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Workplace Mobbing: A New Frontier for the Social Work Profession

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In the United States, reference to mobbing generally conjures up images of a rowdy street crowd on the verge of committing a violent act against some hapless individual. Within this context, mobbing occurs in full public view and becomes a force within itself, often with no legal or moral justification. Mobbing involves rabble-rousers, not docile, quiet co-workers.

The use of the term mobbing to describe an abusive work environment perpetrated by a group is prevalent in other parts of the world, especially Europe. While the United States has yet to adopt this terminology, occurrences of employment-related mobbing within the United States are well documented (Davenport, et al, 1999). Bosses and others who inflict psychological abuse on their coworkers constitutes one of the most common and serious problems facing employees in the workplace (Yamada, 2000, p. 475).

Nearly 100 million Americans work within an employee-employer environment (NASW, 2000). Aside from the indispensable paycheck, work can provide an individual with self-esteem and status in the community. People often define themselves by the work they do; therefore, problems that occur at work have special meaning and often contribute to or aggravate problems at home or in the community.

For social workers, the issue of workplace mobbing is significant because of adverse emotional and other effects on the individual, the community, and society as a whole. How an individual is treated in the workplace environment is a fundamental human rights issue, as everyone is entitled to dignity and respect. Because social work is a human rights profession, it is imperative that practitioners understand workplace mobbing and its connection to basic human rights issues.

This article examines different aspects of workplace mobbing, including a definition of mobbing, the environment in which mobbing occurs, characteristics of mobbers and their targets, the effects of mobbing, legal aspects of mobbing, as well as strategies to prevent the occurrence of mobbing. The article also explains why mobbing is a violation of an individual's basic human rights.

Mobbing as a Workplace Phenomenon

The word mob means a disorderly crowd engaged in lawless violence (Davenport et al, 1999, p. 20). The term derives from the Latin words "mobile vulgus," meaning vacillating crowd (p. 20). Until recently, references to mobbing had no connection to the workplace. However, in the 1980's, Heinz Leymann, a German industrial psychologist, used the term mobbing to describe group violence among adults in the workplace (Leymann & Gustavssson, 1984). This concept of workplace mobbing can be defined as follows:

> *Mobbing is an emotional assault. It begins when an individual becomes the target of disrespectful and harmful behavior. Through innuendo, rumors, and public discrediting, a hostile environment is created in which one individual gathers others to willingly or unwillingly participate in continuous malevolent actions to force a person out of the workplace (Davenport et al. 1999, p.33).*

Leymann began his research in workplace mobbing by investigating people who others claimed were "difficult" in the workplace (Leymann & Gustavsson, 1984). He found that many of these so-called "difficult" people did not exhibit such behavior at the beginning of their employment. His findings indicate that work structure and culture fostered certain situations that prompted others to label these people as difficult. Once an employer or fellow employees identified a person as difficult, the employer created reasons for terminating his or her employment. Leymann described this process

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of identifying certain employees as "difficult" as mobbing (1996).

In 1984, Leymann published his first report addressing his findings on workplace mobbing (Leymann & Gustavsson, 1984). To date, Leymann subsequently published more than 60 articles and books on the topic. In addition to Leymann's research on mobbing, others have examined instances of mobbing in Norway, Finland, United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Italy, France, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Africa (Bjorkqvist, et al, 1994; Niedl, 1995; Zapf & Leymann 1996; Einarsen & Rakens, 1997; Keashly, 1998; Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper 1999; Groeblinghoff & Becker, 1996; Resch & Schubinski, 1996; Vartia, 1996). While research pertaining to workplace mobbing varies as to the extent of and reasons behind these activities, there is an underlying consensus that mobbing often causes severe health problems for the mobbing victim. This act of ongoing emotional and physical abuse should be an area of major concern to occupational and counseling social workers.

In the United States, references to mobbing as a workplace phenomenon are infrequent. Instead, researchers have used terms like bullying or emotional abuse to describe behaviors similar to mobbing. For instance, "workplace bullying" refers to the deliberate, hurtful, and repeated mistreatment of a target by a bully who is driven by a desire to control another person (Namie & Namie, 1998). Workplace bullying includes the intentional infliction of a hostile work environment upon an employee by a coworker or coworkers, typically through a combination of verbal and nonverbal abuse (Yamada, 2000).

Not all researchers in the United States use the term bullying to refer to workplace mistreatment. Some simply refer to aggression and harassment in the workplace (Neuman & Baron, 1997). Others describe workplace suffering as emotional abuse, characterized by hostile verbal, nonverbal, and nonphysical behaviors directed at a person(s), such that the target's sense of him/herself as a competent person and worker is negatively affected (Keashly, 1998).

As noted, while the concept of workplace mobbing has been well established in the United States, adoption of the actual term mobbing has not occurred. However, use of the term mobbing highlights both the severity of the process and the role and involvement of a group. Bullying gives the impression of a single individual perpetrating aggressive or physical harm on the targeted employee. Yet, subtle acts can be just as devastating to the targeted employee as obvious, intentional acts. Emotional abuse does not adequately describe the phenomenon of mobbing and tends to focus on the victim, when attention should also be paid to the perpetrators.

The United States should adopt the term mobbing as it relates to the workplace.

Mobbing combines elements of bullying and emotional abuse as they relate to workplace behaviors perpetrated by a group. Because mobbing is a process that usually involves a number of steps and/or circumstances, the term more accurately describes what is actually happening in the workplace than bullying. Of course, bullying and emotional abuse remain valid concepts. However, the term mobbing reflects group exploitation of another more effectively, focusing on the process leading to emotional abuse.

Extent of Mobbing

In the United States, one researcher has estimated that as many as 20 million employees face workplace abuse or mobbing on a daily basis (Hornstein, 1996). One study has shown that, in the course of a year, one in four workers was attacked, threatened, or harassed (Northwestern National Life Insurance, 1993). Estimates of workplace mobbing activity in other countries vary. For example, in the United Kingdom, one researcher estimated that one-half of all employees might be subjected to mobbing at some time during their careers, while in

Sweden, that figure is about 25% (Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999). In 1990, Leymann found that 3.5% of the Swedish labor force (4.4 million persons) were victims of mobbing at any given time (Leymann, 1995). In Norway, 8.6% of the population considered themselves to be victims of mobbing during the previous six months (Vartia, 1996).

While estimates of mobbing vary widely, certainly a broad public interest in the topic does exist within the United States. Many Americans believe that civility has been lost in the modern workplace. As a result of recent economic and social trends, including a global profit squeeze and declining unionization, the modern workplace has created conditions for abusive behavior toward workers (Yamada, 2000). The popular market offers numerous books on how to deal with difficult people and abusive behaviors at work (Keashly, 1998). Yet, despite this broad public interest, limited organizational research exists in the United States on workplace mobbing. While studies address work relationships as buffers or barriers in dealing with work stress, those studies usually do not focus on these relationships as stressors in their own right (p. 87).

The pervasiveness of this form of workplace abuse necessitates that social workers understand the phenomena of mobbing. The tendency to classify employees as difficult is overly simplistic. The reality of workplace conflict and abuse requires a much deeper comprehension of mobbing dynamics, culture, and other related factors.

Conditions for Mobbing

Although mobbing can occur in any workplace, there are certain conditions that create environments in which mobbing is more likely to occur. Strict hierarchical organizations, authoritarian management styles, and poor communication within the work group all increase risks associated with abusive treatment (Leymann, 1990; Vartia, 1996). Some researchers have found that mobbing occurs more frequently in non-profit sectors, including educational and health care settings, than among larger, for-profit companies (Davenport et al, 1999). Persons poorly versed in management may be more likely to head or administer non-profit organizations than for-profit companies. Also, the financial pressures pertinent to non-profit organizations may cause higher incidents of mobbing. However, other findings suggest that there is no greater incidence of mobbing among non-profit organizations when compared with for-profit settings (Hoel, et al, 1999).

Regardless of the employer's business status, there are specific workplace conditions or precursors that foster mobbing environments. These conditions are summarized as follows (Davenport, 1999):

- Excessive bottom-line orientation at the expense of human resources
- Highly hierarchical structures
- Lack of an open door policy
- Poor communication channels
- Poor conflict resolution abilities and/or ineffective conflict management or grievance procedures in place
- Weak leadership
- Pervasive scapegoat mentality
- Little or no team work
- Ineffective education on diversity

In most workplace situations, mobbing occurs as a combination of factors, with perhaps the most significant factor being the attitudes and/or behavior of management. Unless management or administrators recognize mobbing as a great harm to their organization or company, conditions that allow mobbing to exist will continue to fester.

Characteristics of Mobbers

To understand why workplace mobbing occurs, it is important to identify those characteristics commonly associated with mobbers. To date, there is little empirical research dealing with the psychology of workplace mobbers in the United States. Researchers have suggested that the mobber's actions stem from his or her inability to value life and difference, from pretense and dishonesty, to an

inflated sense of self, or from a need for self aggrandizement (Davenport, 1999, p. 58). These researchers have described the mobber's personality as excessively controlling, cowardly, neurotic, and power hungry. A mobber's actions may be driven by jealousy and envy derived from feelings of insecurity and fear. One study also found that people resort to workplace mobbing to cover up their own deficiencies (Leymann, 1993). Fear and insecurity about their own reputation or position compel them to denigrate someone else. However, social workers should view such generalizations about the personality traits of workplace mobbers with caution because the empirical research is not yet well developed (Hoel, et al, 1999).

The group dynamic is an important facet of workplace mobbing that distinguishes it from the singularized bullying tactic. As such, mobbing needs to be examined in the context of group dynamics. Why do persons who mob seldom act alone? Theories of group dynamics suggest that individuals who have a weak sense of self-esteem feel more secure in a group in which they find support (Westhues, 1998; Davenport, et al 1999; Mayer, 1955). The combined power of the group makes workplace abuse much easier to perpetrate. Members of a group can put tremendous pressure on an individual to conform (Neck & Manz, 1994).

In connection with understanding characteristics of workplace mobbers, the reasons behind mobbing also require study. According to Leymann, there are four main reasons why individuals engage in mobbing behavior (Leymann, 1993):

1. *To force someone to adapt to a group norm.* "If they don't adapt, they have to go" would be the reasoning of someone driven by these motives. An overriding belief is that the group can only be cohesive and strong if uniformity exists.
2. *To revel in animosity.* People engage in mobbing to "eliminate" those they do not like. Relative position in the organizational hierarchy does not really matter. Superiors, co-workers, or subordinates alike, when driven by personal dislikes, can initiate the process.
3. *To gain pleasure.* Sadistically motivated mobbers derive pleasure from the torment they inflict.
4. *To reinforce prejudices.* People use mobbing behaviors because they dislike or hate people who happen to belong to a certain social, racial, or ethnic group.

In addition to the above reasons for mobbing, envy, weak managers, competition for tasks, advancement, and the supervisor's favor and approval appear relevant (Vartia, 1996).

Targets of Workplace Mobbers

Any examination of workplace mobbing needs to also consider the targeted employees or supervisors. Based on existing research, workplace mobbers choose victims who fit three common profiles (Namie & Namie, 1998). Mobbers typically target "nice people" because the mobber believes that these people will offer the least resistance—in other words, nice people are easy prey. Similarly, "vulnerable people" are also targeted because they are less likely to retaliate or stand up to the mobber. In contrast to nice and vulnerable people, mobbers frequently target individuals comprising the "best and brightest." Often occupied with feelings of inadequacy, mobbers try to undermine others who achieve more at the workplace, with the goal of putting the best and brightest in their place. Of course, workplace mobbers may target individuals with profiles other than the three described above. However, based on available research, these three profiles—nice people, vulnerable people, and the best and brightest—constitute the most frequent targets of mobbers.

Mobbing as a Process

Mobbing is a process of abusive behaviors inflicted over time. Mobbing generally begins with minor acts that eventually gain momentum and escalate into major action. Leymann (1996) distinguishes five phases in the mobbing process:

Phase 1: The initial phase consists of critical incidents or a conflict.
Phase 2: During the second phase, mobbing dynamics come into motion, with the mobbers committing aggressive acts against their target.
Phase 3: The third phase introduces management, who often misjudge the situation. Instead of extending support to the mobbers' target, management begins to isolate and eliminate the target.
Phase 4: Here the target or victim is now labeled as difficult, contentious, or mentally ill. This phase reinforces the negativity of the situation in respect to the target.
Phase 5: The final phase is expulsion. The mobbers may eventually accomplish their underlying purpose and force the victim out of the workplace.

Not all workplace mobbing follows exactly the five phases. For instance, the target may challenge actions by the mobbers and succeed in stopping the mobbing process, although this would require support from management. Not all mobbing victims leave their positions either. However, based on existing research, the process of mobbing generally follows these five phases.

Effects of Mobbing

Mobbing clearly affects the mental health of the target or victim. Individuals subjected to workplace mobbing have suffered from anxiety and post traumatic stress disorder (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996). Mobbing can cause severe illness, occupational and earning disability, social exclusion, and even suicide (Groeblingshoff, Becker 1996).

While studies in Europe have identified workplace mobbing as a social stressor that leads to negative emotional effects on the targeted individual, no precise employer cost analysis exists or is possible (Niedl, 1995). Each mobbing case presents its own set of circumstances, thereby preventing the formation of a generalized cost analysis. Existing organizational studies have demonstrated that mobbing can lead to lower productivity and should be seen as a cost factor that has negative influence on overall work effectiveness (Niedl, 1996).

Legal Protection Against Mobbing

The United States prides itself on legal precedent to redress discrimination and other wrongs perpetrated in the workplace. Yet, when it comes to workplace mobbing, the United States lags behind employee protections offered in other Western countries. As Yamada (2000) reveals:

> *Given the negative ramifications workplace [bullying] has for employees and employers, one might naturally look to the legal system to encourage employers to prevent and punish bullying behavior and to provide relief to employees when it occurs. Unfortunately, the growing body of statutory and common-law protections for workers—particularly status-based employment discrimination laws and tort claims for emotional distress—have not been effective against workplace bullying. Consistent with the law's historic reluctance to regulate the everyday employment arena, workplace bullying has yet to be fully recognized and addressed by the American legal system (p.476).*

In contrast to the United States, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Austria, and Germany have enacted proactive and protective occupational safety laws, which promote emotional well-being (Davenport et al 1999). The inclusion of emotional well-being as an employee right specifically aims to prevent workplace mobbing. While these countries recognize the legal need to prevent workplace mobbing, no comparable movement appears to be imminent in the United States. Perhaps Americans are too accepting of a rough and tumble employment style and fear a floodgate of litigation if an employee could sue her employer and colleagues for mobbing. Yet, the significant harm caused by workplace mobbing surely needs attention from legislators.

Prevention of Mobbing

Obviously, no employer wants to be accused of condoning or instigating workplace mobbing. Even in Europe, where anti-mobbing laws exist, employers dislike the topic of mobbing because of its negative connotations (Resch & Schubinski, 1996). Employers might claim that they already have anti-mobbing programs and, therefore, do not need to create a program specifically to prevent mobbing. Employers want others to believe that their workplace environment could not possibly allow mobbing. Instead, employers favor programs that focus on a specific employee deficiency, like alcohol or substance abuse on the job.

Considering the general reluctance of employers to recognize workplace mobbing as a social problem, the initial step toward prevention requires a greater awareness of mobbing activities. Increased discussion about mobbing in the workplace and further research on the topic is necessary. Unfortunate-ly, social work literature on the topic of workplace mobbing is nonexistent. Because social workers frequently find themselves confronted with issues pertaining to workplace mobbing, they should be at the forefront of understanding and preventing mobbing.

Once an employer recognizes the economic and social costs of workplace mobbing, resistance to implementing a program or policies directed toward preventing mobbing should decrease. A program seeking to prevent workplace mobbing should include the following aspects: education, management training, and procedures to redress mobbing (Leymann, 1993).

Education

Education about workplace mobbing should be provided to all employees, including management level staff. This education should encompass a definition of mobbing, as well as symptoms and effects associated with mobbing. Employers could hold regular workshops on mobbing, with occasional guest speakers who have expertise on the topic. Workshops could also include specific training exercises in the prevention of mobbing.

Management training

Management training should incorporate the development of skills to recognize employee conflicts and proactive methods for remedying mobbing activity. This training would highlight early warning signals of the mobbing process to assist supervisors in effectively addressing potential mobbing situations before they became volatile.

Procedures to redress mobbing

Employers should establish clear guidelines for employees to take when incidents of mobbing occur. An employer must ensure employees that it will not allow retaliation for having raised a legitimate issue relating to mobbing. Grievance procedures should protect the individual complaining of mobbing, even if she or he opposes the general viewpoint of a group. Establishing an anti-mobbing policy can be compared to the development of any organizational policy that establishes the norms of acceptable conduct. For instance, employers often have guidelines on sexual harassment, substance abuse, and unethical behavior. A policy aimed at preventing mobbing is no different from those guidelines.

One social work academic has addressed the topic of preventing workplace abuse through his studies on ethics. In developing a model for an Ethics Audit for social workers, F. Reamer proposed a process where social workers evaluate a risk assessment on an ongoing basis in their agencies. While Reamer's focus is on ethical risks pertaining to clients (e.g., confidentiality and privacy), he also addresses issues with colleagues, like defamation and practitioner impairment (Reamer, 2000). Reamer's organizational risk assessment model aims to point out areas of difficulty that can be corrected at an early stage (Reamer 2001).

Prevention of mobbing requires awareness and recognition that mobbing can exist in many workplaces. Only after acknowledging that mobbing activities do compromise the workplace environment can employers take steps to effectively prevent mobbing.

Social Workers and Continuing Education

It is important for social workers to be informed about workplace mobbing so that they can develop appropriate prevention strategies. Regardless of setting and position, be it as a supervisor, manager, case worker, clinical social worker, knowledge about mobbing is needed, since the social work literature has not addressed this topic much. This knowledge can help social workers to better help their clients.

Mobbing and Human Rights

Work is an essential part of a person's life. Individuals often define themselves through their work experiences, and they usually spend the majority of the day at their respective workplace. Therefore, treatment of employees at the workplace holds great importance.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document approved by all member nations of the United Nations, states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood" (United Nations, 1948). Another important human rights document recognizes the "right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favorable conditions" of work. Workers are entitled to "safe and healthy working conditions" (United Nations, 1976).

Social work is clearly a profession based on human rights (Ife, 2001; Reichert, (forthcoming); Reichert, 2001a; Reichert, 2001b; International Federation of Social Workers, 2000; Staub-Bernasconi, 1998; Witkin, 1998). How a person is treated in the workplace is a human rights issue, and workplace mobbing violates established human rights doctrines. By connecting workplace mobbing with infringements on human rights, social workers can better promote anti-mobbing policies.

Summary

In the United States, the subject of workplace mobbing is not addressed in social work literature. While one social work academic indirectly touches upon the topic with studies on ethics, a more specific discussion on work place mobbing is needed within the social work profession. Without understanding the process of mobbing, a social worker could make false assumptions and focus on the target, without fully understanding the workplace environment. Workplace mobbing also violates an individual's human rights, giving even more urgency to exposure of mobbing by the social work profession. The social work profession should take the lead in addressing the important issue of workplace mobbing.

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