



THEORETICAL APPROACHES REGARDING THE MOBBING PHENOMEN

Adina MIHĂILESCU¹

Cristina TOMESCU²

Abstract: *All work situations can potentially generate conflicts, which can lead to risks of abuses, aggression. In any organization, there are divergences of opinion, conflict, power struggle as normal manifestations of the organization. Some of these conflictual situations are solved, but another can degenerate into aggression. Mobbing is that form of psychological aggression, exercised over a period of minimum several months by one or more colleagues over another, through a series of actions designed to discredit and isolate that person. The role of the employee in the organization and his/her professional capacities are deliberately underestimated through various discredits, humiliations, in order to remove the person from organization. Victims of mobbing in most cases end up resigning because they no longer deal with pressure. Repercussions are psychical and social: falling confidence in professional skills, stress, deteriorating family relationships on the background of stress but also physical: depression or health problems. Also, there are consequences for the working environment of the organization regarding work performance and employee relationships. Therefore, organizations should take preventing measures to tackle this problem, as behaviour codes, prompt response to such behaviours from HR leaders.*

Keywords: *mobbing, aggression, victims, behavior, organizational environment, stress, health problems.*

Introduction

For a long time, looking at the risk factors at work, organizational psychologists have considered only the physical environment of work and the risk factors related to the types of physical environment. Over the past three decades, there have begun to gain weight approaches related to psychological well-being in work environments, employee

¹ Senior Researcher, The Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy, e-mail: adina.mihailescu@yahoo.com

² Senior Researcher, The Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy, e-mail: crisdobos@yahoo.com

morale and job satisfaction. (Leymann, 1996; Einarsen, 1999; Davenport, Schwartz, Elliott, 2002; Bogathy, 2002)

Step by step, organizational psychology work has begun to give space to various organizational dysfunctions with psychosocial impact on employees, including the phenomenon called mobbing or moral harassment at work. The term discrimination was far more familiar at that time, but beyond discrimination, moral harassment was a different phenomenon, that could be based on discrimination in some cases, but it was not limited to that. Mobbing has considerable psycho-individual and psycho-organizational effects, affecting the performance of the person at work and his/her health.

The characteristic of the mobbing is the aggression at the level of expression and communication and at the level of relationships, seldom in the form of humiliation in front of colleagues. All these behaviours can be practiced by work colleagues or by the employer and are aimed at compromising the image and performance of an employee, undermining his position in the organization, deterring him/her to resign or even give up working in his field of activity. For certain behaviours to be classified as mobbing, they must be repeated for at least six consecutive months.

In Sweden, surveys conducted (Leymann, 1996) show that out of a total of approximately 4,400,000 employees, 154,000 employees (3.5%) were exposed to one or more mobbing-related aggressions weekly for 6 months. Also, 25% of those prematurely retired suffered from mobbing-specific treatments. As a result of this finding, the Swedish government has set out projects to protect the national budget against such financial losses.

Between 1993 and 1994, a normative act (Vocational Rehabilitation Act) enforced that obliges employers to submit rehabilitation / integration plans to the Social Insurance Office when an employee has been sent on sick leave for one whole month or one countless times over a year.

In Germany, studies show that, out of 40 million employees, 1.4 million (3.18%) suffered from mobbing, and in France, out of 27 million employees, 950,000 (3.51%) suffered mobbing. Globally, gender distribution shows that 55% of those affected are women and 45% are men.

In Romania, several researches talked about the phenomenon of mobbing since 2010. A study developed in 2011 by the Association for Socio-Economic Development and Promotion CATALACTICA, within the SOPHRD/97/6.3/S/54973: "Support for Women Discriminated on the Labour Market" with financing from the Social European Fund, showed that a percent of 8% of the work force at national level was a possible victim of such a phenomenon. (Tomescu, Cace, Preotesi, 2012).

One of the first study in Romania on mobbing phenomenon was developed by researchers from The Research Institute for Quality of Life, Colfasa Association and other several partners, in 2010. The figures referring to mobbing, on national sample were similar. The same study shows that 25.7% of the participants said that a colleague was repeatedly offended by other colleagues or bosses, a percent of 24.7% said a

colleague was repeatedly criticized or reproached and 19.5% said a colleague was discordant and did not integrate into the team. A percent of 41% of the subjects admitted that their boss or colleagues repeatedly scream at each other at work, situations that can generate into conflicts. (Tomescu, Cace, 2010).

Since 2010, the trend of discussion about mobbing in Romania was an ascending one, a part of the Romanian employee understanding the phenomenon and searching for information on internet and recognising the behaviour and their workplace. The team of researchers, which we were part of, was several time contacted by people who were victims of mobbing in order to seek help/advice/consultance and better understanding of the phenomenon. The advice was always to seek psychological help and juridical help.

The trauma is so overwhelming that people need to be confirmed that they have really lived that, and that what they have live was called mobbing (as the victim begins to think in time, under the pressure of the aggresors that she/he has a psychological problem or generate problems and not the abusers). The legislation in Romania, in the field, is behind other more developed European countries and subsumed to the legislation regarding discrimination, but discussion are taking place under society's pressure to change that in order to better support these victims. A series of Romanian psychologists offer support now for the victims, offer lectures or group support for psychoterapy as the psychologists of Institute of Trauma for exemple.

What is the mobbing

Mobbing is a form of psychological aggression, exercised over a period of several months by one or more colleagues over another, through a series of actions designed to isolate the person concerned. Practically, the role of the employee in the organization and his / her professional capacities are deliberately underestimated through various humiliations, in order to remove the person from that work place. Victims of mobbing in most cases end up resigning because they no longer deal with negative pressures and atmosphere.

Repercussions of mobbing are tremendous, psychical and social: falling confidence in professional skills, stress, deteriorating family relationships on the background of stress but also physical: depression, health problems. Also, there are consequences for the working environment of the organization, with implications for work performance.

The term mobbing comes from the word mob, which refers to a disorganized crowd engaged in rule less violence (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliott, 2002) and derives from the Latin "mobile vulgus", which means oscillating, hesitant crowd. The first researcher to use the term mobbing was Konrad Lorenz, in describing behaviors in animals. He calls it the attack or the menacing behavior of a smaller animal group on a larger animal. Later, Heineman (Heineman, 1972) becomes interested in this phenomenon. He studied the behaviour at children and he described mobbing as destructive behaviour, directed by a group of children to another child.

Leymann noticed the existence and action of phenomena of injustice, violation of employees' rights, harassment at the workplace, to which some of the employees are subjected. These acts of injustice generate personal and organizational damage. The effect beach ranges from work-related isolation to suicide acts triggered by harassment over a long period of time.

Leymann introduces the concept of mobbing into the organizational environment, delimiting it from that of bullying, which, Leymans says, is sometimes used synonymously by some authors. In Leymann's view, bullying is different from mobbing, as bullying puts accent on physical aggression and physical threat. Physical violence is rarely found in the phenomenon of mobbing, characterized by subtle, psycho-social behaviours that, by cumulative effect, lead to undermining the victim's respect, social isolation of the victim, failure to perform service tasks. (Leymann, 1996)

Mobbing is initially a hidden, subtle behaviour, which is why the aggressor is aware of his existence quite late. Mitrofan (1996) considers that *"aggression is any form of intent-oriented behavior toward objects, persons or self, in order to cause harm, injuries, destruction and damage, and mentions three approaches to aggression: inborn, the reaction to frustration (the environment) and the learned behavior (education and / or the environment) "*.

Leymann (1996) states that *"Mobbing or psychological terror at the workplace involves hostile and unethical communication, which is systematically directed to a single individual, which is consequently pushed into a situation of helplessness and in which can defend; the victim is held in this situation on Monday (even years) days, while the attackers continue to mobbing (...)" Mobbing is a destructive process; it is constituted by hostile actions which, taken in isolation, may seem anode, but by constant repetition they have dangerous effects (Mobbing is defined by repetition of actions: at least once a week and at least 6 consecutive months) "*(Leymann, 1996, p 26-27).

Einarsen (1999) defines mobbing as the systematic persecution of a colleague, subordinate or superior; persecution in a continuing form, can cause serious social, psychological and psychosomatic problems to the victim. Unison (1997, in Rayner, 1999) defines mobbing as *"offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting or humiliating behaviors, abuse of authority or authority that attempts to undermine an individual or a group of employees and may cause disturbances stress-related "*.

Bogathy (2002) includes mobbing in the sphere of interpersonal conflict that he defines as follows: *"Interpersonal conflict involves two or more people who perceive themselves as opposed to each other in terms of their pursued purposes, attitudes, values, or the manifest behaviors "*.

Brodsky (1976, in Einarsen, 1999) defines harassment as *"all those acts that repeatedly and persistently aim to disturb, harass or frustrate a person, ... comments that ultimately scare, intimidate or cause discomfort to the receiver."* In this sense, sexual harassment, but not necessarily mobbing, can be included.

For Leymann, mobbing can be moderate or aggressive, depending on the type of effect it exerts on employees. Moderate acceptance refers to harassment at work. Radical acceptance defines mobbing as psycho-terror at work.

Hence, not every employment relationship between employees goes into the sphere of mobbing, but only hostile, aggressive situations involving confrontation, moral harassment, contempt of personality, mockery, etc. and repeatedly repeated, not accidental or transient. Errors, ironic remarks, ridicule, sarcastic replies, etc. are part of our everyday life, but they become mobbing when they are practiced systematically and over long periods and when actions become disturbing, painful and dangerous for the mental and physical health of individuals who are under such pressure.

Behaviours that can be mobbing

In order to understand the essence of mobbing, it is necessary to know the behaviors that the aggressors use in relation to their victims. Leymann listed 45 such behaviors, which he disposed of in five categories: 1. Preventing the victim from expressing himself; 2. Isolation of the victim; 3. Disapproval of the victim to colleagues; 4. Discrimination of the victim in his / her work; 5. Compromising the victim's health (Leymann, 1996, p. 42-43). The behaviours described by Leymann constitute a good operationalization of the concept of mobbing.

What characterizes each of these categories of behaviour:

1. The first group of organizational mobbing actions includes behaviours that prevent the victim from expressing himself. This category includes the following types of actions: hierarchical superiors refuse the victim the opportunity to express themselves; the victim is constantly interrupted when he speaks; colleagues prevent the victim from expressing himself / herself; colleagues scream, offend the victim; the victim's work is criticized; criticizing the victim's private life; the victim is terrorized by phone calls; the victim is verbally threatened; threatening the victim in writing; denial of contact with the victim (avoiding visual contact, rejecting gestures etc.); ignoring the victim's presence (for example, addressing another person, as if the victim was not present, would not be seen).
2. The second group of mobbing actions within a work team aims to isolate the victim. The aggressors do not talk to the victim; the victim is not allowed to address another person; she is assigned another post that removes/isolates him/her from colleagues; it is forbidden for colleagues to speak with the victim; the physical presence of the victim is denied.
3. The third group of actions, defining organizational mobbing, according to Leymann, aims to disregard the victim in front of his colleagues. The victim is spoken of evil or slander; rumors are being issued to the victim; the victim is ridiculed; it is claimed that the victim is mentally ill and victim may be compelled to attend a psychiatric examination; a victim's infirmity is invented; the actions, gestures, the voice of the victim are imitated to ridicule it better; the political beliefs or religious beliefs of the victim are attacked; jokes about the victim's private life; is joking on account of her origin or nationality; the victim is obliged to accept humiliating activities; the unfair and unjustified marking of the victim's work; the victim's decisions are questioned or challenged; aggression of the victim in obscene or insulting terms; until the victim's sexual harassment (through gestures or proposals).

4. The victim's professional discredit characterizes the fourth type of action: assigning difficult or impossible tasks; depriving the victim of any occupation and watching for the victim not to find any occupation on his own; entrusting unnecessary or absurd tasks; providing activities below the competencies; always assigning new tasks; imposing the execution of humiliating tasks; entrusting tasks that are superior to qualification to discredit the victim.
5. The most serious form of mobbing leads to compromising the victim's health by: entrusting dangerous and harmful tasks to health or an unhealthy workplace / environment; the threat of physical violence; physical aggression of the victim, either without gravity, as a warning, or severe physical aggression, without retention; it is intentionally caused to the victim a damage; causing inconvenience at home or at work; even sexual assault of the victim.

The effects of mobbing affect three major plans: individual, organizational and social. Individually, mobbing directly affects the victim's psycho-physical integrity, by causing anxiety, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress syndrome, behavioral disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, alcoholism, drug abuse (more commonly with medication), loss of motivation for activity, decreased satisfaction, performance and labor efficiency, premature medical retirement, dramatic decline in self-confidence, professional competence. It finds that the effects are highly destructive, being sufficient for a socio-professional disability of the individual on a medium term.

Conclusions. Social consequences

At the level of the work and organizational group, mobbing translates into effects such as: degradation of professional relationships, communication impairment, absenteeism, staff fluctuations, sick leaves. All this means consistent costs. Interestingly from this point of view is the research undertaken by the Swedish economist Johanson (apud Leymann, 1996), who developed a methodology for calculating the costs of mobbing, showing that it would be more profitable for the enterprise to provide employees with rehabilitation programs, to reorganize the work environment rather than continue to neglect this internal phenomenon.

At the societal level, the effects of mobbing also reach social deequilibrium. On the one hand, the individual's ability to maintain and develop natural relationships with family, social group, social institutions is altered. On the other hand, society, through its social protection institutions, has to pay extra for longer or shorter periods of unemployment, sick leave, health programs and treatments and psycho-socioprofessional recovery programs.

Mobbing is a process that takes place over time. It can be said that all work situations potentially generate conflicts, which, in turn, through degeneration, can lead to increased risks of mobbing. In any organization, there are divergences of opinion, conflict, power struggle as normal manifestations, even necessary, under certain conditions, for the progress of the organization. Some of these are solved by themselves, but another part degenerates into mobbing. In the course of time, the psychic balance of the victim is affected, self-destruct self-confidence, the symptoms of

stress appear. The higher the number of aggressions a person is subjected to – even if they do not come from the same person, but from more, the more mobbing will be. At the time of mobbing, it is necessary to intervene the organization's leadership.

Often, this intervention does not take place, the conflicts being left to power, and the aggrieved people are not defended; or the intervention occurs too late when the situation can no longer be controlled. Leymann said that "*Mobbing ... must be of the same interest and the same preventive measures as accidents at work. Because this is the case for psychosocial accidents that often lead to serious and even fatal sequelae*" (Leymann, 1996, p. 67). It should not be forgotten that most of the high costs left by mobbing will be borne by employers and even by employees, although neither, nor anyone else, initially realizes it.

Prevention is one of the most desirable forms to be practiced, since mobbing once installed is difficult to annihilate without leaving psychological sequelae on the victim and destabilizing the working environment. One of the measures in the prevention action area consists of educational programs addressed to managers. Through trainings, managers can build up some capabilities to identify potential sources of conflict and mobbing, and conflict resolution / resolution skills when they arise. Early managerial interventions are very important. In order to intervene promptly, the manager must be able to read the first signs of the mobbing process. Preventing mobbing in the organization involves inventorying communication and networking issues in the company, monitoring their dynamics, and formulating ethical and behavioral norms.

The anti-mobbing support group is one of the main ways to combat the effects of this phenomenon and to restore the feeling of well-being in people's lives. In mobbing, there is always the intention of persecution. Psychological pressure is being made to get the employee to leave his post or be removed from the organization, as dismissal is not possible, the person being a competent employee with very good results before the onset of mobbing.

As a form of psychological abuse, mobbing occurs insidiously, harassment is often a subtle one, the victim rarely being aware from the beginning of what is happening to him. Things usually start from a conflict and gradually evolve processually into persecution or psychotherapy at work, the attacks being repeated, continuous, systematic. Mobbers (haters) act directly or indirectly, subtly or obviously. Confusion may occur and often things are not properly understood by those around, so aggressors can become ignored, tolerated, encouraged or even sustained and instigated by the organization.

Mobbing is also characterized by inequality between the victim and the aggressor. The aggressor's power is given on the one hand by the hierarchical position (when it is a hierarchical superior) or, on the other hand, by the fact that the aggressor is collective (there are more employees who co-oppose one, even if the latter may be even boss). Mobbers instinct others who act as a group or mob.

The person, identified as the target of mobbing, no matter how strong and competent, will feel the full effects in all life plans. This way she can feel confused, anxious, extremely tense, physically ill, depressed, irritable, does not know who to trust, she is self-isolation.

In the most serious cases where the person does not receive support and counseling, he can develop a sense of persecution or paranoia, become inappropriate, engage in destructive behaviors for himself or others, may develop acute anxiety or post-traumatic (PTSD), may suffer permanent physical or emotional trauma. Not only will the personal balance be broken but also the couple and family, social and professional.

The consequences for the working environment of the organization regarding work performance and employee relationships must be taken into account. Therefore, the organizations should take preventing measures to tackle this problem, as behaviour codes to be respected or prompt response to mobbing behaviours as they are noted by HR leaders. The unsolved problem can cost the organization more than preventing or taking action at right time.

References

- Davenport, N., Schwartz, R. D., Elliott G. P. (2002). *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace*, Civil Society Publishing, Ames.
- Zlate, M. (2007). *Tratat de psihologie organizațional-managerială* (vol. 2), Polirom, Iași.
- Fischer, Reidesser, (2001). *Tratat de psihotraumatologie*, Editura Trei, București
- Leymann, (1996). The content and development of mobbing at work, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 5(2)
- Mitrofan, (1996). *Agresivitatea*, în Neculau, A. (coord.), *Psihologie socială – Aspecte contemporane*, Polirom, Iași, p. 433-443
- Bogathy (2002). *Conflicte în organizații*, Eurostampa, Timișoara.
- Einarsen (1999). The nature and causes of bullying, *International Journal of Manpower*, 209(1/2), 16 – 27.
- Rayner, C. (1999). From research to implementation: finding leverage for prevention, *International Journal of Manpower*, 20(1/2), 28 – 38.
- Tomescu C., Cace S. (2010). *Studiu asupra fenomenului de mobbing și a unor forme de discriminare la locul de muncă în România*, București: Editura Expert
- Tomescu C, Cace S., Preotesi M. (2012). *Discrimination. Romanian Legislation, Practices, Performance on Phenomenon*. Manuscript (not published).