

## Mobbing as an attack to basic hungers and relational needs

### Il Mobbing come attacco alle fami di base e ai bisogni di relazione

Sylvie Rossi – TSTA P.O.

The present paper addresses both to psychotherapists and to organizational consultants, it deals with a frequent and unfortunately widely spread phenomenon in organizations called mobbing (bullying or harassing in some english speaking countries). Although the phenomenon is expanded TA practitioners of both fields, in several countries, often seem to be unaware of it failing to identify correctly the pain, depression and spectrum of symptoms, both psychological and physical connected with this condition experienced by a large number of people in their working environment. The present paper intends to be a contribution in this direction aiming at helping TA practitioners to recognize the situations and symptoms which may be connected with mobbing situations so as to be able to support their clients, who may be going through it, in taking the needed steps and actions to protect themselves from severe emotional damage as well as helping them promote their own health in their working environment. Descriptions of the organizational behaviors connected with it and of their disruptive psychological effect on the mental health of the individual undergoing mobbing actions are indicated so as to help practitioners identify the strategies used, at times, within organizations, to attack the individual and his sense of self-esteem and self-worth. The attacks on the individual at work which I observed in my professional practice, described as mobbing actions in the literature (Leymann, Ege, Gilioli), appear to be attacks to basic human needs or hungers (Berne) and to relational needs (Erskine). TA practitioners can be therefore facilitated in identifying this phenomenon more effectively in using the TA theoretical conceptualization indicated when dealing with clients presenting severe psychological problems at work.

**Key words:** mobbing, basic human hungers, Berne, relational needs.

Il presente saggio si rivolge sia a psicoterapeuti che a consulenti organizzativi, si occupa di un fenomeno frequente e purtroppo ampiamente diffuso nelle organizzazioni chiamato mobbing (bullismo o molestia in alcuni paesi anglofoni). Nonostante il fenomeno sia diffuso, i praticanti di AT di entrambi i campi, in diversi paesi, spesso sembrano non esserne consapevoli non riuscendo a identificare correttamente il dolore, la depressione e lo spettro dei sintomi, sia psicologici che fisici legati a questa condizione vissuta da un numero crescente di persone nel loro ambiente di lavoro. Il presente contributo si muove in questa direzione con l'obiettivo di aiutare gli operatori di AT a riconoscere situazioni e sintomi che possono essere collegati al fenomeno del mobbing in modo da poter supportare i propri clienti, che potrebbero attraversarlo, nell'assumere le misure e le azioni neces-

abstract

sarie per proteggersi da gravi danni emotivi e per aiutarli a promuovere la propria salute nel loro ambiente di lavoro. Le descrizioni dei comportamenti organizzativi ad esso connessi e del loro effetto psicologico dirompente sulla salute mentale dell'individuo soggetto ad azioni di mobbing sono indicate in modo da aiutare i professionisti ad identificare le strategie utilizzate, a volte, all'interno delle organizzazioni, per incidere sull'individuo e il suo senso di autostima e del proprio valore. Gli attacchi all'individuo sul lavoro che ho osservato nella mia pratica professionale, descritti in letteratura come azioni di mobbing (Leymann, Ege, Gilioli), sembrano essere attacchi ai bisogni umani fondamentali o fami (Berne) e ai bisogni relazionali (Erskine). I professionisti dell'AT possono quindi essere facilitati nell'identificare questo fenomeno in modo più efficace utilizzando la concettualizzazione teorica dell'AT indicata quando si tratta di clienti che presentano gravi problemi psicologici sul lavoro.

**Parole chiave:** Mobbing, Berne, bisogni umani di base, bisogni relazionali.

In my professional practice both as a clinician and as a consultant and trainer for organizations I have often observed, in the course of the past 20 years situations where the descriptions presented by the people as experienced in their working milieu seemed to me to be highly pathological. They seemed to have little to do with the persons describing them, and seemed to be only partially caused by them directly or indirectly; my usual reaction after some time was to think that there was no way in that organizational system for the persons involved to protect their own emotional and mental health except by leaving their job. It seemed to me somehow dissatisfying until I began to become aware of the high level of pathology and conflict existing at certain times within certain organizations or groups, it was then that I started to think that may be some of the behaviors used to harass the worker may have some kind of pattern. In discussing that matter with a lawyer friend in Italy, I discovered that indeed in Italy at the time, the law contemplated situations where the worker could start a legal action against his employer for psychological or mental damage suffered at work (called biological damage).

In the past fifteen years (beginning of the nineties in Germany, where Leymann originally presented the result of his research in this area as well as in Sweden, Switzerland, England, France and much more recently in Italy) knowledge and attention to this phenomenon called mobbing and to its consequences and costs both economical and in terms of mental and physical health has developed in many European countries and in the US.

The term mobbing comes from the English verb to mob which means literally to assault tumultuously in a crowd, to aggress, it was originally used by Konrad Lorenz in his studies on etology to indicate the behavior of certain animals belonging to the same species who get together in a coalition to attack a group member isolating it from the community sometimes up to the point of causing its death.

Mobbing in the working place refers somehow to the same phenomenon only as it applies to human beings. It indicates a situation of aggression, exclusion and isolation of a worker by fellow workers or by the boss.

Mobbing can take place along a vertical line, from top down, when an organiza-

tion uses a deliberate strategy, which may be direct or indirect, to make life impossible for one of its workers, so as to persuade him/her to leave.

Mobbing can also take place horizontally when aggressive actions and behaviors originate from people sharing a similar professional status with the victim, for example when a number of colleagues isolate a fellow worker that for some reason the group does not want; sometimes this becomes a kind of collective harassment, where the mobbed person becomes the scapegoat of the group's tensions as it would be described in group dynamics terminology.

"Psychological terror or mobbing in working life involves hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic manner by one or more individuals, mainly toward one individual, who, due to mobbing, is pushed into a helpless and defenceless position and held there by means of continuing mobbing activities. These actions occur on a very frequent basis (statistical definition: at least once a week) and over a long period of time (statistical definition: at least six month's duration). Because of the high frequency and long duration of hostile behaviour, this maltreatment results in considerable mental, psychosomatic and social misery" (Leymann, 1993, 1995).

Mobbing is a relatively recently studied phenomenon, although it may have existed for sometime, the fact that it has been recognized as widely spread in so many different countries of the world may have to do with a number of socio economical variables and trends affecting work and working conditions in the last two decades.

Several authors have attempted to provide interpretations of it (M. Resch, H. Ege, H. Neuberger) by connecting theories from different fields to mobbing (socialization theories, stress management, group dynamics and psychodynamic theories), however because mobbing is a complex phenomenon affected by many variables relating to different levels of functioning: the organization, the group, the individual, theories explaining it are still in progress.

The term Mobbing refers to psychological violence in the working place, the causes seem to be sometimes originated by a dysfunctional internal work organization, or they may be related to a vague or imprecise job description or to a very conflicting working environment.

In fact mobbing is considered as closely related to conflict, a sort of by product of it, evolving over time from an unmanaged conflict that has developed in a negative direction; many serious cases of mobbing have been observed in connection with a bad leadership performance.

As originally understood in the Swedish research carried out since 1982, mobbing is viewed as an exaggerated conflict; although research on aggression and conflicts is quite large in social psychology the mobbing phenomenon as such is not reported, probably because conflict researchers have not focused on the outcomes, in terms of health, for the persons involved in conflict. (Zapf et al., 1996)

In psychologically oriented stress research, in Germany in particular, mobbing is seen as a certain extensive and dangerous kind of social stress. (Knorz & Zapf, 1996, also Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996)

The relationship between Mobbing and stress was confirmed by a research of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (1996) according to which about 47% of the workers submitted to moral violence develop stress, according to the Staffordshire university study 75% of the victims of psy-

chological terrorism on the job undergoes damages to physical health connected with stress, depression and the loss of self-esteem.

Often mobbing victims receive a PTSD diagnosis, depression and adaptation disorders are the most frequent other diagnosis given. In a clinical study conducted in Milan, in 1999 about one fifth of the victims of mobbing were diagnosed as suffering from PTSD referring to all those symptoms appearing after cumulative psychic trauma. In all the other cases the diagnosis was adaptation disorder.

In Europe Leymann in Sweden and Harald Ege in Italy have worked extensively on the assessment, evaluation and study of this phenomenon identifying specific criteria connected with this kind of organizational behavior and describing the characteristics of the situations as well as the responses of the mobber and the ones of the victim of mobbing actions.

Heinz Leymann has indicated a number of criteria to distinguish mobbing from working conflict that usually takes place in working situations; he developed the LIPT questionnaire based on diagnostic instruments used in catastrophe psychiatry. (Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorism 1993) indicating 5 distinctive categories of attacks that can be classified as mobbing actions:

Attacks to the possibility of communicating

(restrictions of the possibility for the person to express himself. Ex: continuous criticism on the person's work and personal life, verbal threats, avoidance of contact)

Attacks to the person's social relations

(restrictions on social relations. Ex: people avoid talking to the person, the victim is moved to another office isolated from colleagues)

Attacks to the person's social status

(Ex: rumors and gossips circulated, ridiculing of physical appearance, habits and personal life)

Attacks to the quality of the individual's professional and personal situation (Ex: the person is not given tasks to perform anymore and/or is requested to do under qualified tasks)

Attacks to health

(Ex: threat of physical violence, sexual harassment).

The first reaction of the victim of mobbing is guilt feelings, the second one is isolation of the victim who believes he/she is the only one to go through this. Then the victim goes through a period of constant pre-alarm with an obscure feeling that something terrible and inescapable is about to happen.

The victimized person becomes incapable of reaction while submitted to ongoing aggressive behaviors, the more depression increases the more the attacked person is still.

The impairment in social relations increases with serious difficulties in the family, with the partner and with friends.

The first task for physicians and psychologists when the victims of mobbing attacks are being referred is to assess the problem in order to help the clients to become aware that they are being submitted to a specific and definite pathological social condition of which they are not responsible.

To be able to recognize the aggression of which the person is victim is essential for the client to start to initiate a reaction in order to start dealing with the different aspects of the problem, from the emotional one to the medical and legal one.

I think mobbing actions can be viewed as an attack to what Berne has described as the basic human needs and also to relational needs as described by Erskine.

In most of his books Berne talks about the basic human needs or hungers:

Stimulus hunger, the first one indicated, is connected with the basic need of stimulations for survival which applies to infants as well as to adults as the well known studies on sensory deprivation of adults have shown. In certain conditions, well described in the studies on imprisonment and uprooting, isolation may give rise to transient psychosis. (Zwingmann & Pfister Ammende)

In mobbed people one of the most serious problem has to do with isolation which is often originally triggered by the initial attacks suffered by the worker which continue to be reinforced in a vicious circle by the thought, very common in such situations, that it is the mobbed person's fault if this is happening and that he or she has caused it or that there is something wrong with the person attacked. The result of all this being increased isolation and increasing starvation for social contact.

Recognition hunger directly evolving from stimulus hunger is according to Berne the second important human hunger according to which strokes are essential for survival, "stroking denotes any act implying recognition of another's presence, a stroke is a fundamental unit of social action. (Berne, 1964)

In situations of mobbing what actually takes place is that the strokes become at times extremely scarce, at others the only strokes given are connected with an obsessive control of the tasks of the mobbed persons. Often there is some kind of oscillation between two extremes, either the victim is left alone in almost total social isolation, or submitted to over detailed and continuous controls of everything done even if unrelated to the job assigned. At other times negative strokes ridiculing the victim are the norm (attacks on the person's social status).

Both situations are extremely stressful on the individual, although isolation is by far more dangerous for the mental health of the mobbed person (negative strokes are less harmful than no strokes at all, as research has repeatedly shown).

Structure Hunger is connected with the need that all of us have to structure our time so as to avoid boredom and to create situations where we can have the possibility of exchanging some strokes.

"The third hunger is structure hunger, which is why groups tend to grow into organizations ..." (Berne, 1972)

What happens to the mobbed person is that the possibility to structure time at work in order to receive and exchange strokes is totally impaired, (attacks on the quality of the individual professional and personal situation) at times he/she is left almost task less, literally with nothing to do, at others his tasks are almost meaningless, at others paradoxically there is a promotion to a professional situation where the person does not have the needed competence or knowledge thus making it very difficult to structure time at work meaningfully, and also to structure work itself. The result of all this being that the worker gradually becomes incapable of using his abilities and skills as the mobbing actions continue over a period of time.

Coming from a different perspective Erskine in talking about human needs, indicates eight relational needs present in every relationship and experienced by all people throughout the whole life cycle (Erskine, 1999). According to him the continuing deprivation of the expression and satisfaction of such needs create difficulties for the individual.

The relational needs indicated by Erskine are: the need for security, the need to be valued, the need for acceptance, the need for mutuality, the need for self definition, the need to make an impact, the need of having the other initiate and the need to express love.

The place where an individual spends most of his awoken time is usually at work, the impossibility of expressing and satisfying relational needs there may result in considerable problems and emotional difficulties for the individual.

In a mobbing situation there is a severe deprivation of all relational needs as I will indicate hereafter in describing the characteristics of such needs as they apply, in my own perception, to working situations.

The needs for survival and safety were indicated by Maslow (1970) as primary for a person to be able to experience and respond to any other type of need, related to them is the relational need for security indicating the need to survive and to be safe in a relationship.

Ongoing mobbing actions at work create a feeling of continuous insecurity where the person attacked is in a constant state of alarm about something unpleasant and unpredictable about to happen.

The need to be valued and worthy is part of all relationships. Valuing refers to purpose and meaning of the actions and feelings of the persons involved in the relationship.

I would say that in terms of working situations and relationships it refers to meaningful and purposeful activities understandable for the worker in terms of his own contribution to the organization. In other terms a perception that what the person is doing has some kind of value or is worthy.

In mobbing this need is deliberately attacked (attacks to the quality of professional and personal situation) when the tasks assigned are meaningless or when no tasks are assigned at all.

The need for acceptance in relationships has to do with a sense of stability, protection and support that a person needs during the course of his/her whole life .

In working terms it has to do with receiving information, and experiencing a working environment which is if not somehow supportive at least not hostile. In mobbing situations what becomes immediately clear to the mobbed person is that he/she is not accepted.

The need for mutuality is "the need to be with someone who has walked in your shoes – says Erskine – who understands what you are experiencing because he or she has experienced something similar in real life or in imagination."

In mobbing situations this is exactly what is being denied to the person exposed to mobbing actions. Usually the perpetrators comments are – "I don't understand why this person is feeling this way or is reacting like this". The discounts take place usually on

Publication in progress several levels, but basically the existence of an attack and therefore of the feelings and internal experience of the mobbed person is denied.

The need for self definition in a relationship is the need to experience and to ex-

press one's own uniqueness and to have the other person acknowledge and respect that uniqueness.

In a working situation self-definition has to do with the persons working identity which is precisely what is often being attacked in mobbing: the person's uniqueness who somehow experiences a sense of "being nothingness" as one of my clients expressed in describing her feelings in the working place where she was being mobbed.

An important part of any meaningful relationship is having an impact on another person which involves an ability to influence the other in some desired way.

In a working situation it has to do with an extremely important need connected to the person's own imago at work where the individual senses he/she has some kind of power as opposed to having lost it completely.

In mobbing what is experienced by the victim is a total powerlessness and a feeling of being defenseless and of having lost any possibility of being influential in any way.

Another relational need is to have another person initiate the exchange in the relationship.

"Any relationship in which I must always make the first approach, always initiate, always make the first step, will eventually become dissatisfying if not painful". (Erskine, *ibid.*)

In a working situation having a fellow worker initiate some kind of contact is part of feeling welcomed, accepted into the group, in a mobbing situation the perception of the person is of slowly becoming almost transparent, when entering the office conversations shut up, in the corridors the person experiences being avoided, and the people who usually initiated contact previously seem to have stopped doing it.

The need to express love refers to the experience of positive feelings in some relations – In positive relationship, people experience some caring, affection, and appreciation for each other. Expressing these feelings is a relational need; ...not doing so requires denying internal experience and avoiding self-definition within the relationships. (Erskine, *ibid.*)

In a mobbing situation the expression of this need becomes quite impossible as the person experiences increasing isolation and an actual deprivation of relationships preventing the individual from expressing any kind of feeling; in fact warmth, caring and any form of appreciation seem to have totally disappeared from the working life of the mobbed person.

TA practitioners both in the clinical and in the organizational fields find it difficult, at times, to work with clients presenting problems about their difficulties in their working environment, often the emphasis and focus of the therapeutic interventions is aimed at identifying possible discounts, games, or impasses of the client without focusing, at the same time, on the characteristics of the working system and its functional or dysfunctional mechanisms on the organizational level of functioning.

In my experience Clinical practitioners are usually not trained to pay attention systematically to the organizational system and context itself as a source of problems that are not caused by the victim of mobbing but are usually related to and originated from within another level of functioning (which may be macro organizational or micro organizational).

Organizational practitioners in turn usually have a fair knowledge of systems and systemic theory as they apply to organizations but often, in many countries, they are not trained to pay attention to this phenomenon that has the potential to cause

serious emotional impairment and needs to be dealt with very carefully as it may go to such extremes as to cause the need of psychiatric hospitalization.

As TA practitioners we share a common theoretical background and philosophy (okayness) as well as being involved in the clinical and organizational field, I therefore believe we could contribute effectively both to the treatment and identification of this problem, as clinicians, and to the organizational interventions that can allow to deal with it in its initial phases, so as to promote health in the working environment.

I would also like to remind to ourselves that part of the heritage we received from Berne has to do with social involvement as the TAJ indicated until 1983 "Transactional Analysis is a theory of personality, and a systematic psychotherapy for personal growth and social change".

Dr Sylvie Rossi is a clinical psychologist and organizational consultant. She is a TSTA EATA-ITAA, in the clinical field and a TSTA in the organizational field, she works in private practice in Rome and Florence, Italy. She is cofounder of the organization "Umanamente", involved in training professionals in the promotion of health in their working environment.

## References

- Berne E. (1964). *Games people play*. New York: Ballantine books.
- Berne E. (1972). *What do you say after say hello*. New York: Grove Press.
- Berne E. (1963). *The Structure and Dynamics of Organizations and Groups*. New York: Grove Press.
- Erskine R., Morsund J., Trautmann R. (1999). *Beyond Empathy*. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.
- Gilioli A. R. (2000). *Cattivi capi, cattivi colleghi*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Harald E. (1996). *Mobbing*. Bologna: Pitagora.
- Harald E. (1997). *Il Mobbing in Italia*. Bologna: Pitagora.
- Harald E. (2001). *Mobbing, conoscerlo per vincerlo*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Knorz C., Zapf D. (1995). *Mobbing – eine extreme Form sozialer Stressoren am Arbeitsplatz*. Unpublished. (Cited in E. Harald (1996). *Mobbing*).
- Leymann H. (1993). *Mobbing. Psychoterror am Arbeitsplatz und wie man sich dagegen wehren kann*. Reinbek: Rowolth.
- Leymann H. (1995). *Der neue Mobbing Bericht*. Reinbek: Rowolth.
- McKenna J. A. (1990). *Permission not granted*. Missouri: Emily Publications.
- Neuberger O. (1994). *Mobbing. Ubel mitspielen in Organisationem*. Monaco: Rainer Hampp Verlag.
- Paoli P. (1996-1997). *Second European Survey on Working Conditions*. Dubino: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.
- Resch M. (1994). *Wenn Arbeit krank macht*. Francoforte: Ullstein.
- Zwingmann C., Pfister-Ammende M. (1973). *Uprooting and After*. New York: Springer-Verlag.