

Employees' coping strategies with workplace mobbing

PhD Nicoleta Mihaela Cramaruc

Summary:

In context with the constant need for change and adjustment to the requirements for performance, contemporary organizations are facing the reality of psychological abuse in the workplace and the resulting effect on the health of their employees. Although the presence of workplace mobbing has been "confirmed" under various names by early organizations, this phenomenon has only generated interest in the scientific field in the most recent decades. In the Romanian field of research, the investigation of this phenomenon can not be accurately studied, due to lack of specialized publications, and also the limited number of investigations at some university research centers. This idea is supported by the finding of Cristina Tomescu and Sorin Cace (2011), that workplace mobbing or its frequency in work teams would not even be talked about in Romania until 2010.

In *the first chapter*, we capture the terminology of the workplace mobbing phenomenon from its earliest attestations. Two of the terms used become prevalent, as *bullying* (Olweus, 1978; Rayner, 1997) and *mobbing* (Leymann, 1982; Zapf, 1996). To ensure the equivalence of terminology, we propose the terms of *organizational psychological abuse* or *psychological harassment in the workplace* as corresponding expressions in Romanian. The abundance of constructs related to it and the various cultural contexts, but also the lack of a clear distinction between definition and description made us unable to relate to a generally valid definition of the concept. From our perspective, workplace mobbing *involves the manifestation of a hostile and offensive behavior against one or more persons, that is not isolated and it exhibits a longer period of time, and having a negative impact on psycho-emotional well-being and professional performance of the target.*

Analyzing the connotations conferred by various authors allowed us to extract certain characteristics of psychological abuse in organizations. Some *types of abuse* are found in taxonomies from the classic one belonging to Heinz Leymann (1990) to the one of Stig B. Matthiesen and Ståle Einarsen (2001) and also of Álvaro Rodríguez-Carballeira and his colleagues (2010). When we are referring to *the frequency* of the psychologically abusive behavior, researchers have different positions from the lack of time conditioning (Adams, 1992) to the monthly (Salin, 2001) and weekly presence (Leymann, 1990) or between occasional and daily extremes of the abuse (Matthiesen, Raknes and Rokkum, 1989). *The duration* of the phenomenon also varies, studies indicating a minimum of six months (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996) and extending to twelve months (Hoel and Vartia, 2003), to eighteen months (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996) or twenty-three months (Namie, 2003). Some other

characteristics of the workplace mobbing are also reported: *unequal power, the intent to abuse, the number of bullies, the organizational status of the aggressive person and the victim's and the perception of the abusive situation from the bully and the victim point of view*. In the scientific field, we consider it useful to differentiate between *subjective psychological abuse* (which is present when reporting abusive acts depends on how hostile, humiliating and intimidating are these behaviors in the victim's perception) and *objective psychological abuse* (which refers to those situations where there are clear evidences and statements of the third parties on the presence of abusive acts).

In *chapter two* we have focused our attention on procedural models and explanatory theories of organizational psychological abuse. *The model of Heinz Leymann* (1996) examines workplace mobbing through the victim's perspective and the author believes that the presence of psychological terror in the organizational environment is correlated with the lack of involvement of managers and supervisors as well as their neglective attitude or denial of the problems. Based on the analysis of psychological abuse from a triple perspective (individual, dyadic and organizational), *the model of Ståle Einarsen* (1999) says that the abuse evolves from an existing conflict between equals if one becomes "disadvantaged" in the process. *Dieter Zapf's model* (2001) promotes psychological abuse as a process of conflict escalation and the victim reaches paroxysmal stage of living via others social stressors, social conflicts, the report interactional injustice-unfairness and negative social behaviors. As for *Gwénaëlle Poilpot-Rocaboy's position* (2003), the author believes that psychological harassment is a dynamic process. Analyzing the models above, *Ioan Tenner* (2004) noted as a common characteristic the fact that they are explaining the organizational psychological abuse only as a evolution of conflicts under certain vulnerabilities of the victim. Therefore, he develops a model centered on intervention and the name of each stage indicates the level where the victim stands in the abusive process.

From *the Attribution Theory* perspective which is focused on *the fundamental attribution error* individuals tend to attribute the causes of positive experiences to internal characteristics and the negative causes to the external ones (Kelley, 1967). When psychological abuse in the workplace can be labeled as a negative experience, the victims are considering the abusive persons and the organizational factors as the main responsible more than themselves (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). The author's characteristics and personal traits are giving birth so the idea that "something is wrong" with the abuser. The reverse situation applies too. *The Frustration-Aggression Theory* gives a central role to frustration in targeting the individual's behavior. When people perceive some obstacles to achieve a goal there is a high probability that frustration turns into aggression but only if that person comes to believe that someone interfere intentionally and dishonest in their plans or tries to deliberately cause them harm (Berkowitz, 1989). The only reasons that lead frustrated individuals not to openly

attack various available targets is labeling the attack on others as dangerous or the anticipation of possible sanctions.

The phenomenon of abuse can be also conceptualized from the perspective of organizational stress that is based on *the Transactional Theory of Stress* of Tom Cox (1978). The studies focused on the dynamic stress have examined in particular, three mediator factors of the connection between the abusive act and the consequences as previous exposure to traumatic incidents, social support and perceived control. If frustrated employees do not know how to analyze social stressors from the organizational environment (mobbing is a notable socio-relational stressor) then each becomes the other's social stressor and one of the individuals is the final target of psychological abuse (Leymann, 1996).

Certain organizational factors may stimulate employees' vulnerability to become victims. *The Organizational Leadership Theory* suggests that not only an authoritarian style of leadership may increase the workplace mobbing but also the laissez-faire style (Skogstad et al., 2007). It can not be ignored the idea that labeling a leadership behavior as destructive varies according to the societal changes over time and so, certain behaviors currently considered destructive can be justified by the organizational interest of another period. By tolerating a low level of mutual support and understanding but also humiliating and oppressive behaviors from some colleagues, the leader imposes the abuse as a model of interaction in group. The culture of the organisation it is contributing to the emergence and development of psychological abuse within the organization. From a social perspective, the manager's negative acts are considered to be induced by the current existence of some rules centered on the idea that the most powerful and who adapts easily survives (Neuman and Baron, 2003).

The Personality theory presents the highly controversial concept that abusive behavior can be correlated with the victim's personality. Although we can not discuss about a general profile of the victim, conducted studies targeted different aspects of personality and traits such as a lower level of self-esteem caused by the target's inability to defend (Zapf and Einarsen, 2003), high social anxiety (González Delgado, 2008), high scores on neuroticism (Brousse et al., 2008), depressive disposition (Kivimäki et al., 2003) or humble pride and the refusal to transfer shame (Braithwaite et al., 2008).

According to *the Psychoanalytic theory*, certain behavioral patterns of victimization in childhood may be transferred in various situations including the organizational context. And so the abusers test the limits of others to find a possible container for their anxieties, making use of the projective identification, and they even "use" those around them because of the narcissistic symptoms (anger, boredom, passivity, self-esteem issues or failure to establish profound and lasting relationships). Therefore, we can consider psychological abuse as a relationship issue based on an inter-generational

connection centered on the existence of a high probability that on one hand, bully children can also manifest aggressive behavior in the adult posture and on the other hand, the victimized parents in their childhood can also have abused children (Farrington, 1993).

Chapter three is dedicated to the analysis of the incidence, the antecedents and the consequences of psychological abuse in the workplace. In this respect we have considered to expose some important elements, the first being the state. European Survey III (2003) and European Survey IV (2007) are indicating considerable variations of abuse's percentages within the same state or between states from 2% in Italy, 15% in Finland to 26% in Austria and 53% in England. If, in earlier periods, the studies were limited mainly to Nordic countries, they currently extended to all European countries and to the Canadian and American space, the South American continent, and the Asian and the Australian one. The first studies on the phenomenon are also developed in Hungary (Kaucsek and Simon, 1996; Virag, 2000) and Romania (Kovacs, 2006, 2007, Dinu, 2005; Pânișoară and Avram, 2009). The variations of the psychological abuse at the state level are also explained by the researchers' options to use various assessment tools, the most famous being *the exposure to a certain definition of the concept* (one item methodology) and *the existing questionnaires* (multiple items methodology). The incidence of psychological abuse based on the number of negative acts is higher than the one suggested by the self-reporting of such behaviors just because some targets are not perceiving these acts as abusive or are avoiding so it not seems like a sign of weakness.

Certain studies on the phenomenon of abuse are prevailing the idea that it is present at higher levels in the public area than the private one and it seems to oscillate according to profession. The previous correlation is justified by a more regulated character and a control, hierarchy and power based culture that is specific to the public institutions. Among the sectors with high risk of psychological abuse are those where there is a direct relationship with other people which implies emotional involvement. No managers are free from being targets of such negative behavior. Concerning the size, we note that psychological abuse is more prevalent in large organizations (over 250 employees) rather than the small and the bureaucratic ones. In terms of target's gender, psychological abuse affects both women and men and the possible differences between these two sexes are determined by the frequency of attacks, hierarchical position/ dominance, age or professional area. Regarding the possible correlation between age and abusive behavior, there is no consensus in the investigative plan.

The academic dispute extends to the causes of the phenomenon in question, some authors focusing on the abuser and the victim's personality and others on organizational characteristics. There are also scientists who promote a comprehensive explanatory model. The perpetrators are defined in

various terms from *authoritarian personality* or *little tyrant* (Ashforth, 1994; Crawford, 1999) to a *Jekyll and Hyde personality type* (Field, 1996) and to some others involving mental disorders such as *psychotic* (Field, 1996), *sociopath* (Vickers, 2001), *narcissistic pervert* (Hirigoyen, 2001) or *paranoic* (Cabarcos and Rodríguez, 2003). Zapf and Einarsen (2003) are "polishing" the abuser profile by including inferiority complex, envy, manipulative and narcissistic personality. We consider Bill Eddy's perspective stating that organizational abusers are personalities with a high level of conflicts as innovator and he defines four types of personalities: *I am superior, I love you I hate you, I feel the need to dominate and I can not trust anyone*. Although some studies aim to outline a profile of the victim, Marie-France Hirigoyen claims that the victim is chosen not because it has something special but because it's in a certain place, no matter the moment and it becomes somewhat annoying to the aggressor. The ideal victim is a person with scruples and inner tendency to make herself responsible, ingenuous and credulous, so after the first attack he/ she shows understanding and adapts.

Over time, many researchers have concluded that negative acts performed in the organizational environment are also determined by some job specific characteristics such as: low autonomy, role conflict, job ambiguity, job content, job insecurity, high volume or rhythm of work and the physical characteristics of the job and, last but not least, the generated stress. In addition, it was also defined the factors related to the group and the organization such as the organization and the group's culture, organizational structure, leadership and organizational changes.

The consequences of psychological abuse in the organization is the only issue on which there is a single position. At the individual level, Iñaki Piñuel y Zabala (2003) distinguishes six types of effects such as hyper-cognitive effects and mental reactions, psychosomatic symptoms of stress, symptoms of discomfort in the autonomous nervous system, symptoms of physical discomfort as a result of prolonged stress, sleep disturbances, fatigue and weakness. Heinz Leymann and Annelie Gustafson (1996) even identify symptoms like those associated with PTSD. At the organizational level, among the notable consequences are the absenteeism, leaving the organization, low productivity and high financial costs.

Employees' coping strategies are analyzed in *chapter four*. The identification of the targets coping strategies with workplace mobbing is based on *the model of Deborah E. Knapp* (1997) centered on responses to sexual harassment where it groups them into categories of avoidance/ denial, social support, confrontation/ negotiation and institutional support. *The typology proposed by Daniel Faulx* (2007) has a more detailed character, and the proof consists in the nine coping strategies: adjustment of the victim's behavior, the request for a transformation of the context, attempts to communicate with the

abuser, avoiding the confrontation, the counterattack, the intervention of a third party, preparing a file for future action, resistance strategy and the resistance strategy itself.

EVLN model of Caryl E. Rusbult and her colleagues (1982) extends the individual responses from exit (leaving the organization) and facing the situation (discussing those conditions in order to change them) to neglect and loyalty. *The exit coping strategy* is an impersonal feedback mechanism because it does not involve a face-to-face confrontation with the management of the organization. It also has a very active destructive character by leaving the organization, seeking another job or transferring to another department of the organization. When we relate to the meaning given by the victim to the decision to leave the organization, for a certain part, is a positive coping strategy because it removes the source of stress. And, for another part, it is a sign of desperation which is installed as a result of health problems or to rebuild the optimal level of self-confidence and socio-professional capacities. A third category of abused individuals are feeling excluded and that is why the departure is forced. Moreover, the employee must be aware of the fact that a potential employer may request information about his previous job and that the former manager has the power to influence the professional trajectory of an employee who has abandoned his organization on the grounds of psychological harassment or even the fact whether that employee will ever work again.

The strategy of confronting the situation (voice) implies a potential danger because it involves an effort to change an objective state of things and a direct expression of the critical opinions of a person. This explains why employees sometimes avoid to approach it (Detert and Edmondson, 2007). Taking into account the active constructive purpose of the strategy the target attempts to discuss the problem with the supervisor, suggesting solutions or seeking social support from colleagues and friends. The victim should not leave the abuser to take benefit of the abuse process and it must take action against any negative act orientated against it. In order that the victim's action to be successful it must redouble itself reporting of the negative act he/ she suffered through a third party position. Otherwise, they may face a situation where the abuser presents himself as a victim in an attempt to discredit the real victim's statement.

Through a behavior of expecting a change based on the organizational trust the employee adopts a passive constructive strategy as the *loyalty* one. The problem raised by this type of strategy is the fact that it is quite difficult to define and measure it, meaning that we do not know exactly what employees are doing while they are waiting for things to improve.

The *coping strategy by neglect* is characterized by a lack of minimum effort and reaction as well as the attitude to let things deteriorate. The employee manifests disregard for the professional activity

and delays, also absenteeism and solving personal problems during the program are extremely common. All these behaviors are labeled as passive destructive.

Starting from the EVLN model, Klaus Niedl (1996) attempted to reconstruct the way in which individuals respond to psychological abuse in the organization, revealing a complex behavioral pattern that suggests that initially the victims adopt constructive strategies, talking to superiors about the incident or demonstrating loyalty and only in the advanced stages of the conflict, they apply destructive strategies as negligence at work or leaving the organization. Its targets have reported that, even if it possible to change the position it remains a bitter taste of injustice. This *VLVNE model* is confirmed later by Dieter Zapf and Claudia Gross (2001) by the fact that victims are initially using constructive strategies to solve the conflicts that they alternate and only in the final stage they are leaving the organization. Most of the involved employees have changed several times their approaches until the final decision to leave the organization and very few are the individuals who give up almost immediately and abandon the organization after the first confrontation.

The large spread of power presents the highest risk that stimulates and supports the psychological abuse in the Romanian institutions (Mihuț and Lungescu, 2006). Moreover, the need to have authoritarian leaders who focus on decisions taken unilaterally and who have subordinates who want to follow the rules established by such managers and to show devotion to them is prevalent for the Romanian employees (Luca, 2005).

The quasi-experimental empirical approach of *the last chapter* is motivated by the lack of specialized publications as well as the existence of only an insignificant number of investigations (empirical or case studies) on the dynamics of psychological abuse at work in the Romanian institutions and organizations. Thus, we identified only Adina Dinu's micro-research (2005), Peter Kovacs' micro-research (2006) and theoretical mini-synthesis (2008), Tudor George Cătălin's theoretical article (2008), and Georgeta Pânișoară's article (2009).

In *the first study*, it appeared even more necessary to calibrate the Negative Acts Questionnaire because in the Romanian scientific area I have not found it calibrated and to define a trifactorial model for a sample of 268 Romanian employees.

The second study was also focused on a measuring instrument, as the construction and calibration of the questionnaire called Coping Strategies with Mobbing Situations, as well on defining a factorial model for a group of 259 Romanian employees of various public institutions. The motive that sustained this approach is the lack of a questionnaire to identify the coping strategies adopted by employees victims of psychological abuse even outside the Romanian scientific.

The observative nature of *the third study* appeared necessary in order to record the incidence of those specific acts of the psychological abuse in Romanian institutions and organizations. Any other correlational approach would have no truthfulness in the absence of the certainty about the presence of workplace mobbing in the Romanian space. Therefore, this study brings together two explorative sequences on a Romanian sample of 268 employees from various public and private organizations, as well as on a group of 177 teachers from secondary schools.

The obtained data it is not consistent with other research approaches from other countries according to whom there is a higher incidence of psychological abuse in public sector and our results are showing a lack of significant statistically difference as it was initially outlined. There were a few items for which differences were significant for the private sector such as: *someone is hiding the information you need so your work becomes complicated, you are ordered to do work below your level of competence, repeated allusions to your mistakes and the underestimation of your work and efforts.* The status of a severe psychological victim's abuse is admitted to a greater extent by the employees from private organizations (8.2%) and not by those from public institutions (5.9%). These percentages reported for the status of victim are considerably lower than those reported for the negative acts that are specific to psychological abuse at work. Thus, the findings confirm the ones of other international studies. So, severe abusive acts are reported in a proportion of 58.2% in private organizations and 41.8% in the public institutions. In relation to other possible authors of psychological abusive acts inside organizations the manager is reported as the main abuser.

In the Secondary schools, the Secondary school teachers are targets of an underestimation behavior of rights and personal opinions on sexual criterion at a significantly higher level than preschool-primary school teachers. Further more, the teachers aged over 37 years are targets of social exclusion behavior from colleagues or from the working group activities at a significantly higher level compared to the ones under the age of 36 years. Even if there were no significant differences depending on the level of education, the status of a severe psychological victim's abuse is admitted to a greater extent by teachers over 37 years (6.8%) than those aged under 36 years (3.4 %). The school manager is still the one reported to be the main abuser both in Pre-school/ Primary education and Secondary school, as well as the teachers under the age of 36 years and the ones over 37 years. The Secondary school teachers usually adopt the active-constructive coping strategy of confronting the abusive situation. We also note that 64.29% of the included teachers are rejecting the exit strategy and choose to remain in the school, regardless of the situation they face.

As for *the fourth study*, the results of the first approach which was focused on the same sample of 268 Romanian employees from various public and private organizations, have indicated that a high

level of stress experienced by the Romanian workers correlates with a significant reporting of abusive acts inside the organization but no matter the specificity of the organizational climate. The regression model defined on this sample allows us to conclude that the specificity of the organizational climate and the stress felt by Romanian employees are to some extent predictors of the incidence of psychological abuse in the workplace. Thus, a non-stimulating organizational climate and a high level of stress experienced by employees are predicting a higher incidence of abuse.

The second correlational substudy applied on the same group of 259 employees from various Romanian public institutions, showed that employees-targets of psychological abuse in the workplace with high levels of extraversion mostly choose the passive-constructive coping strategy of loyalty. Those with low levels of extraversion prefer strategies as indirect facing of the abuse and neglecting the situation. The results also indicate that extrovert employees with higher levels of general self-esteem and of neuroticism choose the loyalty coping strategy as well. From this conclusion, we extract the idea that extrovert employees with high general self-esteem choose especially the coping strategy of indirect confrontation only when the neuroticism level is low. Keeping the same low level of neuroticism, the preference for the coping strategy of indirect confrontation is not depending only on the ratio of extraversion-introversion of participants, but on the general level of self-esteem as well. Therefore, the employees are choosing the coping strategy of indirect confrontation, whether they are extroverts or introverts, but only when the general self-esteem is low in both cases.

The Neuroticism personality factor is an important element in the choices of respondents, however, it seems to bring some significant and obvious changes only when its level is high. When the employee's neuroticism level is low, the three coping strategies are equally preferred and the differences are relatively small. The employees less neurotic and having a low general self-esteem adopted especially the coping strategy of indirect confrontation of the situation. When neuroticism increases, their tendency is to choose the coping strategy of neglect. So, neurotic employees with low self esteem are facing the psychological abuse in the workplace by neglecting professional activities. As for the employees with high professional esteem and a high level of neuroticism, they like mostly the passive-constructive coping strategy of loyalty.

The regression model defined on this sample allows us to conclude that professional self-esteem of the Romanian workers and the neuroticism are to some extent, predictors of the incidence of the loyalty coping strategy with the workplace mobbing. Higher levels of professional self-esteem of employees and neuroticism are predicting a higher incidence of the loyalty strategy.

Keywords: workplace mobbing, victim, perpetrator, leadership, personality, coping strategies, EVLN model