

Mobbing/bullying behaviour and mental health difficulties of a victim of mobbing

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Abstract

The paper provides the theoretical background of mobbing/bullying and description of a case study concerning a victim of mobbing. In conclusion, reflections concerning counteracting of bullying are provided. Each work environment, regardless the form of employment or the specificity of a job, creates conditions for more or less ethical behaviour

Keywords: mobbing, mental health, case study

Introduction

A few reflections concerning mobbing/bullying

Adamiec (2013), when analyzing the problems of ethical behaviour, points out that it is not so much about the ethical behaviour but the ethical – or not ethical – situations, in which people behave in a defined way - desired or undesired one. For a person to act in ethically correct way, the conditions of an "ethical situation" must be met. Adamiec called the first of those conditions "awareness", the clear autotelic values – the system of axioms, which we assume to be true in our logic, and which we do not question. The second condition refers to encountering or experiencing a problem, that is a threat for autotelic values, which appear difficult or even impossible to maintain, also the way of respecting or protecting them is not completely clear or known. Another issue that the author mentions is the fact that the problem applied solely to people, so all non-human creatures are not subject to ethical behaviour. Experiencing the prominence, the consequences of a problem or situation is another condition. It is the situation, considered as loss of autotelic values or a threat to them, for which the consequences are encumbering for the subject. Another important issue is the awareness of possibilities concerning the choice of action or behaviour. This is about freedom in the situations of choice, alternatives, dilemmas, where the sense of responsibility for behaviour is activated in various ways. The last condition is the sense of obligation, labelled as existential loneliness, that is the fact that nobody can replace us in making the choices, which stimulates the sense of subjectivity. The above conditions make up a system of determinants of ethical behaviour, which constitutes a situational and interactive model. Thus, we are able to define, following the author referred to, ethical behaviour as such which a given ethical situation allow to follow the autotelic values as closely as possible (after: Adamiec, 2013, pp. 26-27).

In this sense, mobbing/bullying may be considered as not belonging under ethical behaviour resulting from unethical situations, pathological realization of autotelic values, or disabling them. However, it is but the beginning of the philosophical and psychological considerations concerning the phenomenon of mobbing/bullying, which in the literature of the subject is described rather in the socio-psychological perspective.

Mobbing, or emotional abuse at workplace, is considered a pathology of social relations, occurring at workplace, which may be considered from the perspective of an individual, or a group. The condition for that phenomenon thus includes the repeating interactions between minimum two subjects, and the fact of pestering/bullying one subject or - in group situations – psychological abuse by a group. Mobbing was described by H. Leymann (1990), a Swedish doctor analyzing violence at work as *psychological terror at workplace, connected with hostile and unethical communication, which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual, resulting in helplessness and hopelessness of victims, taking place often (almost every day) and lasting relatively long, at least for six months, leading to psychosomatic and social pathological states*” [re-translated from Polish] (Layman, 1990, quotation after: Kulczycka, Dumiat, 2004, p. 641). Mobbing is also used as a synonym of harassment (violence) after C. Brodsky (1976) describing acts of emotionally abusing, torturing, and frustrating the employee, which has negative influence, causing the impression of discomfort and psychosomatic disorders, accompanying deteriorated efficiency at work, in the praxeological sense. Bullying is psycho-terror at work, continuous finding of those who are guilty, diminishing one’s self-esteem in the presence of others, with the silent approval of the victim; the hidden motive is the desire to dominate and eliminate the victim, while the torturer does not claim responsibility for the consequences of his acts and behaviour (Adams, Crawford, 1992; Field, 1996, after: Kulczycka, Dumiat, 2004, pp. 641-642). Hirigoyen (2002, 2003) defines mobbing as emotional harassment, as manifestation of any incorrect behaviour, understood as the entire process of verbal and non-verbal communication – from gesture, through word, to attitude, which negatively affects human dignity, negatively influences the psychosomatic functioning, causing loss of employment and deterioration of the atmosphere at work by its repeatability and systematic character (after: Kulczycka, Dumiat, 2004, p. 642).

One should not overlook the Japanese *ijime*, which is – in that culture – bullying, psychologically cruel and destructive behaviour towards those who do not think the way everyone is thinking, in accordance with the proverb that says the nail that stands out will not avoid the hammer (after: Dumiat, 2008, p. 549). In Japan, non-individual values are particularly cherished, while those who do not obey the rule of mediocrity are put in their place. Paradoxically, the perpetrator becomes a pathological guardian of institutional values. It can be expected that the positive aspects of one’s personality, such as its integrity, autonomy, the inner sense of control, high level of competencies – the attributes of efficiency and resourcefulness, will make an individual prone to suppressing and tormenting behaviour of the aggressors who are unable to tolerate this very thing, the individualism of their victims.

1.1. Phases of mobbing – introduction to case study

According to Dumiat (2006, 2008, 2010), three phases of mobbing/bullying can be distinguished, because of the dynamics of the process, changing in time. In the first phase, called initiation, as the very name indicates, the attacks on the mobbing target are restrained, the caliber of victim persecution or harassment is limited, and occurs occasionally. The bullying person tries to control the situation, not to be caught red-handed. The mobbing/bullying itself is a form of “violence in kid gloves” which entails that the forms it takes are sophisticated and sometimes difficult to diagnose even by the mobbing target, the attacks are concealed, veiled, connected with sophisticated allusive criticism, understatements, they are based on nuances, compounded contexts, supposedly casual situations. The bullying person is smart, applies manipulation that is hard to prove, allusive, ambiguous communication, and the attacks target the most sensitive points in the mobbing target (after: Dumiat, 2010, pp. 161-162).

In summary, the emotional abuse at workplace connects the dysfunctional elements (based on persecution and attempted unjustified domination) in establishing social relations between co-workers and their superiors, as well as between employees, or between managerial staff members, who are in professional relationships. In the first phase of it, the person or group of persons being the target of mobbing are often unable to be aware of the emotional process they are subject to, coupled with experiencing the feeling of helplessness, hopelessness, and being unable to influence the development the situation in which they function. They are also not able to become aware of the hostile and unethical situation they are involved in which occurs, on regular basis, between themselves and the other person or persons in workplace situation

(Leymann 1990). In the specialist psychological literature, the relations at workplace, which follow the mobbing/bullying pattern are also considered a specific kind of difficult situations, which may be defined as a traumatic crisis, connecting the elements of violence, being destructive for mental health, which occur in interpersonal relations. Such a type of stress is most often characterized by the feeling of emotional discomfort (fear, anxiety, helplessness, depressiveness), many somatic and mental manifestations and destructive social behaviours (alienation or aggressive reactions – towards others or self-destruction).

The emotional and social imbalance and frustration affecting the basic psycho-social needs, arising due to the mobbing/bullying situation (affecting in particular the need to feel safe and to engage in social contacts safely) usually occurs in a few stages, which are characterized by specific somatic and psychological symptoms and social reactions of the person being the target of mobbing in the community. In general, the following phases may be distinguished: the initial one, the phase of mobbing/bullying escalation, and the chronic phase of mobbing occurring between subjects in work situations.

In the case studies and focused studies conducted by the authors (cf. Dobrowolska, 2013) related to unethical behaviour in flexible forms of employment, in their assessment the employees clearly indicated humiliation, devaluation, attempts to lower the self-esteem, to undermine professional, psycho-social and intellectual competencies. An interesting issue was that the mobbing victims did not understand the situation, the strange atmosphere surrounding them, which has been created by the attacker; instead the person blamed herself, tried to find the causes which provoke the hostile behaviour of the pesterer in herself. These are typical symptoms of the bullying/mobbing experienced, which can be difficult to diagnose by the mobbing victim in the first phase.

1.2. Case study description

In order to illustrate the specificity of the phases in stress situation that the mobbing victim is subject to, as well as the specificity of such persons' professional activity and relations established with other people, presented below is a short description of the case of a 34-year-old woman, who was diagnosed with neurotic somatoform disorders, and – after psychological diagnosis – with experiencing mobbing in workplace. Because of the topic of this paper, as well as the extensive research material obtained, only the basic data have been taken into account, which allow to stress the main directions of symptoms development and psychological mechanisms of mobbing/bullying situations, with distinction of the initial phase, related to the development of subordination in bullying situation, as well as the developed pattern of emotional and social reactions based on bullying mechanisms. As concerns the principles of ethics in publication of research papers based on humans, the authors obtained consent for the use of data from medical documentation in this publication.

Mrs. A., 34 years of age, general secondary education, living in city environment for many years, married for 15 years, bringing up the 10-year old daughter with her husband. She has been working for 10 years as education administrator in an institution of education. Since the beginning of her professional career she has held positions connected with "being subordinated and excessively dependent", focusing particular attention to excessive subordination and pleasing other people, without considering her own needs. On the other hand, for Mrs. A. work is a very vital source of satisfaction, that is of fulfilling ambitions, meeting the need to be distinguished socially; although she realizes that she often had to strive for acceptance, assuming the role of a scapegoat (that is what can be derived from her accounts of many situations, e.g. those occurring in her school years).

In the first phase of functioning in the situation of emotional mobbing in workplace, Mrs. A., 34 years of age, was not aware of the subordination and submitting to the pattern of domination and excessive dependence on another person. Mrs. A. was not able to react in situations connected with professional responsibilities and work situation in a way that would provide her the sense of safety, psychic comfort, and alleviation of neurotic symptoms (dysorexia, anxiety, depression) and the sense of continuous psycho-physical discomfort without co-occurring organic source of disorders referred to above. Mrs. A. was not aware of the blindly followed pattern of domination and excessive dependence, and its negative influence - in

professional relations – upon her self-esteem, and the resulting underestimation and devaluation of her own professional competencies.

Mrs. A. came to receive psychological assistance due to intensifying neurotic symptoms of depression, also in somatic form (weakness, apathy, sleep disorders, dysorexia). The onset of psychosomatic symptoms dated back 5 years earlier, and concerned dysorexia. Mrs. A. underwent pharmacological treatment and psychotherapy. Mrs. A., as a result of undertaking and continuing the long term psychotherapy, gained a partial insight into the psychological mechanisms of mental disorders, also those connected with her workaholic attitude. Mrs. A. recognized, in her behaviour pattern regarding the relations with other people in work situations, the type of workaholic reaction referred to as “pleaser”. Mrs. A. requires further psychotherapy, to improve her insight concerning psychological mechanisms of mental disorders, comprising the area of dysfunctions going beyond the workaholic attitude in the life she lived so far.

Analyzing the development of the situation and bullying/mobbing process in its second stage, it is important for the victim to become aware of the specific relation in which s/he has been functioning, and which is regulated by means of the excessive domination-submission pattern in social relations (professional ones in this respect), by which the bullying group makes the victim obey.

The second phase, of bullying/mobbing escalation, is characterized by more frequent attacks of the pesterer, coupled with their increasing intensification, negative intentions are manifested, and destructive pestering starts, gossiping and slander increase, as well as attempts of making the victim feel guilty, coupled with other dirty practices of the pesterer – hitting below the belt, troublemaking; aggression intensifies and with it the feeling of being threatened and generation of fear. Two specific groups of behaviour occur in this stage: destruction of the victim and deceiving the witnesses of bullying, by playing tricks and crafty manipulations. It may happen that witnesses are completely subordinated to the authority figure and feel intimidated. Stigmatization and isolation deteriorate the psychosomatic condition of the victim of bullying. Performing the role of a superior person is conducive to such behaviour, in which tasks that are delegated prove impossible to fulfill, or the victim is not given tasks to fulfill, so that s/he cannot demonstrate her/his competencies; the victim is also subject to abuse of power and position held, to deliberate delaying decisions concerning issues that are important for the victim. The power of negative impact of the pesterer results in the victim's mistakes at work, in being humiliated by others as a result of untrue stories and gossip spread skillfully by the pesterer, while the criticism the victim is exposed to leads significantly lower self-esteem, causing doubts as to the competencies held. Weakening the victim's position in the group, physical and emotional isolation, preventing the victim from finding support and understanding in the group, prejudicing other people against the victim of mobbing, making witnesses turn against the victim (most often the weakest persons) makes the bullying/mobbing activity turn into a group act (after: Durniat, 2010, pp. 162-163).

Analyzing the course of second phase of mobbing in workplace in case of Mrs. A., it is worth pointing out that in her emotional functioning – over the years of work and contacts with superiors – her anxiety and depressive moods intensified, and she developed more acute symptoms of eating disorders and problems with sleep, despite the absence of situations of open interpersonal conflicts in workplace. At that time, however, Mrs. A. was on a sick leave ever more often, and had a history of several hospitalizations. In work environment, Mrs. A. had periods of interrupted contacts with the superiors and performing responsibilities. Such a situation may have been a kind of “flight into illness”, social isolation from the stigmatization by superiors. The deteriorating psychosomatic condition may have been a response of the victim of mobbing to the situation experienced as being attacked by the pesterer. The internalized domination-submission pattern resulting from the victim's own experience may have fostered the development and consolidation of specific relations with people encountered in workplace situation. Such social functioning may be explained, among other things, by the fact that Mrs. A. was brought up in a generation family, where the dominance patterns and submission were in use for bringing up and parent behaviour. Thus, Mrs. A. has had a deeply internalized pattern of domination-submission, disregarding her own bio-psycho-social needs. It results from the interview and autobiographic information that Mrs. A. had an internalized pattern of emotional reactions in social situations, on the basis of features of relations that are established between the victim and

aggressor (domination-submission and total subordination). The above pattern developed as a result of emotional and social relations with parents and child minders in childhood and adolescence. As Mrs. A. reports, in her life so far, regarding the social relations established between her school years and professional life, she often identified with the role of a scapegoat. In return for submission in relations with people of the same age, she received acceptance from others, as well as improved self-esteem, which was always low, as far as she remembers.

On the one hand, Mrs. A. experienced her superiors at work as people one should depend on and submit to (the upbringing pattern in the family, which provides gratifications and meeting the emotional-social needs, e.g. of safety, love, and approval of achievements). On the other hand, she perceived them as dominating persons, who impose tasks beyond her abilities, not in line with competencies and responsibilities related to her position. As years went by, Mrs. A. began to notice the negative influence of her superiors upon her own functioning at work more and more, she started to see the mistakes made, particularly in situations of superiors' control. The increasingly frequent criticism from her superiors was experienced as humiliating and lowering her self-esteem ever more significantly, resulting in growing doubts as to her professional competencies and declining worth of her as a person. It should be mentioned that Mrs. A. continued to hold the same position she was so familiar with, where the responsibilities posed no challenge. With time spent in the same position, Mrs. A. faced increasing difficulty in performing her work duties, her sense of mental and physical well-being deteriorated, neurotic symptoms intensified (in particular the feeling of exhaustion, sleep problems, dysorexia, anxiety, and fear), which resulted in increasing absenteeism from work, dissatisfaction of her superiors, the dominating demand to make her catch up, by attempts to make the victim of mobbing feel guilty.

The last phase defined by Durnat (*ibid.*, p. 163) is called the chronic one. It is utterly destructive for the victim, witnesses, and the entire organization. Unethical behaviour is treated as norm in this phase. Bullying/mobbing becomes a natural thing for three parties: the pesterer, the victim, and the organization as a whole. What is characteristic, consent is given to bullying/mobbing behaviour, and the fact that all parties are accustomed to it. The victim experiences psychosomatic disorders, s/he is exhausted and unable to defend, nervous breakdown is possible, the person may reach for abusing substances, makes more and more mistakes, symptoms of neurosis and depression intensify. Negative consequences of mobbing behaviour towards the victim include: sick leaves because of psychosomatic problems, ruined reputation, falling out of the labour market and having difficulties in finding a new job. Mobbing moves from work environment to social environment and family, because the results of negative actions of the pesterer lead to crises in family life. The pesterer ceases to persecute only when unmasked, or when the community rebels against this behaviour. When the victim starts to speak about her/his feelings, begins to understand the pesterer's behaviour, and occurs to be a threat for the pesterer, who usually is not getting the gratification from the victim any more (in the form of humiliation and abjection of others). In most cases, the pesterer then begins to look for a new victim, being equally prone (after: Durnat, 2009a, p. 145).

Analyzing the case of Mrs. A., it can be pointed out that she has fully experienced the chronic phase of bullying/mobbing, "flying into illness" and particularly going on sick leaves more often, including hospitalizations due to intensifying dysorexia. Upon returning after sickness absence, Mrs. A. would experience situations of having to deal with the outstanding tasks, which often proved impossible due to the time allowed for performing them, as well as her psychosomatic condition, upon returning to work after sickness. Due to the above, Mrs. A. was not in a position to demonstrate her competencies, which intensified her "flight into illness" as a way of alienating herself from the environment that deepens her devaluation and increases the mobbing reaction. In consequence, Mrs. A. suffered from intensified dysorexia, had symptoms of physical casting (lost weight, suffered from bulimic symptoms, sleeplessness, pains) and emotional discomfort (depressiveness), which contributed to subsequent more frequent hospitalizations and, in consequence, obtaining a decision about disability pension due to poor health and inability to continue her professional duties.

It is worth adding here that bullying/mobbing is not only attributed to workplace, it may also occur at home, as well as other formal groups and organizations. Bullying/mobbing behaviour may appear in all forms of employment and any work

environment, also in telework and self-employment, in which the apparent absence of direct employer does not protect from possible attacks of pesterers via indirect relations or via connections and contemporary ICT techniques.

Conclusion. Reflections on counteracting of bullying

The anti-bullying legislation imposes the responsibility for the occurrence of bullying/mobbing on the employer, thus any preventive and corrective actions, as well as the responsibility itself are the management staff's tasks. The ideal attitude would be that of monitoring and prevention of pathological behaviour at workplace. Working conditions, in particular: bad communication, improper information flow, chaotic organization, lack of clarity and randomness in distribution of tasks and positions, poor management skills, ignoring the problems of employees, ignoring conflicts, improper system of personnel evaluation and motivation is conducive to bullying/mobbing behaviour, together with the – typical for victims – attitude that often fails to accept norms and practices of the organization (after: Durniat, 2010, p. 165).

Sztumski (2013), when analyzing interpersonal relations, notices that they require – unconditionally in Western countries – suitable ethical and legal regulations, which are responsible for providing social order; unfortunately, the more such relations, the more regulations. With the development of civilization, based on Western culture, the number of bans must increase, as this is the way of attempted filling of the "ethical gap". However, some form of crisis occurs, as there may be more form than content, as less bans yet clearly formulated may result in better order, may dissipate the doubts concerning their interpretation, which in consequence improves the enforcement. There is a jungle of codes of ethics and law – enactments, executory orders, court interpretations - their excess does not make people better, but has one principal advantage – people are made to think, to act prudently, due to the consequences resulting from regulations. It is disputable whether there is also the effect of contrariness, a defence reaction triggered instinctively, for the purpose of breaking the regulation or omitting it. The increasing number of bans restricts the person's will and freedom. Thus, it seems that the best way would be tedious and time consuming upbringing, as an alternative to normative ethics, enforcing respect for bans by penalty threats, which is used in training of animals (after: Sztumski, 2013, pp. 42-43).

A good solution, taking into account the above, would be the introduction of negative consequences to anti-bullying codes, which would also apply to witnesses of unethical behaviour.

The increasing number of bans, however, fosters stress at work, as well as development of neurosis and other mental diseases in more prone individuals. Bans may cause mental laziness and absence of critical reflections. If we reduce our mental efforts to the use of algorithms, we become like machines, thus the thought that bans are conducive to progressing mechanomorphization of people, who would behave habitually, which has nothing to do with responsibility and favours mass stupefying and stupidization of people (ibid., pp. 45-46).

Bullying/mobbing is a crisis phenomenon, it requires a faultless diagnosis and intervention actions (as well as preventive actions, precluding the occurrence of such crises). In accordance with legislation, employers have the obligation to create appropriate climate and culture of the organization, conducive to ethical behaviour at work. Employers are obliged to develop and implement employee protection programmes and to monitor the organization. It is most recommended to educate the entire staff of the organization as regards awareness and understanding the phenomenon of bullying/mobbing and its symptoms, as well as anti-bullying procedures (Durniat, 2010, p. 167).

Also the The National Association for Anti-Mobbing (Krajowe Stowarzyszenie Antymobbingowe) was established in Poland, which receives signs of bullying/mobbing behaviour, provides support, legal advice, and professional assistance. The most frequent clients there are employees from the sector of education, health service, and office workers, which is a confirmation of the worldwide tendencies that bullying/mobbing affects non-profit organizations the most (Leymann, 1990, after: Kulczycka, Durniat, 2004, p. 645).

An interesting and positive vision of rightfulness was described by Schlenker (2008), as persistent following of a stern moral code - irrespective of pressure to break rules and of costs - which serves the common good. Despite the fact that righteous behaviour entails costs, as in case of keeping promises, being trustworthy, not being prone to manipulation and bribery, a righteous man may also experience short- and long-term positive consequences of his action, such as those related to self-image, reputation, recognition by the group.

Pilch (2013), in his studies and analyzes, presents something contrary to what has been stated above, namely that although training in business ethics or in ethical behaviour is considered a desired form of intervention, its efficiency remains disputable, in the light of research conducted (Peppas, Diskin, 2000). The efficiency of those short-lived forms of education was tested by Tang, Chen (2008). They assessed the ethical dilemmas connected with future work of students, and their results indicated clearly that the attitudes and tendencies regarding behaviour were more in demand only in the sphere of their direct experiences, whereas in case of events not present in their consciousness or experience, the change either did not happen or was but slight. The influence of such trainings upon the willingness to get involved in unethical behaviour is thus absolutely limited (after: Pilch, 2013, p. 148). It is, in fact, the eternal psychological problem concerning the dilemma between the attitude declared and the actual involvement in actions, which do not always go hand in hand, thus the unsatisfactory results of various preventive programmes.

It is also worthwhile to refer here to the results of studies conducted by Durniat (2009, p. 926), in which a negative correlation was demonstrated between mobbing and positively assessed climate in the organization, understood as representing the interests of employees, opportunities of getting promoted and awarded, organization and communication at work, relations with co-workers and superiors. The other important correlation has been demonstrated to exist between mobbing and social-organizational variables understood from the general perspective, such as social support, managerial competencies of superiors, organization of tasks and their distribution, communication efficiency, the attitude of decision makers towards novelty and creativity, consistence of the group, the ways of conflict solving, or work pressure. Finally, there is a third correlation between mobbing and social-organizational factors seen from the perspective of an individual, such as: acceptance of the goals of the organizations, its practices and norms, identification with the team of workers (after: Durniat, 2009b, p. 926).

Coping with bullying/mobbing is not easy, because it is difficult to prove it exists at work, as has already been mentioned, to collect proofs, to find witnesses of its instances, or doctors who are specialists in it. Many researchers stress that it is easier to counteract mobbing via trainings or anti-mobbing campaigns, than to fight when it begins to spread or gets strong (Kmieciak-Baran, Rybicki, 2003; Grabowska, 2003; Durniat, 2006). Despite the fact the Polish Labour Code contains a clear stipulation which says "the employer is obliged to counteract mobbing ..., an employee whose health suffered as a result of mobbing may demand pecuniary compensation for the injury sustained" (Labour Code - K.P., art. 94.3 § 1 and 3), in many organizations bullying/mobbing is still a common practice.

The studies conducted by Kmieciak-Baran, Rybicki (2004), with employees of the education sector as subjects (n=492), revealed that as many as 61.5% of teachers experienced bullying/mobbing as defined by Leymann, for more than six months. Emotional abuse was reported by 79.5% of victims, and manifested as slander, defamation, or denigration. In the study conducted by Delikowska (2003), also based on the tool developed by Leymann (n=245), mobbing was found to affect 73% of the subjects, which indicates how common it is.

Durniat (2010) recommends, for counteracting mobbing, to develop internal regulations and anti-bullying rules, a moral code of conduct in the organization, with the ban on bullying/mobbing behaviour, also with training on what mobbing is and how to cope with it. It is also suggested that every organization should have a path to follow in case of alleged bullying/mobbing events. The possibility of conducting professional mediation, obtaining psychological assistance, or counselling, seems equally justified (p. 105).

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