



When one speaks of the term "Mobbing" (or bullying, depending on where you find yourself to be in the world) it is inevitable to refer to Heinz Leymann. This German psychologist naturalised Swedish, was the first to be interested in the phenomenon, in Europe, during the 1980s!

He was the first to attempt defining and contextualising what this violence entails for the workplace, a definition still accepted worldwide today.

Throughout the years, more recent/current authors have contributed to the investigation/ understanding of this subject/thematic. Yet, they have added little or diverged from Leymann's contribution. That is, they have somehow failed to define the concept so there could be a stabilised and universally usable method to describe these practices (Pedroso et al., 2006). A quick search highlights that little has been added to the basic paradigm built by Leymann.

After a literature review of the most respected authors on the subject, one can say that four main axes, common to all the authors, are brought forward: Mobbing always presupposes an intentional and targeted action, this action has a tangible effect on the target, on the work environment, and takes place over a long period of time. A few examples:

1. Action aimed at an individual/s:

- a. "set of abusive and intentional conducts" ¹
- b. "abusive conduct that is manifested especially through behaviour, words, acts, gestures." ²
- c. "set of unwanted behaviours perceived as abusive" ³
- d. "situation where one or more individuals perceive they are being targeted by negative actions" ⁴
- e. "negative, repeated and persistent acts". ⁵

2. Tangible/measurable effect on the Individual:

Within this axis, the same authors describe in a congruent fashion the effects of the actions on people as:

"Increasing and degrading physical and emotional wear and tear"; "damage to a person's dignity or physical or psychological integrity"; "lowering of the target's self-esteem" "cause humiliation, offence, and distress"; "psychological annihilation or destruction"

¹ Wyzykowski, A., da Costa Lino de Goes Barros, R., & Pamplona Filho, R. (2014)

² Hirigoyen, M. (1999)

³ Torres et al. Torres, A., Costa, D., Sant'Ana, H., Coelho, B. & Sousa, I. (2016)

⁴ Hoel, H. e Cooper, C. (2000)

⁵ Salin, D. (2001)

It is important to emphasise that these are criteria that can be assessed scientifically, through psychological testing and other adjacent medical diagnostic examinations. Therefore, they can be measured.

3. Tangible effect for the workplace:

The third axis intersects with the general consensus among the authors. It enables the measurability and dimension used, in concurrence of the following criteria:

"triggers deterioration of the work environment"; "constrains the victim to leave his or her job; "destabilises the victim's relationship with the work environment and the organisation"; "interferes with the victim's work performance and /or causes unpleasant work environment."; "hostile work environment "

4. Extended in time:

It is on this fourth axis that I would like to draw your attention. The notion of "prolonged in time", how is it delimited? How many days, weeks and months must pass before it can be determined that it is bullying? Does the time period take into account the perspective of the perpetrator or the victim? The more attention one pays to this, the more one questions the inherent subjectivity of this axis.... Where do we draw the line?

According to the studies and observations made by Leymann, he defines a specific and concrete period of time that must be taken into account, in conjunction with the other factors/axes, in order to be able to speak of Mobbing:



- At least once a week, for a minimum of 6 months!

As a result, this dimension seems to alleviate the ambiguity of the concept and is perhaps one of the reasons why its use is universally accepted.

But then again, the question is: is it up to date? Does it reflect the reality of today's world of work?

Leymann first introduced his concept in 1986. In a world very different from the one we live in now, a world to which we did not yet submit ourselves to 'technological slavery'.

To help accompany this reflection, here are some pertinent historical facts:

- The few mobile phones available on the market had a basic numeric keypad, a one-line screen and a deplorable battery life of one hour in active use and 8 hours in standby mode.
- The first SMS was sent in 1992 (6 years later).
- Personal computers used the Dos operating system and 3.5-inch floppy disks.
- Similarly, the first appearance of a social network was not until almost 20 years later...

Nowadays, it is almost impossible to imagine life without these new technologies and gadgets. Taking this change into account helps to underline the difference between that (1980) era and today. The way of life and working conditions have undergone a phenomenal acceleration in the last 40 years.

In the last 2 years, telecommunication and "forced" digitalisation have brought the office into the heart of one's home. The right, and even the obligation, to "disconnect" has become an important topic added to the discussion of the prevention of psychosocial risks (non-exhaustive list of examples).

It is reasonable to say that, from Leyman's first studies to today, the means/channels through which many negative actions materialise have increased exponentially. Their potential frequency and intensity, when it occurs, have considerably accelerates the tangible effects felt by the individual. As well as, the degradation of the work environment; a reality experienced in daily professional practice with victims of mobbing.

How long does it take for a person under mobbing to reach the point of physical and emotional breakdown?

In France, the Law against Mobbing speaks of "repeated actions" without clarifying the period of repetition, focusing more on the physical and psychological damage to the person and the work relationship (artL.1152-2).

In Belgium, where anti-mobbing legislation has existed since 2002, the term adopted was "abusive and repeated conduct". The intentional repetitiveness of the actions is a determining factor, along with the tangible effects. In both cases, the time period is not stipulated or defined. Indeed, given the subjectivity and individuality that characterise us as human beings, it seems favourable that the assessment factors are based more on the damage suffered and felt by each victim than on the establishment of a concrete length in time.

If Leymann were alive today, would he reassess his concept? We can only speculate. Until then, it seems that the most sensible thing to do is to focus on the person and his/her suffering, intervening as early as possible in order to stop the abuse and the suffering of those who find themselves under such terror that destroys not only the victim but also damages the family and their closest relationships.

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