



Wojciech B. Gulin 

Uniwersytet Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz

## MOBBING IN THE WORKPLACE-CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

**Keywords:** mobbing, organization, employee, violence, ethics

### Abstract

Mobbing is one of the most important threats to the functioning of the organization. It refers to the use of unethical activities whose purpose is to harm a colleague. The aim of this study is to present the most important issues related to the issue of mobbing and to describe its causes and consequences that it causes in the individual and social sphere. It turns out that it causes many negative consequences in the functioning of the employee and generates significant financial losses of the organization. An important aspect is the consequent elimination of it, which may contribute to improving the functioning of the organization and its employees.

### Introduction

Nowadays mobbing is becoming a more and more common phenomenon present at workplaces regardless of their character (Ferris, 2009; Sperry, 2009). It is a mental violence comprising both activities of large intensity as well as the subtle ones, unnoticeable for the surroundings (Leymann, 1990; Sperry, 2009). This social pathology causes negative consequences in both functioning of victims and the whole organization, tending to escalate easily into other fields of life (Bechowska-Gebhardt, 2004; Duffy, 2009; Leymann, 1990; Sperry, 2009). Therefore, all actions need to be taken that are directed at limiting the phenomenon of mobbing in the life of an organization. It will not, however, be possible without learning the most significant aspects of it, which may occur to be the indicators

to analyze inappropriate relations between humans at a workplace (Ferris, 2009).

This study presents the issues related to mental violence at a workplace. The first part explains the meaning of the term of mobbing by presenting selected definitions. In the following part the author describes actions and mobbing strategies applied by mobbers most frequently. Next, there is the presentation of causes and consequences of applying mental violence at a workplace.

### Mobbing – the explanation of the term

Science began to analyze the phenomenon of mobbing in the 1960s (Leymann, 1996; Sperry, 2009). Basing on the observations of the wildlife, conducted by an

ethologist, K. Lorenz (1963, as cited in: Duffy, Sperry, 2007) elementary laws of a community were formulated. One of them is abuse by a stronger conspecific over weaker ones. L. Heinemann was the pioneer of observation and analysis of similar behavior among people (1972, as cited in: Leymann, 1996). He observed alike phenomenon among students, when bigger groups opposed individuals during school breaks. Whereas, H. Leymann transferred the phenomenon into the professional grounds in the 1990s, which mobbing has been associated with since then (Ferris, 2009; Leymann, 1990). Recently, we can observe the increasing interest in the issue (Crawshaw, 2009). Analyses are conducted on the grounds of for instance sociology, medicine, law, science of managing, and psychology (Bosak, Danilewicz, 2010; Kokot, 2011; Szweczyk, 2012).

The English term mobbing means attacking, harassing, abusing (Pospiszyl, 2010). In literature there also appear other terms, such as oppression and mental terror (Leymann, 1996). They refer to applying mental violence at a workplace in order to harm a coworker or eliminate him with the aim of gaining some personal profit (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Crawshaw, 2009; Jachins, 2008; Leymann, 1990). Any working individual can be a victim regardless of his function (Hubert, Veldhoven, 2001; Kokot, 2011).

There are numerous definitions of a discussed phenomenon, several of which deserve particular attention (Ferris, 2009). M. Hirigoyen (2012) defines mobbing as a behavior of abuse character, which infracts dignity, strikes on personality and threatens mental and physical integrity of a victim. According to H. Leymann (1990) it is a hostile and unethical behaviour which results in psychosomatic and social harm of a victim. It is of systematic character, has been happening on a daily basis for at least six months (Laymann, 1990). It is a controversial opinion that according to some, that a single situation may be considered mobbing (Crawshaw, 2009).

Studies on mobbing can also be found in Polish literature. W. Okoń (2001, p.243) points at the characteristic of "creating the atmosphere of danger around an individual to exclude him from a peer group or social life." The author emphasises that both an individual and a group may become a victim of a tormenting activity. B. Grabowska (2003, as cited in: Kokot, 2011, p.14) describes the phenomenon as, "undermining the authority and slandering opinions, (...) inhumane, unethical harassment over colleagues. It is a kind of

mental torturing, repressing, destroying reputation." As A. Bechowska-Gebhardt and T. Stalewski see it (2004, p.16) as „unethical and irrational action from the point of view of organisational aims, which displays in long-lasting, repetitive and groundless harassing of an employee (...) in order to intimidate, humiliate and limit his ability for defence.”

Mobbing is also defined on the grounds of law. In the Labour Code it is described as, „activities or behaviours regarding an employee or directed against him, meant to harass persistently or intimidate an employee, resulting in the reduction of his vocational usability, causing or aiming at humiliating or ridiculing employee, isolating him or eliminating from the team of employees.” (Fijałkowski, 2009, p.91). Overcrossing the borders determined in the regulation makes the basis for imposing appropriate legal sanctions (Bosak, Danilewicz, 2010; Jędrejek, 2011; Pospiszyl, 2010; Szweczyk, 2012).

The above definitions prove purposeful, destructive character of mobbing, which by its regularity and long lasting causes problems in both individual and organisational spheres (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Duffy, Sperry 2007; Leymann, 1990).

Three basic types of violence at a workplace can be distinguished (Kokot, 2011). The most common form is bossing, referring to harassment of an employee (or a group of employees) by a boss (Jachnis, 2008; Pospiszyl, 2010). In its case, employees (or their groups) are both senders and recipients of activities (Kokot, 2011; Pospiszyl, 2010). The least common-staffing, refers to the harassment of a boss by employees (Jachnis, 2008; Pospiszyl, 2010).

## Actions within mobbing

The phenomenon of mental harassment may develop in time; initially, minor activities can transform in the long run into activities of much stronger destructive force (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Ferris, 2009).

It is an issue of multiple aspects and conditioned by numerous factors, therefore its dynamics fluctuates (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Leymann, 1990).

Leyman and Gustaffson (1996, in: Duffy, Sperry, 2007) separated five phases in the development of mobbing. The first one called the phase of conflict is charac-

terised by the presence of differences and disagreements between employees, which are the factors initiating abusive activities. When disagreements are not sorted out there is the transition to the second phase, in which activities start aiming at the discrediting of a victim. It is also possible to encourage other people to join a mobber by opposing an opponent. The next phase is associated with the strengthening of pathology and its escalation, which leads to the involvement of a boss to solve it. If he is passive, there start to appear problems connected with mental, somatic and social spheres of a mobbing victim, which after some time result in resigning from the function due to mental and physical exhaustion (phase five) (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016; Leymann, Gustaffson, 1996, in: Duffy, Sperry, 2007; Pospiszyl, 2010).

Unethical activities may appear in a variety of forms, from highly refined, almost invisible, to the strong ones, clearly visible ones. They may be directed straightforwardly at a victim, or affect him in an indirect way (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Kokot, 2011; Leymann, 1990, Pospiszyl, 2010).

K. Kmiecik-Baran and J. Rybicki (2003) describe three tactics applied by mobbers. The tactics of humiliation involves such activities as ignoring, unjustified criticism, libel, slander, inappropriate jokes or insults. The tactics of intimidating refers to applying threats, spreading gossip, ridiculing, destruction of possessions, mocking, terrorising with the use of the social communication means (e.g. telephone or the Internet). Whereas, giving unclear, contradictory instructions, withholding vital information, limiting time off, public criticism or providing too little time to complete complex assignments, are the elements of the tactics of diminishing competences (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Kmiecik-Baran, Rybicki, 2003; Kokot, 2011).

On the other hand, H. Leymann (1996) divided mobbing activities into five categories.

The first of them is associated with the sphere of communication and involves activities that aim at making the communication with social surroundings difficult or impossible (Leymann, 1996). The possibility to express oneself in speech may be limited, there will also be attempts of silencing by means of threats or harassment (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Jachnis, 2008).

The second category comprises activities aiming at the destruction of social relations of a victim (Leymann,

1996). The example being spreading untrue, unverified information on a victim and ridiculing him among his colleagues in order to isolate a victim from the social surrounding, which is a potential source of support. Forbidding other employees to contact a victim is another possible activity (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016; Jachnis, 2008).

The third category describes activities harming the good name of an employee (Leymann, 1996). The main objective of a mobber is to question the competences, knowledge and abilities of a victim. Each decision can be questioned and views may be ridiculed. The extreme example of such activities being the accusations toward a victim regarding his sanity and demands to undergo psychiatric examination. (Jachnis, 2008).

Criticism concerning the quality of work and personal life of a victim are the elements of the fourth group of pathologic activities (Leymann, 1996). Properly done tasks do not acquire approval, an employee is bypassed at the division of assignments, usually under the pretext of insufficient skills, which may result in lowering earnings (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004).

The last group involves activities hazardous for the health and life of an employee (Leymann, 1996), like for instance assigning tasks that exceed the skills of an employee or work in conditions that are dangerous without providing appropriate precautions (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Jachnis, 2008).

### **Factors increasing the likelihood of mobbing**

There are numerous factors that influence the existence of mobbing at a workplace, yet it happens hardly ever that it is caused by a victim (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Zapf, 1999).

The first group is constructed by the factors connected with social and economic sphere (Ferris, 2009). Competition regarding the available job resources, characteristic for modern times, encourages mental violence since it is a tool of elimination potential rivals (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004). The situation at the job market, associated with high rate of unemployment and instability of work, results in more frequent violent situations towards individuals who have found work after a longer period of unemployment. Fearing the loss of a job they submit to mobbing. The

excess of stability and long-lasting period of holding the same position may also result in such activities, which in this case will be taken in order to discourage an employee from holding his post and make him resign (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004).

The next group comprises the factors connected with the managing of an organisation and the features of the management (Ferris, 2009; Sperry, 2009; Leymann, 1996). The inappropriate organisation of a workplace as well as the presence of the culture promoting mutual distrust and competition, creating the climate of competitiveness, tension, insecurity, lowers the coherence of a group and increases mutual animosity (Duffy, 2009; Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016; Jachnis, 2008). Errors in management performed by inexperienced managing staff, regarding unclear division of duties, as well as the lack of effective system of rewards and penalties, also influence the climate of a workplace (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016). Another factor that contributes to the appearance of mobbing is a strictly determined, formalised hierarchy, in which low level workers are frequently treated in subjective, instrumental manner. Violence may also be applied in order to discourage employees from demanding better work conditions and higher earnings (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004).

Autocratic style of management increases the risk of pathology (Pospiszyl, 2010). A manager that prefers such actions excludes the possibility of partner-like relations with employees in favour of superior-subordinate type ones. He aims at overtaking control over all aspects of organisation functioning by, for instance, making employees afraid of him. On the other hand, though, non-interfering style, excessive freedom, the lack of rules, may also lead to disorganisation of work and conflicts (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004).

Authoritarian personality of a boss, characterised with excessive sense of self-esteem, egocentrism and the lack of empathy, conduce to the harassment of subordinates. Mobbers are also often narcissistic, antisocial and manipulative (Ferris, 2009; Hirigoyen, 2002, in: Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Pospiszyl, 2010).

A particular social position of an employee may also be the cause of mental violence aimed at him (Ferris, 2009). His high material status, level of education as well as qualifications may arise jealousy of less well-off colleagues or bosses, which will contribute to the initiation of mobbing (Bechowski-Gebhardt, Stalewski,

2004). Ambitious, creative involved individuals, with perspectives of development are the most exposed ones. High-flyers might become victims of less ambitious colleagues who will aim at the elimination or weakening of competition. Also people who cannot oppose, do not have their own opinion, are characterised with low self-esteem, lack of assertiveness and oversensitivity with tendency to emotional reactions, are frequently mobbed. (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016). Personal problems of an employee associated with the mental and health sphere, may result in the decrease of resistance and being prone to harassing activities (Jachnis, 2008).

Factors like gender, race or religion, belonging to a particular social group or political views, are culturally conditioned discrimination categories which do not have to necessarily lead to mobbing but do encourage it and are the risk factors (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Franicka, Liberska, Niewiedział, 2016; Kokot, 2011).

## **The consequences of mobbing for employees and organisation**

The permission for mobbing, not applying effective means to oppose it, result in numerous negative consequences in the long run (Duffy, 2009; Leymann, 1996). They regard both the functioning of employees, organisation as well as its social surroundings (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004). The emphasis put on the subjectivity in experiencing the phenomenon implies the presence of significant differences in individual reception of oppressive harassing behaviours. The same activities may result in different consequences at different people depending on their internal and external conditioning (Kokot, 2011; Pospiszyl, 2010).

In consequence of experiencing mobbing the problems in mental and health sphere of a victim may appear (Ferris, 2009; Franicka, Liberska, Niewiedział, 2016; Laymann, 1996; Pospiszyl, 2010). His motivation and involvement in work decrease (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016; Leymann, 1990; Leymann, 1996). While positive emotions are limited, the level of negative experience rises (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016). There is the increase in the level of stress, anxiety, which may lead to the decrease of body immunity resulting in various health conditions (Pospiszyl, 2010). There appear psychosomatic disorders with symptoms like perma-

ment fatigue, insomnia, headaches and stomach aches, which may worsen (Gamian-Wilk, Zimoń-Dubowik, 2008). Problems associated with cognitive functioning of a victim regard lowering memory and concentration efficiency (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016). Absence at work that results from the wish to avoid negative experience connected with it become more frequent (Leymann, 1996). When self-esteem decreases, the risk of depression increases, and in extreme cases even suicidal attempts may have place. Professional, personal and social development of victims is hindered, which is accompanied with the lowering of job satisfaction level and in consequence the vanishing of the sense of identification with it (Ferris, 2009; Kokot, 2011). Long-lasting decrease in physical and mental efficiency, the sense of helplessness eventually become the reason for dismissal or resignation (Ferris, 2009; Pospiszyl, 2010).

The lack of intervention and passivity of a victim in searching for alternative sources of aid, results in the extension of negative consequences into other spheres of life (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Duffy, 2009; Leymann, 1990; Sperry, 2009). What is characteristic is transferring negative emotions on family grounds (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Duffy, Sperry, 2007). Victims of harassment cease to fulfil their role in family in an adequate way. Experiencing constant problems connected with difficult situation at workplace increases irritability and tension of family members as well as changes the way of communication (Duffy, Sperry, 2007; Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016). More frequent conflicts lead to weakening of bonds, in some cases even to the decomposition of a family. The same situation concerns other social relations beyond work (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Kokot, 2011). The loss of bonuses or earnings in case of job deprivation, the costs of law suits against abusers or medical treatment generate remarkable losses on the side a victim (Duffy, Sperry, 2007; Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016).

The presence of pathology results in organisational sphere in the degradation of relations amongst workers or the decrease in their productivity, generating significant economic costs (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016; Leymann, 1990). The atmosphere of distrust and mutual suspicions do not contribute to creativity, which blocks the creation of new ideas and solutions, and on the other hand, encourages schematic, routine activities (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016; Leymann, 1996). The mutual trust

among colleagues decreases, and they cease to support one another, at the same time becoming the source of negative emotional effects. Permission for mobbing is associated with the lowering of morale and trust toward the managing staff (Kokot, 2011; Leymann, 1996). There is also the decrease in job satisfaction and professional involvement (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016; Kokot, 2011).

Productivity drops, as well as the quality of performed assignments. By lowering the quality of services and missing deadlines the efficiency decreases, which generates significant losses for a company and the decline of renown (Ferris, 2009; Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016; Leymann, 1990). Both victims and mobbers concentrate on harassment, and not on efficient work, the level of their involvement drops (Jachnis, 2008). Financial loss that affects organisation also concerns the costs of law suits initiated by victims, damages paid to employees injured in accidents, and also costs of low absence (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016; Leymann, 1990). The organisation of recruitment, that results from a significant fluctuation of employees, introducing an employee to a company and administrative costs accompanying it, are also costly (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016). There appears the necessity of psychological intervention as well as the involvement of HR specialists (Durniat, Krupa, Działa, 2016; Leymann, 1990). The problems influence the quality of relations between clients of organisations and its social surrounding, which undermines the image of a company (Gamian-Wilk, Grzesiuk, 2016).

## Conclusion

The existence of mental violence at a workplace generates both at the side of an employee, employer, as well as an organisation and its surrounding. Henceforth, the disapproval towards such behaviour and eliminating even the smallest symptoms of the above described pathologies is vital from the perspective of an organisation efficiency (Duffy, 2009; Ferris, 2009; Sperry, 2009). Acquiring the thorough knowledge on the issue of mobbing, its causes, types and consequences, may become the foundation to introduce anti-mobbing policy. The construction of special programs building up positive workplace environment as well as constructive and effective methods of fighting pathologies may level the likelihood of their existence. The presence of

a psychologist, HR specialist, organising training sessions that rise social competences of employees and the awareness of role and responsibility of a superior will multiply the chance of achieving them (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004; Durniat, Krupa, Działa, 2016; Ferris, 2009). It is also important to grant victims of mobbing adequate psychological and legal aid. The creation of suitable climate, culture and organisation of work, with effective detection and elimination of unacceptable, unethical behaviour at a workplace may result in social and material benefits (Duffy, 2009).

It is necessary to explore the issue thoroughly since despite the increase in the number of studies there are still plenty of unexplored aspects. There are but a few references to the scale of the phenomenon and the size of loss it results in, particularly in Poland.

## Bibliography

- Bechowska-Gebhardt, A., Stalewski, T. (2004). *Mobbing the Pathology of Managing the Personnel*. Warszawa: Difin.
- Bosak, M., Danilewicz, A. (2010). Civil and Legal Liability for Mobbing. *Prokuratura i prawo*, 4.
- Crawshaw, L. (2009). Workplace bullying? Mobbing? Harrassment? Distraction by a thousand definitions. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 61(3).
- Duffy, M. (2009). Preventing workplace mobbing and bullying with effective organizational consultation, policies, and legislation. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 61(3), 242-262.
- Duffy, M., Sperry, L. (2007). Workplace Mobbing: Individual and Family Health Consequences. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 15(4).
- Durniat, K., Krupa, A., Działa, B. (2016). Organizational Mechanisms of Prevention and Dealing with Mobbing from the Perspective of HR Specialists. [in:] *Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu*, nr 430 (p. 83-95). Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu.
- Ferris, P. A. (2009). The role of the consulting psychologist in the prevention, detection, and correction of bullying and mobbing in the workplace. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 61(3).
- Fijałkowski, T. (2009). *The Labour Code*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo WGP.
- Franicka, M., Liberska, H., Niewiedział, D. (2016). *The Psychology of Aggression. Selected Issues*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Gamian-Wilk, M., Grzesiuk, L. (2016). Mobbing in the Workplace The Review of the Research Results Connected with the Displays of Mobbing, Genesis and Consequences. *Psychologia społeczna*, 11 3(38).
- Gamian-Wilk, M., Zimoń-Dubowik, B. (2008). Passivity as the Strategy of Dealing with Mobbingiem in the Workplace. [In:] A. Keplinger (ed.), *Bierność społeczna: studia interdyscyplinarne*. Warszawa: ENETEIA Wydawnictwo Psychologii i Kultury.
- Hirigoyen, M. F. (2012). *Moral Harassment. Perverse Violence in Everyday Life*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo W drodze.
- Hubert, A. B., Veldhoven, M. (2001). Risk sectors for undesirable behaviour and mobbing. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 10(4).
- Jachnis, A. (2008). *Psychology of Organization*. Warszawa: Difin.
- Jędrejek, G. (2011). *Mobbing. Means of Legal Protection*. Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer Polska.
- Kmiecik-Baran, K., Rybicki, J. (2003). *Mobbing- the Threat of a Contemporary Workplace*. Gdańsk: Pomorski Instytut Demokratyczny.
- Kokot, A. (2011). *Mobbing. Threat of Vocational Life of an Employee*. Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo KPSW.
- Leymann, H. (1990). Mobbing and Psychological Terror at Workplaces. *Violence and Victims*, 5(2).
- Leymann, H. (1996). The Content and Development of Mobbing at Work. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 5(2).
- Okoń, W. (2001). *New Dictionary of Pedagogy* Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie „Żak”.
- Pospiszyl, I. (2010). *Social Pathologies*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Sperry, L. (2009). Workplace mobbing and bullying: a consulting psychology perspective and overview. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 61(3).
- Szewczyk, H. (2012). *Mobbing in Employment. Legal issues*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR.
- Zapf, D. (1999). Organizational, work group related and personal causes of mobbing/bullying at work. *International Journal of Manpower*, 20(1/2).