





# Social support as buffer for workplace negative acts of professional public sector employees in Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

Much has been known about negative outcomes of workplace bullying in public sectors in low power distance contexts like the UK, USA, and Australia. Little is known about workplace bullying in non-Western contexts characterized by high power distance, bureaucracy, and collectivism. This study advances Conservation of Resource (COR) theory with empirical evidence that the acquisition of social support buffered the indirect impact of bullying on work engagement in a sample of 207 Vietnamese public sector professionals. This research suggests the provision of contextual resources is critically important to enhance employee positive experience of work in the face of workplace bullying.

**KEYWORDS** Workplace bullying; social support; work engagement; public sector

## Introduction

Public sector professionals are a group of employees who apply specialized knowledge and skills in public administration and management to deliver public services (Farr-Wharton, Brunetto, and Shacklock 2011). Traditionally, these public sector professionals had control, autonomy, and decision-making power (Farr-Wharton, Brunetto, and Shacklock 2011). In the last 20 years, New Public Management (NPM) approach has changed the nature of work in the public sector, leading to the experience of increased pressures, high work intensification, and high job demands (Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, and Shacklock 2011; Conway et al. 2016). Despite the implementation of NPM, public sectors are still characterized by a lack of a positive, ethical, and caring work environment that creates more opportunities and pressures for misconducts (see, for example, Hassan, Wright, and Yukl 2014). These contemporary issues have weakened employees' public service motivation that is the core determinant of work engagement and high performance (Christensen, Paarlberg, and Perry 2017; Cowell, Downe, and Morgan 2014; Ko and Hur 2014). Therefore, management practices are important to enhance the retention, engagement and productivity of public sector employees in the new era of NPM (Conway et al. 2016; Hassan, Wright, and Yukl 2014).

Highly engaged employees frequently show their energy, devotion, and fascination at work when they work in a positive work environment characterized by good relationships with their managers and colleagues (May, Gilson, and Harter 2004;

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Rich, Lepine, and Crawford 2010; Schaufeli et al. 2002). Workplace bullying as part of a negative work environment is a significant barrier for retaining highly engaged and productive public sector employees. In the UK public sector, one in five civil servants experienced workplace bullying (Lewis and Gunn 2007). Approximately 23% of public sector professionals reported to be victims of bullying in the 2018 Tasmania State Service Employee Survey (Easton 2019). Workplace bullying is an example of ethical misconducts that causes severe psychological impact on the victims (e.g. Fevre et al. 2012; Omari and Paull 2015). Bullying victims tend to quit their jobs (Hoel et al. 2010) due to exposure to trauma and psychological distress (Bond, Tuckey, and Dollard 2010; Nielsen and Einarsen 2012), resulting in low work motivation (Lutgen-Sandvik 2008; Nielsen and Einarsen 2012), and high job dissatisfaction (Law et al. 2011; Nielsen and Einarsen 2012).

In public sectors that are characterized by high power distance, hierarchical structure, and bureaucracy, it is difficult to create a safe environment free of negative acts in the workplace (Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers 2009; Fevre et al. 2012). In these workplaces, workplace bullying is seen as a means for perpetrators to maintain power and authority (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014; Samnani 2013); thus, this phenomenon is natural and unavoidable although it indirectly influences employees' psychological health and well-being (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014; McCormack et al. 2009).

Workplace bullying has been found to be prevalent in public sector in Vietnam (see, for example, Nguyen et al. 2017, 2018) and public sector organizations are characterized by high level of bureaucracy and imbalance distribution of power (e.g. Quang and Vuong 2002; Thang et al. 2007). Similarly, workplace bullying has been found to be associated with psychological distress (Nguyen et al. 2018).

This study makes several contributions to public management research. First, as work engagement of public sector professionals is important (Pritchard 2008), research on work engagement in public administration is still considered to be 'under-researched' (Noesgaard and Hansen 2018; Vigoda-Gadot, Eldor, and Schohat 2013). Along with it, the impact of workplace bullying on work engagement has received less attention in recent public management studies (e.g. Nguyen et al. 2018; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al. 2009; Tummers, Brunetto, and Teo 2016). Our study, therefore, contributes an understanding of the harmful impacts of workplace bullying on work engagement in public sector organizations.

Second, there is a lack of theoretical understanding in identifying the moderating and mediation mechanisms in explaining the impacts of workplace bullying on employee outcomes (Nielsen and Einarsen 2012; Samnani and Singh 2012). Our study draws from Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to take into account the prominent argument that the acquisition of supportive resources available in the organization is one of the recommended strategies lessening the detrimental impacts of workplace bullying (Law et al. 2011; Omari and Paull 2015).

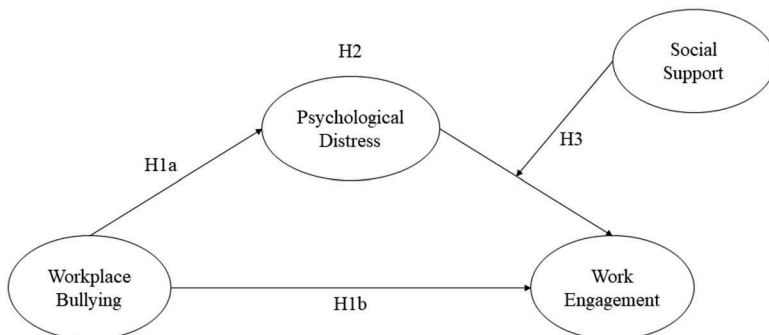
In the current study, we will focus on psychological distress as one such mediator and social support as the moderator in the relationship between bullying and work engagement. Psychological distress is 'the unique discomforting, emotional state experienced by an individual in response to a specific stressor or demand that results in harm, either temporary or permanent, to the person' (Ridner 2004, 539). It is one of the main consequences of bullying at work (Bond, Tuckey, and Dollard 2010; Nielsen and Einarsen 2012). Social support is an important contextual resource used to minimize stress (see Hobfoll 2002; Jang et al. 2018). It refers to the perceptions of

an employee towards the socio-emotional integration, trust between organizational individuals, and the degree of help and assistance s/he receives from co-workers and supervisors (e.g. Karasek and Theorell 1990). In a collectivist society such as Vietnam, employees have a high level of belonging to a group/organization, sharing common goals, caring for, and supporting others (Thang et al. 2007) while the leadership capacity in the public sector is low (Pham 2018). In a situation of high power distance between supervisors and subordinates, we argue that public sector professionals in Vietnam are likely to enlist social support to cope with workplace bullying rather than going to their senior management for support. Drawing from Hobfoll's COR theory, social support could then be used as the buffer for the harmful effect of workplace bullying on psychological stress and work engagement (see Figure 1 for the proposed research model).

## Literature background and hypothesis development

### *The influences of workplace bullying on work engagement*

Work engagement is conceptualized as 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption' (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004, 295). It is argued that high performing organizations are characterized by highly engaged employees who frequently have a sense of persistent, energetic, and effective connections with their work, and be less likely to experience burnout (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Schaufeli et al. 2002). Engaged employees see their jobs in positive and challenging ways that encourage them to work enthusiastically and be willing to invest more energy to obtain self-reward and satisfaction, especially when their jobs are stressful (e.g. Bakker et al. 2008). Engaged employees also dedicate their physical, cognitive, and psychological resources to be excellent in performance (Macey and Schneider 2008; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004). These employees are likely to devote a sense of self in their work for the good of the organization (Christian, Garza, and Slaughter 2011). Work engagement is different from other attitudinal constructs like job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Job satisfaction refers to a low-arousal positive experience and a reactive emotional state or job attitude arising from the feeling of what has been attained (Warr and Inceoglu 2012) while organizational commitment is defined as an attitudinal and affective attachment to the organization (Meyer, Allen, and Smith 1993; Meyer and



**Figure 1.** Proposed model of the study.

Maltin 2010). It is argued that job satisfaction has lower impacts on performance than work engagement and committed workers do not essentially expose a high level of energy (Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006; Noesgaard and Hansen 2018). As work engagement refers to an employee's job, the energy element of work engagement of public sector professionals is of particular importance in creating service values in public sector organizations (Fleming and Asplund 2007; Noesgaard and Hansen 2018).

In the public sector, the work environment is typically characterized by low autonomy, bureaucracy, high levels of organizational politics, and unclear performance outcomes (e.g. Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). These inherent characteristics create difficulties and challenges in reinforcing work engagement while autonomy, supportive leadership, work transparency, and job control have positive influences on work engagement (Lavigna 2015).

Workplace bullying is an aspect of negative and unsafe work environment in public sector organizations (Lewis and Gunn 2007; Nguyen et al. 2018). Bullying behaviours include verbal, physical, and psychological behaviours that are persistently negative and aggressive, occurring frequently and repeatedly over a period of time (Einarsen et al. 2011). In the workplace, these include ignorance, being humiliated and insulted, receiving tasks with unreasonable deadlines, or having removed key aspects of responsibility (Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers 2009).

Workplace bullying is a critical issue in public sector organizations and typically found among social and health workers, public administration, and education staff (Fevre et al. 2012; Lewis and Gunn 2007; Omari and Paull 2015). Public sector organizations are characterized by high power distance and bureaucracy, such that victims find it difficult to defend for themselves (Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers 2009; Samnani 2013). These work characteristics become a barrier for employees to report bullying incidents (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014; Samnani 2013). Public sector professionals are, therefore, 'particularly at risk of both incivility and disrespect and violence and injury' (Fevre et al. 2012, 4).

Research on workplace bullying tends to focus on how it causes psychological distress (Ridner 2004, 539). When employees experienced psychological distress, they exhibit symptoms such as inability to cope with problems, changes to their emotional status, and discomfort in verbal and physical communication (Ridner 2004). Workplace bullying has been found to lead to health problems such as anxiety, fatigue, and depression (Einarsen, Matthiesen, and Skogstad 1998; Lutgen-Sandvik 2008).

Empirical evidence shows that when bullying behaviours are prevalent in the organization, those who have been bullied tend to leave the organization because of low self-esteem and job dissatisfaction (Agervold and Mikkelsen 2004; Lutgen-Sandvik 2008), and less work engagement (Dollard, Tuckey, and Dormann 2012). Nguyen et al. (2018) found empirical support for similar finding in a sample of public sector employees in Vietnam. Therefore, we hypothesize that

*Hypothesis 1a: Workplace bullying is positively related to psychological distress*

*Hypothesis 1b: Workplace bullying is negatively related to work engagement*

*Hypothesis 2: Workplace bullying is indirectly related to work engagement through the mediating role of psychological distress*

### ***Conservation of resources theory (COR)***

COR theory is a motivational and work-leading theory of organizational stress (Hobfoll et al. 2018). COR theory postulates that individuals tend to strive to protect and retain current resources (conservation) and then acquire, accumulate, and foster new resources (acquisition) that are primarily important and valuable according to personal experiences and situations (Hobfoll et al. 2018). This theory proposes that stress is an important outcome of a threat or a loss of the key or central resources. Stress also emerges when individuals fail to gain key resources following significant effort and investment of resources (Hobfoll et al. 2018). However, this principle has a motivational basis suggesting that people are encouraged to engage in behaviours that minimize future resource losses since losses can have a significantly negative impact on well-being. This means people tend to capitalize resources to protect against key resource loss, to recover from losses, and to gain new resources (Hobfoll et al. 2018).

There are distinctive resources in the COR framework (Hobfoll 2002; Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012). Contextual resources can be found in the employee's social context, such as social or family support. Personal resources are closely associated with the self, including personality traits and personal energies (Hobfoll 2002). Volatile resources such as time or physical energy that are temporary cannot be used for other purposes once they are consumed. Structural resources including houses or social networks are more permanent possessions than volatile resources. Key resources (e.g. self-esteem, optimism, social power, social status, or intensity of goal pursuit) represent numerous personality traits that enable a more functioning and efficient coping strategy. Macro resources highlight the embeddedness of an individual into particular characteristics of a larger economic, social, and cultural system (e.g. public policy or government support) (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012, 548).

In our study, social support is argued to be an important contextual resource as we adopt the COR framework in understanding stress and coping (Hobfoll 2002). Social support can broaden an individual's collection of available resources and can substitute or strengthen other resources that have been absent (Halbesleben 2006). Individuals from collectivist societies are likely to participate in various social activities that shape their personal identity (Giorgi 2010; Hobfoll et al. 2018). Social support ensures the fit between an individual, tasks, and the work environment (Bakker et al. 2008; Eisenberger et al. 1997). Furthermore, social support can maintain the positive energy needed to reduce the negative energy from workplace bullying (Bentley et al. 2016; Tuckey et al. 2009). Social support could have a positive influence on an individual's work attitudes and behaviours (Saks 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004).

### ***The moderating role of social support***

Social support has been examined as a moderator in the literature. Drawing from COR theory, social support is most valuable when it provides for situational needs (Hobfoll 2002). Social support could reduce the risks of illness and stress associating with jobs which have high demands and low control (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Karasek et al. 1998). There is also empirical evidence that social support could reduce the existence of stressors and strain (Beehr et al. 2003).

A supportive and mutually respectful environment is a motivational mechanism for eradicating workplace bullying among public sector professionals (Omari

and Paull 2015). Jacobson et al. (2014, 11) noted that organizations with collectivistic cultures tend to create a positive and supportive environment. Social support provided employees with the necessary resource to allow them to develop their ability to cope with the stressor associated with workplace bullying (Sprigg et al. 2019) as social support ‘promotes a positive “sense of self” and a view that one can overcome stressful situations’ (Hobfoll 1989 cited in Sprigg et al. 2019, 10). Social support is a relevant, accessible, and available resource to strategize stress management and energize employees from collectivistic society to obtain support from the workgroup/organization in to order to enhance their work engagement (Giorgi 2010). While high power distance and bureaucratic cultures stimulate the tolerance of workplace bullying and the ignorance of employee voice (Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers 2009; Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014; Samnani 2013), our study hypothesizes that the prevalence of social supportive at work could minimize the negative consequences of negative workplace experience.

*Hypothesis 3: Social support moderates the indirect relationship between workplace bullying and work engagement*

## **Methods**

### **Data and sample**

An anonymous self-reported survey was sent to public sector professionals in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. We focused on collecting data from public sector professionals who were above 18 years old and had at least 1 year of experience working in the current public sector organization. We excluded responses that did not meet these two inclusion criteria. Incomplete responses were not included in the data analysis. Altogether 207 complete and usable responses were collected (response rate 41.48%). This sample size had sufficient power and effect size to yield significant accuracy and flexibility of predictions with four predictors (Cohen 1988). Half of the respondents (53.10%) were females. More than one third (39.10%) were in the range of 26–30 years old, while 36.70% were aged from 31 to 40. Majority of the respondents (90.30%) worked in public agencies located in the city centre. More than three quarters (82.60%) reported to work at weekends. More than half (51.70%) were married. The majority (62.80%) had completed undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and 81.6% were non-managerial employees. The sample consisted of 52.70% who were working in the areas of health and social work, the remaining respondents worked in manufacturing, wholesale and retail sale, and other state-owned organizations.

### **Measures**

We used previously validated scales in this study. Research participants were recruited from public sector organizations in Vietnam. We followed Brislin’s (1970) back-translation approach to ensure the applicability of the English questionnaire with the involvement of a doctorate-qualified academic and other experienced scholars in human resource management and organizational behaviour from Vietnam. The interpretation

process was completed after all errors were eliminated. The finalized survey was also sent to 50 part-time postgraduate business students at universities in Ho Chi Minh City to evaluate the clarity of the translation. This process was to ensure that the questionnaire was understandable for non-academic professionals and representative of the intended constructs.

It has been argued that when examining individual-level behaviours, attitudes, or interpretations of work relationships, events, or behavioural intentions, the utilization of self-report questionnaire becomes the most relevant approach (Conway and Lance 2010; Meier and O'Toole 2012). Accordingly, employees who are the key recipients of organizational treatment and management practices often have different views on the goals, strategy, objectives of their organization. Thus, it is appropriate to use perceptual measures to capture organizational individuals' behaviours, feeling, perceptions, and experience at work (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012). Therefore, this study used perceptual measurements.

### ***Social support***

Following Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), we used a six-item scale from Karasek et al. (1998) to measure social support. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement level with the support they received from co-workers and supervisors, using a five-point Likert scale from '1' = strongly disagree to '5' = strongly agree. Sample items included, 'My co-workers support me'.

### ***Bullying***

This construct was measured by using a 22-item scale developed by Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers (2009). Respondents were asked to indicate if they experienced negative behaviour in the workplace, using a five-point Likert scale, from '1' = never to '5' = daily. An EFA analysis of bullying resulted in two dimensions (KMO test: .89; 69.10% with eigenvalues greater than 1.0): person-related bullying (sample item included, 'Spreading of gossip and rumors about you',  $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and work-related bullying (sample item included, 'excessive monitoring of your work',  $\alpha = 0.81$ ). The CFA test showed that this composite scale had goodness of fit to the model ( $\chi^2/df = 1.89$ , CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.03).

### ***Psychological distress***

We measured employees' psychological well-being through the experience of stress by using a 10-item scale of stress from Kessler et al. (2002). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had felt stressed during the past 30 days, using a five-point Likert scale, from '1' = all of the time to '5' = none of the time. The sample included, 'Did you feel tired out for no good reason?' Low scores signify a high level of stress.

### ***Work engagement***

We adopted the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) from Schaufeli and Bakker (2003). Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement level with the statements demonstrating their experience of work, using a seven-point Likert scale, from '1' = strongly disagree to '7' = strongly agree. Sample items included, 'I am proud of the work that I do'.

### **Control variables**

We included gender, age and education level as control variables because these have been shown to have an influence on negative workplace behaviour (Hoel, Cooper, and Faragher 2001; Zapf et al. 2011). We also controlled for firm size, job tenure, overall tenure, marital status and position level (supervisory versus non-supervisory employees). ANOVA (with Tukey *post hoc* test) and Independent-Samples T Test analyses showed that there is no between-group difference for gender, firm sizes, job tenure, overall tenure and educational levels. There is a between-group difference for social support, workplace bullying and stress by age. The perceptions of workplace bullying were found to be different between supervisory and non-supervisory employees.

IBM SPSS 25 was used to produce descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and correlations. IBM AMOS 25 was used to check the validity of the measurement model through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of all the scales and test the developed hypotheses. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the scales (including mean, standard deviation [SD], composite coefficient reliability [CR], and average variance extracted [AVE] value). CR values of the four latent constructs ranged from 0.88 to 0.91, indicating reliability. The AVE values of the four measures ranged from 0.60 to 0.81, indicating convergent validity (Byrne 2016).

### **Model estimates**

Following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) approach, we conducted a variety of tests to check the convergent and discriminant validity of all the scales. First, we conducted a series of CFAs for the convergent validity of individual scales. The tests showed that each scale had its convergent validity. Second, we evaluated the goodness of fit of the measurement model that included five latent constructs. The test showed that the four-factor baseline model had goodness of fit to the data ( $\chi^2[220] = 371.43$ , CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.06).

We then compared the baseline model with other alternative models to ensure the discriminant validity of all the latent constructs through a Chi-square difference test. The comparison tests showed that Model 1 (i.e. the hypothesized model) had better fit to the data than the alternative models (see Table 1). In addition to this, our study showed that the square root of the AVE value for each construct was much larger than its correlation with any other construct (Fornell and Larcker 1981) (see Table 2). Moreover, the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT)<sup>1</sup> values between four constructs were below 0.90 (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015). Altogether, the tests confirmed that convergent and discriminant validity of all the constructs in our study was established. The composite measures were then created by imputing the parameter estimates from the measurement model in IBM AMOS 25.

### **Common method variance (CMV)**

Following the literature (see Chang, van Witteloostuijn, and Eden 2010; Konrad and Linnehan 1995; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012), we checked for CMV by adopting procedural (e.g. anonymity and confidentiality, randomized items in the survey, etc.) and statistical remedies. We also performed two



**Table 1.** Comparison of fit indices between hypothesized and alternative models.

Model		$\lambda^2$	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\lambda^2/df$
Model 1	Baseline model (Four-factor model)	371.43	220	0.95	0.94	0.06	0.06	
Model 2	Three-factor model (Social Support, Bully+Stress, Engagement)	671.51	224	0.85	0.83	0.10	0.08	$\Delta\lambda^2(4) = 300.08$ , $p < 0.001$
Model 3a	Two-factor model (Social Support, Bully+Stress + Engagement)	1034.42	226	0.72	0.69	0.13	0.12	$\Delta\lambda^2(6) = 662.99$ , $p < 0.001$
Model 3b	Two-factor model (Social Support+Engagement, Bully +Stress)	1018.91	226	0.73	0.70	0.13	0.12	$\Delta\lambda^2(6) = 647.48$ , $p < 0.001$
Model 4	Single factor model (Harman's one factor model)	1469.04	227	0.58	0.53	0.16	0.15	$\Delta\lambda^2(7) = 1,097.61$ , $p < 0.001$

statistical checks for CMV. First, Harman's single factor test showed that a single factor with eigenvalues of greater than 1.0, accounting for 35.78% of the variance in the exogenous and endogenous constructs. Second, we used 'social desirability' as the marker variable (Lindell and Whitney 2001) to determine if it matters the correlations between four constructs before and after adding the marker variable. The comparison test showed that the difference of correlations of all constructs between before and after, including the marker variable, was 0.04. This result indicated that the correlations between exogenous constructs and the endogenous variable could not be accounted for by the marker variable (Lindell and Whitney 2001). A *t*-test of mean difference was undertaken to compare the correlations of the two models (i.e. models without and with the marker variable). The test showed that there is no difference between the two models ( $p = 0.998$ ). Overall, these findings suggested CMV was not a major issue and provided support for the validity of our measures in the model.

## Findings

Respondents reported high social support (Mean = 4.81, SD = 1.23), high stress (Mean = 1.99, SD = 0.78), and average work engagement (Mean = 4.07, SD = 1.06). Approximately 50.72% of respondents reported to be a target of bullying at the workplace (rated from '2' now and then, to '5' daily). Employees reported that the highest bullying behaviour was 'being ordered to do work below your level of competence' (Mean = 2.27, SD = 1.18). In total, 24.1% of respondents reported to be a target of bullying (rated from 'now and then' to 'almost daily') (known as self-labelled bullying) during the past six months. This result was higher than the range of 11–18% for self-labelled bullying across other countries in the previous research (see Bentley et al. 2012; Nielsen et al. 2010).

We used model 14 in PROCESS macro (Hayes 2013) for testing the hypothesized moderated mediation model. Figure 2 presents the results of the path analysis. The positive relationship between bullying and stress was statistically significant ( $\beta = .76$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting hypothesis 1a. As stated in hypothesis 1b, workplace bullying was expected to be negatively associated with work engagement. However, this relationship was found to be statistically insignificant,



**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics, composite reliability coefficients, AVE and zero-order pearson correlations.

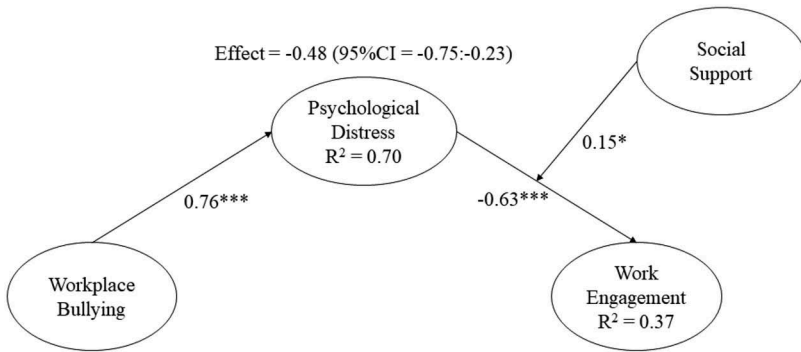
Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	CR	AVE	8	9	10	11	12
<i>Control variables</i>																
1. Gender	-	-	<b>1.00</b>													
2. Age	2.44	0.96	0.13	<b>1.00</b>												
3. Organizational size	4.00	1.30	0.15*	0.13	<b>1.00</b>											
4. Position tenure	2.78	1.21	0.12	0.48***	0.11	<b>1.00</b>										
5. Overall tenure	3.03	1.24	0.08	0.52***	0.18*	0.81***	<b>1.00</b>									
6. Marital status	1.50	0.53	-0.01	0.15*	0.04	0.05	0.14*	<b>1.00</b>								
7. Education level	4.71	1.11	0.05	0.18**	0.26***	-0.05	-0.03	0.07	<b>1.00</b>							
8. Position level	4.53	1.07	-0.01	-0.23**	0.02	-0.05	-0.21**	-0.18*	-0.13	<b>1</b>						
<i>Hypothesized variables</i>																
9. Social Support	4.81	1.23	-0.03	0.06	-0.06	0.05	0.12	0.11	0.01	0.90	0.70	-0.11	<b>0.83</b>			
10. Bullying	2.16	0.86	0.04	0.03	0.05	-0.09	-0.07	-0.03	0.14*	0.90	0.81	-0.25***	-0.06	<b>0.90</b>		
										(0.18)			(0.12)			
11. Psychological Distress	1.99	0.78	0.07	0.00	0.03	-0.15*	-0.13	0.02	0.05	0.91	0.59	-0.08	-0.12	0.60***	<b>0.78</b>	
										(0.21)			(0.76)			
12. Work Engagement	4.07	1.06	-0.06	0.10	0.03	0.09	0.07	0.02	0.02	0.88	0.65	-0.06	0.35***	-0.28***	-0.36***	<b>0.80</b>
										(0.46)			(0.31)			

N = 207

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Bold, italicized numbers signify the square root of AVE value.

Numbers in brackets indicate HTMT values.



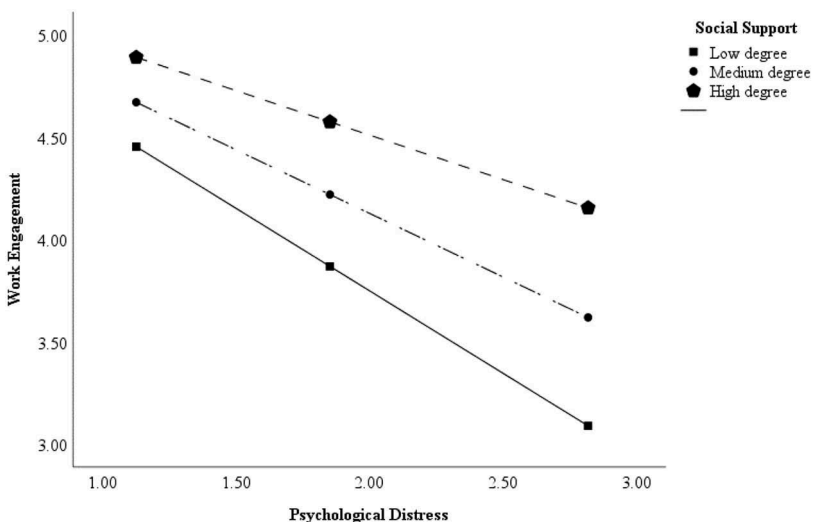
**Figure 2.** Results of structural model analysis.

N = 207

Control variables were included in the test of structural model

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

rejecting hypothesis 1b. While psychological distress was found to be negatively and statistically associated with work engagement ( $\beta = -0.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), this construct was found to be a mediator in the relationship between workplace bullying and work engagement (effect =  $-0.48$ , BootSE =  $0.13$ , 95% confidence interval [CI] =  $-0.75$  to  $-0.23$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 2 was supported. As expected, the interaction of social support and stress on work engagement was statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Figure 3 shows that social support moderated the mediated model related to bullying, psychological distress, and work engagement, such that the negatively indirect effect relating to bullying and engagement was weaker when there was a higher level of social support. Hypothesis 3 was supported. In summary, the model explained 37% of the dependent variable, work engagement ( $R^2 = 0.37$ ,  $F_{(9, 197)} = 12.64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).



**Figure 3.** Interference of social support for the conditional indirect effect of bullying on work engagement.

## Discussion

Our study aimed to examine the moderation of workplace support in alleviating workplace bullying in a sample of Vietnam's public sector professionals. The findings echo empirical evidence showing the harmful influences on workplace bullying on employees' psychological well-being and work engagement. While we did not find any direct impact of bullying on work engagement, psychological distress was an indirect mediator. Drawing from COR theory (Hobfoll 2002), we found that the indirect effect of workplace bullying on work engagement is moderated by social support. This finding suggests social support as a context resource, helps reduce psychological distress caused by bullying behaviours. These findings affirm that social support is highly essential for public sector organizations with high power distance, hierarchical structures, and bureaucracy to retain highly engaged and productive public servants who have been experiencing high levels of stress from bullying incidents at work. Findings in this study make important contributions to public management research domain and implications to the management of workplace bullying.

### *Implications for theory and research*

While work engagement is an important factor constituting public service values and the excellence of public service delivery (Noesgaard and Hansen 2018; Pritchard 2008), a few studies examining the relationship between workplace bullying and work engagement in the field of public management (e.g. Nguyen et al. 2018; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al. 2009). Our study contributes to this under-researched area by providing additional evidence of the indirectly detrimental impacts of bullying on work engagement from the perceptions of public sector professionals. Workplace bullying is inevitably accepted in a high power distance context as the instigation of these negative behaviours aims to maintain power, authority, and status (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014; Samnani 2013). The findings in this study echo the prominent argument that workplace bullying in public sectors indeed causes severe health problems such as psychological distress that demotivates highly energetic and performing professionals to be emotionally engaged in their work. Therefore, our study supports the idea that it is important to develop an awareness of negative influences of workplace bullying among public sector professionals working in organizations characterized by high power distance and bureaucracy cultures (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014).

As previously argued, public sector professionals such as social and health workers, and public administration have experienced higher level of bullying compared to those in the private sector (Cowell, Downe, and Morgan 2014; Hoel, Faragher, and Cooper 2004). While social support is one of the important moderating factors in stress management literature (Sprigg et al. 2019), the central theoretical contribution of our study to COR theory (Hobfoll 2002) and the bullying literature is that it highlights potential buffers of negative psychological well-being effects associated with experienced workplace bullying among public sector workers when bullying occurs by hypothesizing and testing the moderating role of social support. As noted in our findings, the conditional indirect effect changed from negative to positive work engagement in the presence of high social support. In other words, social support appears to compensate for high work engagement while bullying affects work

engagement through psychological distress. Within the context of high bullying incidents, when employees experience high levels of stress that can reduce their engagement, the presence of high social support improves high work engagement. Conversely, when social support is low, public sector employees reported less work engagement when bullying and psychological distress are high.

The present findings are consistent with the buffering hypothesis of social support as noted in prior research (e.g. Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Hakanen, Bakker, and Demerouti 2005). We suggest that social support is a key contextual resource that makes public sector professionals more equipped to cope with stress experience and retain their work engagement. This specific resource is important public sectors in a collectivistic society, showing that collectivistic groups/organizations do provide a level of care and support for organizational members in the context of reducing the prevalence of workplace bullying (Jacobson, Hood, and Van Buren 2014). Specifically, when workplace bullying occurs, this is associated with low-quality social exchange relationships. Hence, support mechanisms are necessary to restore positive social relations in the workplace. Therefore, our study provides validity for the treatment of social support as a valuable contextual resource in lessening negative work behaviour such as bullying.

Finally, bullying has been seen as an act of misconduct or unethical behaviours in public sectors (Cowell, Downe, and Morgan 2014; Fevre et al. 2012; Omari and Paull 2015). Bullied employees in high power distance contexts tend to stay quiet about negative behaviour due to their fear that others will not believe them and view them as being more worried about their own goals (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014; Samnani 2013). This study provides supporting evidence for the idea that the development of know-how knowledge to exacerbate the bullying-stress-work engagement relationship when high power distance and bureaucracy stimulate supervisors' ignorance of employee voice (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014). As high power distance culture can ground the incidence of bullying (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014; Samnani 2013), research on workplace bullying in Vietnam's public sector has still been in its infancy (Nguyen et al. 2017, 2018). To the best of our knowledge, this study is one of the only two empirical research projects which examined organizational supportive environment in the prevention of workplace bullying in Vietnam (also see the study of Nguyen et al. 2018).

Our study suggests that social support as part of a work climate of trust and socio-emotional integration is more important than perceived organizational support in the context of high collectivist society. In a highly collectivist context such as Vietnam, social support plays a key role in encouraging and maintaining positive workplace behaviours as supporting each other becomes the organizational norm and work climate (Eisenberger et al. 1997; Karasek and Theorell 1990). When employees perceive that supervisors and colleagues are supportive, helpful, and committed to them in meeting their socio-emotional and tangible needs, they will then reciprocate by helping other employees to achieve organizational goals. Such supportive social interactions would help to prevent the emergence and growth of negative behaviour. Social support is more important in Vietnam's public sectors in encouraging positive human and social interactions because public sector agencies are generally known to be highly bureaucratic with a low level of management skills and impersonal nature of managerial relationships (Leymann 1996; Zapf et al. 2003).

### ***Implications for managers and human resource practitioners***

Emotionally intelligent and engaged professionals in public sectors are important for the effectiveness of public service delivery (Levitats and Vigoda-Gadot 2019). Therefore, public sectors need to consider the development of a healthy and supportive environment because workplace bullying occurs when organizations reward and allow its presence (Trépanier, Fernet, and Austin 2015). As social support is one of the key factors in positive work experience, public sector top managers should commit to establishing and operating an effective and efficient system that focuses on the protection of psychological health and safety among employees. An establishment of interpersonal interactions from top-down and bottom-up levels emphasizing respect, caring, helping others, and support, humility, collaboration is important to deter workplace bullying incidence (Nguyen et al. 2018; Omari and Paull 2015).

The HR department plays a key role in the protection of occupational health and safety. Specifically, direct managers need training in managerial skills and knowledge in identifying negative workplace behaviours so that they can improve the public administrative system (Dao 1997; Painter 2003). In addition to it, it is important for public sector HR managers to show how bullying could be eradicated by creating a supportive work environment along with sufficient assistance for employees to report bullying incidents and facilitate their well-being (Trépanier, Fernet, and Austin 2015). HR managers in public sectors also create a climate highlighting positive interdependent relationships that inspire the development of mutuality between organizations and members to motivate public sector professionals to invest their public sector motivation, energy, and dedication in performing tasks well (Nguyen et al. 2018; Omari and Paull 2015). Additionally, it is imperative to provide staff with adequate support resources to prevent the development of psychological problems and risks while they are likely to accept authority and power distance of organizational structures (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014; Samnani 2013).

HR practitioners could consider the behavioural responses of employees to the organization and implement HR-related commitment practices that encourage public sector professionals to align their personal goals with the organizational goals and commit to accomplish those goals (Kwon, Bae, and Lawler 2010; Whitener 2001). When the public sector professionals understand the commitment of the organization through HR practices, they are found to have greater productivity (e.g. Kwon, Bae, and Lawler 2010; Whitener 2001). Drawing from social exchange theory, the perceptions of HR-related commitment practices result in a positive experience of the recipients of HR practices. HR practitioners could choose to conduct HR practices that create a share-perceptions of a supportive, favourable, and fair exchanges among organizational members (Kwon, Bae, and Lawler 2010). It is argued that HR practitioners in the public sector play an important role in delivering a positive message and communicating with the employees about the organizational care for their wellbeing (Kwon, Bae, and Lawler 2010). This in turn positively affects employee personal feelings, commitment, and public sector motivation.

Public sector HR managers play an important role in assisting top managers to eliminate bullying when HR managers have formal authority compared to those of private sectors (Nguyen et al. 2018). We suggest that HR departments need to introduce organizational policies, procedures, and practices preventing negative behaviours, as bullying has not been considered in public administration, national laws, and regulations

in non-Western economies (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014). In addition, HR departments need to ensure justice in the distribution of organizational resources to public sector professionals (Shantz, Alfes, and Latham 2016). The presence of high power distance culture and bureaucracy in public sectors can be barriers for employees in discussions with senior management about workplace bullying (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2014; Nguyen et al. 2018). Therefore, public sector HR managers need to ensure an open and transparent atmosphere for employees to raise the issues of psychological health and safety problems.

### **Limitations and future studies**

Although self-reports could lead to common method bias, the statistical and procedural remedies adopted in the present study provided assurances that all variables had discriminant validity. We acknowledge that the cross-sectional and single-source data could be a potential source of common method bias. However, it is not easy to access research participants in an emerging economy, especially when the research relates to negative workplace behaviours (Bartram, Stanton, and Thomas 2009; Quang and Vuong 2002). Future studies should collect data from different sources and/or use longitudinal research design (Brutus, Aguinis, and Wassmer 2013), for instance, multi-level data from self-reports of bullying experience in time 1, psychological distress rated by peers or co-workers in time 2, and direct supervisors' evaluation of work engagement in time 2. In addition, objective dependent variables such as sick leave and work stress compensation claims could be beneficial for the validation and expansion of the research findings. Moreover, future studies should incorporate national contextual conditions in the research design to explain the influence of cross-national differences underlying the developments of social support and negative workplace behaviours.

### **Conclusion**

The present study examined the moderating effects of social support on the work experience of public sector professionals in Vietnam. This research contributes to the extant literature of workplace bullying and COR theory by providing new insights into the importance of social support in buffering the indirect effect of workplace bullying on work engagement. We suggest senior managers and HR managers in public sectors need to play a leading role in the development of a positive and supportive work environment so that public sector professionals are able to receive and accumulate sufficient resources to overcome psychological illness and other employment-related hazards.

### **Note**

1. HTMT shows the average of the correlations of indicators across constructs relative to the average of the correlations of indicators within the same constructs. This approach has been recently recommended as an alternative and superior approach for discriminant validity of constructs (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015; Mitchell and Boyle 2015).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



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