



Beyond the Victim: A Quantitative Analysis of Ethical Leadership and Individual Ideology as Antecedents of Workplace Mobbing in Poland

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Abstract

Research on workplace mobbing has extensively documented its severe mental health consequences, often focusing on the victim's experience. This study shifts the analytical lens from consequences to antecedents, aiming to prevent mobbing by understanding its origins. It quantitatively examines the predictive power of both organizational factors (perceived ethical leadership) and individual-level factors (employee's ethical ideology, specifically idealism and relativism) on the experience of mobbing behaviors in the Polish workplace. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, collecting data from 512 full-time employees in large organizations in Poland. The survey utilized established psychometric scales: the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) for mobbing, the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS), and the Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) for ideology. Data were analyzed using hierarchical multiple linear regression to test the unique contribution of organizational and individual predictors. Results indicate that ethical leadership is the single most powerful deterrent, showing a robust negative relationship with perceived mobbing ($\beta = -.412, p < .001$). Individual ethical ideology was also a significant predictor; idealism negatively predicted mobbing experiences ($\beta = -.179, p < .01$), whereas relativism was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .204, p < .001$). The complete model explained 28.7% of the variance in perceived mobbing. This study provides one of the first

empirical models in an Eastern European context to simultaneously assess the influence of leadership and individual ideology on mobbing. The findings offer actionable, preventative insights, demonstrating that while an individual's ethical framework is relevant, the cultivation of ethical leadership is the most critical organizational defense against workplace toxicity.

Keywords: Workplace Mobbing, Bullying, Ethical Leadership, Ethical Ideology, Poland, Organizational Behavior, Workplace Ethics

1. Introduction

The contemporary workplace, a nexus of innovation and productivity, is also a site of significant psychosocial risk. Among the most corrosive of these risks is workplace mobbing, a phenomenon that transcends simple conflict to become a systematic campaign of psychological terror waged against a targeted individual (Leymann, 1990). The consequences are devastating, inflicting severe and lasting damage on mental health, including clinical depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Beyond the individual, mobbing imposes substantial economic costs on organizations through increased absenteeism, high turnover rates, and diminished productivity.

In Poland, workplace mobbing is not only a recognized psychosocial hazard but is also legally defined in the Labour Code (Art. 94³ § 2) as actions or behaviors concerning an employee or directed against them, consisting of persistent and long-term harassment or intimidation, causing lowered self-esteem and aiming to humiliate or isolate the employee from their team. Foundational Polish research has consistently highlighted its prevalence and destructive impact (Kowalski & Plichta, 2021). Historically, much of the academic and public discourse has adopted a victim-centric approach, focusing on the profound suffering and health consequences for the target. This focus has been instrumental in raising awareness and validating the gravity of the experience.

However, an exclusive focus on consequences is reactive rather than preventative. To effectively mitigate mobbing, research must pivot from documenting the damage to understanding the conditions that allow it to emerge and fester. The core issue, it has been argued, is not merely isolated "ethical behaviors" but the broader "ethical situation" that shapes and constrains individual actions. This "ethical situation" is predominantly sculpted by organizational leadership. Ethical leadership, characterized by integrity, fairness, and accountability, is theorized to be a powerful

antidote to toxic workplace dynamics (Brown et al., 2005). An ethical leader establishes and enforces clear boundaries of acceptable conduct, thereby creating a psychologically safe environment that protects employees from harassment (Manan et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, employees are not passive recipients of the organizational climate; they interpret and navigate it through their own cognitive frameworks. An individual's personal ethical ideology—their fundamental system for making moral judgments—is a crucial, yet often overlooked, factor. Building on Forsyth's (1980) taxonomy, ethical ideology can be understood along two dimensions: idealism (adherence to universal moral principles) and relativism (belief that morality is context-dependent). An employee high in relativism might be more tolerant of an ethically ambiguous environment where mobbing can be rationalized as "tough management," whereas a high-idealism employee would likely perceive such actions as a clear moral transgression (Schlenker, 2008).

Despite the theoretical importance of both leadership and individual ethics, few studies, particularly within the Polish or broader Eastern European context, have empirically modeled their combined influence on mobbing. This leaves a critical gap in our understanding: which is a more potent defense against workplace toxicity—a strong, ethical leader, or a workforce of ethically idealistic employees? This study seeks to fill this gap by moving beyond qualitative case studies to a robust quantitative design. We aim to build and test a predictive model of workplace mobbing in Poland, quantitatively assessing the unique and combined power of perceived ethical leadership and individual ethical ideology as antecedents of being targeted.

Our research is guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent does perceived ethical leadership (an organizational factor) predict a decrease in an employee's perceived exposure to mobbing behaviors?
2. To what extent does an employee's personal ethical ideology—specifically idealism and relativism (individual factors)—predict their perceived exposure to mobbing behaviors?
3. Which factor, organizational leadership or individual ideology, provides a stronger unique contribution to explaining the variance in perceived mobbing?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to provide organizations with clear, data-driven, and preventative strategies. If ethical leadership emerges as the dominant protective factor, it provides a powerful mandate for organizations to prioritize leadership selection and development as their primary defense against the scourge of workplace mobbing.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Defining and Understanding Workplace Mobbing

The construct of workplace mobbing was systematically conceptualized by Heinz Leymann (1990), who defined it as "psychological terror" involving "hostile and unethical communication, which is directed in a systematic way by one or a few individuals mainly towards one individual." Leymann's seminal work identified 45 distinct negative acts, such as social isolation, spreading rumors, withholding critical information, and assigning meaningless or degrading tasks. The defining characteristics that distinguish mobbing from isolated workplace conflict are its frequency (e.g., occurring at least weekly) and duration (e.g., lasting for six months or more), creating a prolonged state of distress for the target.

Expanding on this, the phenomenon has also been framed as "moral harassment" or "perverse violence." This work illuminates the insidious and often subtle nature of the attacks, which are designed not to resolve a conflict but to destabilize the victim, erode their self-confidence, and ultimately eliminate them from the workplace. This perspective highlights the psychological manipulation inherent in the process. In the Polish context, research has confirmed the relevance of these definitions, identifying mobbing as a significant and escalating "threat to the contemporary workplace."

For the purpose of quantitative measurement, this study adopts the operational definition embedded in the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), the global standard for empirical research in this area. Einarsen et al. (2009) define bullying/mobbing as a situation where an employee is "persistently exposed to negative and aggressive behaviors from one or more other persons at the workplace, and where the target of the bullying finds it difficult to defend him/herself against these actions." This definition is advantageous for research as it focuses on the target's perceived exposure to specific negative acts, rather than attempting to infer the perpetrator's intent.

2.2. The Organizational Antecedent: Ethical Leadership

The concept of an "ethical situation" posits that individual behavior is profoundly shaped by context. In any organization, the primary architect of this context is the

leader. Ethical Leadership (EL) 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 et al., 2005, p. 120). This definition highlights two key dimensions: the leader as a "moral person" (being perceived as honest, fair, and principled) and as a "moral manager" (proactively setting ethical standards, communicating them, and holding people accountable).

The influence of ethical leadership is explained through Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Employees learn what is acceptable behavior by observing and emulating their leaders, who act as powerful role models. An ethical leader, by consistently demonstrating respect and fairness, signals that such behaviors are valued and expected. As a "moral manager," they use reward and punishment systems to reinforce these standards, making it clear that mobbing behaviors—such as humiliation, exclusion, or rumor-mongering—will not be tolerated. This creates a climate of interpersonal justice and psychological safety, which serves as a powerful organizational deterrent to potential aggressors and a protective shield for potential victims (Manan et al., 2023). Conversely, a leader who is passive, unethical, or purely transaction-focused creates a moral vacuum. In this ambiguous "ethical situation," toxic behaviors may be implicitly tolerated or even encouraged as a form of "tough management," allowing mobbing to flourish.

Based on this theoretical foundation, we propose our first hypothesis:

H1: *Perceived ethical leadership will be significantly and negatively associated with perceived exposure to mobbing behaviors.*

2.3. The Individual Antecedent: Ethical Ideology

While leadership establishes the external climate, individuals interpret and respond to this climate through their own internal "moral compass," or ethical ideology. This study moves beyond simplistic notions of "good" or "bad" employees to utilize a more sophisticated framework. Forsyth's (1980) influential taxonomy posits that individual differences in moral judgment can be understood along two independent dimensions: idealism and relativism. This framework is not about the content of one's beliefs, but the structure of their moral thinking (Schlenker, 2008).

Idealism reflects the extent to which an individual believes that desirable outcomes can always be achieved by following universal moral principles (e.g., "One should never harm another person"). Individuals high in idealism (idealists) have a strong concern for the welfare of others and believe that harming others is always wrong,

regardless of potential benefits or situational pressures. They adhere to a more deontological or rule-based ethical framework.

Relativism reflects the extent to which an individual rejects universal moral principles, believing instead that moral decisions are contingent on the specific situation, culture, and context. Individuals high in relativism (relativists) are more skeptical of absolute moral truths and are more likely to agree that "what is ethical depends on the circumstances." They adhere to a more skeptical or situationist ethical framework.

This framework provides a powerful lens for understanding vulnerability to mobbing. An employee high in idealism possesses a rigid definition of what constitutes interpersonal harm. They are more likely to perceive the subtle, manipulative tactics of mobbing for what they are: clear violations of moral principles. Their unambiguous moral stance may also make them a "harder target," as they are less susceptible to rationalizations and more likely to report unethical conduct early on, thereby preventing its escalation. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: *Ethical idealism will be significantly and negatively associated with perceived exposure to mobbing behaviors.*

In contrast, an employee high in relativism is more comfortable with moral ambiguity. They are more likely to accept situational justifications for harsh behavior, such as "this is just how our industry works" or "it's a tough environment, but it gets results." This "ethical flexibility" may render them more vulnerable. They may not classify the early, subtle stages of mobbing as unequivocally "wrong," allowing the behavior to become entrenched. This tolerance for ambiguity creates the very environment in which mobbing thrives. Recent research corroborates this, linking relativism to a higher propensity for moral disengagement and a greater acceptance of counterproductive work behaviors (Zhang & Wang, 2022). Therefore, we propose:

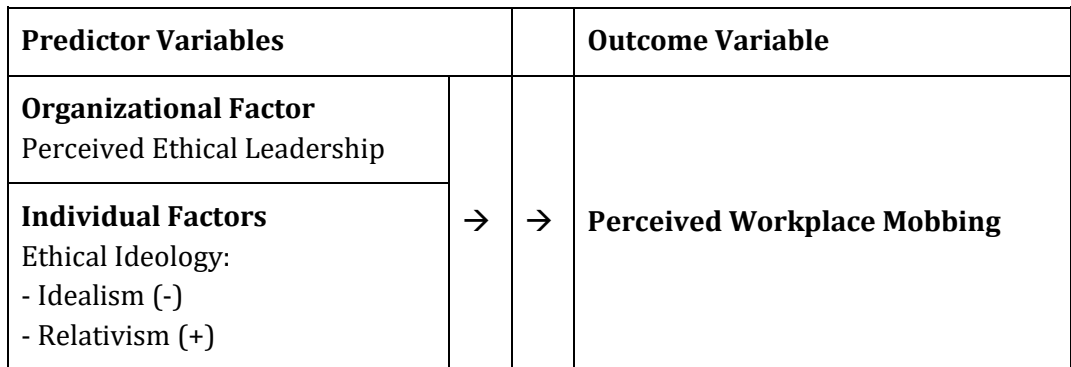
H3: *Ethical relativism will be significantly and positively associated with perceived exposure to mobbing behaviors.*

2.4. An Integrated Conceptual Model

This study integrates these organizational and individual streams of research into a comprehensive model. We posit that both the external environment (shaped by ethical leadership) and the individual's internal framework (ethical ideology) independently contribute to their experience of mobbing. The model, depicted in Figure 1, illustrates our central thesis: that while individual ideology is a significant factor, the organizational context created by an ethical leader serves as the primary,

overarching defense against workplace mobbing. Testing this integrated model allows for a more nuanced understanding of prevention. For instance, if leadership is a powerful predictor but ideology is weak, organizational resources should be focused exclusively on leadership training. However, if individual ideology remains a strong predictor even under ethical leadership, it suggests a dual-pronged approach is necessary, incorporating ethics training for all employees alongside leadership development.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Antecedents to Workplace Mobbing



**Source: Developed by the authors.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Sample

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships between leadership, ideology, and mobbing. Data was collected from employees in large organizations (employing over 250 people) located in the Silesia region of Poland. This region was strategically selected for its diverse and robust economy, with a high concentration of industries including manufacturing, information technology, and business services, enhancing the potential generalizability of the findings within a modern Polish economic context.

A non-probabilistic, purposive sampling strategy was utilized. We partnered with the Human Resources departments of five large companies who agreed to participate. These partner organizations distributed a link to an anonymous online questionnaire to their employees via internal email systems. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, with assurances that no individual data would be shared with management, thereby encouraging candid responses. A total of 650 questionnaires were distributed, and 512 were returned fully completed and valid, yielding a strong response rate of 78.8%. According to an a priori power analysis conducted using

G*Power 3.1, a sample size of N=512 is more than sufficient to detect medium effect sizes ($f^2 = 0.15$) in a multiple regression model with up to six predictors, with a statistical power of 0.95 and an alpha of .05.

3.2. Sample Characteristics

The demographic profile of the final sample (N=512) is presented in Table 1. The sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender, with 281 respondents (54.9%) identifying as female. The average age was 38.4 years (SD = 9.2), with a range from 21 to 64 years. The average organizational tenure was 6.3 years (SD = 4.1). The sample was highly educated, with 373 respondents (72.7%) holding a university degree. The industrial sectors were diverse, with the largest representations from manufacturing/industrial (36.7%), IT & technology (27.5%), and business/financial services (22.5%).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Respondent Demographics (N=512)

Variable	Category / Statistic	Value
Gender	Female	281 (54.9%)
	Male	231 (45.1%)
Age (Years)	Mean (SD)	38.4 (9.2)
	Range	21 - 64
Org. Tenure (Years)	Mean (SD)	6.3 (4.1)
	Range	1 - 25
Education	High School or less	44 (8.6%)
	Technical / Vocational	95 (18.6%)
	University Degree (BA/MA/PhD)	373 (72.7%)
Sector	Manufacturing / Industrial	188 (36.7%)
	IT & Technology	141 (27.5%)
	Business/Financial Services	115 (22.5%)
	Other	68 (13.3%)

3.3. Instrumentation and Measures

All scales used in the survey were presented in Polish. A rigorous translation and back-translation procedure was employed to ensure linguistic and conceptual

equivalence with the original English versions. Unless otherwise noted, all items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Perceived Mobbing (Dependent Variable): We used the 22-item Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R; Einarsen et al., 2009), the gold standard for measuring perceived exposure to bullying behaviors. Respondents rated how often they had been subjected to specific negative acts over the past six months (e.g., "Being ignored or excluded," "Having rumors and gossip spread about you") on a scale from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Daily*). The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in our sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Ethical Leadership (Independent Variable 1): The 10-item Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS; Brown et al., 2005) was used to measure employees' perceptions of their direct supervisor's ethical conduct. Items included statements like, "My supervisor holds employees accountable for their ethical conduct" and "My supervisor discusses business ethics or values with employees," rated from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). This scale also showed excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Ethical Ideology (Independent Variables 2 & 3): The 20-item Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ; Forsyth, 1980) was used to assess individual ethical ideology. The EPQ is divided into two 10-item subscales that are conceptually independent:

- **Idealism:** Measures the degree to which an individual subscribes to universal moral principles. A sample item is, "A person should make certain that their actions are morally right." This subscale demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).
- **Relativism:** Measures the degree to which an individual believes that ethical decisions are situational and context-dependent. A sample item is, "What is ethical varies from one situation and society to another." This subscale also showed good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$).

Control Variables: We included Gender (coded 0=Male, 1=Female), Age (in years), and Organizational Tenure (in years) as control variables. Prior literature suggests these demographic factors can influence perceptions of workplace climate and conflict, and controlling for them allows for a more precise estimation of the effects of our primary predictors.

3.4. Data Analysis Strategy

Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 28. The analysis proceeded in two main stages. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and a

Pearson correlation matrix were computed for all study variables. This provided an initial overview of the data and allowed for a check of multicollinearity among the predictor variables. Second, to test our hypotheses, a three-step hierarchical multiple linear regression was conducted. The total score on the NAQ-R served as the dependent variable.

- **Step 1:** The control variables (Age, Gender, Tenure) were entered into the model to account for their potential influence on perceived mobbing.
- **Step 2:** Perceived Ethical Leadership was added to the model. The change in R^2 at this step was used to assess the unique explanatory power of this organizational factor and to test H1.
- **Step 3:** The two ethical ideology subscales (Idealism and Relativism) were added. The change in R^2 at this final step was used to determine the unique contribution of individual-level factors and to test H2 and H3.

3.5. Control of Common Method Bias

Given that all data were collected from a single source using a self-report questionnaire at one point in time, common method bias (CMB) is a potential concern. We took several procedural and statistical steps to mitigate this risk. Procedurally, we assured respondents of complete anonymity and confidentiality to reduce social desirability bias. The questionnaire was also designed to create psychological separation between the predictor and criterion variables by placing them in different sections with distinct instructions. Statistically, we conducted Harman's single-factor test. An unrotated principal component factor analysis was performed on all items from our key scales. The results showed that multiple factors emerged, and the first factor accounted for only 31.2% of the total variance, which is well below the 50% threshold suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). This indicates that CMB is unlikely to be a significant issue confounding the results of this study.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation matrix for all continuous study variables. The mean score for Perceived Mobbing was 1.48 on a 5-point scale, which is relatively low and suggests that daily or weekly exposure to negative acts is not the norm in this sample. However, the standard deviation ($SD = 0.65$) indicates considerable variation in experiences among respondents.

The correlation matrix provides strong preliminary support for our hypotheses. Perceived Mobbing was significantly and strongly negatively correlated with Ethical Leadership ($r = -.46, p < .001$) and moderately negatively correlated with Idealism ($r = -.31, p < .001$). It was also significantly and moderately positively correlated with Relativism ($r = .35, p < .001$). These initial findings align with H1, H2, and H3. Furthermore, the correlations between predictor variables were all below the problematic threshold of .70, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern for the subsequent regression analysis.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlation Matrix (N=512)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Perceived Mobbing	1.48	0.65	(.94)						
2. Age	38.4	9.2	-.05	-					
3. Gender (1=F)	0.55	0.50	.09*	.02	-				
4. Tenure	6.3	4.1	-.02	.41**	.01	-			
5. Ethical Leadership	3.88	0.89	-.46**	.11*	-.07	.04	(.92)		
6. Idealism	3.91	0.77	-.31**	.14**	.10*	.06	.29**	(.88)	
7. Relativism	2.45	0.81	.35**	-.08	.03	-.04	-.22**	-.15**	(.85)

*Note: Cronbach's α reliability coefficients are on the diagonal in parentheses. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).*

4.2. Hypothesis Testing: Hierarchical Regression

The results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting Perceived Mobbing are presented in Table 3. In Step 1, the demographic control variables (Age, Gender, Tenure) were entered. The model was statistically significant ($F(3, 508) = 3.12, p < .05$) but explained a very small portion of the variance ($R^2 = .018$). Only Gender emerged as a significant, albeit weak, predictor ($\beta = .09, p < .05$), suggesting that female employees reported slightly higher levels of perceived mobbing.

In Step 2, Perceived Ethical Leadership was added to the model. This step resulted in a large and highly significant increase in explanatory power ($\Delta R^2 = .207, p < .001$). Ethical Leadership itself was a strong, negative, and highly significant predictor of perceived mobbing ($\beta = -.412, p < .001$). This result provides robust support for H1,

indicating that employees who perceive their leaders as more ethical report significantly lower exposure to mobbing behaviors.

In Step 3, the two ethical ideology variables, Idealism and Relativism, were added. This final step also produced a significant increase in the model's explanatory power ($\Delta R^2 = .062$, $p < .001$). As hypothesized, Idealism was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.179$, $p < .01$), providing support for H2. Concurrently, Relativism was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .204$, $p < .001$), supporting H3. These findings show that even after controlling for leadership, an individual's ethical framework remains a significant factor in their experience of mobbing.

The full model (Step 3) was highly significant ($F(6, 505) = 32.78$, $p < .001$) and explained a substantial 28.7% of the total variance in perceived mobbing (Adjusted $R^2 = .278$). Crucially, even with the inclusion of individual ideology, Ethical Leadership remained the strongest unique predictor in the model ($\beta = -.412$), underscoring its primary importance in preventing workplace mobbing.

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Perceived Mobbing (N=512)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	β	β
Step 1: Control Variables			
Age	-.08	-.04	-.02
Gender (1=Female)	.09*	.03	.01
Tenure	.02	.01	.01
Step 2: Organizational Factor			
Perceived Ethical Leadership		-.412***	-.412***
Step 3: Individual Factors			
Ethical Ideology: Idealism			-.179**
Ethical Ideology: Relativism			.204***
Model Statistics			
R^2	.018	.225	.287
Adjusted R^2	.012	.219	.278

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	β	β
ΔR^2	.018*	.207***	.062***
F-statistic	3.12*	36.81***	32.78***

Note: β = Standardized Beta Coefficient. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

5. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to shift the focus of mobbing research from a post-hoc, consequentialist perspective to a preventative, antecedent-based model. By quantitatively examining the combined influence of organizational leadership and individual ethical ideology, our findings provide significant theoretical contributions and actionable practical insights for organizations in Poland and beyond.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

The central and most powerful finding of this study is the profound importance of ethical leadership in mitigating workplace mobbing. Supporting H1, ethical leadership was not only the strongest bivariate correlate of mobbing ($r = -.46$) but also remained the most potent unique predictor in the final regression model ($\beta = -.412$), single-handedly explaining over 20% of the variance. This result offers a clear, data-driven answer to the question of the "ethical situation." It empirically demonstrates that the single most critical factor in creating a workplace resistant to mobbing is the active, visible, and consistent ethical conduct of its leaders. When leaders act as both a "moral person" and a "moral manager" (Brown et al., 2005), they establish a climate of psychological safety and interpersonal justice. This climate functions as an organizational "immune system," preventing the "psychological terror" (Leymann, 1990) of mobbing from taking root. Our findings robustly confirm the applicability of this Western-developed theory within the Polish organizational context, extending the generalizability of social learning theory as a mechanism for ethical conduct in the workplace.

While secondary to leadership, the findings related to individual ethical ideology (H2 and H3) offer a more nuanced theoretical contribution. We found that ethical idealism acts as a protective factor, while ethical relativism is a significant risk factor. The protective nature of idealism suggests that employees who adhere to universal moral principles are less likely to experience mobbing. This could be because their clear moral boundaries make them less susceptible to the ambiguous and manipulative tactics often employed by perpetrators. Alternatively, their lower tolerance for

unethical behavior may lead them to identify and report incipient mobbing earlier, preventing its escalation to the chronic levels measured by the NAQ-R.

Conversely, the risk associated with relativism is particularly noteworthy. This finding aligns with recent research linking relativism to moral disengagement and counterproductive work behaviors (Zhang & Wang, 2022) and provides an important psychological mechanism for understanding vulnerability. Employees who believe ethics are "situational" may be more likely to rationalize or excuse the early stages of mobbing, framing it as "part of the culture" or a necessary evil in a "high-pressure environment." This moral flexibility (Schlenker, 2008) creates the ambiguous space in which mobbing thrives. A relativist may not recognize the systematic pattern of harassment until significant psychological harm has already occurred. By demonstrating the independent predictive power of both idealism and relativism, this study underscores the importance of incorporating individual-difference variables into models of workplace deviance.

5.2. Practical Implications

The implications of our findings are direct, clear, and highly practical for managers, HR practitioners, and policymakers in Poland.

1. **Prioritize Leader Selection and Training over Victim Resilience:** Much of the conventional anti-mobbing advice focuses on what the target should do (e.g., "be more resilient," "document everything"). Our results show this approach is fundamentally flawed as it places the burden of prevention on the individual least empowered to effect change. The most effective preventative strategy is systemic and top-down. Organizations must make ethical conduct a core criterion in the selection, promotion, and evaluation of leaders. Leadership development programs must move beyond performance metrics to explicitly teach and reward "moral management" as a non-negotiable competency.
2. **Eradicate Ethical Ambiguity through Clear Policies:** The finding that relativism is a risk factor highlights that ambiguity is the enemy of a healthy workplace culture. Ethical leaders must be supported by organizational policies that are clear, simple, and relentlessly communicated. A "zero-tolerance" policy on mobbing is not enough; it must be defined with specific behavioral examples, such as those found in the NAQ-R. This removes the "gray area" that allows relativism to flourish and provides a clear standard against which all behavior is judged.

3. **Re-evaluate Ethical Oversight in Remote and Hybrid Work:** The shift towards remote work, particularly prevalent in the IT and service sectors represented in our sample, creates new challenges for ethical oversight. Digital mobbing—through exclusion from virtual meetings, hostile chat messages, or constant surveillance—can be more subtle and harder to detect. Our findings suggest that ethical leadership is even more critical in these settings, where direct observation is limited and the "ethical situation" can become more ambiguous. Leaders must be trained to proactively foster psychological safety and monitor team dynamics in virtual environments (Petrescu & Duțu, 2023).

This quantitative study complements earlier qualitative work by providing the systemic "why" behind individual tragedies. Where case studies show the devastating outcome of a failed system, this study identifies the specific points of failure—a deficit in ethical leadership and the exploitation of ethical ambiguity—and, more importantly, the key leverage point for prevention.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its strengths, this study has several limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, the cross-sectional design precludes any definitive claims of causality. While our theoretical model posits that leadership and ideology predict mobbing, it is also plausible that experiencing mobbing could, over time, erode an employee's trust in leadership or alter their ethical ideology. A longitudinal study tracking employees over time, particularly after a change in leadership, is needed to establish a clearer causal link.

Second, our reliance on self-report data raises the possibility of common method bias. Although we took procedural and statistical steps to mitigate this risk, future research would benefit from multi-source data. For instance, studies could correlate employee ratings of mobbing with peer ratings of their leader's ethical conduct or with objective organizational data like turnover rates and formal complaints.

Third, our sample was drawn from large organizations in a single region of Poland. The findings may not generalize to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the public sector, or different national cultures with varying power dynamics and labor relations. Cross-cultural research is needed to test the robustness of our model in different contexts.

These limitations point to several promising directions for future inquiry. An intervention study, using a quasi-experimental design to provide ethical leadership training to one group of managers and not another, would be a powerful next step to test the practical efficacy of our main recommendation. Furthermore, the link between relativism and victimhood warrants deeper exploration through qualitative methods. In-depth interviews with employees high in relativism could provide rich insights into how they experience, rationalize, and cope with ethically ambiguous workplace situations.

6.2. Final Conclusion

This study set out to develop a quantitative, preventative model of workplace mobbing by shifting the focus from consequences to antecedents. Our findings from a large sample of Polish employees provide compelling evidence that mobbing is not an unavoidable interpersonal issue but a systemic failure strongly and negatively predicted by the presence of ethical leadership. We demonstrated that while an employee's individual ethical framework plays a significant role, it is the organizational climate created and maintained by the leader that matters most.

For organizations in Poland and globally, the message is unequivocal: the most effective defense against the destructive phenomenon of mobbing is not a policy buried in a handbook or a resilience workshop for employees, but a visible, active, and unwavering ethical leader in every office and on every video call. By investing in the moral character of their leadership, organizations can build a culture that not only prevents harm but also allows employees to thrive.

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