of social behaviour (Dijker, Kok, & Koomen, 1996). When people perceive a threat of contagion, they experience fear and consequently show stigmatizing behaviour towards the source of the threat (Dijker & Raeijmaekers, 1999). Thus, the fear of "catching" a negative condition from another person may cause people to reject this person. In this study, we interpret contagion as social contagion, that is, SBA. SBA is a negative evaluation following association with a stigmatized individual (Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, & Russell, 1994). Stangor and Crandall (2000) described stigma as an observed threat to a person's social status in a group. Helping the victim will make the bystanders' connection with the victim manifest, which is the first step in the process of SBA in the workplace (Kulik, Bainbridge, & Cregan, 2008). Thus, being associated with the victim of workplace mobbing may lead to a decrease in one's social status with the members of the stigmatizing group, and even to being treated as a victim. Conforming to the group's norms can ward off such social threats (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Following this, we hypothesize that:

**H2: Anticipated SBA has a negative effect on bystanders' helping intention. This effect is mediated by fear. More (Vs. less) anticipated SBA leads to more fear and consequently to less helping intention towards the victim**

Salin (2011) urged researchers to include gender factors in studies on negative acts at the workplace. In her qualitative work, for instance, she found that men (compared to women) tended to attribute the cause for the mobbing situation more to the victim, whereas women pointed to organizational antecedents. Social role theory explains helping behaviour by gender roles (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). The theory proposes that men and women behave differently in social situations and take different roles, due to the expectations that society puts upon men and women. The agentic role is attributed more to men and is characterized by dominance, aggressiveness, assertiveness, independence and self-confidence. The communal role is attributed more to women and is characterized by nurturance, kindness, helpfulness and emotional expressiveness (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000). However, gender differences have been inconsistent across empirical studies (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). More recently, no gender differences in helping were found towards disabled coworkers (Miller & Werner, 2007), whereas women compared to men showed more prosocial behaviour towards distressed persons with HIV (Bos, Dijker, & Koomen, 2007). In view of these inconclusive research findings, we examine the role of bystanders' gender in mobbing situations in an exploratory manner.

## METHOD

### Design, participants and procedure

We designed a 2 (perceived responsibility: strong/weak)  $\times$  2 (anticipated SBA: strong/weak) randomized vignette between-subjects study. All the employees of a Dutch government organization were invited by e-mail to participate in the experiment ( $N = 779$ ). The participants were not offered compensation. Of the 180 employees who consented to participate, 161 finally did, resulting in a response rate of 21% of the total population. The sample consisted of 86 men and 75 women, who were randomly assigned approximately equally to the four conditions,  $\chi^2(3, N = 161) = 2.15, p = .54$ . The average age was 40.78 ( $SD = 10.56$ ), and 68.3% of the participants held a university applied science degree or higher. The participants received the vignette and questionnaire by e-mail and were asked to first read the vignette and then complete the questionnaire, which included demographic items. They could choose to respond on a digital version or a paper-and-pencil version. The vignettes described the case of William (the victim), a new coordinator in a regional government department, and were adapted from Leymann's (1996) description of the case of Eve, a new canteen supervisor. The participants were requested to imagine this department was their own work environment.

### Conditions

In all conditions,<sup>1</sup> the mobbing consisted of repeated, evolving negative behaviour, such as excluding the victim from social events, gossiping about him and obstructing his work. Following Greitemeyer, Rudolph, and Weiner (2003), we manipulated controllability attributed to the victim by varying the description of the victim's behaviour in the vignettes. In the strong responsibility condition, the victim voluntarily chose to take the job of coordinator, despite warnings from the previous job-holder about employees resenting him. Additionally, the victim criticized job performances and the department's organization, frequently proposing new working methods, and sometimes behaved bluntly. In the weak responsibility condition, the members of the department welcomed the victim as their new coordinator. Furthermore, the victim showed considerate behaviour. He chatted with everyone, showing his willingness to learn about the department's organization and its potential bottlenecks. In the weak SBA condition, one person bullied the victim, while the other coworkers took a stand against the bully. Furthermore, the head of the department asked the coworkers to support the victim. In the strong SBA condition, only one coworker helped the victim,

whereupon participants read that this coworker was also bullied. Subsequently, more coworkers bullied the victim.

### Measures

Ratings for all variables ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Where required, items were recoded resulting in higher ratings indicating higher levels. When applicable, in the items the victim was referred to as William.

### Manipulation checks

We measured the effectiveness of the perceived responsibility manipulation with three items, derived from Steins and Weiner (1999), forming a mean score scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ). An example item is: "Is William responsible for the situation that has arisen?" The manipulation of anticipated SBA was assessed with a single item: "Do you think you would encounter the same problems as William if you interfered in the situation?"

### Dependent variables

We estimated sympathy with two items assessing the degree of pity and compassion participants felt for William. Three items assessed anger; participants had to indicate how upset, mad or angry they were with William. Fear was assessed with three items measuring the degree of uncertainty, tenseness and feelings of unease experienced by the participants. Finally, we assessed helping intention with three items on the importance, likelihood or certainness of participants helping William. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations and reliability coefficients.

### Analysis

We tested the mediation model at the .05 level with structural equation modelling (SEM) using AMOS 5 and the joint significant test (see MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). In mediation testing with SEM, the overall effect  $c$  (independent-dependent) is the sum of the indirect effect and the direct effect, and known as the total effect. The indirect effect is the product of the  $a$  (independent-mediator) and  $b$  (mediator-dependent) parameters  $a \cdot b$ , and known as the mediated effect. The direct effect  $c'$  is the effect that remains after controlling for the mediators. To explore the possible moderating role of gender, we also conducted a multigroup SEM analysis. The conditions were dummy coded (*weak* = 0, *strong* = 1). On the basis of the correlation results, gender served as a covariate on

<sup>1</sup>Full descriptions of the vignettes may be obtained from the authors.

**TABLE 1**  
Means, standard deviations, correlations and reliability coefficients (on the diagonal) of the dependent variables ( $N = 161$ )

Variable	1	2	3	4	M	SD
1. Sympathy	.80				4.24	1.29
2. Anger	-.30**	.86			3.31	1.38
3. Fear	.24**	.27**	.80		4.06	1.37
4. Helping intention	.54**	-.39**	-.25**	.86	4.77	1.13

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

fear ( $r = .22, p < .01$ ) and age as a covariate on sympathy ( $r = -.17, p < .05$ ) and anger ( $r = .25, p < .01$ ).

## RESULTS

### Manipulation check

A 2 (responsibility: strong/weak)  $\times$  2 (SBA: strong/weak)  $\times$  2 (gender: male/female) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), controlling for age, on perceived responsibility and anticipated SBA revealed a main effect of the responsibility conditions on perceived responsibility,  $F(1, 152) = 311.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .67$ . Mean ratings indicated that participants correctly interpreted the weak Vs. strong responsibility of the victim ( $M_s = 2.74$  and  $5.49$ , respectively). Furthermore, the analysis showed a main effect of the SBA conditions on anticipated SBA,  $F(1, 152) = 21.50, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12$ . Participants interpreted weak Vs. strong SBA as designated ( $M_s = 3.21$  and  $4.39$ , respectively). Finally, the analysis showed an interaction effect between the responsibility conditions and gender on perceived responsibility,  $F(1, 152) = 8.33, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . Simple main effects analysis showed that in the weak responsibility conditions, men attributed more responsibility to the victim than women,  $F(1, 152) = 7.16, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$  ( $M_s = 3.05$  and  $2.43$ , respectively). In the strong responsibility conditions, the mean scores on perceived responsibility did not differ significantly across gender,  $F(1, 152) = 1.60, p = .21, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . The analysis yielded no other main or interactions effects of the independent variables or the covariate age. Thus, the manipulations were successful.

### Testing of the hypotheses

For reasons of parsimony, we present the estimates of the effects in Table 2 and in the text limit ourselves to descriptions.

#### Responsibility

The results of the SEM analysis showed that the overall effect of the responsibility conditions on helping

intention was not significant at the .05 significance level when tested two-tailed ( $p = .09$ , see Table 2 and Figure 1) but was when tested one-tailed ( $p < .05$ ). Confirming H1, the results showed two mediated negative effects of the responsibility conditions on helping intention, one through sympathy and one through anger. Strong (Vs. weak) perceived responsibility was related to less sympathy and consequently to less helping intention. Strong (Vs. weak) perceived responsibility was also related to more anger and consequently to less helping intention. The responsibility conditions had an unexpected direct positive effect on helping intention, indicating that after controlling for the mediators, participants in the strong (Vs. weak) responsibility conditions tend to help the victim more. Further analysis of gender differences explicated this finding and described in more detail below. This unexpected direct positive effect clarifies the nonsignificant overall effect, as it neutralized the negative indirect effects. In the literature, this is referred to as an inconsistent model, which is observed when at least one indirect effect is opposite to another indirect effect or the direct effect (see MacKinnon et al., 2007).

#### SBA

The results showed an overall negative effect of the SBA conditions on helping intention (see Table 2 and Figure 1). Strong (Vs. weak) SBA led to less helping intention. Confirming H2, this effect was mediated by fear. Strong (Vs. weak) anticipated SBA was related to more fear, and consequently related to less helping intention. Furthermore, there was an unexpected mediated negative effect of the SBA conditions on helping intention through anger. Strong (Vs. weak) anticipated SBA was related to more anger and consequently to less helping intention.

#### Exploring gender influences

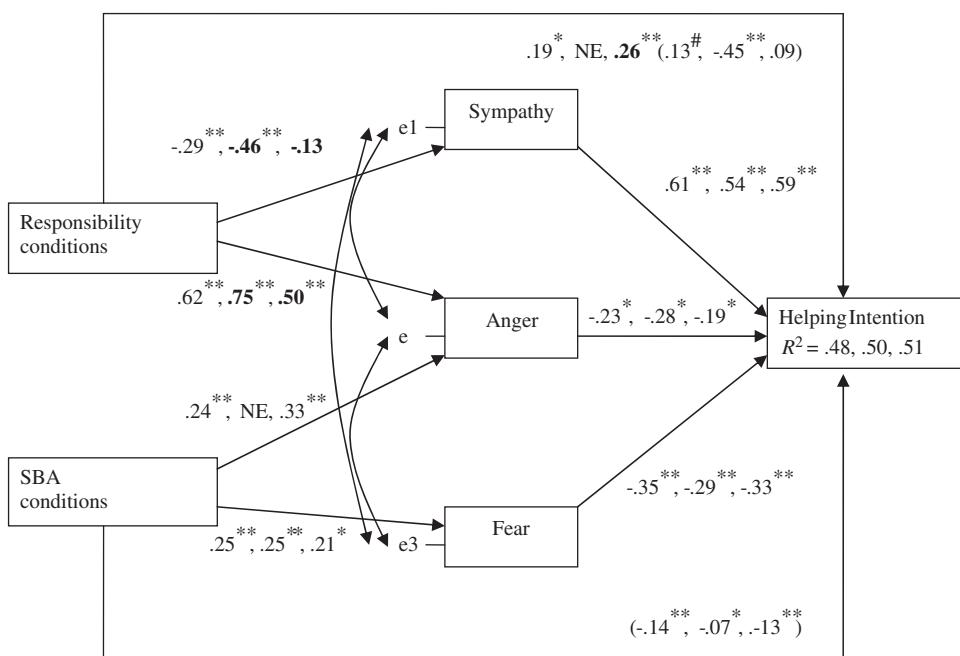
To qualify the mediation effects, we performed auxiliary mediation analyses among women and men separately. The responsibility conditions had an overall negative effect on helping intention for women but not for men (see Table 2). The mediated negative effects were

**TABLE 2**  
Effects of the responsibility and the stigma by association conditions on sympathy, anger, fear and helping intention for the total sample, for women and for men

Independent variables	Sympathy				Anger				Fear				Helping intention						
	Total sample		Women	Men	Total sample		Women	Men	Total sample		Women	Men	Total sample		Women	Men			
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE			
Responsibility conditions																			
Overall effect																			
Summed mediated effects																			
Effect mediated by sympathy																			
Effect mediated by anger																			
Direct effect	-.29**	.07	-.46**	.09	-.13	.10	2.10**	.62**	.05	.75**	.05	.50**	.08	-3.09***	.19*	.07	.26**	.08	2.17**
Sympathy																			
Direct effect																			
Anger																			
Direct effect																			
Stigma by association conditions																			
Overall effect																			
Summed mediated effects																			
Effect mediated by fear																			
Effect mediated by anger																			
Direct effect																			
Fear																			
Direct effect																			

Note.  $z$  = for difference between women and men.

<sup>a</sup>Joint significant test: all involved paths are significant at least .05 level. <sup>b</sup>AMOS does not provide standard errors for specific indirect effects. <sup>#</sup> $p < .10$ . <sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$ . <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ . <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ .



**Note:** Standardized regression weights. NE: path not estimated for women, see section on model fit. Significant different weights between genders in bold typeface. Sequence of estimates: total sample, women, men. Overall effects are in parentheses. Fit-indices model: total sample,  $\chi^2 (df = 13) = 12.87, p = .46, \chi^2 / df - \text{ratio} = 0.99$ ; RMSEA = .06; CFI = .98; TLI = .95; women,  $\chi^2 (df = 10) = 15.66, p = .11, \chi^2 / df - \text{ratio} = 1.57$ ; RMSEA = .09; CFI = .98; TLI = .93; men,  $\chi^2 (df = 8) = 13.45, p = .10, \chi^2 / df - \text{ratio} = 1.68$ ; RMSEA = .09; CFI = .95; TLI = .86

**Figure 1.** Path model (SEM) of the relations between the conditions, emotions and helping intention for the total sample, women and men.

significant for women and men. However, in the strong (Vs. weak) responsibility conditions, women reported less sympathy and more anger, while men reported only more anger. Consequently, women and men reported less helping intention (see Table 2). For men, the responsibility conditions unexpectedly directly affected helping intention positively, causing the nonsignificant overall effect ( $p = .38$ ).

For the SBA conditions, the results showed overall negative effects and mediated negative effects on helping intention for women and men. In the strong (Vs. weak) SBA conditions, women and men reported more fear, and unexpectedly, men reported more anger. Consequently, helping intention decreased. Thus, the results for the female participants confirmed H1 and H2. For the male participants, we found deviations.

### Model fit

Because the fit of the hypothesized model for the total sample was low, we added the path from the responsibility conditions to helping intention and the path from the SBA conditions to anger, assuming that risk perception is related to anger (cf. Dijker et al., 1996),  $\chi^2 (df = 13) = 12.87, p = .46, \chi^2 / df - \text{ratio} 0.99$ ;

RMSEA = .06; CFI = .98; TLI = .95.<sup>2</sup> The final model (see Figure 1) fitted the data significantly better than the research model ( $\Delta \chi^2 / df = 11.37, p < .001$ ). For the female participants, the hypothesized model fitted the data well,  $\chi^2 (df = 10) = 15.66, p = .11, \chi^2 / df - \text{ratio} = 1.57$ ; RMSEA = .09; CFI = .98; TLI = .93. However, for the male participants, we followed the same procedure as for the total sample resulting in an adequate fit,  $\chi^2 (df = 8) = 13.45, p = .10, \chi^2 / df - \text{ratio} = 1.68$ ; RMSEA = .09; CFI = .95; TLI = .86.<sup>2</sup> The final models for the total sample and for the women and men separately explained 48, 50 and 51% of the variance in helping intention, respectively.

### DISCUSSION

We examined the perceived responsibility of the victim and anticipated SBA as possible antecedents of bystanders' helping behaviour towards a victim of workplace mobbing. We further examined the moderating effects of gender in an exploratory way. The results mainly supported our hypotheses based on the attribution model of social conduct and its extension (Dijker et al., 1996; Weiner, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>Extensive results may be obtained from the authors.

Indeed, bystanders who perceive the victim to be responsible for the mobbing situation appear to have less helping intention towards this victim (cf. Weiner, 2006). However, this effect is qualified by gender. For women, this relationship was mediated by sympathy and anger. Women felt less sympathy and more anger for the victim in the strong (Vs. weak) responsibility conditions, and subsequently, these emotions related to less helping intention (cf. Weiner, 2006). For men, only anger served as a mediator. In the strong (Vs. weak) responsibility conditions, men felt more anger towards the victim, but not less sympathy. Anger subsequently decreased helping intention. Additionally, men reported more helping intention as a direct consequence of more perceived responsibility.

Furthermore, consistent with our hypothesis, anticipated SBA led to less helping intentions towards the victim conform findings on contagiousness of illness (Dijker et al., 1996; Dijker & Raeijmaekers, 1999). Again, this relationship was different for women compared to men. Whereas for women and men this relationship was mediated by fear as predicted by our model, for men the relationship was additionally mediated by anger. Women reported more fear in the strong (Vs. weak) SBA conditions and men more fear and more anger; both emotions subsequently decreased helping intention towards the victim.

Finally, male participants in the weak responsibility conditions attributed more responsibility to the victim than female participants did, suggesting that men, more than women, tend to attribute the mobbing situation to the victim of this situation (cf. Salin, 2011).

Our findings that sympathy mediated the relationship between responsibility and helping intention for women but not for men are consistent with the pattern of results in studies on stigmatization of persons with HIV (Bos et al., 2007) and on general helping (MacGeorge, 2003). Sympathy can be defined as an other-oriented emotion (see Bos et al., 2007). According to social role theory (Eagly et al., 2000), women, in contrast to men, are supposed to react more other-oriented and compassionately towards others. In this study, women and men reacted accordingly.

Furthermore, the positive relationship between SBA and anger as suggested by our data corresponds with results on the perception of risk of HIV contagion and anger (Dijker et al., 1996). However, we found this relationship only for men. Research on the role of gender in emotions suggests that gender differences in anger occur depending upon the situation (Kring, 2000). In this study, male participants may have perceived SBA as a threat to their social status, which, according to social role theory, they should uphold (Eagly et al., 2000). Moreover, men may have, more than women, blamed the victim for the anticipated SBA (cf. Salin, 2011). However, this issue was not addressed in the present study and should be

studied in future research. Taken together, in this study, men appear to react more agentic towards victims of workplace mobbing, that is, more aggressively and self-serving, and women more communal, that is, sympathetic, conforming to social role theory (Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Eagly et al., 2000).

Social role theory may also offer an explanation for the direct effect of the responsibility conditions on helping intention for men. The dominant behaviour of the "responsible" victim fits the agentic style commonly ascribed to men. The male participants may have identified with this style and may thus have perceived themselves as largely comparable to the victim. Many studies found that perceived similarity with the subject induced helping behaviour (see for instance Guèguen, Pichot, & Le Dreff, 2005). Thus, while on one hand the victim's responsibility may have angered male participants resulting in less helping intention, on the other hand male participants may have identified with the victim resulting in more helping intention.

### Limitations, strengths and future research

When generalizing the results of this study, there are a few restrictions. First, the study was conducted in a specific type of bureaucratic organization. Hence, to pass more valid judgments on the meaning of our results in actual practice, future studies need to be conducted in other types of organizations as well. Second, the victim in our study was a coordinator, suggesting he held a formal power position. Zapf and Einarsen (2011) observed that, although the risk of being bullied is equal across all organization levels, superiors are seldom bullied by subordinates. Thus, one may argue that the vignettes we used describe a not very prototypical mobbing situation. However, in the Netherlands the position of coordinator does not necessarily imply a power difference. Often, as is the case in the target organization, a coordinator is a coworker with an extra organizing task. To examine possible confounding effects of this variable, as follow-up we conducted an additional vignette study in the same organization (Mulder, Pouwelse, & Lodewijkx, 2008), in which we manipulated the power position of the victim describing the victim either as a supervisor or a coworker. The study yielded identical results to those obtained in the current study. Thus, our findings cannot be attributed to the way we manipulated the responsibility conditions.

Further, we used a single item measure to check the manipulation of anticipated SBA. We constructed this item close to the concept at hand (cf. Jaccard, Weber, & Lundmark, 1975), namely, anticipation of being treated as the victim of mobbing after interfering in the situation. Of course, our operationalization of SBA does not clarify the more intricate processes involved in SBA. A future study establishing a valid condition (vignette) and measurement

for anticipated SBA related to workplace mobbing would be useful.

Moreover, the vignette method we used may have induced a limited view of social reality among the participants and therefore may have created distance between the intended behaviour as reported and behaviour in real situations. However, research indicates that study type (i.e., simulation, recounting or participation in a real event) does not moderate results of studies based on the attribution model (Weiner, 2006).

This study also has substantial strengths as the findings enhance our understanding of bystanders' behaviour towards a victim of workplace mobbing. It shows that the attribution model of social conduct (Weiner, 2006) can partly be applied to the way in which bystanders react towards victims of mobbing. Furthermore, our results offer a successful offset for research on the influence of SBA within the context of workplace mobbing.

Finally, although the study was exploratory, the findings demonstrate that bystanders' reactions to mobbing may differ according to the bystander's gender. Future researchers should look further into these gender differences. Conversely, bystanders' reactions to mobbing may also differ depending on the gender of the victim. In this respect, Eagly and Crowley (1986) found that, in general, people are more likely to help women than men, and MacGeorge (2003) showed that men compared to women tend to help a male target less.

### Practical implications

This study may have implications for organizations confronted with mobbing situations and for professionals working with victims of mobbing. The observation that a victim of workplace mobbing is responsible for the situation is apparently important for bystanders. In fact, their helping behaviour towards the victim depends on it. Therefore, we suggest that, in cases of mobbing, organizations should be aware of attributional and emotional processes and gender differences in bystanders. Alternatively, although we certainly do not mean to blame the victim, this study indicates that the victim's own behaviour may be a point of application for professionals working with victims of mobbing. When seeking help, victims need to be aware of bystanders considering the victim's role in the situation in their decision to help, while victims often do not reflect on that (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). Clarification of this actor-observer discrepancy may give the victim more insight into possible coping strategies. Finally, organizations need to be alert to possible SBA and offer a safe climate for bystanders willing to help a victim of mobbing.

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