

Important note in preface to Heinz Leymann, “Mobbing and Psychological Terror at Workplaces,” *Violence and Victims* 5 (1990), 119-126.

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Mobbing and Psychological Terror at Workplaces

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In recent years, the existence of a significant problem in workplaces has been documented in Sweden and other countries. It involves employees "ganging up" on a target employee and subjecting him or her to psychological harassment. This "mobbing" behavior results in severe psychological and occupational consequences for the victim. This phenomenon is described, its stages and consequences analyzed. An ongoing program of research and intervention that is currently being supported by the Swedish government is then considered.

Through their national Work Environment Acts Sweden, Finland and Norway support the right of workers to remain physically and mentally healthy at work (National Board of Occupational Safety and Health, 1980). Yet, in recent years, a work environment problem has been discovered, the existence and extent of which was not known previously.

This phenomena has been called "mobbing," "ganging up on someone" or psychic terror. It occurs as schisms, where the victim is subjected to a systematic stigmatizing through, inter alia, injustices (encroachment of a person's rights), which after a few years can mean that the person in question is unable to find employment in his/her specific trade. Those responsible for this tragic destiny can either be workmates or management.

Consider the case of Leif:

Leif worked in a large factory in Norway. His job, as a repairman, was to keep the machine park up and running. He was a skilled worker on high wages. He came originally from Denmark and his workmates often made fun of him as he spoke Norwegian with a Danish accent. This happened so often that his personal relations became seriously disturbed — he became isolated. On one occasion he became so irritated that he thumped the table with his fist and demanded an end to all further jokes about his accent. From that point, things became worse. His workmates intensified and widened the range of their "jokes." One of these was to send him to machines which didn't need repairing. In this way Leif gradually gained the reputation of being "The Mad Dane." At the beginning, many workers and foremen did not know that his sudden appearances were the results of "Jokes." His social contact network broke down, and more and more workmates joined in the hunt. Wherever he appeared, jokes and taunts flew around. His feeling of aggression grew and this drew the attention of management. They got the impression that it was Leif's fault and that he was a low-performance worker (which he gradually became). He was admonished. His anxiety

increased and he developed psychosomatic problems and had to take sick leave. His employers reassigned him to less skilled work without even discussing his problems; this Leif experienced as unjust. He considered himself to be blameless. The situation gradually developed into one of serious psychosomatic disorders and longer periods of sick leave.

Leif could not keep his job, nor could he get another one, as his medical history could be only too clearly seen in his job applications. There was nowhere in society where he could turn for help. He became totally unemployable — an outcast. One of the ironies of this case is that Leif had previously been employed by a number of companies where he had performed well, had been a good workmate and had been given good references by his employers. (We have found similar cases in Sweden, Denmark, Western Germany, England, Austria, USA, and Australia.)

Although “mobbing,” at the lowest denominator, is probably the result of ignorance, it may have fatal consequences. This paper gives (a) a brief overview of current Swedish and Norwegian research into this problem in ordinary work place situations (Leymann, 1986, 1987, 1988), and (b) a description of an ongoing development of procedures where lawyers and psychologists cooperated to ameliorate this problem.

The Operational Definition of Mobbing

Investigations carried out notably in one of the major Swedish iron and steel plants (Leymann & Tallgen, 1989) support the following definition of mobbing:

Psychical terror or mobbing in working life means hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual. There are also cases where such mobbing is mutual until one of the participants becomes the underdog. These actions take place often (almost every day) and over a long period (at least for six months) and, because of this frequency and duration, result in considerable psychic, psychosomatic and social misery. This definition eliminates temporary conflicts and focuses on the transition zone where the psychosocial situation starts to result in psychiatric and/or psychosomatic pathological states.

In order to establish the mobbing frequency in an organization, I have developed the LIPT questionnaire (Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorization, Leymann, 1989). The method has been validated and has an enhanced capacity to differentiate between mobbed and non-mobbed employees. It also shows that this social situation is not linear, that is, people hardly ever suffer from degrees of mobbing — either one is a victim or one is not.

INITIAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

Mobbing of adults as a phenomenon has, up to now, been discussed in our research in detail from the point of view of social structure, the occurrence of specific actions and the different ways in which the victim risks being expelled from working life. Also there have been some, what I would like to call, indicatorial investigations that point to a frighteningly high occurrence of this mode of behavior.

This research work has, up to now, concentrated on the conceptualization of the phenomenon and its localization in society, which proved to be extremely difficult since it was well hidden. The conceptualization permitted a number of deductive conclusions. In addition, a number of preliminary investigations of an indicatorial type were carried out that attempted to locate quantitative occurrences of individual subspects (the suicide study mentioned below is one such indicatorial investigation).

The Structure of Critical Events: From Mobbing to Expulsion

At present the real reason why mobbing occurs at workplaces is unknown, although there are a number of hypotheses, as will be shown later. Harassment can go on for years, despite the fact that a supervisor, or some other manager, should have been able to stop it very early. In some cases it is not clear, at the start, who will be the victim. In these cases, the victim becomes apparent when one party to the conflict gains the upper hand. In this field of research, the victim is defined as the person in the schism who has lost his/her "coping resources" (Leymann, 1988 - see also below). Four critical incident phases can be found:

Phase 1: The Original Critical Incident

As regards the investigated situations, it is known that the triggering situation most often observed is a conflict (usually over work); but not much is known in detail about critical incidents and other probable triggering states in working life. Hypothetically, this phase is very short and the next phase will be entered into as soon as the focused person's workmates and management reveal stigmatizing actions. In Leif's case, the real reason was envy over his wages.

Phase 2: Mobbing and Stigmatizing

Many of the communicative actions which can be observed occur fairly often in everyday life. But within the framework of the harassment phenomenon, they have an injurious effect, as these actions are used consistently and systematically over a long period, with the intention of causing damage (or putting someone out of action). All the observed actions have the common denominator of being based on the desire to "get at a person" or punish him/her. Thus manipulation is the main characteristic of the event. What is shown to be manipulated is:

1. The victim's reputation (rumor mongering, slandering, holding up to ridicule).
2. Communication toward the victim (the victim is not allowed to express him/herself, no one is speaking to him or her, continual loud-voiced criticism and meaningful glances).
3. The social circumstances (the victim is isolated, sent to Coventry).
4. The nature of or the possibility of performing in his/her work (no work given, humiliating or meaningless work tasks).
5. Violence and threats of violence.

For an exhaustive description of all these attitudes of hostility, see Leymann (1986). For Leif's part the mobbing sequence was that he, at a first stage, was ridiculed and derided and then, when he protested, treated as an enemy and sent on false missions to damage his reputation.

Phase 3: Personnel Administration

When management steps in, the case becomes officially a "case." In the research mentioned above it has been shown that, during this phase, people can be confronted with serious violations of justice. Management tends to take over the prejudices of the victim's workmates. This is one of the outcomes of the mobbing situation, which turns the person into a marked individual. Those around regularly assume that the cause of the problem lies in the

deviant personality of the victim (that is, one observes the victim's defensive behavior and from that draws the conclusion that the victim is suffering from a personality problem). The situation is complicated since personnel administration is governed by different working-environment legislation in different countries, with the notion of what constitutes a violation varying according to the applicable law.

Leif's work situation became so manipulated that his superiors noticed his low performance; they "bought" the rumors that had been spread about him (the mad Dane) and relocated him to a job where he could not "do so much damage."

Phase 4: Expulsion

As far as the mobbing scenario at workplaces is concerned, one knows quite well what social circumstances people end up in, when they have been expelled from working life. In the Scandinavian countries, the most dangerous situations that give rise to further stigmatizing are long-term sick leave, no work provided (but still employed), relocation to degrading work tasks, and psychiatric treatment.

Leif suffered psychosomatic problems because of his treatment, went on the sick list, defended himself aggressively against his assailants, became a *persona non grata* and ended up in a situation where it became increasingly difficult for him to find new work. (Staff departments usually ring each other to obtain references about applicants for jobs.)

Psychical, Social, and Psychosomatic Effects

It seems to be a general clinical experience among physicians working in occupational health departments that immediate and grave psychosomatic effects can be observed. I have located (Leymann, 1987) the number of suicides having this background as being between 100 and 300; this means that about 10%–15% of the total number of suicides in Sweden each year have this type of background. The Swedish Salaried Staff Union and the Civil Service Staff Association have found that over half of their members, who resign without having another job to go to, have done so because they can no longer stand the conflicts they have been exposed to (Asking, 1987). In Norway, an opinion poll among members of unions affiliated with the Norwegian TUC showed that about 1% of the working population (some 20,000 in Norway) have or had this problem. Translated into Swedish terms, this would mean about 50,000 people — a figure which can also be obtained from other estimates. In the United States, this would mean that about one million employees might suffer from this type of problem.

Among the social consequences, we can assume a presumably high expulsion percentage (according to the definition above), many periods of sick leave over the years, discreditable transfers to other work, social isolation, employment without any real work to do, as well as ignominious psychiatric examinations and diagnoses. (We suspect that there is a substantial amount of "overkill" in psychiatric diagnoses because of inefficient social anamneses. It is clear that here we must expect considerable psychosocial occupational illness.)

To sum up, one can point to a number of effects which, up to now, have only been examined clinically and not statistically. However, these effects are very grave:

Socially: Social isolation, stigmatizing, voluntary unemployment, social maladjustment.

Social-psychological: Loss of coping resources; many coping resources are linked to social situations, and as these change in a negative direction, the coping system breaks down.

Psychological: A feeling of desperation and total helplessness, a feeling of great rage about lack of legal remedies, great anxiety and despair.

Psychosomatic and psychiatric: Depressions, hyperactivity, compulsion, suicides, psychosomatic illness. There are suspicions that the experiences deriving from this social situation have an effect on the immune system (one company physician observed a couple of “mysterious” cases of cancer).

The Economic Consequences for the Organization and for Society

We must assume that the economic consequences—like the psychosocial—are considerable. A person can be paid without having any real work to do (or none at all), and this can go on for years. Long periods of sick leave; a catastrophic drop in production by the whole group; the necessity for frequent intervention by personnel officers, personnel consultants, managers of various grades, occupational health staff, external consultants, the company’s health care centers and so on.

All this extra effort, combined with loss of productive work, can be estimated to amount to between 30,000 and 100,000 U.S. dollars per year for the employee exposed to such mobbing. We know of cases in the USA, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, West Germany, and Scandinavia where these situations have lasted for ten years or more.

Ongoing Research

With grants from the Swedish Work Environment Fund, a number of research projects will be initiated during the next three years. First and foremost of interest is the qualitative occurrence of mobbing both in Sweden as a whole and in various branches of industry and commerce. These investigations have already begun. An examination will also be made of causal relationships: Are there specific organizational factors which favor the growth of these situations and course of events? In what respects can it be a group phenomenon or does it depend on personal characteristics? The target of this research will be to develop preventative working methods and techniques to help the victim break the vicious cycle. International comparisons will also be made. Hypothetically, one can assume that in the progression of critical events in mobbing Phases 1 and 2 are similar, regardless of the cultural background of the countries concerned. Phases 3 and 4 will probably show major differences, as the course of events will be affected greatly by labor law legislation in the various countries (Phase 3) and their national health and social security organization (Phase 4).

AMELIORATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Obviously, there is reason to assume that in Phases 3 and 4, there is, or at least should be, close cooperation between psychologists and lawyers in responding to the phenomenon of mobbing. If, in any country, trade unions play a prominent role, they will of course be involved. In the account given below, I have assumed a “Scandinavian situation” where the unions are powerful. In countries where this is not the case, their part must be taken by a lawyer or some other person.

Actions Against Expulsion: Conciliation and Arbitration

Whatever is done to intervene in this iniquitous progression, action or actions taken must, primarily, be aimed at preventing the victim from sliding down the slope toward expulsion. This process must be stopped dead in its tracks the moment one starts working on the case.

If the problem has gone as far as Phase 3, both psychological and legal action will be needed. By this stage, at the latest, it will be essential for the victim to be represented by

somebody — a representative of the local union branch or, in more difficult cases, from the union head office. In Norway, for example, those who have been victims of mobbing have built up a very effective self-help organization.

Unfortunately we have not found, so far, very much help in the existing negotiation literature. The reason for this might be that the psychological as well as the legal work procedures to be carried out have to be integrated. Nevertheless, the recent work of de Bono (1985) seems to be in line with our observations to date. The description of our experiences, given below, is our first publication of them so far.

There exist a number of prerequisites for the successful conclusion of conciliation negotiations or arbitration procedures. The principles for mediation in very grave cases of conflict between workers should be:

- setting up an ethically defensible form of discussion;
- setting up formal procedures, agreed to by both the parties;
- absolutely avoiding psychic or social damage;
- treating the two parties as if they are “on the same level with each other”; neither treats the other in a patronizing manner; and
- having a conciliator be very active in commuting between the parties and in making independent proposals.

The principle of avoiding social damage dictates that the target of conflict solution should not be, as it is at present, elimination of the conflict by the expulsion of the marked person. One would not look for a social solution for the individual in society’s so-called “Caring services” (the National Health Service or the Department of Health and Social Security in the U.K, for example). The principal aim of conciliation to solve a conflict must be the elimination of (preferably, a solution to) the conflict, while granting the weaker party certain basic rights.

Experience from other forms of conciliation work in the labor market shows that two more important prerequisites must exist: First, the conciliator must have such a status that s/he can act as a conciliatory authority vis-à-vis the higher-ranking party. Second, both parties must have access to ethical reprisals if conciliation should become deadlocked. Examples of such reprisals are: (a) ethically based social pressure from those closest to the case forcing both parties to reach a solution; (b) publicity for the case to create a wider social interest which, in turn, can exert pressure in the form of a moral point of view; (c) access to an impartial hearing, but not, however, before certain formal procedures have been exercised; in the United States for example, collective bargaining agreements between employer and employees specify these procedures (Library of Congress, 1983).

My experience, gained from insight into a large number of conflicts, is that legal matters are not usually a hindrance. Often the weaker party, the one threatened with expulsion, wants some sort of honorable rehabilitation or an assurance that s/he was not solely the guilty party in the conflict. It is puzzling that we have never found a single case where the employer, as the other party, could find himself at fault and give the employee some redress for wrongs suffered. Usually, in cases where the conflict has gotten completely out of hand, the employer representative demands some form of total capitulation to his demands. As I have said, my experience inclines me to think that this kind of experienced violation is the factor which drives the situation to its climax. For this reason the problem, in principle, should be easier to solve if one can find suitable conflict-reducing forms of conciliation, as

well as a humane and ethical approach toward dealing with those in a state of extreme mental and social desperation.

The means by which the conciliation is carried out, the principles which should exist and how they are to be developed are, at this moment, the subject of a research project in cooperation with employer federations and trade unions. The work will require both legal and psychological expertise. The proposed procedure to be carried out is as follows:

1. The parties agree that conciliation is to take place.
2. A representative is provided for the employee, either from the trade union or a firm of consultants. (It is absolutely necessary for the employee to have a representative; the employer side should also have one. Under no circumstances should the opposing parties be allowed to personally come into conflict during the conciliation process.)
3. The parties and those involved in the conciliation listen to a lecture on the results of research up to that time. (The objective is to refocus from personalities as a cause of the conflict to complicated situations in general as a cause of conflicts.)
4. The conciliator negotiates on the conciliation procedures.
5. The conciliator commutes between the parties with proposals while at the same time trying to moderate their expectations. (It is not unusual for each party to demand the total capitulation of the other; a compromise solution is required in most cases.)
6. A binding legal agreement is drawn up.
7. In most cases the victim will need psychic rehabilitation.

But even if we will be able to solve many cases in the future, there will always be people who will either be expelled and/or so damaged that psychological and social rehabilitation must be considered. Ego-supportive and/or reality-supportive psychotherapy will then be of immediate importance. However at the moment it is not clear that this approach would help some of the people who have been the victims of mobbing, as they seemed to have been gravely impaired both psychologically and socially. In these cases supplementary rehabilitation methods may have to be developed, paying special attention to the social and legal factors.

It is remarkable how central is the feeling of violation of rights in all the cases which have been examined. From the psychiatric point of view this observation is highly interesting. A logically justified experience of being gravely violated in connection with the typical (and logical) behavior pattern in this situation — namely, a struggle for moral redress against forces which portray the victim as someone with personality problems, is frequently misinterpreted by psychiatrists as a sign of paranoia. There have been a number of observed cases where the victim of mobbing has been subjected to a compulsory detention order in a psychiatric hospital on those very grounds (for instance, see Leymann, 1986). Further research will need to find ways of improving the psychiatric anamneses so that its social sector is given a more reasonable level of diagnostic weight.

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