

Mobbing: Elements-Causes-Effects

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Abstract

Aim: To investigate the Mobbing phenomenon as well it's causes and effects, **Material and Methods:** We investigated the Mobbing by reviewing previous international research over mobbing. The research material was accumulated after thoroughly examining former studies and reviewing the existing literature, as it was found in the bibliography, data bases, academic libraries, academic journals and the internet. **Results:** Through the research we tried to define this phenomenon and at the same time to study the constituent elements as well as it's causes and effects. Finally, we conducted a literature review from previous research in order to investigate this phenomenon and its factors. **Conclusions:** The current study has concluded that mobbing sadly negatively affects the recipient by creating both direct and indirect effects on various aspects of his daily life, one of which is the workplace.

Keywords: mobbing, causes and effects, psychosocial factors

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the phenomenon of moral harassment in the workplace has become an increasingly common occurrence. This is a highly threatening phenomenon, which is associated with significant personal, family, professional and social consequences (Φουστέρης, 2013). Indeed, it is a social problem that many professionals face in the workplace, if not many times, at least at some point in their lives (Κοϊνης & Σαρίδη, 2013). Although moral harassment, also known as mobbing, is an unpleasant reality, both in Greece and abroad, it is unfortunately treated with mistrust both by employers as well by other professionals and it is often difficult to identify it as a phenomenon. On the other hand, however, it is recognized that it is crucial to protect and defend workers and to ensure safe working conditions in every company, private body or public service (Κοϊνης et al., 2017; Τούκας et al., 2012). In view of the above, it is important to study the phenomenon of moral harassment i.e., mobbing.

2. Literature Review/Methodology

For the purpose of our research, we have reviewed a significant number of published studies. The literature on this topic was studied thoroughly in order to create and compile a scientific study around this major problem. Both from the international and domestic literature, important results could be drawn.

3. Results and Findings

In order to understand the phenomenon of moral harassment, it is important to study the components of this syndrome, i.e., the forms in which it manifests itself, the causes to which it is attributed, the persons involved in it, its evolutionary stages and so on. In particular:

What constitutes mobbing?

In order to explain the phenomenon of mobbing, but also to be able to identify it and to limit it, it is important to clearly identify what actions it consists of.

Thus, in the relevant literature, both in Greek and in foreign languages, it is accepted that mobbing can be distinguished in the following categories of actions:

Insults to working conditions: in this context, all decisions taken by a person are systematically questioned, either unfair or excessive criticisms are made of the person's work, tasks are systematically assigned to the person which are beyond his or her capabilities or cannot be carried out, responsibilities are taken away, and so on (Κοϊνης & Σαρίδη, 2013; Sloan et al., 2010).

It is clear, therefore, that these actions are aimed at the professional devaluation of the victim and the cancellation of his/her job (Cornoiu & Gyorgy, 2013) and in any case, perpetrators avoid verbal communication and physical contact with their victims (Δέδε, 2017).

Isolation, exclusion and refusal to communicate: no worker addresses the victim, communication is only written between other workers and the victim worker, the victim worker is distanced from his/her colleagues, ignored, etc. (Cornoiu & Gyorgy, 2013). This is a typical case of actions that violate the social relations developed by the worker-victim in the

workplace and is associated with rejection, exclusion, social marginalization, isolation and exclusion from social events (Δέδε, 2017).

Insulting the dignity of the employee victim: either by contemptuous gestures, or by comments of a derogatory nature, or by spreading rumors, or by assigning tasks that are offensive, etc. (Δέδε, 2017; Sloan et al., 2010). This category also includes actions that prevent the free expression of the victim, the free expression of his/her views, the constant interruption of his/her speech, etc. (Cornoiu & Gyorgy, 2013).

Verbal—physical or sexual violence: threats of physical violence, harassment inside and outside the workplace, assaults, etc. This category includes acts that endanger the health of the employee, i.e., assigning dangerous tasks to the employee who is subjected to moral harassment, threats of physical violence, assaults, sexual harassment, etc. (Cornoiu & Gyorgy, 2013). In this context, mobbing aims to humiliate, degrade, threaten and constantly humiliate the victim, resulting in the victim feeling guilty about anything attributed to him/her. Thus, his physical and mental health is compromised due to the duration of the intimidating actions against him (Δέδε, 2017).

Insults based on social norms: these are actions that insult the dignity of the employee-victim of workplace harassment and are based on negative comments based on gender, religion, age, race, social origin, etc. (Κοϊνης & Σαρίδη, 2013).

Based on the above, on a practical level, it is found that mobbing evolves through the following actions (Divincova & Sivakova, 2014):

- Gossip, i.e., one or more employees providing information about someone else, with the aim of destroying their reputation and getting a better position,
- Mockery, focusing on the haircut, dress, character, physical appearance of the victim, etc.,
- Exclusion from colleagues, which can lead to humiliation and deliberate isolation of the victim in the workplace,
- Withholding professional information, which affects the performance of the victim employee and causes stressful situations for him/her,
- Administrative and operational measures against the worker-victim. Such actions are usually observed in the case of moral harassment by supervisors, which refers to the transfer of the employee to another department, usually to a position that does not correspond to his/her qualifications, etc.
- Excessive workload, i.e., assigning unnecessary and often meaningless tasks, beyond the capabilities and abilities of the employee-victim,
- Excessive and constant criticism of the victim-worker, who causes stress to the victim, challenges his/her abilities and reduces his/her self-confidence,
- Sexual harassment, mainly targeting women and less often men. This can be in the form of relevant comments but also in the form of actual abuse.

At this point it should be noted that it is difficult to identify the actions that are part of the phenomenon of mobbing. This is related to the fact that mobbing presents a “secret” nature, while the perpetrator often appears to be supportive and cooperative, making it difficult to identify (Sloan et al., 2010). In any case, however, Egge has developed a tool to determine whether or not a behaviour amounts to mobbing. In particular, certain parameters are taken into account. These are objective and can be scientifically verified. The assistance of these, leads to the confirmation of the occurrence of moral harassment phenomena in the workplace. In this context, initially a conflict should be observed, which should take place within the work environment and be daily, a few times a week or a few times a month, for at least six months.

The process of mobbing is characterized by action against freedom of speech, and/or systematic isolation, job switching, name-calling and violence or threats. Also, the victim cannot properly defend himself or herself because there is a power asymmetry. This asymmetry is either horizontal—when the perpetrator and the victim are in the same position/role, but the victim considers himself/herself to be weaker than the perpetrator, or vertical—when the perpetrator is in a higher position, or strategic—when the manager puts in place such strategies to exhaust the victim and drive him/her out of the workplace (Maran et al., 2018).

What does not constitute mobbing?

It is very important, however, to make it clear that every workplace is a miniature of society. Within it is inevitable that likes and dislikes will develop, but also that disagreements and conflicts will develop. These, of course, do not always amount to mobbing. Thus, it is important to be able to distinguish the actions included in section 2.1 from other actions, which do not ultimately constitute acts of ethical harassment in the workplace, but instead, are an everyday part of the functioning of a work environment. In this context, it is recognized that the following actions do not constitute ethical harassment and bullying in the workplace (NSW, 2020; Τσιάμα, 2013):

Providing feedback on an employee’s performance, based on objective facts and the performance of the individual employee and aimed at improving the employee’s work,

- Informing an employee of unsatisfactory performance, provided that this is done with fair but realistic judgment and provided that he or she has the necessary means, information and knowledge to perform his or her duties,
- Constructive comments on the outcome of a particular employee’s project,
- Managing issues related to employee performance,
- Setting reasonable performance criteria and setting achievable deadlines for the completion of a project,
- Providing appropriate guidance on work allocation, performance and attendance in the workplace,

- Making decisions related to recruitment, selection and other career development opportunities for employees, but based on fair and objective procedures,
- Transferring an employee to another position to ensure fairness and good performance for all employees,
- Appropriate and reasonable actions to protect the safety of workers,
- Actions aimed at ensuring compliance with each company's policies and observations of an employee's misconduct.

It is argued that mobbing is “a structural dynamic process, which evolves progressively, outlining a frame work that includes a sequence of events that differentiate the different stages in which the employee finds him/herself, while being subjected to the psychological violence strategy of the perpetrator” (Τούκας et al., 2012). In this context, it is recognized that mobbing unfolds in specific stages. Indeed, Tukas et al. (2012) and Batsi and Karamanis (2019), state that mobbing is a phenomenon that evolves and gradually increases in frequency and becomes a gradual process. This phenomenon is characterized by a specific dynamic that scales in a gradual way. In the early stages of this process, victims cannot recognize aggressive behaviours, as they are implicit and covert. Usually, mobbing develops after a period of incubation and then occurs at a recurring rate, has duration and gradually worsens. Colleagues are removed, victims are isolated and feel ridiculed. In the final stage of this process, the tools used are psychological violence and physical violence.

In the same way of thinking, Shakula et al. (2014), distinguish three stages of mobbing. In the initial stage of mobbing, the employee-victim resists and seeks to be moved to another workplace. In the second stage it is not possible to resist it and unfortunately it suffers from mental and physical diseases. As a result, it faces difficulties in integrating into the workforce. In the third stage, the person is unable to return to his or her working environment and suffers from serious and long-term illnesses, both physical and mental.

Finally, and Shallcross et al. (2010) identify five stages in the development of mobbing. In particular, the first stage is the isolation, exclusion and expulsion of the individual from the group, which begins with unresolved conflicts. This is followed by psychological attacks (stage two), after which the conflict escalates (stage three). During the fourth stage, the victim employees are blamed as the problem and in the fifth stage, the target is finally expelled from the workplace or resigns from his/her position.

Mobbing is a phenomenon in which three categories of actors can be identified: the victim (or victims), the perpetrator (or perpetrators) and the spectator (or spectators) (Δέδε, 2017).

The victim is the target employee, who is ultimately the recipient of the moral harassment within the workplace where he or she works. This is a person who has certain characteristics, namely: 1) Frequent absences from work (either due to illness, studies or other reasons), 2) He/she has high levels of mental stress, psychosomatic problems and usually goes through phases of depression and other related problems, 3) He perceives himself as a passive being, who is not allowed to participate in professional events, 4) He believes that he is not

responsible for the moral harassment he is subjected to, but he also believes that he is always at fault because he does not trust his own abilities and lacks confidence. In any case, it should be noted that the people identified as victims of mobbing are very often lonely people, people who are considered “strange”, people who are successful, as well as new recruits (Φουστέρης, 2013).

The victim of mobbing usually falls into one of the following categories. In this case, the victim recognizes the phenomenon of mobbing, but does not know effective strategies to prevent it from happening. It also identifies the “passive victim”, who is unable to resist the moral harassment he or she experiences. There is also the “ambitious victim”, i.e., an employee who is subjected to moral harassment in the workplace because of his or her high performance, efficiency, competence and effectiveness. As a result, this particular employee—the target of the mobbing—causes envy among his colleagues. At the same time, there is the “hypochondriac”, who—as a victim of moral harassment in the workplace—makes everyone (colleagues and non-colleagues) aware of the uncomfortable situation he is experiencing and feels depressed and unsatisfied. Finally, there is also the “scapegoating”, where the victim feels powerless and concentrates the anger of his/her colleagues (Maran et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the perpetrator is usually a person who manifests aggressive behaviour, which becomes a way of life. He knows he is practicing emotional terrorism, but he denies responsibility. It is usually not subject to negative consequences from the violence it inflicts on the worker-victim, and very often maintains the impression that it is good for the victim. It is also found that most of the time, he shifts the responsibility for his actions to other persons (Φουστέρης, 2013; Δέδε, 2017). It should be noted that it is accepted that the perpetrator sets certain goals when practicing moral harassment on colleagues. Among these objectives, the following are identified (Maran et al., 2018):

To reduce the victim’s self-confidence and sense of power, but also their reputation and credibility,

- Causing him emotional distress and negative feelings,
- To gain for himself power, strength and higher status,
- To feel superior and respected by his colleagues, through the fear he causes to the victims of his moral harassment,
- Evict the victim from the workplace
- To move up professionally, getting rid of colleagues with higher qualifications or performance, and so on.

Finally, the spectator of the mobbing phenomenon maybe positive and friendly towards the victim and supportive, in different to the developments he/she observes, or even hold a negative attitude towards the situation, wishing to resolve the situation and find a solution to it (Φουστέρης, 2013).

Mobbing as a phenomenon is attributed to specific causes, while at the same time it has a number of consequences, which are considered to be particularly important, both at an individual and collective level. In this context, the following should be mentioned:

Attempting a causal approach to the interpretation of mobbing, three main directions have been developed, each of which focuses respectively on the personality traits of the perpetrator and the victim, the group dynamics and the work organisation (Ρόμπολας & Μπρέντα, 2019).

The first approach is the individual approach. In it, the personal characteristics of the recipient of mobbing and the perpetrator are studied. In this context, there is a correlation between some characteristics of employees involved in mobbing and the occurrence of this phenomenon. Thus, it is argued that some of their characteristics make them predisposed to be potential victims or perpetrators of mobbing (Τούκας et al., 2012). Based on studies that have been conducted, it is argued that mobbing is very often directed towards individual characteristics such as independence, extraversion, instability and conscientiousness. On the other hand, abusers are usually authoritarian, lack skills and have psychopathology (Σάκουλα et al., 2014). At the same time, other individual elements linked to mobbing are the diversity of the victim, such as his/her views and way of thinking, his/her sexuality and the feelings of the victim, such as fear, competition, jealousy, etc. (Κοϊνης & Σαρίδη, 2013).

The second approach is sociological. In it, the dynamics of the employee group are studied. This approach accepts that the victim is predestined for the role of victim, not because he or she has certain individual characteristics, but according to a dynamic that develops in the social group in a spontaneous way. Thus, the individual becomes the object of oppression and harassment, based on the scapegoat theory.

It is a process of stigmatization to identify the scapegoat, and it is the person towards whom frustration stemming from the stressful work environment is directed and vented (Τούκας et al., 2012). In fact, in the context of the specific approach to mobbing, i.e., with regard to employee relations, reference should be made to a factor that intensifies the occurrence of mobbing, namely the strictness of senior managers in a workplace. Many times, the occupation of a senior or managerial position by a person is associated with the demonstration of a strict attitude, due to the many and increased responsibilities and competences that are assigned to him. However, the use of perverse means and the demonstration of tyrannical behaviour facilitate the transition to exploitation, the exertion of pressure on subordinates, their contempt and insult. Thus, such behaviour easily evolves into mobbing (Κοϊνης & Σαρίδη, 2013). The same applies to conflicts—misunderstandings in the workplace. Of course, as mentioned above, it is inevitable that in every workplace disagreement, arguments and conflicts will arise, which may not exclude the possibility that they may work in a positive way. However, if they remain unresolved, they swell and can turn into mobbing (Κοϊνης & Σαρίδη, 2013).

The third approach is the ergonomic one. In this context, work organisation is studied, and mobbing is attributed to shabby and unsafe working conditions. Therefore, in order to understand the genesis of mobbing, the work environment, the workplace climate, the company's policies, the leadership style, the organisation of work, solidarity between

colleagues, interpersonal contacts between employees, etc. (Τούκας et al., 2012). In this context, the main factors to which mobbing is attributed are the business culture (which fails to identify this phenomenon in time and adequately), unexpected changes in the operation of the company, job insecurity, excessive demands, etc. (Divincova & Sivakova, 2014).

At this point, however, a clarification must be made: mobbing should not be confused with work difficulties, heavy workloads or poor working conditions. In contrast, in the context of mobbing, the degradation of the characteristics of the victim's work organisation intensifies the mobbing. This means that the victim gradually compares the conditions under which he or she works with those of his or her colleagues. It therefore observes a special treatment, which leads to the degradation of the victim's situation only in terms of difficulties, workload and working conditions, in order to damage his or her morale (Κοϊνης & Σαρίδη, 2013).

It should be clarified, of course, that the above-mentioned considerations are not always presented in isolation and that their combination is not excluded. Besides, it is accepted that they often overlap or complement each other. This fact confirms the complex nature of mobbing and supports the argument that a holistic approach and management of mobbing is required (Τούκας et al., 2012).

Mobbing is an underestimated and often hidden threat to the health and safety of its recipients, it affects the very workplace in which it occurs, and it has some social consequences (Δέδε, 2017; Πρεβύζη, 2019).

Mobbing is understood as a syndrome, which presents specific clinical symptoms, understood as its effects on the recipient (Τούκας et al., 2012; Yahaya et al., 2012). These, as developed by the World Health Organisation, are divided into psychosymptomatic type, psychosomatic-psychopathological type and behavioural type symptoms (Μακρή, 2021). At the psycho-emotional level, symptoms such as anxiety and reduced tolerance to it, intense discomfort and anxiety, difficulty in communication and loss of control, difficulty in externalising emotions, the development of feelings of loneliness, failure, resignation, irritability and uncontrollable aggression, the development of phobias and manias, depression and suicidal tendencies, the development of post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. (Κοϊνης & Σαρίδη, 2013; Κοϊνης et al., 2017; Τούκας et al., 2012).

On the other hand, at the psychosomatic level, the symptoms identified are tremors, headaches—migraines, blood pressure, gastrointestinal, sleep disorders, etc., tachycardia and chest pains, nausea and vomiting, fainting spells, nervous twitches and tics, hypotension or hypertension, itching, menstrual disorders—sexual mood disorders, etc., nausea and vomiting, skin diseases, hair loss, etc. (Κοϊνης & Σαρίδη, 2013; Κοϊνης et al., 2017; Σάκουλα et al., 2014). At the same time, the symptoms associated with the behaviour of the victim of mobbing are anorexia, bulimia, alcoholism, the development of addictions and abuses, difficulty in cooperating, etc. (Καρακιουλιάφη, 2005; Demirag & Ciftci, 2017; Davenport et al., 2014).

The first symptoms that appear are of the psycho-emotional type. These manifests themselves in the form of intense anxiety and the subsequent loss of the harassment recipient's ability to

work. There is also a loss of confidence in oneself. Then we see what Tukas et al. (2012) they describe as “the beginning of an ascending spiral of additional symptoms”. That is, intense discomfort and anxiety, irritability, signs of aggression, fatigue and so on are observed. Many of these symptoms develop gradually, while they allow the manifestation of the aforementioned psychosomatic symptoms and mental illnesses, such as manic-depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. It should be noted that the symptoms can be exacerbated if the negative workplace climate is combined with a negative climate in the victim’s family (Tukas et al., 2012). Furthermore, employees who are victims of mobbing are characterized by low self-confidence, the fact that they are possessed by fear, shame and embarrassment, confusion, etc., while they lag behind in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and productivity at their workplace and in their relationships with other employees (Μακρή, 2021). This is linked to two important consequences. On the one hand, the victim of mobbing also experiences financial losses, as he or she lags behind his or her colleagues in terms of performance. This is also related to the fact that, because of the symptoms they experience, they may often be absent from work, or may be about to give up work (Divincova & Sivakova, 2014; Sloan et al., 2010; Demirag & Ciftci, 2017).

On the other hand, the social image of the victim is also affected (Somunoglou, 2013). Due to being the recipient of mobbing, the victim is socially isolated, stigmatised, unable to adapt socially and often driven to voluntary unemployment (Leymann, 1990). In this context, socio-psychological symptoms are also identified, such as the inability to socialise and to cope with the situation they are experiencing (Ρόμπολας & Μπρέντα, 2019).

It should not be overlooked that all of the above has an impact on society itself. This impact varies depending on the social welfare framework of the mobbing victim’s country and the social service offered but is also related to the burden on the social welfare system for early retirement, unemployment benefits, etc. (Duffy & Sperry, 2007; Demirag & Ciftci, 2017).

However, mobbing also has a significant impact on the company or unit in which it occurs (Τούκας et al., 2012). Initially, the image of a company is weakened, while mobbing also adversely affects the smooth functioning of the company (Sloan et al., 2010). The victim of mobbing is often absent because of the situation and the consequences of the mobbing that they are required to manage, as mentioned above, and this causes distress to staff. As a result, the efficiency, productivity and effectiveness of not only the mobbing recipient but also of his/her colleagues is reduced due to the bad psychosocial climate in their workplace (Μακρή, 2021).

At the same time, the mobbing syndrome is also associated with a financial loss for the company, as it will have to manage the cost of compensating the mobbing recipient (if he or she moves accordingly) and the cost of hiring a new employee. The victim’s experience and knowledge are also lost, as the employing unit is deprived of it, because the victim will most likely give up (Καρακιουλάφη, 2005; Leymann, 1990). Finally, the programmes implemented by each organisation to identify mobbing phenomena and to support employees who suffer from its effects are also considered economic losses (Τούκας et al., 2012).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the above, it can be seen that mobbing as a phenomenon is attributed to certain causes, while it also has very serious effects. These results are related both to the recipient, the company that employs him/her and the society in which he/she lives. The actions identified as belonging to the concept of mobbing refer to the violation of working conditions, isolation, exclusion and refusal to communicate, insulting the victim's dignity, verbal and physical or sexual violence, insults based on social norms, etc.

On the contrary, mobbing does not include conflicts between colleagues, remarks, instructions, criticisms, etc., which take place in the context of a professional relationship between two people. In any case, however, all the actions that constitute mobbing are a dynamic process, which evolves gradually, and it is crucial to recognize it as such.

In any case, however, and regardless of the factors that contribute to the occurrence of mobbing, it is accepted that this phenomenon is associated with very important consequences, both for the recipient of mobbing and for the organisation within which it occurs. Thus, mobbing affects the physical and mental health of the employee-victim, while it also reduces his/her efficiency and effectiveness.

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