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**THE ISSUE OF MOBBING IN THE WORKPLACE**

Michaela Pugnerová (a)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Department of Psychology, Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic, [michaela.pugnerova@upol.cz](mailto:michaela.pugnerova@upol.cz)

*Abstract*

According to current research studies, the incidence of mobbing in the workplace has increased. This paper demonstrates the mechanism and strategy of mobbing through the case study of a victim of mobbing. The aim of this paper is to present the issue of mobbing as a social pathology phenomenon occurring in the workplaces of different types and among employees of different levels of education. The important contribution of this paper is a case study (and its analysis) of a person who became a victim of mobbing in the workplace. The case study and its analysis show that the individual has certain possibilities of defence against mobbing in the workplace, but there are some significant limitations. Therefore it is very important to think about questions such as what a person can do to contribute to the reduction of the phenomenon of social pathology. Employees (and future employees) should have a broader awareness of mobbing and how to solve it. The incidence of mobbing in the workplace is a topic that requires foreknowledge and further research. Its mediator is an aggression which is a natural part of human nature. It always depends on whether the aggression is regulated in an appropriate way. It is often perceived negatively when it is used to control, abuse and harm people or to the self-destruction. If it begins to occur in the workplace, then it makes employees and the whole workplace inefficient.

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**Keywords:** Mobbing, aggressor, aggression, victim, helplessness



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## **1. Introduction**

Discussions about work-related environments often include the issue of mental and physical health. In 1980s a new workplace-related psychosocial issue emerged called mobbing, i.e. bullying in the workplace. Until then, bullying had been diagnosed mostly among youth or in military environments. Currently, however, this issue also appears in work-related environments among adults, where this phenomenon would hardly be expected (Huberová, 1995, Čírtková, 2008).

### **1.1. Explanation and origin of the term**

The term mobbing comes from the English word 'to mob', which literally means to bother, annoy, collectively attack, tell somebody off in a vulgar way, assault somebody. It includes psychological terror in the workplace, systematic intriguing and bullying by colleagues (or colleague) in order to harm or discredit somebody (Svobodová, 2008). Mobbing means that the victim is attacked systematically for a longer period of time (at least once a week for six months). Mobbing includes psychological and sometimes physical attacks. As a result, the victim of mobbing is often mentally and physically ill. Mobbing means exclusion from a team of workers and subjecting the victim to extreme social stress. The effects of such strong stress often lead to complete mental and physical exhaustion (Huberová, 1995).

There are more authors dealing with this issue. They include Lorenz, Heynemann and Leymann (Beňo, 2003). Lorenz focused on the study of animal behaviour. He used the term mobbing in defining animal territoriality. Many animal species live in their home territories, and when an intruder appears in their territory, they attack it. These behaviours are especially apparent in animals living in packs, which use mobbing to attack the intruder in order to expel it from their territory. The author makes an analogous comparison between animal behaviour and human behaviour and mentions a known situation, when for example the presence of a human intruder in a village party causes a fight. Another example is fighting between groups of boys with antagonistic attitudes (e.g. from neighbouring villages).

In the area of human behaviour the term mobbing was introduced by Heynemann in 1960s (Kratz, 2005).

The third of the authors mentioned above Leymann focused on patients and clients with communication and relationship issues in the workplace. The author performed a number of observations and concluded that company employees often formed an 'attacking pack' against their colleague. He started to call these behaviours mobbing in 1993 in Germany (Beňo, 2003).

### **1.2. Mobbing and its alternatives**

As mentioned above, the term mobbing denotes mistreatment of a colleague. Currently, other forms of systematic bullying are being developed, because mobbers' fantasy has no limits. Some of them are mentioned below.

Chairing: this is a form of bullying (mobbing) at the level of top management. It includes a variety of unfair attacks, but also other methods and tools that top managers have at their disposal.

Shaming: the purpose of this type of bullying (mobbing) is to discredit the reputation of somebody through gossip and unfounded facts. At the beginning these incidents might not deviate from standard behaviour but later gain intensity.

Defaming: the aim is to discredit the reputation of a person through the media, such as television, radio, internet or newspapers (Beño, 2003).

Staffing: this is a type of bullying in the workplace (mobbing) by employees towards their superior. The motive for this type of behaviour may be the employees' effort to achieve various benefits in the workplace, which are not consistent with the labour code or the working rules (Svobodová, 2007).

### **1.3. Causes and mechanisms of mobbing**

The most frequent cause of mobbing is a conflict. However, each conflict does not lead to mobbing. It always depends on the atmosphere, and whether the colleagues are able to agree. Most staff believe that the main stressing factor is an unhealthy working environment, which is more serious than for example time pressure. However, dangerous and irritable mood depends for example on work overload, poor corporate management, competitive pressure and fear of unemployment, insufficient ability to deal with a conflict, low level of ethics in the workplace, personality of the mobbed person, envy, etc. (Buscotte, 2008).

The course and mechanism of mobbing includes several stages as follows: *Psychological terror* – the victim becomes the target of attacks, which are sporadic at the beginning but later become systematic, the victim's self-confidence and performance decrease, the mental condition and sometimes the health condition deteriorate. The victim becomes defensive. *The case becomes official* – the employee has an incessant problem in the workplace, is often sick, late, makes mistakes. This makes the management take a closer look at the case. Seemingly it is simple – the problem lies in the personality of the employee, but nobody sees (or wants to deal with) the fact that the person was driven into the situation. *Exclusion* – the employee is moved from one department to another, the employee's competences are restricted, the employee is subject to constant supervision, everything is getting ready for the employee to leave. To put it simply, an unwanted employee must be get rid of, and if the victim does not want to leave voluntarily, there is a variety of means of destroying him/her (Huberová, 1995).

To define typical perpetrators of mobbing is not a straightforward task. They are referred to as 'masterminds' if they are the perpetrators of mobbing, and 'partakers' if they participate in psychological terror. A typical feature might be that they usually focus on the same gender (Kratz, 2005). They constantly search for new and more effective weapons, which they use to systematically destroy the victim: they even need not be imaginative, for example there might be new gossips emerging from the victim's private life. The victim becomes uncertain, less concentrated and restless, and starts to think about the causes of these attacks. The performance of the victim decreases, the victim makes more mistakes and is criticized for poor professional competence; there are also gossips from the victim's personal life. The victim becomes even more nervous, suffers from psychosomatic problems, and is often sick; this becomes apparent to the superiors, which causes even more criticism. On a daily basis, the perpetrator of mobbing searches for new inspiration to torment the victim, and finds other allies who also

want to get rid of the unwanted person. A vicious circle is formed from which there is no escape (Spurný, 1997).

It is true that the ingenuity of mobbers has no bounds but their strategies can be defined jointly for both genders.

#### **1.4. Mobbing strategies**

Empirical studies conducted by the research team around Leymann defined more than 45 mobbing strategies (Kratz, 2005). Basic strategies include a large number of behaviours such as *slandering* (the victim is the target of whispering, innuendos, exaggeration and generalization, defamation in front of the superior in order to harm the victim and present oneself in a better light); *isolation of a colleague* (closing the door when the victim is approaching, preventing the victim from expressing his/her opinion, withholding or concealing new information); *sabotaging* (stealing files, letters, counterfeiting and damaging documents); *disparaging performance and abilities* (questioning the victim's competence, emphasising weaknesses); *damaging health* (damaging physical health or direct violence) (Huberová, 1995).

#### **1.5. Most frequent victims of mobbing**

Those people who differ from others are at a greater risk: for example a woman among men, a man among women, people with an apparent distinction (e.g. body weight, dialect, different nationality or ethnicity), or successful people. Victims of mobbing are sometimes people who just started in their job (and are different from the rest, for example higher academic degree, younger age than the average of the team, etc.) A newcomer changes the existing environment, which some individuals might feel as a threat to themselves and their developed positions (Buscotte, 2008). A critical situation might occur when a superior gives a positive evaluation and prefers a newcomer to those who have been employed for a longer period of time. This may relate to employees who are somehow special and have an introverted personality. This also applies to employees who are more intelligent, capable and have a higher academic degree than the rest of the team (Svobodová, 2007).

#### **1.6. Consequences of mobbing**

The consequences of mobbing differ; they can be psychological and physical (psychosomatic). *Psychological consequences* include depression, concentration disorders, doubts about oneself, feelings of insecurity, helplessness, increased nervousness, anxiety, and psychiatric diagnoses (phobias, obsessions), suicidal tendencies (statistical data shows that up to 20% of suicides are linked to mobbing) (Svobodová, 2008).

*Psychosomatic problems* include blood circulation disorders, excruciating feelings while breathing, headaches, back pain, digestion disorders, dizziness, skin problems, etc.

The onset of symptoms depends on the type of mobbing various personality factors, and the victim's social contacts. Resistance to mobbing also depends on the victim's frustration tolerance. Important aspects include supportive family environment and good financial situation. If people are financially secure, they do not need to stay in a working environment where they are subject to mobbing. Lonely people are disadvantaged because after coming home from a stressful environment they have nobody to support them and distract their fears (Comby, 1997).

### **1.7. Defence against mobbing**

Psychological terror often catches the victim unprepared, because people do not usually start employment with the idea of being mobbed. If the victims of psychological terror in the workplace are women, they have a greater tendency to search for help and confide their problems to colleagues or superiors. The best way to cope with mobbing is to take the initiative as soon as possible. If the victim quickly recognized the threats and dangers, he/she is in a good position to avoid psychological stress, which often leads to long-term (sometimes lifelong) health consequences. Probably the best situation is when the victim can rely on the superior or has fair colleagues. However, if neither is available, the victim must help himself/herself (Kratz, 2005; Pugnerová, 2006).

There are some rules that are generally applicable in dealing with psychological terror in the workplace. However, before solving an unpleasant situation, the victim must ask himself/herself a fundamental question of whether there is hope for amicable settlement. If yes, firstly it is necessary to *identify the conflict*, the second step is to *process the conflict* (preferably by means of a mediator), the third step is to *settle the conflict*. Decisions must be taken and communicated to all parties involved, these decisions will result in a compromise (what might happen is that the employer does not accept any of the proposed solutions, which results in further development of the conflict) (Buscotte, 2008, Pugnerová, 2013).

The employer is obliged to investigate any employees' complaints relating to possible mobbing. If the employer believes that the complaint is well-founded, the whole matter must be resolved.

Mobbing cannot be overlooked and is usually first noticed by the victim's co-workers. However, their involvement in the conflict might result in them getting into the role of victims. They can also act as mediators in settling the conflict, inform other colleagues or subordinates about the conflict and its development (Čírtková, 2008).

A different situation in addressing mobbing is when the victim sees that it is impossible to stop the escalation of attacks against himself/herself. In such case the problem cannot be solved amicably and it is time for self-rescue (Huberová, 1995). In the course of everyday situations it is already clear to the victim that the superior's criticism and number of complaints escalate and that everything leads to dismissal. In these cases the victim should be advised by a competent professional – lawyer specialized in the issues of mobbing. Recently, a frequent defensive measure against mobbing is legal action. In compliance with the law, the employer is obliged to provide the employee with adequate working conditions (Barancová, 2014).

## **2. Problem Statement**

According to current research studies, the number of cases of mobbing in the workplace is increasing (Čírtková, 2008). The present paper demonstrates the mechanisms and strategies of mobbing through an analysis of a case report of an individual who was the victim of mobbing.

## **3. Research Questions**

Based on the research problem, the following two research questions were formulated:

RQ 1: Is there a possibility for an individual to protect herself against mobbing in the workplace?

RQ 2: Can an individual contribute to reducing the incidence of mobbing in the workplace?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The objective of the present paper is to introduce the issue of mobbing as a socio-pathological phenomenon in workplaces of various types and among employees of various academic degrees. The paper is based on an analysis of a case report of an individual who became the victim of mobbing. Mobbing is a problem in workplaces around the world. Surprisingly, it is spoken about little. An important aspect is to acknowledge the problem, try to solve the problem, or even better, try to prevent the problem. As far as mobbing is concerned, prevention is better than cure, because the presence of this phenomenon in the workplace always leads to economic losses and especially psychological harm to the victim. Therefore, another objective of the present paper is to raise awareness as one of the preventive measures.

## **5. Research Methods**

The present paper used the case report method. The case report is a scientific approach applied in qualitative methodology. It is a specific psychological method including both the description and interpretation of a particular case. The case report method may relate to an individual, group of people or an institution. The purpose of the method is to help and compare similar cases (Hartl, Hartlová, 2004; Kučerová, 2010). The case report (sometimes called case study) is a frequent method in clinical psychology, but also for example in medicine, psychiatry, social work, law, ethics etc. This approach focuses on a single case – all facts known about the case are clearly arranged and then analysed. The case study method identifies some associations that might not be obvious at first sight and thus allows thorough understanding of the case (Opatřilová 2008, Maroon 2008). The case report is based on the data from psychological examination, observation, medical history or another educational-psychological method. Some case reports are based on observation, which might take several years, while others contain current information (Plevová, 2004).

The present paper uses the so-called personal case report (monitoring of a single person).

### **Case report: Mobbing in the workplace**

**Reason for investigation:** 32-year-old employee who became the victim of bullying in the workplace in a horizontal level – by her colleagues.

**Family history:** Both Jana's parents are employed, father (58 years of age), university degree, employed as a civil servant, good health, mother (56 years of age), secondary education, employed as a rehabilitation nurse in the health care sector, good health. The relationships in the family are good.

**Personal history:** Jana (32 years of age), university degree in sociology (specialized in theory and history of culture), good health, without limitation, hobbies – sport (swimming), reading. Jana's husband Jaroslav (35 years of age), university degree, employed as a civil servant. Both live in the same household and bring up two children (girl 7 years of age, boy 10 years of age).

**Job search history:** After graduating from university, Jana was unable to find a job. She married and soon became pregnant, the second pregnancy came less than three years afterwards. After graduation, Jana spent six years on maternity leave. Before the end of her maternity leave she found a job as a clerk in the cultural department of the municipal authority in her place of residence. She was very grateful for the job.

**Situation in the workplace:** In the workplace there were a total of six middle-aged female colleagues and one manager. Jana quickly became familiar with the content of her new job and started preparing for professional competence examination, which was required by the employer. In addition, she tried to be a friendly colleague. All was going well. The colleagues were also friendly, the manager had considerable work-related demands and kept distance, but Jana thought that was all right. After successful completion of the professional competence examination Jana considered herself an equal member of the working team.

**Beginning of problems:** Shortly after passing the professional competence examination the management announced an 'austerity package' with possible staffing reductions in all departments. Jana heard this information with displeasure and concerns, just as her colleagues did. Gradually, she began to realize that (despite the previous friendly working atmosphere) right after the announcement of possible staffing reductions she became the subject of gradual, slowly increasing pressure by her colleagues and later the manager.

**Mobbing strategy:** She began to hear more and more verbal attacks and various kinds of criticism for poor work. Her colleagues made indirect as well as direct allusions that her position was redundant and that she was a junior employee. When she asked her colleagues for help with work assignments, she was refused under various pretexts. The workplace became hostile towards Jana. In addition to verbal attacks, she received similar e-mails and text messages. Jana noticed that this behaviour is directed only to her and that otherwise her colleagues had fair relationships. Everything culminated when she did not receive important work-related information, which resulted in a failure to fulfil her duties. Soon afterwards she heard rumour exceeding the scope of her employment. This related to systematic slander including the style of her social behaviour, private life (stories about extra-marital affairs), and allegedly disastrous upbringing of her children.

**Attempts to solve mobbing:** Jana tried to resolve the situation with the manager. However, he was not helpful at all and did not want to hear about any problems in the workplace. On the contrary, he showed dissatisfaction with Jana's performance of her duties (there had been no such complaints before).

When the situation escalated after Jana had not received (once again) the necessary information which led to a failure to observe her duties, she once again tried to resolve the situation with the manager. She explained to him briskly that she saw a deliberate action in this, and showed dissatisfaction with being neglected just because she was a junior employee. At the same time she explained that she understood the reasons behind the tension at the office (workplace). She also reminded the manager of the fact that they were not a private company, where such practices would be easier to hide, but in a public institution. The manager suggested that her behaviour was inadequate and argued that her working position and university degree should be matched with a higher degree of independence, professionalism and last but not least detachment and assertiveness. The manager refused to comment on the behaviour of the colleagues arguing that he had not seen the disputes and that his role was to ensure official functioning of the department, not a friendly climate in the workplace.

**Emotional experiencing of the victim:** After several attempts to resolve the situation Jana felt helpless and unable to do anything about the situation. After she heard the slander relating not only to work, but also to her private life, she realized it was no longer acceptable. She was afraid to leave the position, mainly because of her concerns about finding a new place. At the same time, however, he resigned in all aspects. She no longer enjoyed her job, was full of fear, started to suffer from sleeping disorders, was anxious and felt inferior.

**Reaction of superiors:** The psychological terror from the colleagues (and the disregard and criticism by the manager) continued, and Jana was called to the secretary, who told her without a sign of interest that the manager's assessment of her was very negative and that she was in the group of employees who should consider leaving their positions due to absolutely unsatisfactory results of their work. For the last time, Jana tried to defend herself. The secretary pointed out the difficult staffing situation and confirmed his loyalty to the manager.

**Reaction of the family:** Jana's husband had been annoyed by the situation for a long time. However, he was not willing to deal with the situation in an official way because he thought it would be useless, and recommended his wife to hand in her notice and concentrate her energy on searching for another job.

**Solution by the victim:** For Jana it was difficult to decide how to solve the situation. On the one hand she felt incapable and humiliated, on the other hand she resented the practices she believed would never be possible in a public institution among educated people. But eventually, when she was cut down on her salary in the last two months and the attacks reached their maximum, she decided to hand in her notice. She was not surprised that the notice was accepted immediately without any signs of gratitude and with a commentary by the manager: "This has been the best of your ideas for months."



### **Analysis of the case report – employee subject to mobbing in the workplace**

The likely causes of mobbing in the workplace described above may be the chronological age and length of Jana's employment (probably the youngest member of the working team), and the novelty of the job. Theory suggests that the usual causes of mobbing are competitive pressure and fear of unemployment. This was also the situation in our case. The behaviour of the colleagues changed only after the announcement of staffing reductions. According to theoretical assumptions, the victim of mobbing is usually an individual who is new to a team of workers or who differs from the rest of the team. This might include a higher degree, or younger age than the average of the team of co-workers. It is because a newcomer changes the existing environment, which some individuals might feel as a threat to themselves and their developed positions (Buscotte, 2008). Such risk was apparently posed by Jana. She was young, flexible (completed her qualification in a short time), adaptable (she got quickly used to the new team of colleagues), educated (university degree), and had a functioning family (full functioning family with children). It is hard to distinguish who was the mastermind of mobbing and who were the participants, because Jana did not highlight any colleagues in terms of the mobbing strategies applied. This may be a sign of her generosity. This was probably an equal participation of mobbers, which confirms the theory that women are very active and inventive in mobbing. This was reflected in the strategies applied, which were dominated by 'spreading rumour' (firstly in the workplace – verbal attacks and criticism regarding Jana's poor work, later in her private life – stories about extra-marital affairs, allegedly disastrous upbringing of her children), and 'colleague isolation' (when she requested help in fulfilling her duties Jana was refused by her colleagues and did not receive the information needed). According to theoretical assumptions, the consequences of these strategies are dangerous and put the victim at risk in terms of maintaining the job and health. When rumour is spread, people who are not directly involved might be hesitant about the truthfulness of such rumour. Moreover, when information is withheld, the employee makes mistakes, does not fulfil his/her duties and is negatively assessed by the managements. This happened in the case of Jana, who was told by the manager she was not a dependable employee. This had a negative effect on Jana's psyche, she became afraid of going to work, she was anxious and felt inferior. Therefore, she attempted to resolve the situation. She still believed in an amicable settlement. This shows that Jana tried to take a proactive approach to resolve the situation. She spoke to the manager, but he suggested that she was not a trustworthy person (long-term criticism of her work) and suggested that her behaviour was inappropriate. He showed no willingness to settle the climate in the workplace and showed dissatisfaction with her presence in the workplace. By taking this negative (passive) approach he became involved in the mobbing strategy (in his case we can speak about bossing) of 'spreading rumour' by criticizing Jana's work despite previous satisfaction. The strategy included complaints to the secretary, who later suggested to Jana that she was not wanted in the workplace. After the meeting it became clear that Jana can rely neither on the manager or her colleagues. In these situations, victims must help themselves. According to the theory, important aspects include a sound family environment and good financial situation. If people are financially secure, they do not need to stay in a working environment where they are subject to mobbing. Upon consultation with her husband, Jana handed in her notice, which was probably a wise solution concerning her deteriorating health and good socio-economic background.

## 6. Findings

Before the research questions are answered, it is necessary to compare theoretical knowledge and practical experience.

If the victims of psychological terror in the workplace are women, they have a greater tendency to search for help and confide their problems to colleagues or superiors. The best way to cope with mobbing is to take the initiative as soon as possible. If the victim quickly recognized the threats and dangers, he/she is in a good position to avoid psychological stress, which often leads to long-term (sometimes lifelong) health consequences. Probably the best situation is when the victim can rely on the superior or colleagues. However, if neither is available, the victim must help himself/herself (Huberová, 1995). According to the case report, the victim actively tried to defend herself against mobbing in the workplace but faced resistance and disregard. Answer to RQ 1: Is there a possibility for an individual to protect oneself against mobbing in the workplace? There are strategies to protect oneself against mobbing in the workplace but very limited. One of the strategies is an assertive effort to resolve the situation although this may result in failure. However, it is important not to be passive.

As far as mobbing is concerned, prevention is better than cure, because the presence of this phenomenon in the workplace always leads to economic losses and especially psychological harm to the victim. One of the prevention strategies is raising awareness about this problem (seminars and trainings) or appointment of a person to deal with mobbing. These measures contribute to a healthy atmosphere in the workplace. Psychological terror will hardly appear in a healthy atmosphere. An analysis of the case report suggests that the victim tried to point out the problem of mobbing in the workplace during an interview with the manager. However, he did not want to hear anything about the problems and took a passive and negative attitude to solving the situation. Answer to RQ 2: Can an individual contribute to reducing the incidence of mobbing in the workplace? An individual can contribute to reducing the incidence of mobbing in the workplace, but this requires the support of the whole staff including superiors.

The analysis of the case report suggests that an individual has certain possibilities to protect oneself from mobbing and decrease the incidence of mobbing in the workplace but with significant limitations. Therefore it is very important to consider questions about what can be done to reduce this socio-pathological phenomenon. It is desirable that staff (and future employees) have general awareness about mobbing and relevant mobbing-solving strategies.

## 7. Conclusion

Mobbing in the workplace is an issue that deserves attention and further research. The vehicle of mobbing is aggressiveness, which is a natural part of human behaviour. What matters is whether this behaviour is corrected in an appropriate manner. Aggressiveness is considered negative when used for controlling, abusing and harming other people or for self-destruction (Spurný, 1996). Mobbing includes psychological terror in the workplace, systematic intriguing and bullying by colleagues in order to harm or discredit somebody and cause damage. The analogous term, which describes bullying by a manager, is

bossing. The perpetrators of mobbing are both men and women. The victim of mobbing can be anyone of any age, position or expertise. However, most frequent victims of mobbing are those who differ. The consequences of mobbing include mental as well as somatic problems. If mobbing occurs in the workplace, it makes both the worker and workplace inefficient (Čírtková, 2008). The case report confirmed that there are defence strategies against mobbing but this requires an active attitude of the victim. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee of success. All things considered, prevention is better than cure. Once mobbing occurs, both the employee and the workplace become inefficient.

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