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# MOBBING IN CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS: WHEN ABUSE IS SPIRITUALIZED

## **Abstract**

Mobbing in the workplace has been the subject of intense research in the last 15 years. Little is known about if and how it manifests itself in Christian organizations. This study was conducted as an exploratory multiple-case study with the purpose of understanding how mobbing is experienced in Christian organizations and institutions. The research participants were 10 employees who told their stories. Findings show that mobbing exists in Christian organizations and that the abuse is frequently “spiritualized.” Christian leaders need to become aware of the existence of this phenomenon, as well as devise ways to prevent it.

**Keywords:** *spiritualized, mobbing, Christian organizations, abuse*

## **Introduction**

In the last decade, workplace mobbing or bullying (as it is referred to in European and American research respectively) has been the subject of increased interest (Carnero & Martínez, 2005; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; González & Graña, 2009; Leyman, 1996). The term refers to a specific type of psychological abuse in the workplace and is becoming increasingly common in a wide variety of organizations (Agervold, 2007; Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 2005; Yildirim & Yildirim, 2007).



which to operate (Hodson, Roscigno, & Lopez, 2006). Some Christian organizations offer just such conditions. They tend to be closed systems in which people work for those they trust, but who also have the all organizational power—administrators. Where there are no mechanisms for objective and independent checks, workplace abuse is more easily possible and rationalized without employees being able to find help when the system mistreats them.

Here are some concrete situations where the phenomenon of mobbing is either clearly manifested or occurs in a more subtle or hidden way that is still abusive behavior:

- Assigning objectives or projects with deadlines that are intentionally unreasonable or impossible to finish on time
- Taking away from the employee key areas of responsibility, and instead offering uninteresting or routine tasks, or worse, no tasks at all, with the purpose of provoking discouragement that will lead the abused employee to resign
- Ignoring or excluding the employee, talking only to a third person, as if he or she were not physically present at the meeting
- Retaining information crucial for the employee's job or manipulating it so that errors will be committed in his or her work performance, leading later on to accusations of negligence or professional mistakes
- Disseminating malicious or slanderous rumors that harm the employee's reputation, image, or professionalism
- Lessening or failing to value the effort put forth by the employee, denying that a job has been well performed or being reluctant to periodically and objectively evaluate the employee's performance
- Ignoring the employee's professional successes or maliciously attributing them to other people or other factors, such as luck, randomness, or a situation that is unrelated to the performance of the employee
- Constantly criticizing the employee's performance, ideas, propositions, solutions, etc., considering them ridiculous or useless
- Severely punishing any form of personal decision or initiative in the course of performing the job and reporting it as a serious lack of compliance to the hierarchy of the organization
- Ridiculing the employee's work, ideas, or the results obtained, in front of other employees
- Encouraging other employees to participate in the above-mentioned actions through persuasion, coercion, or abuse of power

- Invading the employee's privacy, by tapping into his or her mail, email, phone, documents, closets, drawers, etc., or in any other malicious manner obtaining key elements of the employee's work. (Piñuel, 2001)

Experts on the subject of mobbing show that any abusive behavior that is expressed in non-verbal cues, words, behavior, or attitudes which are systematically repeated, destroying the mental dignity of a person, and thus, jeopardizing employment or degrading the organizational climate, constitutes mobbing (Hirigoyen, 2001). Yildirim and Yildirim, (2007) who conducted a study of mobbing with 505 nurses in healthcare facilities in Turkey, posit that "psychological abuse has become more widespread because of legal regulations... against physical violence" ( p.



a specific position, even though this has never been previously discussed as an issue. The individual's unsuitability is communicated clearly, loudly and consistently; however, no opportunity is given to make necessary changes.

### **Punishing Individuals**

Abusive superiors may assign tasks that are outside the employee's capabilities, with the intent of discouraging or degrading them in their own eyes or in front of their peers. The sole purpose is to put pressure on the individual to resign. A pastor who is not "productive enough," for instance, might be sent to sell religious publications or to teach school, without having the skills or background for either task. It is common to hear pastors talk of being "punished" in reference to their work as chaplains, teachers or colporteurs. They perceive such assignments as a demotion caused by a disciplinary action.

### **Demotion or Salary Reduction**

Abusive employers may try to pressure individuals to resign by lowering the employee's salary or changing his or her position in an attempt to create discouragement.

### **Biased Information**

Individuals that engage in abusive behaviors will sometimes provide biased information regarding an employee's productivity in an administrative meeting. As a result, decisions about the future of the employee will be made, knowing that the employee will be negatively affected and forced to eventually resign.

### **Withholding Recognition**

Abusers will refuse to recognize the work done by an employee, emphasizing only mistakes made and claiming that recognition for a job well done could cause the employee to become arrogant and fall into the "great sin" of pride. Lack of recognition tends to turn into harassment over time.

The recognition of mobbing is complicated by the fact that Christian organizations, like any other organization, have to deal with unproduc-

tive employees or human weakness. Addressing these problems, however, needs to be done without resorting to mobbing tactics.

Even when employees in Christian organizations may realize that they are being mistreated, they are often reluctant to take legal action against their employers because they have been taught that Christians should not air their differences in justice halls (cf. 1 Cor. 6:1-8). When religious employers take advantage of this interpretation and use it as a harassment tool, implying or outright stating that anyone who takes another Christian to trial should not be forgiven, they create an atmosphere favorable to mobbing, as it removes social support from the abused individual.

The basic element present in mobbing is “lack of respect toward another person” (Pastrana, 2002). The psychological consequences of this disrespect are serious for the individual, causing depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, burnout syndrome and career abandonment. Leyman and Gustafsson (1996) point out that the psychological effects of mobbing are similar to those experienced by people with post-traumatic stress syndrome.

While mobbing is clearly unethical behavior for any human being, for Christians who have a view of individuals as specially created and loved by God, it is even more unacceptable. Regardless of the importance of its mission, a Christian institution cannot put aside the rights and dignities of the individuals it employs in the service of that mission. To do so is ultimately un-Christian—and yet, there is ample anecdotal evidence that mobbing happens all too frequently within Christian organizations.

## **Case Studies**

This study is an attempt to explore the phenomenon of mobbing in Christian organizations. A purposeful sample of 18 people from four different countries was developed, based on reports that they had encountered situations of mobbing in their Christian workplaces. Individuals were contacted by phone, email, or in person. Four of the 18 declined to participate for personal reasons or fear of the consequences if their story was mentioned, in spite of confidentiality assurances on the part of the authors. One of the key reasons that the majority shared their stories is the fact that this research study had the purpose of seeking to understand this phenomenon in order to take steps towards possible solutions.





details provided that will allow the reader to identify people, organizations, or countries.

One of the most pervasive forms of mobbing is changing an employee's job description, duties, or even salary, without explanation or consultation. Samuel, a young seminary graduate, had been working as a chaplain in an educational institution. When he returned from a vacation, he discovered that he had been transferred to another institution and his salary had been reduced by fifty percent. In addition, he had been assigned new extra duties that were impossible to fulfill as part of his already excessive workload. When he inquired as to the reason for those changes, and to see if he had done something wrong, his superior informed him that he had no right to ask, and that the fact he was questioning the decision showed that he was unqualified to be an employee of the organization. Samuel was also told repeatedly that the best thing he could do was to resign. Finally, he did. Afterward, he discovered that his previous job had been assigned to a friend of the administrator, and that this person was paid the salary Samuel had previously enjoyed. The abusive treatment Samuel received caused him to suffer from insomnia and depression, requiring specialist medical treatment.

Mobbing can be seen in an employer's refusal to make reasonable accommodation toward an employee's personal needs, instead putting pressure on the person to comply with unreasonable demands or risk losing their job. Maggie, a specialized health worker in a Christian medical institution, took leave from work to take her seriously ill daughter to another city for treatment. When she returned, her boss gave her a stern lecture, saying, "Due to the work and the mission of this institution, you should not take any other leave of absence." When she tried to explain that she was dealing with an emergency, he shrugged his shoulders and refused to listen. Three months later, Maggie became sick with pneumonia. When she approached her boss to ask for a medical leave of absence, he pointed to a pile of papers and said, "Do you know what I have here? Résumés. If you do not TjTl Maggie, oleashad previously enjoyed. e

that she has lost something very important in her life: the trust that she had for an institution that has failed her.

When an individual is targeted for abuse, for whatever reason, his work performance typically suffers, his motivation is impaired, and often depression sets in. The employer is then able to use the lackluster performance as further evidence that the employee is of no value. Robert, a pastor, looks older than he is, and has aged especially during the last year in which he reports that “it feels like I’ve aged a decade.” Considered one of the most successful pastorstelz isdistrico8er wha Zs”

When they see you are submissive, everything will change.” His workplace friends encouraged him to say yes to everything and to never disagree with anything. He finally broke down and left the job.

Now George is convinced that if he had been sufficiently humble, he would have accepted the situation. Like many employees in church settings, he does not understand the psychological damage he endured and constantly spiritualizes his sufferings, blaming himself for failing to be good enough.



In mobbing, harassed workers often represent a threat to the system (Piñuel & Oñate, 2003). Thomas, a Christian teacher, dreamed not only of teaching his specialized courses, but also of sharing his faith with others. Unfortunately, the principal was extremely demanding and constantly insisted that Thomas and other teachers remain at the school after hours. After a hard day, dealing with children and teenagers, Thomas was required to visit parents and give Bible studies. Leaving home at 6:00 AM and returning at 11:00 PM on a fairly consistent basis took a toll on his family life, and left his wife and children resenting his

weakness that enables abusers to attack them. Alex, normally a likable, agreeable person, began to suffer deep depression, resulting in psychi-

in herself as she struggled between being true to the Christian organization she served and remaining true to her own personal beliefs. Brenda decided to remain in her job until she could see the possibility of another position. Meanwhile, her influence, her work performance, and her self-esteem suffered to the point that she became a non-entity within the organization. This prompted the administration to relegate her to a lower level position, for which she is overqualified.

The unfortunate situation in all of the above cases is that those involved—both abusers and abused—have assumed that these behaviors are normal, that they are part of the cost the employee has to pay in order to have a job. Even more disturbing is the seemingly widespread acceptance in these organizations of the idea that one also has to tolerate abuse in order to be a good Christian.

## **Conclusion**

Mobbing represents a fundamental breach of the employee's right to be treated with dignity and as a relevant element in the workplace (Piñuel & Oñate, 2003). While many employees in Christian organizations are privileged to work with competent employers who exert a fair and balanced leadership, sporadic cases of abuse that do exist should alert Christian communities and religiously-oriented institutions to create structures that prevent these kinds of situations.

Nothing justifies mistreatment. The important spiritual mission of a Christian institution does not negate the need to preserve the dignity and value of the individuals who work there. When mobbing is justified in a spiritual context, it creates confusion about Christian values and what is truly important in an organization that claims to work for the glory of God. All people merit respect, consideration of individual differences, and human dignity.

Considering the severe consequences of mobbing for both the individual and the organization—and even more so for a Christian institution or organization—it is important that this issue be addressed openly. It is recommended that both qualitative and quantitative research be conducted in Christian organizations and institutions to determine the possible presence and extent of mobbing. With open information, the workplace should ideally institute mechanisms for prevention and intervention of mobbing, independent of the administration. There is also a

need for the development of theoretical models that will help explain what organizational factors influence the prevalence of mobbing in the workplace and why and how they do so, with the aim of providing a safe and healthy organizational culture where employees are treated with dignity and respect.

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