

WORKPLACE MOBBING: ATTITUDES OF EMPLOYEES IN THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTORS IN THE CITY OF SPLIT

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of whether it is the private or public sector, mobbing at the workplace represents one of the significant problems of today's society and can occur anytime and anywhere in the work environment. Processes of abuse take place every day, leave a whole series of consequences on the individual, and very quickly turn from an individual problem into a social problem. The aim of the paper is to examine the attitudes of employees in the private and public sector in the city of Split (Croatia) on workplace abuse. The paper presents the results of a survey conducted in Split in 2022 on a sample of 300 participants aged 18 to 65. The obtained results show that the participants most often associate mobbing with bullying, abuse and violence, especially those employed in the private sector, while those employed in the public sector associate mobbing with the media, colleagues and superiors. Approximately half of the participants experienced mobbing, but a significantly smaller number of them reported it. They are aware of the causes of mobbing and its consequences, as well as certain characteristics of the mobber, and they could recognize him/her if they met him/her. Training on appropriate reactions to mobbing for all employees according to the participants would be the best way to prevent further abuse in the workplace. A positive shift is reflected in the results according to which participants would report mobbing in the future if they would experienced or noticed it, which can certainly help in the future processes of prevention.

Keywords: Workplace mobbing, sociological research, employees, private and public sector, Split

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INTRODUCTION: MOBBING AT WORKPLACE

Work represents an important part of a person's life and enables the acquisition of knowledge and skills as well as getting the income for normal functioning in modern society, but also the fulfillment of one's own interests and the construction of one's own identity [6]. However, the progress of civilization and the ever-faster pace of life have made work to be an ever-increasing challenge. Work, associated with an increasing degree of stress, is becoming an increasingly difficult commodity and less and less privileged [2]. One such source of stress is often mobbing at the workplace. "Mobbing" or psychological terror is defined as hostile and unethical communication that one or more people systematically directs toward an individual. Such procedures generally take place daily and over a long period and result in significant psychological, psychosomatic and social problems [7]. Mobbing as a systematic form of psychological violence perpetrated by colleagues, superiors or inferiors on the victim is a consequence of poor work organization and management style, which leads to weak interpersonal relations in the work environment or organization [2]. Also, there is a difference between „active mobbing“ and „passive mobbing“. In an „active or direct mobbing“, "the employee is exposed to behaviors such as harassment, psychological pressure, threat, intimidation, insult, heavy workload by supervisor or co-workers". In a „passive or indirect mobbing“ the mobber indirectly ignores the victim, allowing the harassment and negative behaviors of all the mobbers [12].

Not every insult or offense is considered mobbing. Mobbing is characterized by repetition, for example weekly and over a certain period e.g. several months. It is certainly perceived as a worrisome process because the person being bullied ends up in inferior positions with reduced opportunities to improve them [3]. Based on different definitions, and theoretical and practical experiences, three essential features of mobbing can be highlighted: it includes aggressive behavior; it lasts for a long time or over a certain period, and there are power ratios and imbalances in interpersonal relationships [10]. Mobbing, as Leymann points out, occurs through four phases: the original critical incident, mobbing and stigmatization, personnel management and expulsion [7]. In approaching and researching mobbing it is also important to distinguish it from some other very similar concepts. Therefore, authors Mujtaba and Senathip state that there different terms associated to mobbing such as bullying and harassment. According to their opinion, these terms are inseparable. For example, mobbing is nonsexual harassment of a coworker and it's also more extreme form of bullying, because the bullying usually lasts less [9]. Harassment is non-physical as it's bullying in most cases, while mobbing can include physical touch in all sorts of way [9].

The original critical incident is the source of mobbing and usually lasts a short time because it quickly moves to the next phase, that is when co-workers and superiors notice stigmatizing behavior. Mobbing and stigmatization of the victim include all communication actions that hurt the individual. The aim is mainly to damage the reputation of the victim, disrupt communication and social relations with the victim as well as the possibility of his/her doing of work, and the victim is under constant threats of violence. However, when management gets involved, the case officially becomes a "case". The management should take responsibility of solving the case, but the situation is usually complicated, considering that each management is regulated by different laws on the work environment in different countries, and the definitions of violations of the law differ. As for expulsion, it mostly involves the victim leaving the workplace, especially if the mobber is one of the superiors [7].

Mobbing can be divided into a set of activities that indicate abuse of a worker such as attacks on the possibility of adequate communication (e.g. superiors and/or colleagues limit the victim's ability to express themselves, interrupt him/her in conversation, refuse any form of

non-verbal contact with the victim), attacks on the possibility of maintaining social relations (e.g. the victim is isolated, ignored and neglected), attacks on personal reputation (e.g. inventing stories about the victim, gossiping, ridicule, etc.), attacks on the quality of professional cooperation (e.g. constant criticism and objections, excessive and unnecessary control, not providing tools and means of work, overwhelming the victim with work, etc.), attacks on health (e.g. the victim is forced to perform tasks that harm his/her health, is denied annual vacation and/or days off, physical and sexual assaults) [13]. The mobber does not respect the victim either on a personal or professional level and thus abuse is present in all types of work organizations, in all areas of the economy in the private and public sectors. In this way, the mobber reduces the victim's work and ability to conduct work. He/she often ridicules, gossips and criticizes the victim in front of others, thus preventing him/her from expressing himself/herself. If abuse is observed at the level of the entire organization, it manifests itself in the impossibility of social relations, interpersonal relations are bad, and there is an atmosphere of fear, coercion and control. Of course, the above has consequences for the functioning of the organization or company. The performance, efficiency and productivity of the organization deteriorate. In organizations where mobbing occurs, management is defined through the concepts of incompetence, ignorance and unscrupulousness [14]. Thus, the management is characterized more as "bossing". Considering such work and the attitudes of management, it is clear that the management tolerates and ignores any form of abuse at the workplace [14].

Causes of mobbing at the workplace

The development of mobbing was mainly influenced by competition in the labor market, the increase in crisis situations, globalization, and thus the insecurity regarding jobs [13]. The most frequently asked questions are why mobbing occurs in the workplace and why it develops as a process. Widespread prejudices claim that the problem arises when an employee with certain character specificities enters the work environment and becomes a workforce [8]. Causes of mobbing at the workplace often include situations in which bullies feel threatened by their victim's skills, popularity, success and they experience jealousy [9]. The cause of mobbing can also be a bad organization or poorly organized production and/or way of working, as well as disinterested management. Poor managerial performance implies equal involvement in group dynamics or denial of the existence of conflict. It is also stated that the personality of the victim should not be seen as a crucial source of mobbing, considering that everyone always follows certain rules of behavior at the workplace, and even when there is non-compliance and/or violation of the rules, superiors should react and prevent further non-compliance [8].

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (OSHA-EU) defines the primary factors that influence the existence of, for example, bullying at work. This includes a corporate culture that does not adequately recognize the problem, unexpected changes in business, instability and insecurity of work, dissatisfaction and bad relations at the workplace, excessive demands, high exposure to stressful situations and conflict of interests [11]. Given that there are factors that lead to mobbing, it can be seen as an ongoing process as the mobber's violent behavior increases [4]. It is believed that mobbing has its source in the psychological profiles of the perpetrators and victims of violence. Both roles share several characteristic features, such as a high level of anxiety in social situations, a low level of social competence and a reduced level of self-evaluation. Some studies indicate that perpetrators are characterized by high but unstable self-esteem and a tendency towards narcissism, so in a situation associated with danger they react with aggression [2].

Victims of workplace mobbing

Victims of mobbing often do not report the abuse for fear of retaliation. Fear of retaliation discourages reporting, especially in situations where the attacker is someone superior, able to influence the employee's professional position and the one who takes advantage of that opportunity. A certain problem also arises when it is necessary to prove the unethical behavior of the abuser in court [2].

Certain studies show that both men and women are equally exposed to mobbing, men experience threats and physical attacks more often, and women experience verbal and sexual harassment at the workplace [5]. Some other research shows that typical victims of mobbing are people who are looking for more independence in their work or better working conditions, people who are looking for recognition of their work position and salary increase, people of different religious beliefs and people of different ethnic origin or gender [13].

At the same time, research shows that there is a certain pattern of reaction to abuse, such as initial self-blame, loneliness and personal devaluation. Abuse at the workplace carries a certain risk of permanent damage to health. Health problems and symptoms of the victims appear as changes at the social-emotional level (e.g. depression, anxiety, panic attacks, social isolation, etc.), changes at the physical health level (e.g. headaches, sleep disorders, lack of air, heart problems, skin problems, etc.) and changes in behavior (eg aggressiveness, passivity, eating disorders, alcoholism, sexual disorders [13]. Leymann also lists a whole series of consequences of mobbing: social consequences (social isolation, stigmatization, voluntary unemployment, social maladjustment), social-psychological consequences, psychological consequences (despair, helplessness, feeling of great anger, anxiety, etc.) and psychosomatic and psychiatric consequences (depression, hyperactivity, suicides, etc.) [7].

Recognizing workplace mobbing is not easy, and the reason is the wrong perception of the bully's appearance. The mobber, in many cases, does not realize that he/she is doing something wrong [5]. Identification and prevention of mobbing are very complex processes. An essential part of the business relationship is compliance with the Labor Law and the anti-discrimination law. However, despite the existence of laws and regulations of the European Commission, human rights, and especially the European Charter, there is still a gap in legislation. The lack of the Law on Prohibition of Mobbing creates space for unpunished violations of human rights by mobbers [4]. Basic measures to combat mobbing are systematic prevention, problem identification and professional rehabilitation. However, the problem is that the victims of mobbing remain silent about it, and at the same time it is difficult to prove mobbing [13].

METHODOLOGY

Research objectives

The general aim of the research was to examine the attitudes of employees of the private and public sectors in the city of Split regarding workplace bullying. In accordance with the general aim, specific research goals were determined: 1. to examine the frequency of mobbing with regard to gender; 2. examine the frequency of mobbing with regard to age; 3. to investigate the understanding of mobbing with regard to employment in a certain sector; 4. examine the frequency of reporting mobbing with regard to the level of education.

Research hypothesis

In accordance with the set aims, research hypotheses were set:

H1: more women experienced mobbing than men;

H2: employees between the ages of 18 and 24 experienced mobbing the most;

H3: private sector employees associate mobbing with experiencing bullying, while public sector employees associate mobbing with relations to their colleagues;

H4: employees with a higher level of education reported more mobbing than employees with a lower level of education.

METHOD AND SAMPLE

The research method used in this study was a survey, while the measuring instrument was a questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part contains questions related to the sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents, and the second part contains questions related to the attitudes of employees of the private and public sectors in the city of Split about workplace mobbing. The fieldwork of the research was conducted in 2022 in Split (Croatia).

Employees in the private and public sector in the city of Split were selected for the sample of this research, regardless of their place of residence, and the sample was convenient and consisted of 300 respondents, of which 54 were men (18.0%) and 246 were women (82%). The age of the respondents varies from 18 to 65 years since the the research aimed to examine the work experience of the population of all age groups. The most represented group of participants by age are participants aged 35 to 49 (45.7%), and the least number of them are aged 60 to 65 (2.3%). As for other age groups, 11.3% of participants belong to the group from 18 to 24 years old, 17.7% to group from 25 to 29 years old, 13.7% to the group from 30 to 34 years old, and 9.3% to the group from 50 to 59 years old. Most of the participants live in the city of Split (70%). When it comes to the level of education, most of them have completed high school (52.7%). Also, 21.7% of participants completed graduate studies or higher vocational education, 19.7% of participants completed professional/undergraduate studies or higher vocational education, 5.7% has an academic degree, and 0.3% of participants completed elementary school. Respondents usually have between 700 and 1000 euros per month. Most of them are employed for an indefinite period (70.7%) and 90,7% of respondents work full time. As for the work sector, slightly more than half of the participants (60.3%) work in the private sector, while slightly more than a third (39.7%) work in the public sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research show that the majority (67.0%) of respondents consider working extremely important, as well as job satisfaction (86.0%). Given that the subject of the research is bullying at the workplace, respondents were asked what they think of when they hear the word "mobbing". Since the question was open-ended and answers were reduced to categories. According to the data obtained, slightly less than a third (27%) of the respondents associate mobbing with bullying and abuse (2.3%), violence (18.3%), bad feelings (8.3%), workplace (7.3%), boss (7.3%), maltreat (3.3%), colleagues (1.7%) and the media (1%). Accordingly, we were interested in the relationship between the employees' work sector and their perception of mobbing, so hypothesis H3 assumed that employees of the private sector associate mobbing with experiencing bullying, while employees of the public sector associate mobbing with colleagues.

Table 1. The relationship between the understanding of mobbing and the work sector

		Sector				In total	
		private sector		public sector			
		f	%	f	%	f	%
<i>Understanding mobbing</i>	no answer	1	25.0	3	75.0	4	1.3
	violence	35	63.6	20	36.4	55	18.3
	abuse	45	61.6	28	38.4	73	24.3
	bullying	54	66.7	27	33.3	81	27.0
	maltreatment	7	70.0	3	30.0	10	3.3
	bad feelings	15	60.0	10	40.0	25	8.3
	media	1	33.3	2	66.7	3	1.0
	workplace	12	54.5	10	45.5	22	7.3
	boss	9	40.9	13	59.1	22	7.3
	colleagues	2	40.0	3	60.0	5	1.7
In total		181	60.3	119	39.7	300	100.0

The results show that most employees in the private sector associate mobbing with the concepts of maltreatment (70%), bullying (66.7%) and violence (63.6%), while most employees in the public sector associate mobbing with the media (66.7%), colleagues (60%) and boss (59.1%), so this hypothesis can be considered confirmed. Thus, we conclude that employees of the private sector associate mobbing with a specific act or event, while employees of the public sector associate it with a certain person.

Mobbing includes indirect bullying (isolation, exclusion, ignoring, unreciprocated communication, gossiping, lying, false accusation, undermining) as well as direct bullying (verbal attack/harassment, persistent negative eye contact, staring, criticizing, belittling remarks, deliberate belittling, intimidation, shouting, humiliation, threats, manipulation) [1]. For this very reason, the participants were offered some of the listed items and were asked if they considered the above to be mobbing. The obtained data show that the majority of participants consider mobbing to be threats (96.3%), disparagement (94%), intimidation (93.7%), false accusations (93.7%), verbal attacks (93%), sexual behavior connotations (92.7%), manipulation (87.3%), shouting (86.7%), ignoring (75%), isolating (77.3%), lying (61%), impolite behavior (59.7%) and gossiping (57%), while approximately a third of respondents consider staring (37.7%) and criticizing (35.7%) as mobbing.

Since there are two basic types of mobbing, i.e. the bully can be a colleague, which is horizontal mobbing, or a superior, which refers to vertical mobbing, i.e. bossing [3], the participants are asked which form they consider to be more common. According to the results, a third (32.3%) of the participants believe that horizontal mobbing is more common, while for the majority (67.7%) vertical mobbing is more frequent.

Furthermore, the causes of the occurrence of mobbing can be various, but the majority of our participants (86%) agree that the personality of the perpetrator is crucial in the occurrence of mobbing. Also, the participants believe that the causes of mobbing can be bad organization within the company (66.3%) as well as bad distribution of duties in the company (67%). Many authors explain what exactly can motivate a person to commit mobbing. For example, Brudnik-Dabrowska states that some research suggests that perpetrators are characterized by high, but unstable self-esteem and a tendency towards narcissism [2]. Therefore, our participants were given some of the characteristics discussed by various authors and were asked what they considered to be the characteristics of the perpetrator. Most participants agree that it is narcissism (92.3%), egoism (90.7%), reduced ability to feel empathy (79.3%), greed (76%) and low self-confidence (69%). However, when considering the characteristics of the perpetrator, it is also necessary to mention the characteristics of the victim, that is, whether any of their characteristics could be the reason why colleagues or superiors mob them. As with the previous question, the participants were given several characteristics that various authors noted as significant in previous research. The obtained data show that the majority of participants believe that the most common characteristic of the victim is reticence (74.7%) and shyness (70.3%). Participants also believe that honesty (50.3%), different sexuality (48.7%), different ethnicity (41.3%) and different religion (39.3%) can be significant characteristics of the victim.

Mobbing is a very significant and dangerous problem for society, and especially for the person who suffers, and as such it leaves many consequences for the individual, both psychologically and physically. As with the previous two questions, our participants were offered a list with certain psychological and physical consequences that the authors who investigated mobbing observed in the victim or that the victims themselves reported. According to the results shown in Table 2, it can be seen that, when it comes to the negative consequences of mobbing, the participants selected a considerable presence of all of the above. However, for the vast majority of participants, the extremely negative consequences of mobbing are anxiety (91.7%), helplessness (88.3%), despair (86.0%), depression (85.7%), anxiety (85.7%) and anger (83.7%).

Table 2. Consequences of mobbing

Consequences of mobbing	no		I'm not sure		Yes		In total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
social isolation	28	9.3	51	17.0	221	73.7	300	100.0
stigmatization	20	6.7	76	25.3	204	68.0	300	100.0
unemployment	45	15.0	97	32.3	158	52.7	300	100.0
despair	13	4.3	29	9.7	258	86.0	300	100.0
helplessness	11	3.7	24	8.0	265	88.3	300	100.0
anger	12	4.0	37	12.3	251	83.7	300	100.0
depression	3	1.0	22	7.3	275	91.7	300	100.0
concentration disorders	19	6.3	53	17.7	228	76.0	300	100.0
anxiety	9	3.0	34	11.3	257	85.7	300	100.0
depression	11	3.7	32	10.7	257	85.7	300	100.0
hyperactivity	113	37.7	108	36.0	79	26.3	300	100.0
psihosomatic diseases	20	6.7	80	26.7	200	66.7	300	100.0
chronic fatigue	35	11.7	69	23.0	196	65.3	300	100.0
digestive disorders	25	8.3	85	28.3	190	63.3	300	100.0
eating disorders	27	9.0	89	29.7	184	61.3	300	100.0
alcoholism	49	16.3	103	34.3	148	49.3	300	100.0
consumption of drugs and opiates	57	19.0	108	36.0	135	45.0	300	100.0
other physical diseases	37	12.3	106	35.3	157	52.3	300	100.0

After being asked about their attitudes toward mobbing, participants were asked about their own experiences regarding mobbing. The data show that approximately half (52.3%) of the participants experienced mobbing at their workplace, as well as noticed mobbing of colleagues (53.3%), and even 67.7% of them know the person who was mobbed. However, the majority (65%) of the participants did not report mobbing to their superiors, while approximately a third (31%) of them did. Nevertheless, the majority (67.7%) of the participants estimate that they would report mobbing in the future.

Furthermore, hypothesis H1 assumed that more women than men experienced mobbing. The chi-square test found no statistically significant difference with regard to gender ($X^2=0.690$; $df=2$; $p=0.708$), whereby 57.4% of male participants experienced abuse as did 51.2% of women, so this hypothesis is rejected. Likewise, we were interested in the relationship between age and experiencing bullying at the workplace. By bringing these two variables into relation, we obtained the results that employees aged 30 to 34 (63.4%) experienced mobbing the most ($X^2=12.758$; $df=10$; $p=0.237$). Therefore, hypothesis H2, which assumed that the youngest employees (between the ages of 18 and 24) experienced mobbing the most, was rejected.

Although only a third of respondents reported mobbing to their superiors, we were interested in the level of completed education of those who did so. Therefore, with hypothesis H4, we assumed that employees with a higher level of education reported mobbing more than employees with a lower level of education. The chi-square test showed a statistically significant difference with regard to the level of education ($X^2=8.182$; $df=1$; $p=0.004$). According to the results, mobbing was not reported by 73.6% of participants who completed high school, while those participants who did so had a higher level of education, so this hypothesis is accepted.

Since mobbing is seen as a big problem in society, it would be desirable to prevent it before it occurs or at least at the very beginning of its appearance. Therefore, the participants were asked about ways to prevent mobbing. The majority of participants (85.3%) state that training on appropriate reactions to mobbing for all employees as well as education on mobbing for employees (83.3%) is the best way of prevention. Also, one of the forms of prevention could be monetary sanctions to perpetrators (74.7%), as well as firing them immediately (73.3%).

CONCLUSIONS

Work is a basic human right and need, therefore mobbing at workplace becomes a big and non-negligible social problem by leaving lots of consequences on individual, group and social levels. Considering that there are different causes and forms of mobbing, its recognition seems to be difficult, as well as its prevention. However, the problem is that victims are afraid to report that someone is mobbing them, and a certain problem arises when it is necessary to prove the act of mobbing. Therefore, all employees within the company must know how to recognize mobbing and abusers, and thus react in time.

The research conducted for this work on a convenient sample of 300 employees in the private and public sector in the city of Split, aged 18 to 65, shows that slightly more than half of the participants experienced mobbing at the workplace, while only a third reported it. Nevertheless, more than half of the participants would report mobbing to their superiors in the future if they experienced it or noticed that it was perpetrated against one of their colleagues. Most of the participants associate mobbing with the term bullying, but at the same time, they also consider threats, disparagement, intimidation and many other forms of abuse to be mobbing. Likewise, they consider vertical mobbing to be more common, i.e. the situation when a superior mobs a subordinate. Furthermore, most participants state that the personality of the perpetrator is the cause of mobbing, which is also pointed out by the authors who researched mobbing. They consider narcissism and egoism to be the most prominent characteristics of the abuser, while the victim's characteristics are reticence and shyness. Anxiety, according to research participants, is a consequence of mobbing for most participants. But there are also depression, anger, helplessness and many other psychological and physical difficulties or feelings. Most participants consider training on the appropriate reactions to mobbing for all employees to be a very useful way to prevent mobbing.

Finally, it can be concluded that employees in the city of Split experienced and noticed mobbing and, although they did not report it before, they would do so in the future. In that sense, mobbing should be discussed more publicly thus encouraging as many victims as possible to report and take action against it.

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