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MOBBING IN A WORKPLACE SETTING

MOBBING W ŚRODOWISKU PRACY

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Słowa kluczowe: mobbing, środowisko pracy

Abstract

Mobbing: activities consisting in a persistent and lasting harassing and intimidating a coworker or a superior, evoking in the victim a depressed sense of professional usefulness causing or aiming at humiliation, ridiculing the employee, his isolation or elimination from the team. A phenomenon specific for mobbing is manipulation.

Particularly common mobbing practices include gossip, improper evaluation of work performance, snide remarks and concealing important information. Individual consequences of mobbing are a decreased level of professional competencies, decreased effectiveness, psychosomatic diseases, symptoms of PTSD (*Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*), in extreme cases inability to work and live without assistance, suicide attempts.

Streszczenie

Mobbing - działania polegające na uporczywym i długotrwałym nękaniu i zastraszaniu współpracownika lub przełożonego wywołujące tej osoby zaniżoną ocenę przydatności zawodowej, powodujące lub mające na celu poniżenie, ośmieszenie pracownika, izolowanie go bądź wyeliminowanie z zespołu. Dla mobbingu specyficzna jest manipulacja.

Do najczęściej stosowanych podczas mobbingu działań należą: plotka, błędna ocena efektywności pracy, docinki, zatajanie ważnych informacji. Konsekwencje indywidualne: obniżający się poziom kompetencji zawodowych pracownika, spadek wydajności w pracy, choroby psychosomatyczne, objawy PTSD; w krańcowych przypadkach: niezdolność do pracy zawodowej i samodzielnego życia, podejmowanie prób samobójczych.

Motto: "A blow delivered by a saber may be healed,
but a blow delivered by a tongue may not".
Chinese proverb

Introduction

Work is the essence of the life of an adult man, allowing for earning material resources to support the family and also for pursuing his passions. Satisfaction from work is regarded a key factor determining the general sense of life satisfaction, which at the same time supports one's health. The relationship is bilateral in character; thus, satisfaction from work affects the quality and satisfaction from life and vice versa (Argyle 2004).

The progress of civilization and the increasing pace of life – the true *signum temporis* – have made work increasingly more challenging. Along with political changes, work, associated with an increasing degree of stress, is becoming a commodity more and more hard to obtain rather than a privilege. The literature on the man's functioning in a workplace setting frequently addresses the problem of poor management and its consequences, drawing attention to lack of work culture and professional ethics. Various investigators analyze the causes of such pathological phenomena as workaholism, professional burnout or mobbing.

"Mobbing" is defined as a systematic form of mental violence effected by colleagues, superiors or inferiors of the victim. It is a derivative of poor work organization and management style, which leads to poor interpersonal relations in a company. In case of an employee, mobbing results in loss of health and increases the risk of the victim developing professional burnout (Laschinger, Grau, Finegan, Wilk 2010, Merecz, Mościcka, Drabek 2005, Trépanier, Fernet, Austrin 2013). The emergence of conflicts that may progress into mobbing is facilitated by lack of a sense of social safety and a fight to keep one's job.

Terminology and etymology of the term "mobbing"

Mobbing¹ is a process of harassment at work; organized activities aimed against a single individual in order to effect his mental and professional destabilization. The term, officially accepted in Poland, is sometimes employed interchangeably with "bullying²". Bullying is a term that denotes persecution of a selected pupil by his peers at school. Suggestive terms for pathological relationships in the workplace setting that appear in the literature on the subject are listed by Małgorzata Gamian-Wilk (2011): "*moral molestation*" (Hirigoyen 2003), "*mental terror*" (Leymann 1990), "*trauma experienced at work, petty tyranny*" (Ashforth 1994), "*scapegoating*" (Eagle, Newton 1981); in the United States, there appears the term "*harassment*" (Brodsky 1976), in Japan, the phenomenon has been termed "*ijime*" (Meek 2004) (in: Gamian-Wilk 2011). "*Tortures in white gloves*" is the title of a report on mobbing in a workplace setting used by Ewa Ger (2003).

The term "*mobbing*", coined by Konrad Lorenz (1996) to denote animal behavior he observed (a herd turning against a representative of a different species), was employed by Heinz Leymann, who in the eighties of the 20th century used the word to describe similar mechanisms operating among employees in a company. His studies focused on a situation when coworkers or a superior harassed a single person for a long time in order to get the company rid of the said employee. The clinical description of the victims of mobbing was provided by Leymann; such individuals were defined as "maladapted, helpless, frightened, affected with various psychosomatic disorders, depressive and behaving impulsively" (Leymann 1992; in: Warszewska-Makuch 2012a, p. 19).

¹ mob (ang.) – a large disorderly crowd, the populace; to crowd around and jostle (something or somebody), to crowd into.

² bully (ang.) – a person who is cruel to weaker people, a thug; to terrorize, to harass.

Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian zoologist and ornithologist, used the term "*mobbing*" to describe a specific phenomenon observed in the world of nature:

► when a herd of small animals attacks a predator which hunts such animals.

"More similar to aggression than an attack of a predator upon its victim is the extremely interesting reverse activity, namely the counterattack of the hunted animals upon its hunter. Especially animals living in herds collectively attack the dangerous predator everywhere they can get to it. In English, such an activity is called "*mobbing*". The Polish language (...) does not have a special term to denote such an activity, so we shall say here that for example crows or other birds <harass> (...) an eagle owl, a cat or any other night hunter when they see it in daylight. (...) In addition to a didactic importance (showing the aggressor to young individuals; footnote by the author), harassment of predatory mammals by jackdaws and geese also has a primary sense of making the enemy's life unbearable. Jackdaws clearly actively attack the enemy, while geese frighten it with their cries, large number and brave actions. Heavy Canadian geese form a closed phalanx and jostle the fox even on dry land; I have never seen the fox in such a situation to try and capture a goose. With cupped ears and showing a face that is decidedly full of disgust, looking over its shoulder at the clanging flock of geese, it slowly departs, trying only to <save its face>.

Harassment is obviously especially effective in larger herbivores capable of defending themselves that – when in a large number – dare to even attack large predators. According to credible descriptions, zebras would harass even a leopard when they manage to take it by surprise in a bare steppe".

(Lorenz 1996, p. 48-50)

Definition, legal regulations

There are numerous definitions of mobbing³. Some difficulties while defining mental terror are posed by differentiated workplace settings and long lists of reported mobbing behaviors. Unethical behaviors, which constitute a series of gradual mental devastation and exclusion of the victim from the community, are subject to legal penalty.

In keeping with the Polish law, "mobbing denotes activities or behaviors associated with an employee or directed against an employee and consisting in persistent long-term harassing and intimidating the said employee, evoking a decreased sense of professional usefulness, resulting in or aiming at belittling or ridiculing the employee, his isolation or elimination from the team of coworkers" (Penal Code 2010, art. 94³, §2.). To the category of mobbing belong detrimental behaviors occurring at least once a week and persisting for a period not shorter than six months.

Marie-France Hirigoyen (2003) calls mobbing "moral molestation". While defining the phenomenon, she emphasizes the psychological aspect of unethical practices occurring in a workplace setting. In her opinion, they include "improper practices (gestures, words, behaviors, attitudes), which - through their repetitive or systematic character - infringe upon mental dignity or mental or physical integrity of an individual, posing him at risk of losing employment or deteriorating the atmosphere at work".

She states that "molestation is violence given in small doses, which is, nevertheless, highly destructive. Each attack taken separately is really serious, while aggression results from a cumulative effect of frequent and repeated microtraumas" (Hirigoyen 2003, p. 11).

Polish law imposes on the employers the obligation to prevent mobbing (Labor Code 2010, article 94³, §1, 2). The supervisor is legally responsible in situations when he himself has resorted to mobbing and in cases when he has failed to intervene in behaviors of his inferiors allowing for prohibited practices to occur in the company.

Victims of mobbing often do not report persecution, fearing retributions. Fear of revenge provides discouragement from reporting especially in situations when the attacker is one's superior, who is capable of affecting the professional position of an employee and takes advantage of such an

³ See: Merez, Mościcka, Drabek (2005).

opportunity. Proving an unethical conduct of the mobber in court is not easy⁴. To use an example, in 2004, of 400 cases of mobbing reported to the State Labor Inspection, 70 reports were regarded fully justified. It should be stressed, however, that sometimes employees who do not fulfill their obligations treat disciplining remarks of their superiors as mental terror (Zajdel 2011).

Review of studies

The problem of employee harassment (mobbing) is seen in organizations all over the world. In the European Union, in Finland, approximately 15% of employees are at risk of intimidation and mobbing at work, while in Italy and Portugal, various manifestations of mobbing are experienced only by 4% of the work force (see: Zajdel 2011). In view of a great versatility of results, it is estimated that approximately 3-10% employees face unethical practices of this type as effected by their superiors and coworkers (e.g. Einarsen 2000, Fox, Stallworth 2005, Meek 2004, Niedl 1996, Vega, Comer 2005, Zapf, Gross 2001; see: Gamian-Wilk 2011).

In Poland, the issue of improper relations in a workplace setting was investigated by such authors as Kmiecik-Baran⁵ (Kmiecik-Baran, Rybicki 2004), Delikowska (2004), Derczyński (2002), Zielińska-Sroka (2006). It should be emphasized that there is a considerable disparity of results in view of differentiated methodology. More than one-half of elementary and junior high school teachers (61.5%) in 2002 were found to be subjected to mobbing (Kmiecik-Baran, Rybicki 2004). Delikowska (2004) observed that various behaviors defined as mobbing were experienced by 6.8-47.2% of the investigated subjects; the activities of mobbers mostly consisted in infringement of the right to personal image of the victim. The results of studies carried out by the European Foundation on Improvement of Life and Work Conditions suggest that in 2005, 3.2% of Polish employees experienced mobbing⁶. Karney (2007) quoted the results of studies performed at the Institute of Sociology, Wrocław University (2002/2003) and pointed to a destructive role of poor organization of work, which is a source of mental terror.

Mobbing is somewhat more often encountered⁷ in large companies, in the education, research, health care and commerce sectors (Leymann 1996, Ger 2003) as well as in the non-profit sector (Ger 2003). At the highest risk of being mobbed are employees below 25 years of life, while in case of individuals above 55 years of age, the risk is slightly increased (Litzke, Schuh 2007). Hirgoyen (2003) draws attention to unethical conduct towards young teachers, who are excessively burdened with a multitude of obligations and blamed for improper - in the opinion of their superiors - behavior towards the pupils.

Studies on mental terror in a workplace setting are difficult due to the character of the phenomenon, the subject and site of investigations. Research in this sphere of interpersonal relations often refers to case description and epidemiology studies. To date, it has not been possible to determine a satisfactory statistical psychological portrait of the mobber and his victim. According to the majority of reports, such variables as gender, age, duration of employment of both the mobber and the victim are generally not decisive in the course of the analyzed process (Merecz, Mościcka, Drabek 2005).

Mobbing is believed to have a source also in psychological profiles of the perpetrator and victim of violence. Both roles share numerous characteristic features, for example a high level of anxiety in social situations, a low level of social competences, and a decreased level of self-evaluation. Some studies suggest that the perpetrators are characterized by a high but unstable self-evaluation and a tendency towards narcissism, hence in a situation associated with danger, they react with aggression. Typical victims are indeed less aggressive, less assertive and less domineering as compared to the perpetrators (Matthiesen, Einarsen 2004, Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, Cooper 2003 in: Gamian-Wilk 2011).

The mobber demonstrates a specific configuration of personality traits. Mobbers are usually domineering individuals, with an extended sense of their own value, unable to tolerate resistance and

⁴ A typical comment of a bystander: "You only think so, you are oversensitive" – from a statement of a classic ballet dancer Anastasja Nabokina (the Grand Theater - National Opera in Warsaw), who was awarded by the court compensation for discrimination and a settlement for mobbing (Jarecka 2012, p. 13).

⁵ Studies carried out by the Pomeranian Democratic Institute.

⁶ See: Warszewska-Makuch (2012a,b).

⁷ See: Litzke-Schuh (2007), p. 133-134.

negative remarks, characterized by mistrust and fear of competition from other members of the team (Karney 2007). "On the other hand, the victims are characterized by an elevated level of neuroticism and depressiveness; they are unable to cope with conflict solving. Moreover, they are diligent, oriented towards achievements, punctual, adhere to norms and regulations and are solemn. Yet, in given circumstances, the combination of the above virtues with sensitivity and defects in social competences makes the individuals an easy target of negative treatment" (Gamian-Wilk 2011, p. 380).

The phenomenon of mobbing is difficult to pinpoint since - contrary to physical aggression - the basic technique employed by the mobber is manipulation leading to deprivation of the mental needs of the victim. Employees subjected to mobbing are reluctant to report the fact of being harassed. They are afraid of retributions or a loss of a *toxic*, but nonetheless steady job being a source of their income. Superiors are also reluctant to give permission for carrying our investigations, fearing that in case incidents of mobbing are revealed, they will be held legally responsible (Kmieciak-Baran, Rybicki 2004).

Activities typical for mobbing

Mobbing is perpetrated by individuals steadily collaborating with the victim; the most effective in this type of activities is a group consisting of several individuals. The tormentor may be a coworker (horizontal mobbing) or a superior (vertical mobbing) (Ger 2003). Sometimes, very infrequently (Zajdel 2011) the inferiors harass their superior, attempting to demonstrate his incompetence (banks, hospitals, corporations, educational institutions).

Mobbing is a process where an employee is gradually deprived of support; the said process encompasses diversified actions of the mobbers. Investigators who describe the phenomenon of harassment in a workplace setting mostly emphasize behaviors aiming at the sphere associated with fulfilling one's professional tasks.

The following activities are quoted:

1. Behaviors endangering the professional status, such as belittling, undermining opinion public ridicule, accusations of ineffective performance at work;
2. Isolation: physical or social isolation, hindering access to means, resources and materials, concealing important information;
3. Purposeful imposing excessive workload: strong pressure, dates due that cannot be kept, additional tasks, interference with currently performed work;
4. Professional destabilization: assigning insignificant tasks to be implemented, constant nagging, taking away tasks that require responsibility (Cowie et al., 1999 in: Merez, Mościcka, Drabek 2005).

A detailed list of detrimental behaviors of mobbers consisting of five categories, which refer both to the professional and personal sphere was presented by Leymann (1996). These behaviors include activities that jeopardize the process of communication, negatively affect social relations, activities that infringe upon the personal image of the victim, are aimed at the professional position and health of the victim⁸.

"Humiliation, ridicule, spreading gossip and slanderous comments, unjustified criticism that triggers a sense of guilt, intimidation, questioning one's competences, calling someone names, restricting access to information and technical resources, harassing, setting traps in various forms and situations, removal from performed tasks, restricting the ability to voice one's opinion, interrupting one's statements, making derogatory remarks behind one's back, mocking (e.g. the manner of walking, voice), ridiculing political or religious views and many other behaviors that degrade one's sense of value and deprive one of one's dignity - are all typical mobbing techniques".

(Ger 2003, p. 49)

As it was stated by Hartley (2005), "violence is often accompanied by manipulative behaviors consisting in hiding real intents under the pretense of personal charm and impeccable manners. When the persecutor is finished with one victim, he usually looks for the next – more than 90% of cases of violence described in the paper constitute such series" (Hartley 2005, p. 84).

⁸ See: Merez, Mościcka, Drabek (2005), p. 9-11.

Hirigoyen (2003) stresses that understatements are characteristic for the process of mobbing. The victim's vigilance is dulled and in consequence, he allows ill treatment. The aggressor voices contrary and unclear statements, uses allusions and veiled threats, resorts to deception and providing incomplete information. The unclear and vague character of the mobber's activities results in the victim being disoriented and having a strong sense of helplessness. In the opinion of Hirigoyen (2003), "mobbing is a specific situation combining numerous, constantly emerging strategies of social influence. One of such strategies is evoking constant seesawing emotions in the victim. (...) the perpetrator behaves like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, sometimes being a charming, warm companion in daily work, and sometimes a venomous aggressor" (Gamian-Wilk 2011, p. 383).

One of the strategies employed by the supervisors is making sure the victim will fail through excessive burdening his inferior with professional tasks. To use an example, the supervisor orders the employee to perform a large volume of work in a time that is too short (a quantitative overload: *there is too much work to do*) or commissions a difficult project leaving the employee without any support (a qualitative overload: *the work is too difficult*) (Hartley 2005).

Excessive seeking of faults and destructive criticism of the employee are treated as violence. Another strategy is isolation of the victim from colleagues who might offer support, or spreading gossip addressing somebody's skills and abilities (Hartley 2005). It should be emphasized that there is a group of people who – directing their activities against a selected individual in a workplace setting – compensate for their own problems and life failures (Kmiecik-Baran, Rybicki 2004). In such cases, psychologically weaker individuals are endangered, since they are easier to be humiliated and frightened.

A list of particularly common practices is quoted by Litzke and Schuh (2007): spreading gossip, untrue information: 61.8%, erroneous evaluation of effectiveness at work: 57.2%, derogatory comments, ridicule: 55.9%, concealment of important information: 51.9%, harsh and unjust criticism of the performed work: 48.1%, exclusion or isolation: 39.7%, describing somebody as incompetent: 38.1%, insulting: 36.0%, disturbing someone when working: 26.5%, taking one's work: 18.1% (Litzke, Schuh 2007; Fig.14., p. 136).

The stages of mobbing result in the affected individual breaking down and quitting their work or lead to a situation when his employment may be terminated, as described by Gamian-Wilk (2011).

The process of mobbing begins with the emergence of a hidden or unsolved conflict. Initially, the majority of interactions do not differ from earlier contacts. Subsequently, the perpetrator begins to manipulate the personal image of the victim spreading gossip. The victim is deprived of the possibility to voice his opinion, his viewpoint is not taken into consideration. Relationships are gradually increasingly formalized. All forms of contact steadily become more abrasive. The victim starts to be isolated, his public value is diminished. The mobber, seeking allies, interprets his behaviors in a way that makes the victim the source of problems. Subsequently, the perpetrator starts to systematically torment his victim. He uses threats and accusations, which leads to eliminating the victim from the group. In consequence of the previous actions of the mobber, the managers accept the negative image of the victim. Finally, the individual who is the source of problems is excluded.

Mental disturbances in the victims of mobbing are often identified with PTSD (*Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*). The victim is withdrawn, reacts with anxiety, experiences problems with communication, is irritable and often gets angry and his professional value is low (Matthiesen, Einarsen 2004). In extreme cases, the victim succumbs to a severe disease, is unable to function without assistance or attempts suicide.

Consequences of chronic stress cause the victims of mobbing to experience serious problems while seeking new employment. Mental and physical exhaustion and loss of self-confidence hamper exerting yet another effort which is seeking a job at the time of unemployment. Moreover, as observed by Litzke and Schuh (2007), "the hope of the victim to start anew without prior prejudices is shattered by negative information which ruin his reputation long before he even reports to a new workplace" (Litzke, Schuh, 2007, p. 139). The awareness of costs associated with changing a job does not facilitate a decision to start a professional career anew.

The following costs are associated with changing a job:

- extending one's qualifications (learning new procedures, necessity of ongoing education);
- adaptation to a new work environment (coworkers, organizational culture);

- habits (necessity to modify present habits and structure of work-associated activities, such as change of a work place, time of getting up, route to work, parking space, time of meals);
- fear of the unknown (the danger results from the fact that what we already have is certain, while all that is new is not fully foreseeable).

Risk factors of mobbing occurrence

Two basic factors may explain the occurrence of mobbing in a workplace setting. These are psychosocial work environment (an organizational perspective) and individual traits of the victim and the perpetrator (an individual perspective) (Warszewska-Makuch 2012a).

In the opinion of Leyman (1992), the key organizational factors include problems with work scheduling (they augment stress, facilitate frustration, increasing the number of conflicts), incompetent or autocratic management (50-80% of victims of terror are individuals mobbed by a superior), social position (such determinants as being a representative of a minority, lower status related to one's social background, being handicapped), negative social climate (lack of collaboration, a high degree of competitiveness), organizational culture (allowing/encouraging harassment, ridiculing selected individuals) (Leymann 1992, in: Warszewska-Makuch 2012a). Hoel and Salin (2003), in addition to such factors as organization of work, leadership, organizational climate and culture, draw attention to the changing nature of work, which forces readiness for change (Hoel, Salin 2003; in: Warszewska-Makuch 2012a)

An important factor that facilitates the occurrence of mental terror in an organization is imbalanced job market, restructuring of companies and legal regulations that protect the employed (for example the Teacher's Charter). The fight for a job may take the form of horizontal or vertical mobbing, when the employer is unable to terminate an employee for formal reasons and resorts to mental terror, thus forcing the said employee to resign.

Stereotypic course of mobbing

- Critical incident: hidden or unsolved conflict.
- Mobbing: behaviors aiming at excluding a given person, including aggressive manipulation through voicing half-truths, loyalty letters, group letters to the media;
- Superior: supports one of the parties rather than solves the conflict (mobbing enters the scene); the employee becomes branded; the superior/coworkers who are co-responsible for mobbing shift the responsibility to the victim – they look for guilt in his *incongruity* (the victim becomes the source of problems).
- False diagnosis – if the persecuted individual seeks medical (psychological) help, he is most often misdiagnosed; the problems experienced by the patient are situated in his personality, and not in the sick work environment.
- Deprivation of work – the consequence may be removal of the victim from the job market.

(Kmieciak-Baran, Rybicki 2004; Gamian-Wilk 2011)

As it is emphasized, the sources of violence are firmly embedded in the organization of work and in management/leadership style in a given institution. Organizational factors explain approximately 24% variances of various causes of mobbing development (Gamian-Wilk 2011). Organizations, which are managed in a rigid, hierarchical manner are at a considerable danger of such abnormalities. Poor organization of work and errors in management most often lead to dehumanization of interpersonal relations.

Below, potential sources of mobbing are listed⁹:

A. Psychosocial work environment

⁹ Sources: Bechowska-Gebhardt, Stalewski (2004), Gamian-Wilk (2011), Hirigoyen (2005), Leymann (1990), Merecz, Mościcka, Drabek (2005), Terelak (1999), Warszewska-Makuch (2012a).

1. Organization of work: no defined job description and criteria of work evaluation (role conflict, ambiguous roles), unstable organizational structures, inadequate coordination of their activities, imprecise procedures and interference in information flow, lack of ability to negotiate (the superior).
2. Leadership: hierarchical style of management, giving a sense of impunity, autocratic leadership fulfilling the need to fully control the employees and environment.

Superior:

- helpless or non-interfering (*laissez-faire*): the management strategy leads to organizational chaos (poor organization of work), lack of well-defined requirements and unclear rules of employee evaluation; ignoring the needs of employees, avoiding making decisions, lack of control of completed tasks, leaving the employees to their own devices;
solving conflicts:
 - inept or side-taking (more often encountered in females); individuals who have been harmed in a poorly solved conflict are subject to intensified harassment;
 - ignoring conflicts (more often encountered in males): unsolved conflicts lead to deterioration of the mood in the team;
 Liberal style (no intervention or insufficient intervention) – regardless of causing organizational chaos, which generates conflicts, it may lead to excessive concentration of informal power, which facilitates mobbing;
- individuals fearing loss of personal image: the need to create an image of a responsible individual coexists with the belief in the effectiveness of harassment of one's inferiors in order to improve discipline;
- narcissistic attitude: excessive sense of one's importance, a high need of attention and respect and being in the center of attention;
- an opportunist: an individual lacking stable principles, bending to circumstances to reach personal gains; mobbing gives an opportunity to eliminate an inconvenient individual who – in the opinion of the superior – threatens his position;
- a psychopath (antisocial personality): scorning the safety of others and lack of respect for truth; easiness and glibness of statements, which are accompanied by lack of remorse and lack or limited ability to experience guilt due to one's own actions¹⁰;

3. Social climate and organizational culture in a workplace setting:

Social climate is determined by a high level of competitiveness (for a success, formal and informal power), an atmosphere of conflicting interests rather than collaboration facilitates the occurrence of mobbing, for example to relieve stress.

Adverse social climate resulting from management style and organization of work: mobbing allows for reduction of negative emotions and work-associated stress.

Mobbing-associated behaviors are inherent in the organizational culture; the inferiors assume the manner in which their superior behaves, there is a tacit permission (an incentive supported by a reward) to ridicule and harass a given group of individuals/an individual;

B. Individual factors associated with a danger of being harassed at work – the traits of the victim¹¹:

1. Positive traits predisposing to achieving success: pugnacity, creativity, intelligence, high level of education and competences, responsibility, straightforwardness.

In specific situations (striving for promotion or status at work), the employee may pose a danger to the power-wielding individual or a person enjoying the support of the team. One of the methods of eradicating competition is placing a given individual in the position of a victim and effecting his professional and personal destabilization

2. Lack of match between the requirements and the skills, abilities and means of implementation being at the disposal of the employee: an individual who cannot cope with work requirements may become an object of harassment;

¹⁰ Reber A.S. (2000). Słownik psychologii [Dictionary of psychology]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, p. 54.

¹¹ Individual factors explaining the phenomenon of mobbing – the traits of the perpetrator – were discussed while presenting the psychosocial work environment (organizational factors).

3. Specific life situation (an excessively sensitive person, an introvert): such individuals become victimized, who – because they are going through a difficult period (or have specific personality traits) – are particularly prone to be hurt and unable to cope with the hostility of their environment; peaceful individuals, introverts;
4. Social status: individuals representing various types of minorities due to their age, gender, physical handicap, social status, professional status, social background, religion, or political views may be in danger of being mobbed, fulfilling the role of the so-called "*scapegoat*".
5. Demonstrating irregularities in the functioning of the company; the purpose here is to frighten or punish the individual, at which mobbing activities are directed; persecution is supposed to cause the inconvenient individual to quit his job.

The process of mobbing may be initiated by an accidental incident and the habit of constructing the image of the employee based on a single event. An accidental slip, a mistake, an unfortunate statement begin to influence the image of a given person in a group. In time, each move of the employee is perceived solely through the prism of the discrediting situation – the person becomes a *scapegoat*, irrespectively of his previous and current services for the team and organization. The institution of a *scapegoat* gives the members of the group an opportunity to relieve frustration resulting from stressful work at the expense of the victim or else gives them tangible benefits (for example, in a school setting: a better allocation of tasks, a more convenient schedule). In this case, stress is a direct trigger of aggressive behaviors directed against the victim; at the same time, the latter experiences a lack of safety and loss of control (Einarsen 2000; Einarsen et al. 2003 in: Gamian-Wilk 2011).

The diagnosis of the phenomenon of mental terror based on national studies was undertaken by Kmiecik-Baran and Rybicki (2004). The authors of the report describe characteristic cases that illustrate mobbing in various work-associated environments (social welfare, offices, police, schools, universities, privately-owned companies, non-government organizations, hospitals, ministries, media) (Kmiecik-Baran, Rybicki 2004, p. 14-25). Below the reader will find a description of a situation which occurred at a university.

"I am employed by a well known university. The Director Professor seemed to be a well-controlled and quiet man. I tried to help him in many issues. The first three months, he would visit me often and make critical comments on other people and their work.

The Professor became friendly with several students. In the presence of these students, he made malicious comments about one of his inferiors. The students added their own comment, also malicious.

The Professor also spoke ill about the employee to other assistants and doctors. Just as the students did, the faculty members also added their nasty comments. The Professor would summon the employee, pronounce a negative opinion about his work (in spite of his considerable achievements), called him names, swore – but he did it in such a way that there never were any witnesses. However, he was not always successful.

His outbursts were always combined with contempt for the persecuted individual and a personal, malicious comment. The Professor kept the papers written by the slandered employee in his drawer for weeks. He employed different criteria while evaluating his work. The criteria were generalized and imprecise in character. The clique – the Professor, selected students and selected employees – were getting increasingly stronger. The Professor pushed the students to attack the employee. He encouraged writing complaints, anonymous letters, unjust evaluating statements signed by the loyal employees and students. He encouraged the student to voice open, nasty comments in the presence of the employee. He would tell the employee: *I can do whatever I wish, and you may not prove it*".

(Kmiecik-Baran, Rybicki 2004, p. 20).

Psychological costs of mental terror

Mobbing is a special form of ostracism. "Much more difficult than being rejected by the group is living in the group that rejects an individual. Being subjected to mobbing is a kind of being rejected, while at the same time one endures in an unfavorable environment. Isolation, coldness, dislike, with

which the other treat the victim (...) and negative criticism, contempt, giving the victim a bad name and spreading gossip (...) are the daily life of the victim of mobbing" (Gamian-Wilk 2011, p. 377).

The strategies employed in the process of mobbing constitute a direct attack on mental needs of the employee, most of all on his need for affiliation and safety and his self-evaluation. The need for affiliation is demonstrated as the need to be among people, collaborate with others, form friendships; it is associated with the need for self-value. The need for safety is a basic need: for protection against physical danger and reduction of fear of social danger (Karney 2007). In the opinion of Gamian-Wilk (2011), already in the initial phases of mobbing, not only is the need for high self-evaluation frustrated, but also the need to belong, to exercise control and to find sense in life. All these needs are prerequisites for mental well-being. Meeting social needs in a workplace setting is a priority for Polish employees (Hryniewicz 2007).

Self-assessment plays a regulatory function with respects to actions one undertakes and affects the sphere of social relationships. When negative, self-assessment triggers such phenomena as lack of self-confidence, a sense of anxiety resulting from a fear one will be unable to meet the requirements, progressive self-isolation or manifestations of aggression¹². Decreasing self-assessment indicates deteriorating social relationships. If an individual believes that in spite of being rejected, he is a valuable person and will be accepted by others, he will cope somehow through attempts at entering into satisfactory relations with other people. Otherwise, he will back away from social relationships. Based on evaluation of one's abilities, one predicts one's chances in various areas of life. In case of mobbing, in addition to systematic, seemingly innocent attacks, we deal with persistent ignoring an individual by the group, what in consequence leads to social death (Gamian-Wilk 2011).

Mockery leads to emotional imbalance; the need to decipher unclear social statements constitutes - as it has been described by Gamian-Wilk (2011) - a cognitive drainage. Attempts at restoring good relations at work by the harassed individual often fail due to mistakes such a person makes, which result from emotional overload. Mobbing, similarly as other stressors, triggers a chain reaction. Stress dictates changes in the behavior of the attacked person, who starts to react nervously and untrustingly, to make errors; in consequence, other individuals, initially behaving neutrally, distance themselves. The intents underlying behaviors that are (...) to extinguish the conflict are purposefully misread by the mobbers and interpreted for example as servile or arrogant behaviors; in consequence, there emerge new starting points for new mobbing practices. Leymann (1993) provides a brief and apt summary of the process, stating: *"Whatever the victim does to save himself, it will be always the others who would one-sidedly pronounce the sentence whether the victim will be accepted again or not"* (Litzke, Schuh 2007, p. 141).

Satisfaction derived from work is highly correlated with popularity or acceptance by members of the team; interpersonal relations at work are of a paramount importance. Belonging to a group gives an individual special benefits. The coworkers provide both material and social satisfaction. The measurable benefits consist mostly in helping an individual with his work and collaboration while solving problems and working towards reaching common goals, what in turn may lead to success and rewards. The coworkers may also be a source of social satisfaction. Social support offered by coworkers and superiors helps in combating stress, is a major source of both satisfaction from work and good mental health (Argyle 2004).

The effects of mobbing depend on duration and intensity of the undertaken activities and on individual abilities of coping with harassment. In the opinion of Fischer and Riedesser (in: Litzke, Schuh 2007), the most common symptom is depression and obsessive behaviors. Obsession is manifested as permanent thinking of and recounting to family members and acquaintances all difficult situations happening in a workplace.

Some of the harassed individuals find support in their families or among friends, yet after approximately six months of continuing mobbing, they burn out trying to help the individual being mobbed at work (Litzke, Schuh 2007, Gamian-Wilk 2011).

¹² See Tab.8. Funkcjonowanie osób z wysoką i niską samoocena w środowisku pracy [Functioning of individuals with high and low self-assessment in a workplace setting] (Karney 2007, p. 173).

Women and mobbing

Despite changing social consciousness, it is still impossible to overcome the deeply rooted, hidden assumptions and beliefs associated with gender. They have been formed in consequence of stereotypes, which reproduce the pattern of male domination in cultural, social, professional, religious and family life (Nelson 2003).

Females are to a higher degree at risk of mobbing in a workplace setting; they also incur higher psychological costs of harassment. In general, they manifest a stronger tendency to concentrate on personal relations and on social aspects of work. When excluded, they pay a higher psychological price for ill-treatment directed at deprivation of social needs (Argyle 2004, Aronson, Wilson, Akert 2006, Niedl 1996, in: Warszewska-Makuch 2012b). Women in general show a lower self-assessment than males; when exposed to mobbing, they are poorer at coping with aggression. They more frequently react with succumbing to a disease, agree to have their position in the company changed or willingly quit (Litzke, Schuh 2007).

According to Hirigoyen (2005), 70% of victims of mobbing are female, while Litzke and Schuh (2007) report the risk of mobbing to be higher by 75% in women as compared to men (Hirigoyen 2005, Litzke, Schuh 2007). In some professional groups, e.g. employees of university schools, females more often report they experience mobbing (Niedl 1996 in: Warszewska-Makuch 2012), yet the results of other studies are not as unambiguous. Females are considered to be more ready to discuss their problems and more willing to seek help. Males, who have to support their families, when faced with mobbing attempt to hide the fact, minimizing the risk of losing their job (Litzke, Schuh 2007). Mobbing in a workplace setting is often combined with sexual molestation (Hirigoyen 2005), a failure of a molesting superior almost always results in mobbing against the female inferior. (Baranowska, Miecik 2004).

In workplace settings where they are a minority (industry), females are more often than males objects of harassment¹³. "Numerous women emphasized they are forced to work in a brutal, boorish environment, where shouting and swearing are an element of every-day communication and conflicts are solved in the atmosphere of yelling. (...) Being convinced they are condemned to bear such behavior, they admitted they are exposed to constant stress" (Warszewska-Makuch 2012b, p. 18).

Scarce studies carried out to date show that the scope and forms of mobbing vary depending on gender (female: 41%; male: 59%; Litzke, Schuh 2007). A lower participation of women in resorting to violence is only apparent. The studies suggest that females prefer less overt methods, which are associated with a lower probability of revealing their socially unacceptable behavior (indirect aggression, e.g. gossip, intrigues) (Blum 2000).

In case of mobbing practices, there are differences that depend on gender, age, professional status and prestige of work. Activities aimed against women are usually rooted in the social context and less frequently directly refer to the tasks they are performing. In case of males, a common phenomenon is attacking the contents of their work (Litzke, Schuh 2007).

Conclusions

"Mobbing in Poland may appear to be a highly exclusive problem, since it affects individuals who hold jobs and numerous unemployed would gladly change places with the mobbed individuals and bear harassment of the superior or coworkers providing they would receive steady income" (Baranowska, Miecik 2004, p. 21). Is this truly so?

Mobbing is a process where emotions and chronic stress accumulate, a state of prolonged emotional, volitional and cognitive overload, which leads to loss of identity and a decrease of professional competences. In this case one might use the metaphor of a closing "fan" of professional competencies introduced by Stanisław Kowalik to illustrate the consequences of burnout in teachers during their work at school (Kowalik 2011).

An employee exposed to mobbing ceases to be effective. The majority of his energy is spent on confirming the role he plays in the team and maintaining his social status. The necessity to decipher unclear social messages and exert chronic vigilance poses a considerable burden on such an individual (Gamian-Wilk 2011). "Social isolation, lack of positive feedback, accumulated negative information

¹³ See the review of studies on violence, including mobbing, in a workplace setting against women employed in industry (Warszewska-Makuch 2012b).

and concealment of important data make him (...) lose his purpose and orientation and by the same token become unable to act. Tormented by anxiety and doubts as to his strength, he fights to preserve his dignity and behaves increasingly less assuredly" (Litzke, Schuh 2007, p. 132).

Chronic stress leads to depressed immunity and the victim developing psychosomatic ailments; the risk of coronary heart disease increases. Depression appears along with a loss of sense of life and suicidal attempts. "I cannot do it any longer, I am not a right person for it" – wrote Bernadetta, a teacher from Podobin, in her farewell letter (Sidorowicz 2012, p. 3).

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