



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**WORKPLACE BULLYING AND ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS:  
A STUDY AT SELECTED PUBLIC SECTOR DEPARTMENTS IN  
MALAYSIA**

**Siti Aisan Binti Wakijo**

**Master of Science (Human Resource Development)**

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FACTORS: A STUDY AT SELECTED PUBLIC SECTOR  
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**SITI AISAN BINTI WAKIJO**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science (Human Resource Development)

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## **ABSTRACT**

### ***WORKPLACE BULLYING AND ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS: A STUDY AT SELECTED PUBLIC SECTOR DEPARTMENTS IN MALAYSIA***

**SITI AISAN WAKIJO**

(Workplace bullying is universal problems and become a phenomenon in many of western countries. Here in Malaysia, this phenomenon seems does not exists and more subtle. In order for Malaysia to achieve Vision 2020 as develop nation, many organizations face tremendous changes in the context of globalization, new technology, workforce diversification and work processes that contribute to work conflicts. Conflicts create many negative consequences that lead to workplace bullying. Therefore the main purpose of this study is to identify the perception of workplace bullying in the context of public sector in Malaysia.) This study was conducted in three public sector departments in Sarawak in which 190 employees participated. Quantitative survey method using a Five Likert-scale questionnaires were distributed to the respondents. The objectives of this study were to determine the existence of workplace bullying, types of workplace bullying, the occurrence of workplace bullying based on the demographic characteristics, the relationship between work environment factors and workplace bullying, and the dominant work environment factor that influence workplace bullying. The relationship between workplace bullying and work environment factors (leadership styles, organizational climate and organizational change) was tested by using Pearson Correlation Coefficient. In addition, Multiple Linear Regression test was used to identify the dominant factors that influence workplace bullying. The findings showed that 70.5 percent of respondents claimed they never experienced workplace bullying. Whereas, 52.6 percent of respondent claimed that they never observed others being subjected to workplace bullying. However, only 0.5 percent respondents reported that they have been bullied and 1.6 percent of respondents witnessed those behaviours in weekly basis and more. Type of workplace bullying which occurred the most was work related bullying. Throughout the statistical analysis, it was found that only leadership style was significantly correlated with workplace bullying. Among the three predictor variables, leadership style is found to be the dominant factor that contributes most to workplace bullying in the sample studied in public sector. From the findings, it is recommended to come up with an agreed, defined definition of workplace bullying in the local setting, which is more precise in relation of value and culture of Malaysian society.



## **ABSTRAK**

### **BULI DI TEMPAT KERJA DAN FAKTOR-FAKTOR ORGANISASI: KAJIAN TERHADAP JABATAN-JABATAN KERAJAAN YANG TERPILIH DI MALAYSIA**

**SITI AISAN WAKIJO**

*Buli di tempat kerja merupakan masalah sejagat dan menjadi satu fenomena di kebanyakan negara-negara barat. Di Malaysia, fenomena ini hamper tidak wujud dan rahsia. Bagi Malaysia untuk mencapai Visi 2020 sebagai negara membangun, banyak organisasi mengalami perubahan yang sangat dasyat dalam konteks globalisasi, teknologi, kepelbagaian tenaga kerja dan process kerja yang menyumbang kepada konflik kerja. Konflik akan mengakibatkan pelbagai masalah negatif yang menjurus kepada perlakuan buli di tempat kerja. Oleh itu, tujuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk menyiasat persepsi perilaku buli di tempat kerja dalam konteks sektor awam di Malaysia. Sampel populasi kajian diambil dari tiga (3) jabatan kerajaan yang bertempat di bahagian Kuching dan Samarahan, Sarawak. Seramai 190 orang pekerja terlibat sebagai responden dalam kajian ini. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif dan soal selidik berskala 5-Likert telah diagihkan kepada responden. Kajian ini dijalankan untuk menentukan kewujudan gejala buli ditempat kerja, jenis-jenis buli, kekerapan perilaku buli berdasarkan ciri-ciri demografi, hubungan antara faktor persekitaran tempat kerja dan perilaku buli dan faktor yang dominan dalam mempengaruhi perilaku buli ditempat kerja. Hubungan antara perilaku buli dan faktor persekitaran tempat kerja (gaya kepimpinan, iklim organisasi dan perubahan organisasi) di tentukan menggunakan Korelasi Pearson. Manakala ujian Regresi Berganda digunakan untuk menentukan faktor dominan yang mempengaruhi perilaku buli di tempat kerja. Hasil kajian didapati bahawa 70.5 peratus responden menyatakan bahawa mereka tidak pernah mengalami sebarang perilaku buli di tempat kerja dalam tempoh masa 6 bulan terdekat. Manakala, 52.6 peratus responden menyatakan bahawa mereka tidak pernah melihat pekerja lain dikenakan sebarang perilaku buli di tempat kerja. Walaubagaimanapun, peratus pekerja yang di kategorikan kerap (perilaku buli berlaku setiap minggu atau lebih kerap) mengalami perilaku buli hanya 0.5 peratus dan mereka yang menyaksikan perilaku buli sebanyak 1.6 peratus. Jenis perilaku buli yang paling kerap berlaku adalah "perilaku buli yang berkaitan dengan kerja". Bagi analisis statistik, hanya faktor gaya kepimpinan sahaja mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan dengan perilaku buli di tempat kerja. Selain daripada itu, gaya kepimpinan merupakan faktor persekitaran kerja yang dominan dalam perilaku buli di tempat kerja. Dari hasil kajian, dicadangkan agar kajian akan datang dapat membina definisi perilaku buli yang lebih tepat dan bersesuaian dengan nilai dan budaya masyarakat Malaysia.*

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the background of workplace bullying, the problem statement, the purpose for the research, objectives of the study and the significance and nature of the study. The chapter additionally presents the hypotheses, a design of a conceptual framework, definitions of terms, and the scope and limitations of the study.

#### **1.1 Background of Study**

In the last two years, Malaysia has been haunted by bullying activities amongst student in school. However bullying does not only happen in school but it also exists in the workplace. Workplace bullying is an open secret action and often more subtle. People always do not realize the actions that can be considered as bullies. Many actions can be considered as workplace bullying such as harassment, psychological terror, emotional abuse, and victimization (Rigby, 2002; Needham, 2003). Unfortunately, bullies are not easy to identify and the incidents are rarely isolated (Peyton, 2003). This issue of bullying in the workplace seems to be officially recognised in western countries like United Kingdom, United States and Australia, and it has received a growing interest across the world.



Bullying is defined as unwanted and recurring negative acts at one or more individual, which involve a perceived power imbalance and relative inability on the part of the victim to engage in self- defence, resulting in some degree of psychological harm to the victim (Mattice, Spitzberg, & Hellweg, 2008). According to Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper (2003), workplace bullying is defined as:

*“Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal "strength" is in conflict.”(p. 15)*

Bullying consist of a number of different negative behaviours such as sarcasm, threats, verbal abuse, rumours intimidation, bad-mouthing, manipulation, duplicity, exclusion, social isolation, excessive criticism and the assignment of staff to unpleasant jobs (McCarthy, Sheehan, & Kearns, 1995; Salin, 2008). The major differences between harassment or normal conflict and bullying are the frequency and how long this behaviour does occur. Einarsen and Skogstad (1996), and Vartia (1996) found that bullying is “repeated, persistent and continuous behaviour” (cited in Salin, 2008, p. 1213). One off action is not considered as bully but it can develop a pattern of bullying if it is repeatable and regularly occur. Repeatable incidents can give negative effects on the victims and if it is not being reported and tackled by the management, the phenomenon will increase over time. Moreover, the more frequent the bullying acts and the more intense the negative behaviours. This situation indicates to the existence of power imbalance in the organization (Einarsen, 1999, cited in Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2007).

Many researchers have tried to identify organizational factors or situational factors which are associated with workplace bully and looking for an explanation in deficiencies in the work environment (Salin, 2003). Zapf (1999) provided support that bullying is associated with negative work environment such as lack of communication, low in control and uncertainty due to unclear responsibilities and role of ambiguity. Besides that, the relationship between the role organization and workplace bully has been clearly stated with strong empirical evidence in the pioneer study by Leymann (1990). Leymann strongly rejected the idea of “victims personality” that contribute to the workplace bullying. He more emphasized on the roles of poor work environment that caused bullying behaviours in the organization. Then, Leymann had pointed out four factors that contributed to workplace bully; “1) deficiencies in work design, 2) deficiencies in leadership behaviour, 3) a socially exposed position of the victim, and 4) a low moral standard in the department” (cited in Matthiesen, 2006, p. 33).

Furthermore, many researchers have shown an empirical evidence that bullying behaviour is correlated with many features of work environment, including organizational problems, role conflicts, heavy and low workload, haste at work, organizational change, leadership styles, social and organizational climate and work group conflict (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994; Zapf, 1999; Hoel & Cooper 2000; Matthiesen, 2006). Here, it shows that the low quality work environment can create a negative situation which leads to threat and stress. This situation will directly or indirectly affect members in the organization. In this study, factors of work environment will be based on Salin and Hoel (2003), and Vartia (2003) framework, whereby work environment factors are divided into 1) leadership, 2) organizational climate, and 3) organizational change.



Workplace bullying does not only affect the well-being of individuals but also has negative consequences for the whole organization. Targets or victims and also observers faced psychological problems such as stress, humiliation, anger, anxiety, embarrassment, discouragement, feelings of inadequacy, hopeless, depression, lower job satisfaction, de-motivation, and greater intention to leave (Mattice, Spitzberg, & Hellweg, 2008). Rayner (1997) reported that “27% of victims do leave their jobs”. According to Namie & Namie (2000), a survey conducted for Workplace Bullying Institute, “82% of employees who had been bullied left their workplace, 38% for health reasons and 44% because they were victims of a low performance appraisal manipulated by a bullying supervisor”. Besides that, bullying is a costly phenomenon to the organization, which can harm the health of the victims (employees), high turnover, absenteeism and the reduced organizational productivity and performance (Shehan & Jordan, 2000; Namie & Namie 2003; Mattice, Spitzberg, & Hellweg, 2008).

## **1.2 Problem statement**

Bullying in the workplace is a growing issue that leads to organizational destruction. Workplace bullying has drawn greater attention and it is recognized as unhealthy and increasingly worrying phenomenon especially in the western countries. This phenomenon caused by individual (perpetrator and victims) that may lie with the organization (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003) and organization itself. Hodson, et al. (2006) and Lawrence (2001) indicated, “when workplaces are chaotic, unpredictable, role-conflict or strain, workers are more likely reported being bullied” (cited by Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003, p. 53). In an increasingly competitive global economy and rapid technology advancement, most organizations struggle with the effect of

dramatic change process in order to sustain, therefore many employers victimise their workers and it is considered as bully (Di Martino, et al., 2003, Poilpot-Rocaboy, 2006).

In Malaysia, this issue is rarely being discussed and studied. Mostly studies in bullying in the workplace were done in countries like United Kingdom, United States, Australia and South Africa. Nevertheless, a few studies on workplace bullying conducted here by Khalib & Ngan (2006) and Muhammad Affandi (2009) and similar studies address issues of workplace violence by Ruth, Samsiah, Hamidah, & Santhna (2009); Mohammad Ahmad (2009). Most of the studies were conducted in the context of school bullying (Wan Salwina, Tan, Nik Ruzyanei, Tuti Iryani, Syamsul, & Aniza, 2009; Uba, Siti Noor, & Rumaya, 2009; Lee, Chen, Lee, & Kaur, 2007; Azizi, Jamaludin, Shahrin, Mohd. Ali, & Raja Roslan, 2009). Although there were a few studies conducted in addressing this issue but few have been done specifically on assessing the bullying activities at a public sector's environment. Here, workplace bullying seems to not exist and according to one of the articles in the local newspaper (Borneopost.com, 2010) stated that 'there is very little official data to support the fact that bullying does go on in the workplace in Malaysia'.

Workplace bullying is one of the issues that many of the western countries, which have higher interest in combating from growing. Furthermore, in the western countries, there is a system that supports action against workplace bullying. They are more aware and understand on the bullying actions. Here in Malaysia, the system is absent and the community seems to accept bullying in the workplace. This situation requires in depth study on why people in Malaysia do not realise that they are being bullied. Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Studies in 1984 and 1999 shows that Malaysia scored very high in



power distance which contributes to power imbalance (Hofstede, 2009). The cultural differences might be one of the factors that contribute to the ignorance of bullying behaviour at work in Malaysia.

Workplace bullying is not considered as a critical issue here, maybe due to the Malaysian culture itself that respects work hierarchy and traditionally, Malaysians believed the need to show respect to the elders and those in higher authority. Previous study showed that employees working in hierarchical (Archer, 1999 cited by Boucaut, 2001) and autocratic structure (Mc Carthy, Sheehan, & Kearns, 1995; Sheehan, 1999) were more exposed to workplace bullying. Again, Di Martino, Hoel, & Cooper (2003) in their studies in Europe confirmed that bullying appears to be higher risk within public sector rather than private sector. Therefore this study intended to explore the existence and type of workplace bullying, and the relationship between work environment factors and workplace bullying in the context of public sector environment.

### **1.3 Research questions**

This study aims to provide answer to the following questions:

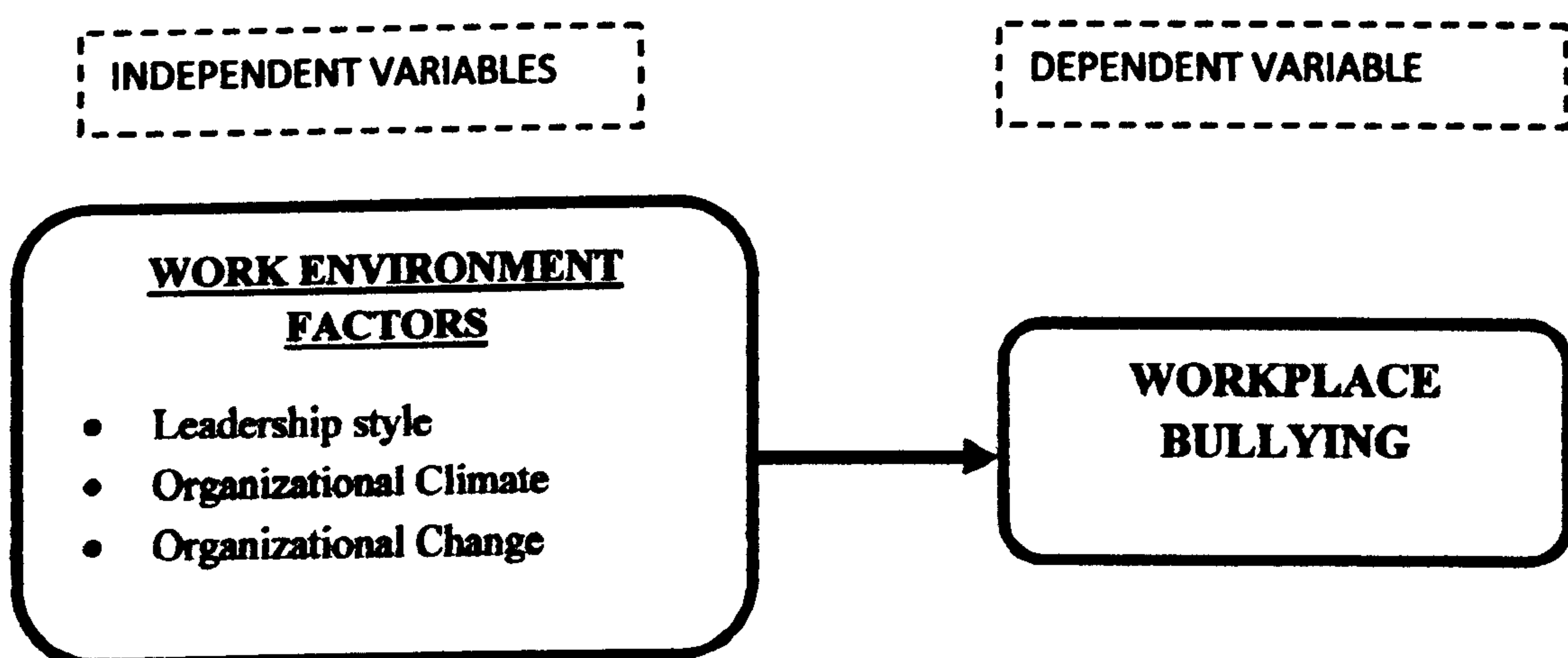
- i. Does workplace bullying exist in the studied organization?;
- ii. What types of workplace bullying exist in the studied organization?;
- iii. What is the workplace bullying occurrence (experienced and witnessed) based on demographic characteristics?;
- iv. What is the relationship between work environment factors and workplace bullying?;
- v. What are the dominant work environment factors in workplace bullying?.

## 1.4 Research objectives

The main objective of the study is to investigate the perception of workplace bullying in the context of public sector in Malaysia. Specifically, the objectives of this study are listed below:

- i. To identify the existence of workplace bully;
- ii. To identify the types of workplace bully that normally exists;
- iii. To identify the occurrence of workplace bullying (experienced and witnessed) based on demographic characteristics;
- iv. To identify the relationship between work environment factors and workplace bullying;
- v. To identify the dominant work environment factors in workplace bullying.

## 1.5 Research Framework



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework on work environment factor that contribute to workplace bullying**



A conceptual framework for this study was developed and illustrated in Figure 1 based on Salin and Hoel (2003), and Vartia (2003) and other resources obtained through literature review. In this study, only work environment factors were considered as potential factors in contributing to workplace bullying. Work environment factors as independent variables consist of leadership style, organizational climate, and organizational change.

### **1.6 Research hypotheses**

This research was conducted to find the relationship of the independent variables, which were work environment factors (leadership style, organizational climate, and organizational change) with the dependent variable, which was workplace bullying.

This research intends to test the following hypotheses:

- Ha1      There is a significant relationship between leadership style and workplace bullying;
- Ha2      There is a significant relationship between organizational climate and workplace bullying;
- Ha3      There is a significant relationship between organizational change and workplace bullying;
- Ha4      There is a dominant work environment factor that affects workplace bullying.

## **1.7 Definition of terms**

### **1.7.1 Workplace Bullying**

**Conceptual**            “The repeated actions and practices (of a perpetrator) that are directed to one or more workers, which are unwanted by the victim, which may be done deliberately, or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offense, distress, may interfere with job performance, and/or cause an unpleasant working environment” (Einarsen, 1999, p. 17)

**Operational**           Workplace bullying in this study refers to a range of negative behaviours that can be categorized into work-related bullying, social isolation, personal attacks, verbal threat and physical violence. Such behaviours need to occur frequently (weekly basis and more) and over an extended period of time (eg. six month).

### **1.7.2 Work Environment**

**Conceptual**        : “The day-to-day social and physical environment in which you currently do the most or all of your work” (Amabile, Conti, & Lazenby, 1996)

**Operational**       : In this study it refers to many features of work environment including leadership style, organizational climate, and organizational change.



### **1.7.3 Leadership style**

**Conceptual** : “The traits, behavioural tendencies, and characteristic methods of a person in a leadership position” (Encyclopedia.com, 2010)

**Operational** : Leadership style in this study refers to various range of styles used by the leader that contributes to workplace bullying. Inadequate leadership or weak leadership style were missing positive leadership behaviour such as provide guidance and support, encouragement, good relationship, give recognition and feedback, and give clear instruction.

### **1.7.4 Organizational Climate**

**Conceptual** : Pareek (2008) defined organizational climate as “the perceived attributes of an organization and its sub-system as reflected in the way an organization deals with its members, groups, and issues” (p. 654).

**Operational** : Organizational climate in this study refers to employees’ perception of work social system such as reward, communication, teamwork, innovation and organizational dynamism.

### **1.7.5 Organizational Change**

**Conceptual** : “Organizational change is defined as the adoption of a new idea or behaviour by an organization” (Daft, 2010).

**Operational** : In this study, organizational change is defined as a state of change

in the organization due to the introduction and adaption of new system or ideas that require change in the organizational behaviour. The “change” can be in the form of work environment changes (technological change, change in management, changes in the composition of the work force, changes concerning who is executing which work tasks), personnel and salary reduction (personnel reduction/downsizing, budget cuts) and restructuring. The “change” can create work-related conflict and person-related conflict between individual with colleagues or supervisor.

## **1.8 Significance of the study**

### **1.8.1 Significance to Theories**

This study aimed to add new knowledge and information with regards to workplace bullying, whereby this study will give awareness and understanding on workplace bullying in Malaysia. As such, the results of the study may add to current literature and support theory and models related such as social learning theories, Glasl’s conflicts escalation model, Leymann model, the psychological harassment model and Zapf model. It was hoped that this study can show the relationship between work environment factors and workplace bullying in the context of public sector environment in Malaysia, specifically in Sarawak

### **1.8.2 Significance to the organization**

The findings will hopefully provide information to the studied organization such as types of workplace bullying occurs in Malaysia and the frequency of occurrence of those behaviours. Whereby all information gathered through this