THE PHENOMENON OF MOBBING AT WORK – INITIAL REPORT FROM THE RESEARCH

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Purpose: The article concerns the phenomenon of mobbing in the workplace. Possible causes and consequences of mobbing are described, as well as the specificity of mobbing behavior.

Design/methodology/approach: In order to illustrate the phenomenon of mobbing, terminological arrangements are first made. Mobbing is analyzed through the prism of both its causes and the mechanism of its emergence, as well as the anticipated consequences of its health, social and economic effects. In order to draw a picture of mobbing in Polish companies, an in-house study was conducted. They were of a pilot nature, and only selected results are included in the paper. The survey was conducted in 2021 among employees of West Pomeranian Companies. The research method used to achieve the stated goal was a diagnostic survey, while the research tool used within this method was a standardized interview questionnaire. The study also used secondary data taken from public statistics, thematic reports and academic research.

Findings: Research was conducted to determine the nature of mobbing activities. Primary data indicate that these behaviors tend to increase, while the conducted research indicates that there may be some problems related to the lack of openness in talking about this type of behavior for fear of negative consequences.

Originality/value: Mobbing is a phenomenon that relatively rarely becomes the subject of research. There are many difficulties, both methodological and technical, in assessing this phenomenon. The paper analyzes this phenomenon in the context of behaviors encountered in Polish companies bearing the hallmarks of mobbing. The article is addressed to employees in order to make them aware of the dangers of mobbing at work, but also to managers in order to improve psychosocial factors in organizations.

Keywords: mobbing, unethical behavior in the workplace, causes and consequences of mobbing.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The subject of stress in the workplace and its impact on the well-being of employees has been present in the scientific discourse for several dozen years, but it was not until the early 1980s that mobbing was included in the stressors category. This issue was of interest mainly to the Scandinavian countries, and a little later other European countries, as well as the United States, Canada and Australia. This was due to the observation of aggressive behavior in the workplace, which was caused by its inappropriate organization.

2. Review of definitions

Mobbing is most often equated with psychological violence in the workplace, however, the multithreading and complexity of this issue meant that the scope of understanding this category is very wide.

The International Labor Organization describes mobbing as "offensive behavior by vengeful, cruel, malicious or humiliating harm to an individual or group of workers ...” (Ziółkowska, 2015, p. 227). In turn, according to art. 94³ of the Labor Code (LC) "mobbing means actions or behaviors concerning an employee or directed against an employee, consisting in persistent and long-term harassment or intimidation of an employee, causing him to underestimate his professional suitability, causing or aimed at humiliating or ridiculing the employee, isolating or eliminating him. from a team of colleagues” (Labor Code, art. 94).

In management sciences, mobbing is also understood as: “unethical, malicious harassment of one of the team members or a group of employees by a co-worker with a higher position in the group or performing a managerial function; it is the subjecting of an individual or group to humiliation and to limit its defensive abilities” (Bańka, 2007, p. 241).

On the other hand, A. Bechowska-Gebhardt and T. Stalewski define mobbing as “unethical and irrational from the point of view of the organization's goals, activity consisting in long-term, repeated and unjustified harassment of an employee by superiors and colleagues; it is subjecting a victim of economic, psychological and social violence in order to intimidate, humiliate and limit her ability to defend herself” (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004, p. 16).

The authors of the definitions also refer to the consequences borne by the victims of mobbing - social isolation, self-depreciation, a sense of harm, helplessness and rejection by colleagues, which may result in severe stress and somatic and mental diseases (Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski, 2004).

The Swedish psychiatrist and professor of psychology - Heinz Leymann is considered to be the precursor of research on mobbing behavior. According to Leymann, mobbing is a form of terror at work, it expresses unethical and hostile communication, which can lead to psychological damage and social alienation. Leymann pointed out that mobbing activities should take place at least once a week, for a minimum of 6 months (Leymannn, 1990). Among the criteria describing the phenomenon of mobbing, the most frequently emphasized is the frequency and duration of unethical influences towards the employee, negative consequences for the victim and asymmetry of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. Despite the ongoing discussion on terminological arrangements related to mobbing, the following criteria for defining mobbing were adopted (Einarsen et al., 2011):

- regularity and systematicity of unethical behavior,
- duration of the behavior,
- severity of the harassment over time,
- subjecting a person to negative influences, which often results in social exclusion,
- detriment to welfare and health.

In Poland, the best known classification is proposed by Leymann (1996). On the basis of interviews with employees, he distinguished five categories of behavior (Leymann, 1996):

- actions that hinder communication,
- actions that have a negative impact on social relations,
- actions influencing the image of the victim,
- actions detrimental to the professional status of the victim,
- actions against the physical health of the victim.

Although mobbing is defined in various ways, the authors agree on the basic nature of this phenomenon - it is a form of deliberate mental torment that affects communication, social relations, life and work situation and the health of the victims (Kozak, 2009).

3. Causes and consequences of mobbing

In the literature, a lot of space is devoted to the analysis of factors contributing to the occurrence of behaviors or activities that can be considered mobbing. In order to explain the causes of mobbing in the workplace, researchers focus on two factors, i.e. the psychosocial work environment and the individual characteristics of the victims and perpetrators of this phenomenon. They emphasize that the organization plays a key role in the emergence of mobbing at work. Organizations with a lot of conflicts are particularly exposed to this phenomenon (Matthiesen, Einarsen, 2010). Moreover, people working in such environments have a low assessment of both the management style prevailing there and the ability to control

their own work, as well as transparency in the scope of roles in the organization (Einarsen, 2000).

The reasons for mobbing can also be found in rigid social structures, which are favored by the directive style of management. Typical negative features of the organization where the phenomenon of psychological violence can be observed include: time pressure when performing tasks, issuing contradictory or meaningless orders, burdening the employee with high responsibility, while limiting his ability to make decisions and underestimating the actions of subordinates. A bad atmosphere in the workplace is also important, as is the lack of kindness and support in interpersonal relations. These factors foster a sense of threat and uncertainty among employees, thus increasing the risk of mobbing (Mobbing, Materiały Centralnego Instytutu Ochrony Pracy – Państwowy Instytut Badawczy, http://www.ciop.pl, access 15.04.2012).

It should be emphasized that the causes of psychological terror can also lie in the personality traits of both the persecutor and the victim. It is worth adding that research on this aspect indicates that there is no single type of bully and victim (Maran, Bernardelli, Varetto, 2018).

Numerous studies show that long-term workplace harassment has serious effects (cf. Leymann, 1996; Einarsen, 2000). People subjected to mobbing experience primarily anxiety (Hansen et al., 2006, Plopa et al., 2017), a drop in self-esteem (Harvey, Keashly, 2003; Ireland, 2002; O'Moore, Kirkham, 2001), shame (Lewis, 2004), a sense of fatigue and depression. The persecuted person may also develop Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (after: Matthiesen, Einarsen, 2004; Nielsen, Hetland, Matthiesen, Einarsen, 2012).

It is worth emphasizing that mobbing has serious consequences not only for the individual, but also for the enterprise and society. Such consequences include an increase in sickness absenteeism, staff turnover, a reduction in the quality of work performed, a reduction in satisfaction and the level of commitment to work. The company in which the mobbing took place must take into account the loss of a positive image, as well as financial losses resulting from the costs of conducting the procedure and the possible payment of compensation and redress. The burdens related to the occurrence of mobbing in the work environment also affect the entire society, which bears the costs of treating mobbing victims (Nerka, 2013).

4. Findings

Behavior such as harassment, bullying, and humiliation are not unique in Polish enterprises. The asymmetric relationship between superiors and employees creates an opportunity for this type of behavior. The data collected in the field of labor law and social insurance as part of public statistics shows that the number of cases in courts under the provisions of the Labor Code remains at a similar level with a slight upward trend (Table 1). It should be emphasized,

however, that mobbing in Poland is a phenomenon that is difficult to estimate, as not every employee experiencing mobbing decides to go to court. This is due to the difficulty of proving, the burden of which is on the flood, fear of negative consequences, including losing a job. Many victims of bullying also prefer to focus on changing jobs and forget the unpleasant experience.

Table 1.
Records of cases in courts of first instance for compensation and redress in connection with mobbing in 2017-2021

		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
District courts						
Art. 94³ § 3 LC	women	298	311	305	286	292
	men	160	173	174	157	156
Art. 94³ § 4 LC	women	57	48	40	48	52
	men	41	34	44	32	34
Total		556	566	563	532	534
Regional courts						
Art. 94³ § 3. LC	women	69	66	66	82	89
	men	35	30	41	50	55
Art. 94³ § 4 LC	women	18	12	10	9	15
	men	17	8	9	14	13
Total		139	116	126	155	172

Source: own study based on https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/1210,dyskryminacja-mobbing-molestowanie-seksualne-w-pracy-w-latach-2011-2017/resource/39511/table, 06.08.2022).

In order to present a picture of mobbing, research was carried out to identify mobbing behavior in Polish enterprises. The research was of a pilot nature, the article contains only selected results. The survey was conducted in 2021 among employees of West Pomeranian companies. The research method used to achieve the assumed goal was a diagnostic survey, while the research tool used within this method was a standardized interview questionnaire.

The adopted research procedure included the following steps:

1. Preparation of a research tool.
2. Collecting interviews from respondents.
3. Initial selection of answers according to criteria consistent with the definition of mobbing.
4. Classification of respondents' answers according to Heinz Leymann's concept.

In total, 187 people were included in the study. Women predominated in the surveyed group, accounting for 71.6% of the respondents. Over 66% of the respondents came from the city, the least numerous group were respondents from rural areas - 6.4%. The average age of the respondents was 36 years, the average length of service was 12.3 years. The vast majority of respondents (68.45%) were employed in medium-sized enterprises, 26.74% worked in small enterprises, and 4.81% - in large enterprises. Employees were employed based on an employment contract (95.19%). The respondents were asked to make a subjective assessment of their well-being at work. The vast majority of respondents felt good at work (66.3%). Almost one third of the respondents feel bad in their workplace (28.9%), the rest had difficulty responding to the answers. Respondents were asked about their experiences related

to mobbing. Relatively few respondents (18.7%) experienced mobbing behavior in the last two years, while when asked if they had witnessed such behavior, the percentage increased to 34.8%. The respondents indicated that they most often experienced inappropriate behavior on the part of their superiors (73,8%).

Respondents who reported having experienced or witnessed harassment at work were asked to provide examples of specific behaviors. Most often they indicated actions that infringed their image. This included slandering, disseminating false information about them, commenting on their appearance and the way they dressed. It was relatively often pointed out that the subject of comments was their attitude to vaccination, especially in the first year of the pandemic. People who declared an unwillingness to be vaccinated were isolated by co-workers, and they also experienced unfavorable comments that made them feel guilty. The respondents also pointed to comments regarding their negative features affecting the quality of performance of duties - lack of diligence and responsibility, but also conflict in relationships. Sexual behavior and attacks on health were mentioned much less frequently. Detailed results are presented in the table 2.

Table 2.
List of mobbing behaviors

Actions that hinder the communication process	% of indications
- criticizing work (criticism of working with other employees without a justified reason, comments on the quality of the work performed, mocking the way the work is performed)	40,0
- criticizing private life (reference to receiving the Family 500+ benefit, comments on unemployment of your life partner)	52,3
- restriction or obstruction of the victim's speech (continuous interruptions, shouting, hanging up the receiver during telephone conversations, failure to grant the right to speak during employee meetings)	27,7
- harassment over the phone (text messages and phone calls after working hours, on days off)	73,8
Actions negatively influencing social relations	
- physical and social isolation of the victim (not providing information about integration outings and trips, designating a separate place to work, designating a separate place to eat meals due to the lack of vaccination against Covid-19, no teamwork)	12,3
- disregarding the employee (not answering e-mails, avoiding contact, reluctance to talk)	16,9
Actions violating the image of the victim	
- slandering, spreading rumors (disseminating information about the private life and financial situation of the victim, commenting on the appearance, manner of dressing, commenting on the victim's financial situation, political and religious views, attitude towards vaccination against Covid-19, mocking disability, sexual orientation, comments on employee group on FB)	83,1
- sexual innuendo (making sexual offers, making promotion conditional on consenting to sexual situations, sexual jokes, singing sexual songs in the presence of a victim)	6,2
- suggesting mental disorders (referring to a psychiatrist, comments such as "you should be treated, you are emotionally and mentally unstable, referral to psychological and psychiatric examinations)	3,1
- suggesting that the employee has negative qualities (maliciousness, conflict, laziness, lack of diligence and responsibility)	87,7

Cont. table 2.

Actions hitting the professional position of the victim	
- not assigning tasks to be performed (no new tasks in which the victim could prove himself, hindering professional promotion, taking away the project being implemented)	58,5
- violations in the field of finances (failure to pay remuneration on time, no remuneration for overtime, despite no objections to work, failure to award an incentive/reward, financial penalties, awarding high financial benefits to other employees in exchange for loyalty to the employer, forcing them to stay under overtime at work under the threat of losing it)	75,4
- assigning tasks that are too easy/difficult to perform (assigning tasks in which the employee cannot prove himself, thus making it difficult to receive a professional promotion, assigning tasks that are too difficult to perform, punishment for their non-performance, assigning nonsensical tasks, assigning tasks below qualifications, above qualifications, over-checks)	70,8
- undermining the decisions made by the victim (criticizing the decisions made, penalties for the decisions made)	78,5
- rescheduling the leave without consulting the employee	21,5
- threatening with negative consequences when using a sick leave	47,7
Actions affecting the health of the victim	
- entrusting work that is harmful to health (commissioning work in conditions not adapted to this, e.g. with mold, failure to ensure safe working conditions)	15,4
- sexual activities (touching intimate places, supposedly accidentally touching the victim)	1,5
- the threat of using physical force	6,2

Source: own research.

Survey participants were also asked about the effects they experienced due to harassment at work. More than 68% complained of mood disorders, 28.6% had suicidal thoughts, and nearly 80% experienced anxiety caused by excessive work-related stress and insecurity and feelings of threat. The majority of respondents (91.4%) indicated that the experience of bullying caused them to lower their self-esteem and professional usefulness. This is particularly dangerous, as it can result in less motivation to work and negatively affect feelings of agency and career progression. Respondents also experienced exclusion from the work collective (62.9%) and, as a consequence, emotions of shame (28.6%). Respondents were also asked about their need to seek the help of a psychiatrist or psychologist. More than half (51.4%) of the respondents admitted that they had asked for this form of support. Respondents during the survey emphasized that the experience of mobbing at work primarily affected their psychological well-being and their sense of security within and outside the organization.

5. Summary

On the basis of the obtained results, it might seem that mobbing in Polish enterprises is a marginal phenomenon. However, it should be taken into account that this is a phenomenon that is relatively rarely studied. There are many methodological and technical difficulties in assessing this phenomenon. These difficulties relate to the diversity of bullying, the complexity, but also the difficulty of obtaining test subjects. It is worth remembering that despite the relatively low unemployment rate, it is currently difficult to find a stable job, and mobbing is usually associated with a conflict situation in the workplace, resulting from the asymmetry of

dependencies between the employer and the subordinate (Chomczyński, 2008). This can result in a lack of openness about unethical behavior in the workplace. Nevertheless, research shows that the scale of this phenomenon is increasing. In Poland, despite the rapidly growing interest in mobbing, no comprehensive research has been carried out so far to show the nature and scale of the phenomenon in Polish enterprises. However, it can be assumed that the phenomenon of mobbing occurs in Poland on a similar scale as in other EU countries and affects from 4% to 15% of the entire population of employees (Warszewska-Makuch, 2005). In Poland, every sixth employee (17%) declares that they have been harassed by their supervisor in the last five years, including - every twentieth (5%) says that it happened often (Komunikat z badań CBOS, Szykany w miejscu pracy, 2014).

Taking into account the negative effects of mobbing, it would be worthwhile to conduct research relating primarily to the scale of this phenomenon, taking into account various professional groups. It is also worth getting to know the predictors and consequences of mobbing, not only for the individual but also for the organization and society.

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