The conflict in mobbing. Triggers and resolution

Marina Parés Soliva

Resumen

La pretensión de estas lineas es contribuir al conocimiento del conflicto en el fenómeno del acoso moral en el trabajo con la intención de promover la eliminación del ejercicio de estas prácticas violentas en el seno de las organizaciones. En este artículo además de deternernos en la definicion del fenómeno nos interesa saber qué condiciones favorecen la emergencia del conflicto y aportamos nuevas contribuciones. Analizamos la fase de conflicto del proceso de acoso moral en el trabajo por entender que la resolución del acoso vendrá determinada en función de la fase en que es abordado. Reflexionamos sobre las condiciones que lo hacen posible en las empresas, y finalmente, exponemos lo que consideramos contribuciones y retos para el futuro de los estudios sobre este conflicto denominado "mobbing". Como consecuencia de las diversas investigaciones sobre el fenómeno señalamos, tanto los componentes básicos para que surja un acoso, como la manera de atajarlo y esperamos, con estas contribuciones, aportar nuevas motivaciones para incidir en la erradicación de este problema, que ha sido entendido como una epidemia del siglo XXI.

Abstract

The purpose of these lines is to contribute to the knowledge of conflict within the phenomenon of moral harassment at work, with the aim to promote the elimination of the exercise of these violent practices within organizations. In this article, apart from paying special attention to the definition of this phenomenon, we are interested in knowing the conditions that foster the emergence of this conflict, and we bring new contributions. We analyze the conflict phase of the mobbing process at work, since we understand that the resolution will be determined by the moment in which it will be tackled. We reflect on the conditions that make it happen within companies and, finally, we state what we consider to be contributions and challenges for the studies to come about this conflict called "mobbing". As a result of the different researches about this phenomenon, we show both, the essential components for a conflict to arise, and the way to stop it. With these contributions, we wish to bring new motivations to have a bearing on the eradication of this problem, which has been seen as an epidemic of the 21st century.

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MOBBING

What is mobbing?

Mobbing or moral harassment is the psychological harassment at work and it is an emerging phenomenon in the 21st century. Although this phenomenon has always existed, we must underline the spectacular increase it has gone through nowadays. The rise in the number of cases and the seriousness of some of them has fostered the growing interest in this subject during the current century. Moral harassment is a complex phenomenon and, consequently, the rise in the number of cases has many causes and this is so because many elements converge in its triggering. But, we can already say that all those elements that make it emerge are intimately linked to the predominant social values, that is to say, those that constitute the characteristics of a narcissistic society as ours, where the cult to image and success is leading without worrying excessively about the methods to obtain it. In this sociological context, the people best prepared to get the power are those who base their success on a careful "glamorous" looking without being really competent, whereas the moral and ethical norms stay in the background to obtain power, and, consequently, to achieve personal success as well. In short, the emer-

gence of the mobbing phenomenon is being provoked by the narcissistic idea, prevailing in society, of being successful no matter what. Moral harassment, or mobbing in the workplace, is a new kind of labor conflict which is far from the work conflicts of the trade social movements of the last century. On this purpose, we quote Vinyamata,[1] who says:

> Conflicts in the workplace imply productivity losses that may even reach –in the U.S.A– a 20%; horizontal conflicts, far from the discrepancies and fights between trades and entrepreneurs; conflicts between colleagues due to organizational deficits, to an excessive competitiveness or to a serious lack of acknowledgment of people's dignity, which leads to high levels of stress and ends up with the generation of masked boycott and espionage acts, fake sick leaves, loss of productive stimuli, arbitrary and high cost dismissals…

The first definition of the "mobbing" concept comes from Heinz Leymann[2] who got it from a study by Konrard Lorenz[3] about ethology. The contribution of this article's author to find a definition enclosing all the elements of the concept is as follows:

> "The aim of moral harassment at work is to destroy the psychological stability of a human being through disrepute and rumours with a view to conceal a fraud. It is carried out by making a group harassing so strong that the stigmatized victim cannot defend him or herself, cannot speak and his/her word has no value. The victim's defencelessness comes from the passive attitude of those witnessing the violence, those allowing the destruc-

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1   Eduard Vinyamata. UOC's Dean Delegate for the Campus for Peace and Director of the University Centre Pau i Treva (Peace and Truce) for Research and Intervention in Conflicts' Resolution, Universidad Ramon Llull. Available on http://www.getec.etsit.upm.es/articulos/gproyectos/art2.htm (ref. 1-8-08).

2   Heinz Leymann "Mobbing. La persécution au travail". París. Seuil, 1996.

3   Konrard Lorenz. Medicine Nobel Prize, in 1973 spread the term "mobbing" to describe harassment conducts among animals of the same species. Available on http://www.acosomoral.org/pinuel9.htm (ref. 1-8-08).

tion of another human being in an outrageous and coward way". (Marina Parés.2005)[4]

This definition justifies the inclusion of two new elements in order to describe this phenomenon: the group element and the fraud. The group element is stated in the theoretic construal of "the mobbing circles" described by the author (Parés 2005)[5] as *"the roles played by each one of the harassment characters"*. In order to be able to diagnose mobbing, it is important to see who takes part in the harassing gang and sort them out of the rest of people who participate in it. Establishing the roles of each character consists of seeing where in the harassment, each person, in the organization, places himself. Thereby we have: the instigator, the allies, the tacit collaborators, the accomplices, and the staunch friends.

The other element constituting harassment is fraud. In my professional experience with victims of moral harassment, I have established the fact, not proven enough, of what lies behind every harassment, which is nothing more than the concealing of a fraud or an illegality. The concern to come to a good resolution for the cases of moral harassment in the workplace has been the driving force to reflect on this phenomenon and get to find these two elements, the group and the fraud, as constituting and determining elements of the harassment.

We understand by fraud all those things that are beyond legal performance and therefore are kept hidden from the observers of a moral harassment situation. In short, we can confirm that the person inciting to harassment towards a subordinate or a colleague what really wants is to acquire or keep a privileged situation, regardless the current regulations, and sees the future victim as a hindrance to his/her end. The special personal characteristics of this person push him to start a fight for power through the foul play of designing a strategy oriented to get rid of the future victim without the wearing away of a clear confrontation. For this purpose he surrounds himself with allies that will provide him with credibility and will help him to get rid of the victim through moral harassment. Undoubtedly, mobbing responds to a strategy planned by the main harasser. Therefore, it is not a conflict situation that emerges spontaneously

and becomes chronic. Let's see an example, with the case "message 183", of the intentions of a harasser appeared on an Internet forum where it is clearly stated that a plan has been designed to destroy another human being.[6]

"I have a plan so that this person self-destructs all by herself so that, at no moment, my friend and I will appear in front of the others. What happens is that it is a little bit slow, but there are some months since we have started to carry it out and we already see some satisfactory results and we hope it to be completed by this year's last quarter".

This account appeared on the Internet in the year 2001, a time when the spreading of the moral harassment phenomenon or mobbing was not very common and, because of this general ignorance, the harasser herself explains her intentions without any obstacle. In those short lines, some of the determining elements of moral harassment appear. They deserve to be underlined because of their evident didactic value, that is to say: group, planning, and covering up.

As for the group, it can be pointed out that the existence of a person planning the destruction of another and his/her counting on an ally to do so is evident among the major figures. So we have a group, formed by two people (instigator and ally), against another person.

Concerning the planning, we must point out that moral harassment is a strategy consciously designed by the person who starts the harassment. The aim of this harassing person is to destroy another one and, moreover, has enough will to achieve it. In the short account that we analyze, the instigator clearly states that she has a plan, that she has been carrying out for a certain time (months), that this plan is having its results (satisfactory) and even forecasts the completion of the plan (this year's last quarter). Without any doubt, harassment is the result of a strategy that has been planned to destroy another human being.

The last element appearing in the analyzed paragraph is covering up. The inciting person conveys it this way: *"at no moment, my friend and I will appear in front of the others"*. She even admits that this masked way of

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4   Marina Parés Soliva.(2005) "Definición de acoso moral desde la óptica social" Available on http://acosomoral.org/ (ref. 1-8-08).

5   Marina Parés Soliva.(2005) "Los Círculos del mobbing". Available on http://acosomoral.org/pdf/Conociendo%20al%20grupo%20 acosador.PDF (ref. 1-8-08).

6   "Mensaje 183" Available on http://es.groups.yahoo.com/group/Acoso/message/183 (ref. 16-8-08).

acting is less effective *("it is a little bit slow")*. However, we must underline that the effectiveness of harassment is due, in most cases, to the covering up because, since violence is denied by those practising it, the victim is neither allowed to defend him/herself nor to be supported.

The person who wrote this message does not explain the reasons that lead her to desire the destruction of a work mate, even though it is not relevant at all. What is essential, when analysing harassment, is to ask oneself what kind of person is the one that plans the destruction of another, that devotes time and efforts to achieve it, sometimes years *("there are some months", "this year's last quarter")* and that considers as a *"satisfactory"* result the self-destruction of another person *("she self-destructs all by herself")*.

All the works done about the kind of person being able to devise a strategy oriented to get rid of a peer through the psychological violence of moral harassment, confirm that such a person suffers from an alteration of his/her personality consisting of a lack of empathy and an exaggerated self-esteem. And depending on these signs, he/she can be defined as a psychopath in a slight degree. In other words, he/she appears to be socially integrated although his/her way of interacting with the rest of people is highly toxic. They are people having enough superficial charm so as to manage to manipulate those around him/her so that they help him/her to achieve his/her personal objectives. But when their seduction is not effective and someone is seen as a hindrance, they turn to the psychological violence of harassment and they weave a real plan of relentless harassment. Consequently, for the instigator, moral harassment is just one more step in his/her way to power. His/her ultimate objective is not to harass, but the fraudulent acquisition of privileges that he/she would not be able to obtain without harassing a subordinate or a colleague.

If you want one more evidence that the person who wrote this message fits in the criteria of psychopathic alteration of personality in a slight degree, typical from integrated wicked people, I must tell you that this message was not published in any given forum, but in a forum of people affected by harassment and that person defined him/herself, in a clearly perverted reply, as a mobbing "victim". The integrated wicked are those people who seem to be adapted to society

but that pervert everything they touch, they create a bad atmosphere wherever they are and generate around themselves a series of conflicts difficult to solve. The socially integrated wicked see themselves as good people, somehow above the others. This high self-esteem allows them to justify their need to "punish" their opponents with ostracism and harassment. In the analyzed case of the author of message 183, it is a fake "mobbing victim" who thinks is authorized to defend herself from the so-called work harasser by planning a strategy to destroy that colleague just as she explains.

From the theoretical contributions of Tim Field,[7] it has been proved that quite often *"a harasser pretends to be a victim when he is found out"*. And according to the research done by the European Service of Mobbing Information on "false mobbing",[8] there is evidence that sometimes the harasser do not even need to be found out to pretend being a victim, since there are more and more situations in which the main harasser self-victimizes as an excuse to trigger the harassment against the real victim. A not very attentive observer may get caught in this trap since we have already said that they are wicked people. Therefore, these changes transforming the truth into a lie and viceversa, the lie into a truth, are their best manipulating weapon. Finally, we point out that it is surprising that in the forum where this message was published, formed by real mobbing victims, nobody realized the violence implied in the message and that a harassment similar to the one suffered by them in their workplaces was being described. We cannot find an explanation for this fact since the ability to manipulate through personal charm, typical from the integrated wicked, gets dissolved in the virtual media.

Moral harassment is the result of a preconceived plan and needs some actions to be carried out, which are called the 16 establishment steps. It is widely accepted that mobbing cannot be done by the main harasser alone and that to carry it out, he needs the cooperation of some allies which, together with the harasser, constitute what is called the *harassing gang*, which is the realization of the group harassment mentioned before. In order to make the harassment happen, the harassing group, or gang, will need to implement a series of actions, with a view to stigmatize the victim: the 16 steps to mobbing. The sixteen steps

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7   Tim Field "El acosador se hace pasar por víctima" Available on http://www.acosomoral.org/Tfield2.htm (ref. 1-8-08).

8   Marina Parés Soliva "La Prueba Testifical. ¿Cómo detectar el falso mobbing?". Available on http://www.acosomoral.org/pdf/poMPares.PDF (ref. 1-8-08). http://www.sedisem.net/ponencies/ponencies_girona/m_pares.pdf (ref. 17-8-08).

take place gradually and over a period of time. They are the actions within the destruction plan and are the following: the prevention of communication, the actions that show a lack of ethics, the incitement of envious feelings, the alteration of communication channels, the emergence of a conflict, the shortage of working materials, the establishment of boycott, the use of paradoxical communication and ambiguous messages, the establishment of a campaign of disrepute, the action of staunch friends, the consolidation of the harassing gang, the increasing pressure on the victim and his/her isolation and, finally, the spreading of rumor and the statement of the attributive mechanism.

As for the conflict phase in mobbing, we must point out that most experts define mobbing from this phase. They verify that an interpersonal relationship that used to be good or neutral suffers, suddenly, a negative shift and, obviously, this sudden change cannot be explained without understanding the existence of the previous seduction phase. Approaching the phenomenon of moral harassment at work or mobbing, with the aim of solving it, forces us to know one of the process' phases, the conflict phase, and to know the consequences on the victim and the objectives that the harassers want to achieve and, sometimes, get to achieve. Therefore, we are going to describe this phase, its consequences and the objectives of conflict in mobbing. To begin with, the characteristic of this phase is the appearance of a conflict in the working environment. There is a variety of reasons given, sometimes occasional personal disputes are blamed for it, other times it is the existence of different opinions or the pursuit of different objectives and, even in rare occasions, it is for personal disagreements. We must point out that not all conflicts degenerate into harassment, in my opinion, only those having an outrageous interest underlying. In all kinds of conflict, the sides try to defend their own points of view or interests, but, it becomes the starting point of harassment when one of the sides initiates a strategy to influence, win or oppress the other one. A bad resolution of the conflict leads to labor harassment. Now we are going to see the consequences of the conflict phase. The first consequence is that the occasional conflict is not solved, becomes chronic and goes to the next phase, the harassment in itself. Sometimes, the lapse of time between "conflict" and "harassment" is so short that overlap. The second consequence is that everybody, victim and organization, fall into the clutches of a manipulator that is an

expert in creating bad atmospheres, just as the organizational wicked. We must not forget underlying that, regardless of the reasons given as conflict triggers, the conflict is almost always related to the authority of the wicked as a leader being called into question by the future victim. Either if it is a head person (formal leader) or someone with influence within the organization (informal leader), the questioning of leadership is evident and, since he/she is a toxic leader, his/her defense will be to harass. The wicked realizes that the other person is a nuisance, either because he/she refuses to participate in fraudulent acts, either because his/her only presence generates comparisons that decrease the leader's value. The purpose of conflict in mobbing is, precisely, to become the trigger of harassment. A deep look at the reason generating the conflict confirms that the conflict is the harasser's justification to start the harassment and, even if someone wants to see it as the reason, because the reason is the previous will of the manipulator. I state that, previous to the appearance of conflict, there exists the will of the harassment instigator to get rid of the victim and out of his/her way. The conflict is just the harasser's excuse to get the affected person excluded and we must state that in some occasions the manipulator does not need a real conflict to exist; he/she will just distort any given situation. The act of lying and inventing an unexisting reason to start a harassment confirms, precisely, that the origin of harassment lies in the harasser's previous will, not in the conflict itself. That is the reason why quite often conflicts appear because of trivial, stupid things. What leads to harassment is the unmentionable nature of power game that lies under the conflict in mobbing. We have already mentioned that not all conflicts degenerate into harassment, in my opinion, only those having an outrageous interest underlying such as keeping some privileges at the expense of another's submission.

The arguments to justify the conflict in front of the victim are just a mask to cover up the real reason, which is the existence of a conflict of ignoble interests that the instigator may think are endangered. This is what I call fraud in mobbing.

HOW TO SOLVE THE MOBBING?

Solving the conflict in mobbing will imply to stop its two constitutive elements: the group and the fraud. On the one hand, by avoiding a harassing group being formed and, on the other hand, by showing the

underlying fraud. There is a methodology for conflicts' resolution. We understand that the resolution methodology consists of those means with which we intend to solve opposed interests.

There are four kinds: negotiation, mediation, conciliation and arbitration. We are going to look at each one of them in order to determine which one is the most appropriate to apply with the aim to solve a situation of moral harassment at work.

Negotiation

With negotiation there is not a third person intervening and the conflict is solved by both sides. When a situation of labor conflict cannot be solved by the implied sides, it will be necessary to intervene with one of the other methods. The moral harassment situation is a labor conflict with specific circumstances that makes it necessary to apply an approach different from those for the rest of labor conflicts. What happens in incipient harassment cases is that the sides have not even tried to solve their discrepancies and, very often, does not know what has triggered the conflict because the instigator shows a clear will of not communicating with him/her. This is a fact to take into consideration.

Mediation

However, there is a third party in mediation. The mediator is the one who facilitates the resolution of conflicts since he leads the sides to do so. The people intervening in the mediation process are both the people in conflict and the mediator, who is a person, not implied in the conflict that has a specific training to be a mediator. The word mediation comes from the Latin word "mediare", which means to stand in the way of someone or something. The mediator cannot suggest different options to solve the conflict; he just facilitates the communication between the sides avoiding thus, the disputes among them. Mediation is a process of positive conflicts' resolution through dialogue and this is why the mediator's functions are: to facilitate the communication between the sides in conflict, to facilitate that the people in conflict come to solve it through dialogue, and to be neutral throughout the whole mediation process. The mediator does not usually suggest, except for labor issues, in those countries where this figure is regulated in trial processes. Mediation is a formula to resolute conflicts which is being widely used, but has proved to be ineffective to solve situations of moral harassment. This statement is not only supported by a large part of the

scientific community and by those professionals working on the recovery of victims, but even mediators themselves agree with that. The important question in a harassment situation is the harasser's total lack of will to solve it, his total lack of desire to stop his/her wish to destroy his/her opponent, which is shown through the constant boycott to any negotiated solution implying to treat the victim with dignity. Quite often, when the harasser feels to be forced to take part in the mediation, he uses the "dialogue" situation to go on blaming and ill-treating the victim. Mediation is not a mechanism to solve moral harassment in the workplace.

Conciliation

In the conciliation, the presence of a third party is stronger than in mediation. This third party suggests solutions to conflicts, but these conciliating proposals will only have a binding effect if the willingness is voluntary, that is to say, if it is assumed by the sides. The etymological Latin origin of this word, "conciliare", means to repair and adjust the mood of those who are opposed to each other, that is to say, to bring peace to them. For this reason, the conciliator suggests solution formulae to help the sides getting to an agreement since his suggestions are not obligatory. An additional problem to conciliation in harassment situations is that the wicked person can use the conciliation process to go on hurting the victim, thus unilaterally, breaking the agreements and leaving the victim even more unprotected. Conciliation will only be effective when the respect of the agreements can be granted by someone hierarchically above the harasser.

Arbitration

Finally we have arbitration, which is characterized by an even stronger presence of a third party who acts as an arbitrator and the sides must obey him. The arbitrator states what in judiciary terms are called "arbitration decisions", which are binding for the sides. The arbitrator does neither propose nor suggest, he solves. And he does it in such a way that the sides must obey. However, to go under arbitration can be voluntary, when the sides freely agree to submit themselves to it, or compulsory when, under certain circumstances, the sides must submit themselves to him because of the current legislation. We consider the compulsory arbitration to be the most efficient method to solve the harassment. It was already stated by the early researchers of this phenomenon, although with other words, when they said:

"Every mobbing can be stopped. It is only necessary that someone with a certain amount of power be really interested in it and face the problem." (Leymann 1993:8).[9]

In order to solve a mobbing situation, it is only necessary that an arbitrator stops the harassment since the victim will not be able to cope with the harassing group by him/herself and his/her balance will become more and more weak, getting to symptoms of stress and anguish. The purpose of the harasser's techniques is to persuade us to admit the harassment of another human being. If the environment allows to be manipulated, if it does not intervene, mobbing settles. All the conflicts degenerating into harassment happen because they are tolerated, because nobody intervenes. It was already stated by Leymann when he said *"they hide themselves saying that it is a personal problem and this abstention is guilty"*. The behaviour of the environment will determine the settlement of harassment as well as its destructive degree. Therefore, we can state that interpersonal conflicts will not degenerate into any kind of harassment in a healthy working environment. For this reason, we consider the role of the organization and the business good practices to be important in order to stop violence in the workplace. All human beings are responsible for the eradication of violent practices and it is not fair to delegate our acts to someone else.

Finally, I would like to focus on an issue, the aim of harassment. We know that the victim's discredit will always benefit the harassment's instigator. He would not be able to obtain this benefit without using harassment. The fraudulent acquisition of this ultimate purpose of the instigator through harassment will determine whether the mobbing has been beneficial for him/her. The objective of harassment is intimately linked to getting the victim away from the environment, whether through a transfer to another department or through the worker's dismissal, with the consequent disappearance of the person from the organization, or by getting rid of the victim through a destructive pressure that will provoke such an intense vital anguish that he/she considers suicide as the only way out. Definitely, it only happens in the most serious cases. The harasser will have achieved his/her purpose if it is allowed that the person affected by mobbing leaves the organization.

CONCLUSIONS

Our society is characterized by an uncritical acceptance of ignoble methods allowing, thus, the settlement of psychological violence as a strategy to obtain whatever it may be. We understand that what fosters the different kinds of harassment in all the areas of life is this uncritical and social acceptance. According to the Work International Organization, violent acts at work provoke an immediate and often long-lasting alteration of interpersonal relationships and, therefore, the labor organization and the working environment are also affected. Work harassment is a problem where there are only losers: the harassed people, because of the disorders they suffer affecting their health; the allies-harassers because they have proven to be people in which one cannot trust, since they are responsible for the terrifying atmosphere within the company; the colleagues spectators, also called mute witnesses, because being afraid to become the next victims, they are suspicious and loose the joy of working; the top lines of the company because they must compensate the loss of productivity caused by the lack of cooperation, since the workers devote their energy in trying to solve the conflict situation and the constant difficulties of personal relationships rather than trying to get things done; and the entrepreneurs because they have to pay the costs of all these things inside the company. The society is also generally loosing because it has to pay the assistance costs of victims.

Finally, we are going to state what we consider to be contributions and challenges for future studies and actions on this conflict called "mobbing". One of the major contributions received consists of thinking of the moral harassment process as one more element of a wider plan. This wider plan must be understood as the rising of a destructive leader in its two versions: as a formal leader or as an informal one. This rising is settled through keeping and enlarging the privileges that he/she has or through the seizing of power from the wicked side without respecting the established ways. In both cases the harasser sees the mobbing victim as a hindrance to obtain his/her objectives.

The society's challenge, if it wants to stop the emergence of cases of moral harassment at work, is to face two lines of action. On the one hand, to deal with the individual cases that may appear and, on the other hand, to look for the reason of such emergence in order to stop the structural elements of harass-

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9   Heinz Leymann *"Mobbing. La persécution au travail"*. París. Seuil, 1996

ment. The protection of people affected by mobbing must consist of approving rules to which the victims may have recourse: the existence of anti-mobbing protocols in companies, the regulation of arbitration in labor issues, public social and health systems being able to efficiently attend the damaged aspects of the victim, in terms of both health and social networks; and, obviously, the existence of a legislation punishing the harassment practices and putting an end to the executors' impunity.

The other challenge is more complex since it is linked to the questioning of the prevailing values of our advanced societies, where the value of a successful looking is more important than the ethics to be suc-

cessful. We have to begin asking ourselves how people has achieved success, so that, the whole society, that is to say, all of us, can start protecting ourselves from the narcissistic wicked and avoid their coming to powerful situations where they can attack, humiliate, and harass their peers with great impunity. I want to put an end to these lines with the same words I use to begin:

Freedom is what liberates us from the tough task of passively accepting a non-chosen destiny and leads us through the sinuous path of individual and collective emancipation.

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