

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Expressions of workplace collective aggression. Navigating through concepts and views on mobbing, bullying and harassment

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Abstract

Aggression at the workplace has been defined under many forms and instances across the scholarly literature, and also throughout time, the organizational sector constantly systematizing incoming approaches, paradigms, theories and trends. Since the early '80s and all the way through the '90s the concept development and expansion on the specific collective aggression at work have led to numerous discussions and term approval. This theoretical article presents in short the major trends and updates on most known forms of collective aggression at work, in order to structure concisely several acceptances and interpretations of organizational pathology expressions such as mobbing, workplace bullying and workplace harassment, updating the existing state of the art. The overview results highlight several directions of comprehension and analysis outcomes, which in turn solicit a conceptual refining and the establishment of a unitary acceptance in addressing collective aggression at work, sources and effects, term similarities and distinctions.

Keywords

collective aggression, workplace, mobbing, bullying, harassment, organizational pathology

Concept trends of collective aggression at work

With the start of pioneering research on individuals, groups and their interactions in a specific environment, the initial findings of Karl Lorenz, on collective aggression from a group towards one of its members, were transferred and given attention in the organizational sector by numerous researchers and explicative works. In this view, Leyman explored and explained the behavioral aggression patterns against fellow employees by their work groups, uncovering for the first time the mechanisms, sources and effects of the mobbing concept at the workplace. As a

general trend, most studies on mobbing focused later on frequency indicators, risks and outcomes (Grzesiuk et al., 2022).

From another point of view, other studies started to embrace the idea of bullying, which emerged from research conducted into educational sectors first, where the phenomenon explained an aggression towards a fellow pupil. The bullying concept expanded towards the work environment as well, and caught the attention of most English-speaking countries, being associated with numerous concepts such as emotional abuse, workplace abuse or aggression, mistreatment or harassment (Einarsen et al., 2003).

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With the start of 1980 and throughout 1990, the research development lead to various concept approaches, raising the complexity of appropriate usage and debates. Either bullying or mobbing, harassment or victimization, all the way to psychological terror, the attributes seemed to describe the same mistreatment of employees but with subtle distinctions (Einarsen et al., 2003). In a meta-analysis, İbiloğlu (2020) indicated that there is a concept specific usage in the scholarly literature sources, with a preference for the term mobbing, more present in areas such as Germany, Austria, Sweden, Italy, Spain and Turkey while in England, Denmark or the United States of America, there is a prevalence for the term usage of workplace bullying. The same author mentions the presence of moral or psychological harassment concepts, more present in areas such as France or Canada (İbiloğlu, 2020).

In time, numerous research works defined the term in relation with its manifestations, intensity and frequency, type of aggression and outcomes. For example, Davenport et al. (1999) consider mobbing as an abusive group behavior towards the employee which is facing prolonged emotional abuse.

Other authors associated the collective aggression at the workplace with distinct features such as work violence, bossing, abusive leadership, workplace harassment, persecution or simply work aggression or abusive behavior (Hershcovis, 2011; Çoban, 2018; Góralewska-Słońska, 2019; İbiloğlu, 2020; Romero Starke et al., 2020; Ilieva et al., 2024). As part of the developments in organizational pathology, and following the start of 1990, mobbing or workplace bullying have become of interest and concern for the human resources management and organizational psychology domains as such.

In the article's next sections, the three major concepts are presented systematically and concisely, based on specific views over their presence in the organizational sector, following terminologies, sources and outcomes, for a better understanding upon workplace collective aggression and organizational pathology expressions.

Mobbing

As an organizational phenomenon, deemed to imply three type of “actors” present in the process, from victims to abusers, alongside viewers or bystanders (Mulder et al., 2014), mobbing has been perceived mostly as a collective aggression, by a group of workers on a fellow employee, in various forms and manifestations, with particular degrees of impact on the victim and consequences (Davenport et al., 1999; Yildirim et al., 2007; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Boudrias, 2021). Perceived as a stage process, mobbing can develop due to a wide range of causes (e.g. personal background, organizational culture and climate, role conflict, leadership styles, work relations and competition, communication rules and habits, group or team roles and functioning, organizational change etc.).

Davenport et al. (1999) described the phases to which the victim is exposed, underlining three major directions: 1. a first level which comprises “mild” attacks and to which the victim can stand against; 2. a constant and increased second level of attacks which generate physical and psychological negative outcomes for the victim; 3. a third level where the negative mobbing effects overwhelm the victim's resources to respond and defend, affecting performance, work life, well-being and the overall situation.

Quite early, Leymann (1996) indicated a series of behaviors that describe mobbing in terms of collective aggression on several dimensions such as: employee's personal expression, social relations, reputation, professional and personal projects and health. As a brief example for the personal expression, the employee victim can be denied the freedom of speech or be limited in their discourse, receive frequent threats and interruptions, facing non-verbal denial or various innuendos. In the case of social relations, the victim tends to be isolated by the mobbing co-workers, while the reputation is constantly challenged by rumors, gossip and myths, core private elements such as values, beliefs and identity being assaulted. For the professional and personal domains of the victim, mobbing will target task overloading

or underusage, misinformation, lack of support, sabotage.

The entire process can culminate with more direct violent abuses, harassment and mistreatments which put the employee mental and physical health at risk. Davenport et al. (1999), based on Leymann's mobbing behaviors, offered a structured grid of specific conducts that define certain typologies, facilitating identification, prevention and management from the leadership level. Some examples reside in (Davenport et al., 1999): systematic interruptions, negative imitation, co-worker interaction limitations, meaningless activities, harassment etc.

Beyond types of conduct and expressions, several features remain constant in defining mobbing at the workplace: the systematic abuse and repetition, intentionality, the prolonged ordeal and negative acts frequency, as well as the participation of several aggressors who function as a group even though some research works define also a one to one relation as in the case of bullying. The impact can be observed individual, cultural and environment levels of the organization (Arnejčič, 2016).

As an organizational pathology "product", mobbing represents a dysfunctional work setting, in which numerous causes lead towards capitalizing aggression in a collective

stance, where usually the victim bares the responsibility for the group failure, power seek or need to compete and perform at all costs of co-workers and lead management. In another study, Pheko (2018) mentioned the social dominance and undermining drives as examples of rationales behind action motives, while Bershadskyy and Seidel (2024) highlighted the personal benefits as one of the main drives for the process development, which at times can reside into attaining specific goals or avoiding sanctions through "sacrificing" others reputation, work and performance. In this view, mobbing becomes an image of today's frequent pathologies inside the modern organization (Vandekerckhove & Commers, 2003).

Bencsik et al. (2024) showed that mobbing as a major psychological harassment at the workplace should receive more attention at management level, with a focus on prevention and intervention programs, awareness campaigns, training for resilience, raising efforts to build a healthy organizational culture and code of ethics.

Based on these representative studies, certain directions for more future research can be advanced as presented in Table 1, useful for projecting particular management and intervention strategies in tackling aggression phenomenon at work.

Table 1. *Future research directions on mobbing management at the workplace*

Areas	Research directions
Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mobbing stage development and process ● Leadership style, mobbing and follower effects ● Bystander effect and participation dilemma ● New organizational cultures and climates specificity ● Digital workplace and new forms of mobbing
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Longitudinal studies on long term mobbing effects ● New mobbing evaluation instruments validation ● Experimental approach on mobbing phases and responses ● Qualitative analysis on mobbing coping behavior
Intervention outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy and regulations on mobbing behavior and acts ● Support programs for mobbing victims ● Employee perception and awareness on mobbing ● Management guidelines and action strategy for mobbing prevention and intervention

In conclusion, mobbing as a collective aggression at the workplace, still needs further exploration and concept clarification, besides the usual definitions, classifications, frequency and phases, taking into consideration the new digital workplace challenges, team dynamics and pressure points on resilience, fast adaptation or change in organizations.

Workplace bullying

The concept of workplace bullying has been widely associated with a workplace aggression, often conducted against a worker victim or a group of victims, by a single or multiple aggressors. As a term it is highly preferred in the English speaking areas of research, but not limited to it, knowing an increase in its usage in the scholarly literature lately. Often used as a replacement for mobbing, the concept is viewed by certain works as being more specific in defining a psychological aggression in a professional setting (Galanis et al., 2024; Ullah & Ribeiro, 2024).

Bullying as a classical term originates from the education sector research, a topic that caught the public attention since 1970 (Olweus, 1993; Espinosa, 2018; Crețu & Morândău, 2024; Slonje et al., 2025), where it describes the school violence, as an imbalanced power relation act, both intentional and repetitive, usually as a one to one interaction. The adoption of workplace bullying was quickly integrated in the organizational research from the late '80s, continuing and developing a specific path, apart from the educational field as expected.

At the workplace, bullying could be identified by either direct or indirect attacks (e.g. harassment, offence, exclusion etc.) on an employee victim with lesser resources or inferior position to respond, on a repeated and regular manner (Einarsen et al., 2003; Einarsen et al., 2010), with direct negative outcomes on the individual (e.g. low performance, burnout, occupational stress, workaholism, absenteeism, conflict, chronic illnesses, high turnover rates etc.) (Xu et al., 2018; Galanis et al., 2024 ; Léné, 2024).

Same as in the case of mobbing, the workplace bullying can be analyzed as a process, in which stages and escalation shape the impact and consequences (Krishna et al., 2023). Some perspectives on bullying inside the organization highlight the psychological aggression and the mechanisms of abuse in terms of the aggressor profile and behavior, harm strategies, victim response and state of learned helplessness if the situation can't be de-escalated or resolved (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Krishna et al., 2023), while in other works, by using the term mobbing, the authors underline the victim, the mistreatment experience and victimization process (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Mota, 2024).

Several authors, including Leymann (1996), Matthiesen and Einarsen (2010) conclude that the term bullying implies a more direct, confrontational approach while mobbing can engulf both, straightforward and subtle, indirect aggressions, making the latter more comprehensive and inclusive, covering a wide range of behaviors and acts.

The debate is ongoing, plenty of publications using the term workplace bullying, others considering the two concepts as overlapping. Moreover, numerous other articles refer to various other labels that fall in the same conceptual category (e.g. workplace harassment, group bullying, psychological terror at work, work abuse etc.) (Faldetta & Gervasi, 2024; Bencsik et al., 2024; Ilieva et al., 2024). Supplementary, workplace bullying may reveal more complex systematic associations and structuring, than previously thought to be, according to Matthiesen and Einarsen (2010), the concept can be classified as a subtype of workplace aggression, while questioning intent.

At the same time, aggression is a mark of bullying, either at micro or macro level (Sue & Spanierman, 2020; Mota, 2024). Covering a wide range of types, just as in the case of mobbing, bullying can be verbal, psychological, physical, social, sexual, institutional, and lately cybernetic (De Obesso Arias, 2023; Mota, 2024; Trudgett-Klose & McLinton, 2024) with multiple effects on the employee, work group and organization, from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, low

motivation to various illnesses, absenteeism and resignation (Verkuil, 2015; Kallman et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2022; Galanis et al., 2024; Ullah & Ribeiro, 2024; Nielsen et al., 2024).

When analyzing the bullying pathology at work, various researchers have underlined the study importance of organizational environment and factors, previous experiences and history with bullying, as well as latent conflicts and job and roles design, culture and climate, team functioning, leadership features and individual differences (Zachariadou et al., 2018; Özer & Escartin, 2023).

The process of research is ongoing, many causal relations remaining unknown between variables associated within the aggression at work. Bullying at work, similar to mobbing brings extra pressure and urgency on the prevention and intervention management plan, due to the risks it brings on core human rights inside the labor market (e.g. dignity and respect, safe and healthy work environment, freedom from discrimination and harassment etc.), challenging the correct application of legislation, regulations, legal obligations and

international human rights (Vijayakumar & Rajagopal, 2023; Munro & Phillips, 2023).

Due to its frequency in presence, urgency and risks, the scholar literature has indicated on many occasions, the need for employee centered strategies and support measures. In Table 2, several such strategies are proposed, as a useful tool for managerial interventions. Workplace bullying can be associated, as presented before, with a variety of sources and organizational context circumstances, from role conflict, power and resource competition, to “toxic” work climate and dysfunctional work relations and leadership. Focusing on practical interventions at work, both at employee and management levels, organizations can withstand a phenomenon that tends to engulf, if not addressed, crucial activities of employees, their health and professional status, work group interactions, performance objectives and well-being, possessing the capacity to extend from isolated events to constant and continuous state of work and negative environment.

Table 2. *Employee centered strategies regarding workplace bullying*

Level	Strategy
Employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information and awareness campaigns on bullying • Support services and groups for victims of bullying • Counselling and psychotherapy with focus on bullying sources, mechanisms and effects • Topic related prevention and education programs for employees • Guidelines for managing resilience, healthy work and well-being at the workplace • Education on public perception and attitudes towards work abuse
Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information access, processing and comprehension on national and European legislation concerning work aggression • Measure sets for legislation, regulations, obligations and human rights applications • Managerial guidelines for workplace bullying context prevention and intervention • Managerial training • Internal prevention policies • Strategies for safeguarding healthy work environments and culture • Leadership training and group coordination to tackle bullying at work

In the near future, in parallel with in-depth research about mobbing or bullying at the workplace, profiling better intervention programs should be the norm, giving priority to employee support, well-being at work, refining and educating leadership conducts, monitoring data and developing adequate practices, regulations and policies with regard to these organizational pathologies.

Workplace harassment

Throughout the scholarly literature databases, the term of workplace harassment has been used alongside mobbing, bullying, aggression, hostility, psychological terror and many more, often overlapping and depicting the same hostile interaction between a employee perpetrator and the co-worker victim. As in the debate case over workplace bullying, concerning the number of participants to the aggression and its specificity, some works present this particular pathology as a one to one aggression, just as the case of workplace bullying, while others perceive a much broader sense of the term, where a group of people in the company may exercise their aggression repeatedly and persistent on one or more victims (Khubchandani & Price, 2015; Österman & Boström, 2022; Bencsik et al., 2024). However, even if, for a longer time, singular, isolated acts of aggression at the workplace did not make the headlines for being included in harassment category, lately the International Labour Organization (2019) defined the concept in terms of actions, behaviors or threats, singular or repetitive, that are unacceptable and which generate physical, psychological, organizational negative effects and mistreatment.

In a systematic review, Kim (2024) concluded that definitions and measurements on the term need standardizing, alongside setting specific intervention refinement. The same author underlined the challenges of the new world frame in which organizations develop (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic, cyber work reality) and which will require more attention (Kim, 2024). Beyond the association with mobbing or bullying, the term itself encompasses the idea of aggression repetition, with a clear target and intention, which

becomes more specific than in the case of mobbing, targeting the victim on a more direct manner.

Gumbus and Lyons (2011), observed through a content analysis the frequent occurrence of specific acts related to harassment, among which: verbal humiliation, intimidation, humiliation, power abuse, work abuse, physical abuse. In the same view, Berry and Yarbrough (2019), structured several themes and commentaries on women harassment, observing their prevalence in the organizational settings (e.g. promotion discrimination, sexism, verbal aggression, work abuse, benefits or rights denials, closed networks etc.). On the other hand, Bencsik et al. (2024) indicated that motives such as lack of emotional intelligence, stress, professional jealousy, lack of trust, faulty leadership are more common in generating psychological harassment at work, materializing in aggressions on well-being inside and outside the organization, community impact and mental health risks. Harassment triggers a wide range of effects, from counterproductive behaviors, sabotage, abuse, turnover, negative emotions to deteriorating work relations, low performance and efficiency, frustration, anxiety, depression and lack of trust, just to mention a few (Zhang et al., 2024).

In order to prevent workplace harassment, Khubchandani and Price (2015) suggested a three level approach in prevention (primary, secondary and tertiary type) which can capitalize policies, laws and education in the first phase, followed by clear protocols, job design and evaluation, specialty assistance and finally policy revisions, re-education and countermeasures, going through a gradual increase in operating and implementation costs. Moreover, Luong and Green (2023) suggested annual mandatory employee training on harassment topic (e.g. reporting, identification, evaluation etc.), induction courses, policy development and management action, as major measures to counter workplace harassment. As a specific view, harassment may indicate a constant stalking, with the intent of repetitive aggression in various forms, from which the victim can't escape, and the perpetrator keeps coming back.

More recent works have shifted research attention on newer forms of aggression at work, advocating for more analysis, comprehension and prevention on digital transformation and violence, cyber aggression and abuse in organizational contexts, following a post-pandemic era and rapid artificial intelligence and smart technologies development. In a meta-analysis by McCord, Sawhney and McHugh (2024), results indicated a series of pre-conditions in terms of age, gender, personality, support, work requirements with regard to cyber mistreatment, which in turn predicts various employee behaviors, well-being outcomes, burnout and job satisfaction. In another literature review, Mukred et al. (2024) highlighted the fact that so far, research on cyber violence has explored mainly and more frequent the factors behind the conduct intention, leaving too few studies on its effects, models, and presence in developing countries. If cyber bullying or harassment was previously investigated with preference towards adolescence and educational settings with regard to violent behaviors, deviance, various pathologies, addictions, mental health, risk behaviors, low performance, social rejection etc. (Wright & Li, 2013; Litwiller & Brausch, 2013; Mamaci, 2024), more recent studies have extended the concept towards the organizational sector, showing an impact on counterproductive behaviors, digital aggressions, work abuse and negative emotions, group norms (Richard et al., 2020; Kreuder et al., 2024).

Moreover, harassment has been observed also in telework or remote work, where abusive behaviors affect negatively the life satisfaction, deepening the work life conflict (Goswami & Jena, 2023), while taking multiple forms, under the incivility virtual workplace term, where employees resort to offensive remarks and accusations, aggressive attitudes, ignoring and isolating victims etc. (Torres, Morman & Mistry, 2024).

As a concluding remark, harassment as an individual or collective aggression at work, directed towards a fellow employee, can be difficult to identify in its indirect or subtle forms. In many situations, whether a repeating act of diminishing someone's role and effort, depriving the person of professional

recognition chances or by simply denying the victim's access to information and a constant burdening with unimportant tasks or non-related solicitations, alongside frequent questioning and exaggerated control, escape the direct observation and clear spotting, making it challenging for the management to adopt intervention actions, in a situation that even the victim is not aware of its functioning or can't prove its presence, though the negative effects are visible.

Limitations and future directions

The present study follows a theoretical background argumentation and debate premises upon major developments of various forms of collective aggression at work. The perspectives, as part of the organizational pathology domain focus specifically on mobbing, workplace bullying and workplace harassment, highlighting certain directions for analysis and research outcomes, conceptual refining, practical implications and term structuring.

Despite being a comprehensive review of work mistreatment behaviors and settings, there are several limitations that can serve as directions for future research. Firstly, future studies should incorporate empirical data, either quantitative or qualitative, in order to test comparisons between the three concepts, common ground, similarities and differences, completing the theoretical frame with situational analysis in real organizational contexts.

On a second note, even though the study provides a slight insight into the regional and international specificity on the term usage, future studies may elaborate more closely on the cultural, society level and activity sectors characteristics, analyzing various mediators as such, distinct variables, definitions, preferences and trends in certain areas in association with the collective aggressions manifestation at work, its sources and effects, its approach and solutions. This may support a better understanding of concept validation in key areas, taking into consideration local, regional, national and international particularities, while generalizing theory and practice research outcomes.

The study offers the work frame for future research directions on mobbing management at the workplace alongside employee centered strategies regarding workplace bullying, and beyond concept clarification proposes specific interventions and assessment both at employee and managerial levels. However, future study approaches should expand and investigate in-depth effects of such applications, targeting the development of research based tools for prevention, intervention and education on these themes.

Even though the study main focus was on the so-called “classical” forms of aggression at work, there is a growing interest in emerging types of individual or collective aggression such as digital aggression, cyber violence or bullying, cybervictimization, remote and telework misconducts, which solicits further investigation, encompassed in today’s challenging artificial intelligence dynamics and growing digitalization of work life and contexts, with crucial relevance on the organizational settings.

Last but not least, the study discusses the thematic from a human resources and organizational theory and practice perspective. As a future direction for research, the concept exploration can be tested and conducted in a broader interdisciplinary area, adding newer and more diverse introspections from public policy, law, economy and social domains with regard to its numerous applications and impact.

Conclusions

The aggression at the workplace envisages multiple forms and expressions, complicating the identification, prevention and solution driven strategies. As part of the organizational pathologies spectrum, mobbing, bullying and harassment generate negative variations and effects, operating in direct or indirect ways, confrontational or more subtle, burdening the normal functioning of company, its employees well-being and balance, putting at risk the secure, stable and optimal work future.

Depicting their mechanisms and understanding their impact on organizational settings require first of all an extensive analysis, comprehension and structuring of the

concept framework. The scholarly literature so far on the matter has met numerous challenges and definitions, the collective aggression at work embracing too many instances and manifestations. Future directions in research need to address more the systemizing of major dimensions and concepts in social sciences with regard to this particular organizational pathology, refining the distinctions and similarities between terms, sources, effects and measures.

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