

Article

Fear of Non-Employability and of Economic Crisis Increase Workplace Harassment through Lower Organizational Welfare Orientation

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Abstract: There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that economic crisis is a preeminent stressor (i.e., economic stress) that may worsen working conditions and expose individuals to negative acts at work (i.e., workplace bullying). Following an occupational health perspective that considers contextual factors as risk factors for workplace bullying, this study aims to examine the mediation effects of organizational orientation to employee welfare in the economic stress-workplace bullying relationship. A cross-sectional study with the participation of 1004 Italian workers from several organizations was conducted. Our results indicate that economic stress (composed of two dimensions: fear of the economic crisis and perceived non-employability) is associated with workplace bullying through the total mediation of organizational orientation to employee welfare. These results have relevant implications for psychosocial risk assessment in turbulent times.

Keywords: economic stress; employability; workplace bullying; psychosocial risks; workplace harassment

1. Introduction

There is evidence that economic crisis produces adverse mental health effects that increase hospitalization and suicide (for a review, see [1]). For example, Brenner [2,3] have linked economic instability periods to both increased psychiatric hospital admissions in the US (period analyzed 1910–1960) and mortality due to psychopathological conditions in Sweden (period analyzed 1950–1980). More recently, Chang, Gunnell, Sterne, Lu and Cheng [4] found that the Asian economic crisis (1997–1998) was associated with increased suicide rates in several East and Southeast Asian countries (period analyzed: 1985–2006). Indeed, they concluded “that some of the crisis’ impact on male suicides was attributable to increases in unemployment” (p. 1322). Similarly, Chang, Stuckler, Yip and Gunnell [5] compared the number of suicides in 2009 with the expected suicides based on trends before the 2008 economic crisis (period 2000–2007). They found that suicide rates increased after the economic

crisis in the European Union (except in Luxembourg) and North America (Mexico, US and Canada), which can also be attributed to the higher levels of job loss in such countries.

Unfortunately, the 2008 economic crisis is still affecting some European countries that are facing major financing problems with the urgency of repaying sovereign debt (i.e., Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Ireland). In that sense, some authors have indicated that economic crisis can be considered as a macro stressor grouping different stressors of employees' economic life, such as financial hardship, employment instability or actual job loss [6,7], that can activate a prolonged stress response which is associated with psychological distress and job dissatisfaction [8].

However, although researchers have examined the effects of macroeconomic conditions on mental health for decades, few studies have empirically explored how economic crisis influences workers' working environments and exposure to psychosocial hazard (for a notable exception see [9]). In response, the main aim of this study is to examine the association of economic stress factors (i.e., fear of the economic crisis and perceived non-employability) with workers' exposure to bullying behaviors, which is considered a severe psychosocial hazard from an occupational health perspective [10]. Moreover, our study extends previous research (a) by considering the macroeconomic context (i.e., economic stress) as a potential risk factor for workplace bullying in a sample of Italian employees, which seems a particularly well-suited context to address the issue because of the turmoil of the current European sovereign debt crisis; and (b) by exploring the role of organizational orientation to employee welfare as a potential mediator of the economic stress–workplace bullying relationship; which may offer possible avenues (i.e., organizational health promotion practices) to prevent workplace bullying in turbulent times like the ones looming because of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic [11].

In short, our research combines macro-level societal and meso-level organizational concepts, overcoming the limitations that some previous research, dominated by environment and economic concerns, shows [12].

Economic Stress, Organizational Orientation to Employee Welfare and Bullying at Work

Previous research has consistently shown the detrimental consequences of economic stress on employees' health and well-being [7,13,14], whereas the role of the economic context on the working environment and interpersonal relations at work has been largely neglected (for a notable exception, see [9]). In response, following an occupational health perspective, this study assumes that economic stress is a risk factor for workplace bullying (i.e., an interpersonal process by which one individual ends up in a helpless situation after being the target of systematic and subtle negative acts). Indeed, in contrast to the mainstream in economic stress research, this study focuses on subjective aspects of the economic stress concept (vs. objective aspects such as actual job loss [7]), which is operationalized in terms of fear of the economic crisis and perceived non-employability.

We argue that economic stress is a risk factor for bullying because employees may react to the fear of the economic crisis and perceived non-employability with bullying behaviors as they may perceive that they have to be less cooperative and to compete against one another for securing limited resources [7]. Indeed, Houdmont et al. [9], after comparing the findings of two employee surveys from the Northern Ireland Civil Service conducted in 2005 (n = 17,124) and in 2009 (n = 9913), found that there was an increase in psychosocial hazard exposures, work-related stress prevalence and stress-related sickness absence associated with the 2008 economic crisis.

We hypothesize that economic stress or negative appraisals of economic crisis (i.e., fear of the economic crisis and perceived non-employability) are positively associated with workplace bullying (Hypothesis 1).

Hypothesis 1. *Economic stress is positively associated with workplace bullying.*

Despite some promising research agendas and findings from business ethics and social corporate responsibility literature [15,16], neglect of the organizational role in promoting and protecting employee

welfare as a goal per se (vs. a performance or productivity-related factor) in the management literature is surprising given its demonstrated association with organizational sustainability (for a critique and review, see [17]). Recent studies have shown that social sustainability is as important as organizational financial independence [8]. Moreover, recent research has focused on the need of improving employees' quality of life [18]. Economic stress might lead employers to perceive that employee welfare and social support are not priorities for the company and try to maintain its survival by layoffs and budget reduction [8,17]. Moreover, in line with the uncertainty management theory [19], economic stress increases employees' sensitivity about the treatment they receive from their organization in uncertain times. Employee welfare is a broader concept including various services, facilities and social support provided to employees for their betterment. However, it can be considered a subjective perception of the organizational environment [20]. Therefore, we hypothesize that economic stress is associated with perceptions of low organizational orientation to employee welfare (Hypothesis 2).

Hypothesis 2. *Economic stress is negatively associated with organizational orientation to employee welfare.*

In addition, employees would probably perceive that they are being bullied at work if they felt that the organization did not care about their well-being and that further resources might be lost. In contrast, the likelihood of perceiving workplace bullying is lower when employees perceive organizational support or that a climate of psychosocial safety exists [21,22]. For example, Bond et al. [21] concluded that a strong psychological safety climate reflects managers' commitment to promoting employee well-being, including preventing and dealing with workplace bullying. These results are also supported by Law et al. [22], who observed a negative association between psychological safety climate and workplace bullying.

In sum, employees may perceive a higher frequency or exposure to bullying behaviors when they consider that their organization does not care about their welfare. In line with the Conservation of Resources theory (TCOR) [23], people perceiving a threat of losing resources is likely to be as damaging as the actual loss of resources, rendering workers at risk of bullying when the environment has fewer resources (low welfare). On the other hand, protecting employee well-being during economic stress may either provide workers with the necessary resources to cope with potential bullying situations, or make it difficult to support the factors that underpin bullying. Accordingly, we hypothesize that an organizational orientation to employee welfare is negatively related to workplace bullying (Hypothesis 3).

Hypothesis 3. *Organizational orientation to employee welfare is negatively associated with workplace bullying.*

Finally, economic stress seems to be indirectly related to workplace bullying through organizational change. Indeed, economic stress usually implies downsizing and restructuring processes, as well as others organizational changes that companies often introduce to face economic and financial difficulties [6]. In this sense, focusing on the literature on workplace bullying, several theoretical proposals and pieces of empirical evidence have linked organizational change and its associated frustration and strain to workplace bullying. For example, Salin [24] proposes that frustration is an antecedent of workplace bullying that can be incentivized by organizations that promote internal competition and be triggered by organizational change. Moreover, the three-way model of workplace bullying posits that "bullying may result from inefficient coping with frustration" at work [25]. Baillien et al. [25] concluded that in most cases (68 interviews) bullying behaviors occurred because employees were frustrated with changes in their organization. Similarly, an interview study showed that ongoing organizational changes were identified as the trigger of the studied bullying cases [26]. In addition, results from national surveys conducted in the UK [27], Ireland [28] and Norway [29] have shown that targets of bullying reported a higher prevalence of organizational changes (e.g., budget cuts, change in management, downsizing and organizational restructuring) than employees who did not report being bullied.

In our study, we argue that one of the most noticeable organizational changes when facing economic recessions and financial difficulties is the decrease in organizational orientation to employee welfare as mentioned above [6,9,13,17]. Therefore, we hypothesize that organizational orientation to employee welfare mediates the relationship between economic stress factors and workplace bullying (Hypothesis 4).

Hypothesis 4. *Perceived organizational orientation to employee welfare mediates the association between negative appraisals of economic crisis (i.e., fear of the economic crisis and perceived non-employability) and workplace bullying.*

To sum up, we hypothesized that individuals who doubt their employability and the company's solidity will perceive the economic crisis to be more threatening and destabilizing, thus affecting their perception of the working environment (i.e., organizational orientation to employee welfare). This might render employees frustrated and leave them with fewer resources, stimulating bullying perceptions (see Figure 1). Findings will have interesting implications for the planning and designing of anti-bullying policies through the promotion of an organizational culture that values health and employee flourishing. Furthermore, our findings may be useful for the current uncertainty generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, whose effects on the economy [11] are already noticeable in sectors such as tourism, passenger airlines or oil, due to the lower demand from affected countries such as China or Korea. Indeed, although no one is able to figure out the economic impact of this health crisis yet, nor its effects on employment, different international organizations warn of the danger of a new recession similar to the one of 2008.

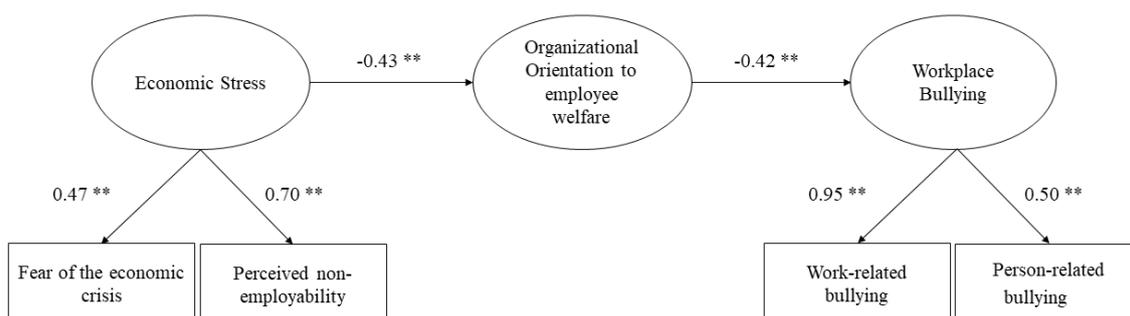


Figure 1. Completely standardized path coefficients for Model 1. ** $p < 0.01$.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Procedure and Participants

As the assessment of work-related stress in Italy is compulsory (Italian Legislative Decree 81/08), several Italian organizations were invited to conduct a work-related stress assessment. The study was approved by the first author's university ethical committee for research. Five private and two public organizations took part in the study. These organizations came from different Italian regions belonging to multiple organizational contexts (public administration, production, luxury area, transportation, industry). Company sizes ranged from small (30 employees) to large (about 300 employees). In small and medium companies (4 out of 7 companies) with a population up to 150 employees, all workers were invited to participate in the study. In large companies (more than 150 employees), a stratified sampling technique was applied to reach a representative sample of the organization.

Data collection took place between 2012 and 2014, using surveys administered onsite by psychologists skilled in organizational testing. Anonymity and confidentiality in the responses was fully guaranteed. Participation was voluntary and therefore no payment was provided to participants. Workers' response rate was high (more than 60% in all companies). The final sample in this study was 1004 employees. Regarding the characteristics of the participants: 65.5% were male and

34.5% were female. In addition, as regards job seniority, most of the participants had worked more than seven years for the same company (72.1% vs. 27.9% of participants who had worked less than seven years). As far as job title is concerned, clerks or office workers were 46.7% vs. 42.6% manual workers and operators and 11.2% in managerial positions or managers.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Socio-Demographics

Different socio-demographic variables (i.e., gender, seniority and job position) were considered because of their association with workplace bullying in previous studies [30,31]. Because of the highly confidential nature of the study, it was agreed with the organizations that a limited number of demographic data would be collected. Thus, age, education and further demographics were not requested in order to protect the anonymity of the participants, length of service was coded as 0 = up to seven years and 1 = more than seven years working in the same company. Gender was coded such that 0 = male and 1 = female. Job position was coded into three variables: 1 represents manual workers/operators; 2 = administrative staff/clerks; 3 = managers and middle managers.

2.2.2. Economic Stress

Economic stress was measured with the scale about subjective economic stress included in a recent stress questionnaire developed and validated in Italy [20]. The economic stress measure is composed of two dimensions: (a) fear of the economic crisis—employees perceive that the organization is suffering from the economic crisis; and (b) non-employability—employees perceive that their working competencies would not permit them to acquire another job in the market. Each dimension includes five items in a 5-point Likert scale (from 1: “strongly disagree” to 5: “strongly agree”). Recent studies using this scale have reported Cronbach’s alphas ranging from 0.72 to 0.77 [8,32]. We computed both dimensions into a single measure of economic stress and calculated its mean score: higher mean scores indicate a worse perception of the economic crisis and its potential consequences (i.e., higher economic stress).

2.2.3. Workplace Bullying

Exposure to workplace bullying behaviors was measured using the Italian reduced version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) [33] validated by Giorgi, Arenas and Leon-Perez [34]. The NAQ-R measures how often, during the last six months, respondents have been subjected to negative acts that may be perceived as bullying and whether they occur on a frequent basis (weekly or daily). We coded frequency into 0 = never, 1 = now and then, 2 = monthly, 3 = weekly and 4 = daily. Two clearly differentiated dimensions have been identified: a component related to personal bullying behaviors and a component of work-related bullying behaviors [34]. Then, we computed a total mean score, where higher scores refer to more frequent exposure to bullying behaviors. The Cronbach’s alpha of the Italian version for the total scale was 0.91 [34].

2.2.4. Organizational Orientation to Employee Welfare

The scale “organizational orientation to employee welfare” comprises four items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1: “strongly disagree” to 5: “strongly agree”) and measures the extent to which the organization values and cares for employees’ welfare (e.g., “This organization pays little attention to the interests and well-being of its employees”—reverse scored; “This organization tries to take care of its employees’ welfare”). Consequently, after computing a total mean score, a higher score refers to higher organizational orientation to employee welfare. This scale was included at the end of the above-mentioned stress questionnaire [20]. Recent studies using this scale have reported Cronbach’s alphas ranging from 0.72 to 0.77 [35,36].

3. Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Assessment of Common Method Variance

Following Anderson and Gerbing's [37] two-step structural equation modelling procedure, we established discriminant validity among the variables prior to testing the hypotheses. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was therefore conducted with the maximum likelihood estimation procedure of Mplus, version 7.11 [38] on the three variables examined: economic stress, organizational orientation to employee welfare and workplace bullying. To evaluate the model fit, we considered model chi-square (the higher the values, the worse the model's correspondence to the data) and used both absolute and incremental fit indexes. Absolute fit indexes evaluate how well a priori model reproduces the sample data. In our study, we focused on three absolute fit indexes: the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR), for which values of less than 0.08 are favorable, the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), which should be less than 0.10 [39], and the Akaike's information criterion (AIC), for which lower values indicate a better fitting model [40]. Incremental fit indexes measure the proportionate amount of improvement in fit when a target model is compared with a more restricted, nested baseline model [41]. We considered the comparative fit index (CFI), for which values of 0.90 or greater are recommended [41]. As expected, the hypothesized 3-factor model yielded a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(17) = 156.90$, CFI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.09; SRMR = 0.05, AIC = 15148.79. Additionally, as shown in Table 1, this model had a significantly better fit than alternative, more parsimonious models ($p < 0.01$), providing evidence of the distinctiveness of the study variables.

Table 1. Fit Indexes for Confirmatory Factor Analyses.

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta \chi^2$	Δdf	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC	ΔAIC
Hypothesized three-factor model	156.90 *	17	-	-	0.92	0.09	0.05	15,148.79	-
Two-factor models									
Combining economic stress and OEW	235.41 *	19	78.51 *	2	0.88	0.11	0.06	15,223.31	74.52
Combining OEW and workplace bullying	345.75 *	19	188.85 *	2	0.82	0.13	0.07	15,333.66	184.87
Combining economic stress and workplace bullying	298.01 *	19	141.11 *	2	0.84	0.12	0.08	15,285.90	137.11
One-factor model	421.87 *	20	264.97 *	3	0.77	0.14	0.08	15,407.77	258.98

n = 956. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual; AIC = Akaike's information criterion; OEW = Organizational orientation to employee welfare. * $p < 0.01$.

However, because data were collected at the same time with self-report scales, common method bias problems may arise and inflate the patterns of relationships among the study variables. Following Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee and Podsakoff's [42] statistical recommendations, we therefore used the unmeasured latent method factor approach to control for the effects of common method variance. This approach was chosen because it does not require specifying the source of method bias, and it controls for any systematic variance among the items that is independent of the covariance because of the constructs of interest [42]. Thus, this technique is particularly recommended when the specific source of the method bias is unknown or cannot be measured [40], as in our study. Accordingly, a common method factor was added to the hypothesized three-factor model, to assess the potential increase in model fit that would be obtained from accounting for the unmeasured method factor. The model provided a better fit to the data than the same model without the method factor: $\chi^2(9) = 8.88$, CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.00; SRMR = 0.01; AIC = 15016.7; $\Delta \chi^2(8) = 148.02$, $p < 0.01$. Nonetheless, the method factor accounted for 17% of total variance, which is below the average portion of variance (26%) reported in self-report studies [39,40]. We can therefore conclude that common method bias is unlikely to be a serious threat in our study.

3.2. Hypothesis Testing
Table 2 displays descriptive statistics, correlations and reliability coefficients for the study variables. As can be seen, the correlation between economic stress and organizational orientation to employee

welfare was negative and significant ($p < 0.01$). In addition, organizational orientation to employee welfare negatively and significantly correlated with workplace bullying ($p < 0.01$). These results provide preliminary support to our hypotheses.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations.

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Sex	-	-	-			
2. Economic stress	2.56	0.58	0.06	(0.76)		
3. Organizational orientation to employee welfare	2.75	0.82	-0.15 **	-0.32 **	(0.77)	
4. Workplace bullying	1.37	0.31	0.03	0.17 **	-0.40 **	(0.78)

$n = 956$. Internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alphas) appear along the diagonal in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$.

In order to examine the hypothesized theoretical model, we performed Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). SEM offers the advantage of (a) controlling for measurement errors when the relationships among variables are analyzed, and (b) comparing the goodness-of-fit of the hypothesized model with that of alternative models. Accordingly, we tested our proposed structural model and compared it with alternative models [43]. Additionally, when conducting SEM analyses, we controlled for the effects of gender on both the mediator and the dependents variable. Fit indexes for each tested model are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Fit Indexes for Nested Structural Models.

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	$\Delta \chi^2$	Δdf	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC	ΔAIC
Model 1 (hypothesized fully mediated model)	190.54 *	24	-	-	0.91	0.08	0.05	15,127.31	-
Model 2 (partially mediated model)	190.53 *	23	0.01	3	0.91	0.09	0.05	15,129.29	1.98
Model 3 (non-mediated model)	212.53 *	24	-	-	0.90	0.09	0.06	15,149.30	21.99
Model 4 (economic stress → workplace bullying → OEW)	244.66 *	24	-	-	0.88	0.10	0.07	15,181.43	54.12
Model 5 (workplace bullying → OEW → economic stress)	194.84 *	24	-	-	0.91	0.09	0.05	15,131.61	4.30
Model 6 (workplace bullying → economic stress → OEW)	253.98 *	24	-	-	0.87	0.10	0.06	15,190.75	63.44
Model 7 (OEW → economic stress → workplace bullying)	273.15 *	24	-	-	0.86	0.10	0.07	15,209.92	82.61
Model 8 (OEW → workplace bullying → economic stress)	264.33 *	24	-	-	0.87	0.10	0.08	15,201.10	73.79

$n = 956$. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual; AIC = Akaike's information criterion; OEW = Organizational orientation to employee welfare. * $p < 0.01$.

The hypothesized model (Model 1), which is a fully mediated model, displayed a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(24) = 190.54$, CFI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.08; SRMR = 0.05; AIC = 15127.31. Specific inspection of direct relationships further revealed that economic stress was negatively associated with organizational orientation to employee welfare ($\beta = -0.43$, $p < 0.01$), and that organizational orientation to employee welfare in turn was negatively related to workplace bullying ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$).

To assess whether the hypothesized model was the best representation of the data, we then compared its fit to that of alternative models. First, we assessed a partially mediated model, which included an additional direct path from economic stress to workplace bullying. This model yielded an adequate fit to the data, but it was not significantly better than Model 1, as revealed by the chi-square difference test ($\Delta \chi^2 = 0.01$, *ns*). Moreover, the additional direct link between economic stress and workplace bullying was not significant ($\beta = 0.01$, *ns*). These findings hence supported the mediation model (Hypotheses 2 and 3) rather than a direct association between economic stress and workplace bullying (Hypothesis 1).

Next, we compared the hypothesized model against a non-mediated model (Model 3), which only included direct relationships of economic stress and organizational orientation to employee welfare with workplace bullying. Because this model had the same degrees of freedom as the hypothesized model, the statistical significance of the chi-square difference could not be calculated. Accordingly, we used the AIC, instead of the chi-square, to compare the two models. As recommended by Burnham and Anderson [44], a model is considered as superior if its AIC is lower than another model's AIC by four or more units. Results showed that the non-mediated model had an AIC more than four units higher than the AIC of the fully-mediated model (Δ AIC = 21.99), suggesting that the former was a significantly poorer fit to the data than the latter.

Finally, Model 1 was compared against a set of alternative models that specified all the possible reverse indirect relationships among the study variables, namely: economic stress \rightarrow workplace bullying \rightarrow organizational orientation to employee welfare (Model 4); workplace bullying \rightarrow organizational orientation to employee welfare \rightarrow economic stress (Model 5); workplace bullying \rightarrow economic stress \rightarrow organizational orientation to employee welfare (Model 6); organizational orientation to employee welfare \rightarrow economic stress \rightarrow workplace bullying (Model 7); organizational orientation to employee welfare \rightarrow workplace bullying \rightarrow economic stress (Model 8). Again, these models had the same degrees of freedom as the hypothesized model. We therefore compare model fit using the AIC difference test. Results suggested that Models 4, 6, 7 and 8 were not a good fit to the data, as indicated by the significant AIC difference from the hypothesized model, as well as by the poor fit indexes. In contrast, Model 5, which specified a reverse indirect path from workplace bullying to economic stress through organizational welfare, provided an acceptable fit: χ^2 (24) = 194.83, CFI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.09; SRMR = 0.05; AIC = 15131.60. However, this model had an AIC more than four units higher than the fully-mediation model (Δ AIC = 4.30), indicating that the latter was a significantly better fit to the data.

Overall, results from model comparison suggested that Model 1 was the best fitting and most parsimonious model. We therefore retained the hypothesized fully mediated model. In order to assess whether the indirect relationship between economic stress and workplace bullying through organizational orientation to employee welfare was significant (Hypothesis 4), we calculated 95% bootstrapping confidence intervals [45,46]. Based on 5000 bootstrap replications, results indicated that economic stress had an indirect positive effect on workplace bullying via organizational orientation to employee welfare (indirect effect = 0.18; 95% CI = 0.12, 0.24). Hypothesis 4 was therefore supported.

4. Discussion

In times of economic turbulence, the actively working population is also likely to experience negative consequences of economic stress in the form of exposure to workplace bullying behaviors as organizations may pay less attention to workers' health and well-being (i.e., organizational orientation to employee welfare). In that sense, this study aimed at assessing the role that perceived organizational orientation to employee welfare plays in the association between negative appraisals of economic crisis (i.e., fear of the economic crisis and perceived non-employability) and workplace bullying.

Our results confirmed the hypothesis that workers fearing the economic crisis and who perceived themselves as unemployable in the external labor market, were more prone to perceive their organizations are not paying enough attention to their welfare, which, in turn, is associated with higher exposure to negative acts at work (i.e., workplace bullying). This is in the line with previous research which has shown that organizational development and well-being is related to positive narratives and relationships in organizational contexts [47].

These results are consistent with the Conservation of Resources theory [23] and the Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress (CATS) [48], that propose that workers can appraise the external macroeconomic context as a severe stressor that elicits negative emotions (i.e., fear) derived from the perception of the economic crisis as threatening the non-continuation of important instrumental (money), psychological (sense of autonomy) and social (status) resources associated with one's job (i.e., primary appraisal or perceiving the situation as threatening [49]). In addition, when workers perceive

that they do not have the necessary skills and resources (i.e., perceived low employability) to deal with the challenging situation and its potential consequences, such as downsizing or losing one's job (i.e., secondary appraisal or lack of coping strategies [49]), the stress response can lead to sustained activation and result in bullying behaviors, as hostility is associated with perceived loss of control over one's environment according to the theory of psychological reactance [50]. This lack of coping success and control increases employees' levels of counterproductive workplace behaviors directed toward others in the organization, including obstructing others' tasks and bullying behaviors [51]. The frustration feelings and strain resulting from not being able to change or reduce exposure to the stressor (i.e., economic stress implies a potential loss or threat that is beyond personal control, making it difficult to put in place coping mechanisms to deal with such stressful situations [8]), may lead employees to displace or redirect their frustration and aggression toward less powerful colleagues in the form of subtle negative acts or bullying behaviors [29].

In previous studies, workplace bullying has been considered a strategic behavior associated with downsizing and restructuring processes as well as other organizational changes that companies often introduce to face economic and financial difficulties. In these situations, "bullying can have political dimensions and be a deliberate strategy for improving one's own position, by sabotaging the performance of competitors or by getting rid of persons considered as threats or burdens" [24]. Thus, some workers may determine that it is in their personal best interest to put themselves above others by exerting bullying behaviors. In other words, "employees may engage in micro-political activities to put down their colleagues in an effort to look better in the eyes of their superiors" in organizational change situations [29,52], as bullying victims, becoming less competent and self-confident, might be identified earlier and laid off in cases of downsizing [53].

In a similar line, several authors have proposed that workplace bullying can flourish in stressful climates [24,25,29], which seems to be the case in organizations with a low orientation to employee welfare. Indeed, our results reveal that organizational orientation to employee welfare mediates the relationship between negative appraisals of economic stress factors and perceived exposure to negative acts at work (i.e., workplace bullying). In that sense, we can conclude that an individual's appraisal of fear of the crisis and non-employability elicits negative emotions and cognitions that contribute to the perception that the organization is providing poor welfare and are associated with negative perceptions of the working environment in terms of exposure to bullying behaviors.

Our research shed light on the need for primary prevention and, as previous research has stated [47] human resources management should be aware of the well-being of individuals, groups and organizations. Because of this, future interventions should be based on a primary prevention perspective [54] and enhancing health and organizational well-being [18].

In summary, our results expand the existing literature on economic stress and suggest a need to more comprehensively consider the implications of economic stress for the organizational welfare more broadly, rather than only for the individuals, providing practical applications.

4.1. Limitations and Further Research

Although our model suggests new and different pathways through which economic stress affects employee well-being, several limitations exist in the present study. First, future studies should test our research model in different contexts as the operationalization of the construct fear of the economic crisis is quite new in the literature. In a similar vein, the present sample is not representative of the Italian population and therefore the generalizability of the results appears to be limited.

Also, the competitive models analyzed in this study have shown the necessity to prevent workplace bullying as well as the potential negative effects of economic stress, because both bullying and economic stress seem reciprocally related. In this regard, the alternative reverse causality model (see Model 5) obtained an acceptable fit, which is a clear call for further longitudinal data exploring potential spillover hypotheses between economic stress, organizational orientation to employee welfare and workplace bullying, as well as eliminating alternative theoretical explanations to our results. Examining how

economic stress and organizational orientation to employee welfare influence workplace bullying over time and vice versa will allow scholars to better understand the process and consequences of macro stressors.

In addition, previous research has shown that the labor market is characterized by insecurity, economic instability, and turbulence [47]. Nowadays, with the COVID-19 crisis, insecurity grows. Recent studies have stated that nowadays, with the coronavirus crisis, even a contained outbreak could impact the global economy in the short run [55]. Some authors consider that the foreseeable economic crisis due to COVID-19 is different because it affects the economic giants all at once, and that economic strikes are very spread out, which is a new phenomenon affecting our economies [56]. Future studies need to address whether the foreseeing economic strikes due to COVID-19 share similarities with the economic recession of 2008. Moreover, for dealing with this, research should focus on sustainable development and in prevention [18,47]. This is in line with previous research where sustainability has become an essential practice in predicting well-being, even constituting a new kind of leadership: Human Capital Sustainability Leadership [57].

4.2. Practical Implications and Conclusion

Despite these limitations inherent to the study design, our results have interesting practical implications from both a human resources and an organizational health and safety perspective. First, organizations in turbulent times should encourage among employees a good perception of welfare, which seems crucial for preventing workplace bullying. The employees' positive subjective perception of welfare policies seems important in dealing with uncertainty during times of crisis. Second, employability consultancy, such as developing and promoting existing and new activities designed to enhance workers employability, might be another good strategy to increase welfare perception and reduce counterproductive behaviors. This idea is central to new career models such as the boundaryless or the protean career [58,59]. Third, organizations should introduce preventive measures to avoid negative behaviors, such as increasing welfare activities and developing policies in order to maintain the well-being and social support for all employees. For instance, employee assistance programs, such as arranging external counseling service for employees or members of their immediate family, might be a good strategy.

Finally, as it is shown that economic stress is related to workplace bullying, specific and updated anti-bullying policies should be developed. To protect an employee from harassment of any kind, guidelines should be provided for proper action, considering also that economic stress has the potential to erode welfare perceptions, enhancing the risk of workplace bullying. Furthermore, that employees perceive that their organizations are concerned about occupational health and safety is of great importance at any time, but it is even more important in an exceptional situation such as the one that the planet is going through due to the COVID-19 crisis and organizations should be aware of this phenomenon in order to face current economic stress.

In conclusion, our research provides new knowledge by establishing the negative effects of economic stress (fear of the economic crisis and non-employability), a factor that to date has received scarce attention. In addition, we demonstrated that welfare may mediate the economic stress-bullying relationship. This adds to earlier literature and we call for ongoing research that continues to examine the role of welfare in the economic stress-bullying relationship both for research and practice purposes.

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