

The Best Psychosocial Correlates of Mobbing (bullying) at Work



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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a preventive and operative definition of mobbing based on mobbing behaviours and identifies the best preventive correlates of these mobbing behaviours. 513 subjects participated in the study voluntarily. Mobbing behaviours were measured in a reliable and valid way incorporated into a regular psychosocial risk assessment. Selected predictors of mobbing behaviours have been factor analysed and later included in a regression analysis that shows a high predictive power for eight principal components (Adjusted R square = 0.507). These predictors can be used in preventive assessment and intervention safety and health programs.

Key words

Mobbing, Bullying, Psychosocial Factors, Psychosocial Risks, Safety Climate.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is one of the most painful forms of aggression at work. Following the classic Leymann criteria, in order for the label bullying -or the equivalent term mobbing- to be applied to a particular situation, some well-known mobbing behaviours have to occur repeatedly and regularly, at least once a week, and over a period of time lasting more than six months (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003).

The previous definition was created in order to differentiate mobbing from other forms of conflict and to provide a rigorous delimitation for clinical or legal contexts. However, it has three major shortcomings. First, it is useless from a psychosocial risk prevention perspective. Waiting for at least six months of mobbing behaviours to occur before accepting the presence of mobbing goes against the first preventive principle: anticipate and avoid risk and harm. Second, it is a self-demanding definition: Mobbing is defined as suffering mobbing behaviours weekly for at least six months. Third, an important number of well-established mobbing behaviours (e.g., rumours, isolation, changes in job demands) are by their nature difficult to analyse under the frequency and duration criteria.

The aim of this research is to propose a preventive and operative definition of mobbing based on mobbing behaviours and identify the best correlates of these mobbing behaviours from a set of psychosocial factors.

In order to obtain a preventive approach to the mobbing phenomenon, it is necessary to: (1) move the focus from the victim's symptoms to the social setting of the mobbing behaviours, (2) define mobbing as a continuous of aggressive behaviour, actions and omissions, performed by some members of the social setting and (3) identify the psychosocial conditions in organizations that promote or facilitate mobbing behaviours.

The Battery of Psychosocial Factors (Meliá, 2003a) provides such a measurement of mobbing, and it works under these main assumptions.

METHOD

Sample

513 subjects participated in the study voluntarily. 47.7% of the sample were men. 47.8% were less than 30 years old, 19.5% were between the ages of 30 and 39; 19.5% between 40 and 49, and the remaining 13.2% were 50 years old or more.

They worked in different organisations from a broad array of sectors: 56.2% Services (9.3% education, 8.7% tourism, 7.5% commercial, 7.3% health, 6.3% public administration, 3% transport, 2.2% cleaning, 1.2% security forces, 10.7% other services), 35.9% Industry (7.7 food and drink, 6.1 metal, 5.9% textiles, 2.2% car industry, 2% paper and cardboard, 2% wood, 1.8% plastic, 1.8% telecommunications industry, 6.4% other industries), 6.1% construction and 1.8% agriculture and fishing. 75.1% were workers, 7.6% supervisors, 8.9% middle managers and 8.4% managers.

Measures

All the variables (Table 1) were measured using the Battery of Psychosocial Factors of the University of Valencia (Meliá, 2003a) or the Valencia PREVACC Battery (Meliá, 2003b). Each factor includes several specific sub-factors. For example, Role Conflict includes, among others, the demands-resources conflict and this, among other sub-factors, the role overload. This Battery allows the separate assessment of each factor and each sub-factor. The Battery of Psychosocial Factors of the University of Valencia is a set of instruments designed for a detailed assessment of the so-called psychosocial hazards at work (e.g., Cox & Griffiths, 1996), and developed on the tradition of the Michigan Model and further European developments (e.g., Winnubst, de Jong, & Schabracq, 1996). The Valencia PREVACC Battery is a set of instruments designed for the measurement of the safety response in the tradition of safety climate literature (e.g., Flin, Mearns, O'Connor, & Bryden, 2000) and the psychosocial model of work-related accidents (e.g., Meliá, 2005).

Table 1. Main groups of variables measured by the Battery of Psychosocial Factors.

<p>a. STRESS FACTORS</p> <p>a.1. Role stress a.1.1. Role Conflict a.1.2. Role Ambiguity a.1.3. Boundary roles</p> <p>a.2 Social Dysfunctions a.2.1. Mobbing (Bullying)</p> <p>a.3 Organizational Factors a.3.1. Leadership a.3.2. Communication a.3.3. Quality, Safety and Ecology involvement</p>	<p>b. EFFECTS b.1. Satisfaction b.2. Psychological Health b.3. Tension b.4. Burnout b.5. Propensity to Leave b.6 Performance</p> <p>c. ACCIDENTS C1. Without time off last year C2. Without time off 3 years C3. With time off last year C4. With time off last 3 years C5 Company Acc. Last year C6 Company Acc. Last 3 years</p>	<p>d. CONTROLLED BIASES d.1. Social desiderability Congruency control Inverted answers control Resistance control Omission control Neutral answer control</p>
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Table 2 summarizes the number of items, reliability (coefficient alpha) and main statistics of each indicator. The mobbing indicator has 6 items and a 0.86 coefficient alpha. All items were measured on a 1-5 point scale.

Table 2. Number of items, reliability (alpha coefficient), mean, standard deviation and main percentiles (percentile 5 to percentile 95) of the main scales measured using the Battery of Psychosocial Factors.

	Items	Alpha	Mean	SD	P5	P25	Med	P75	P95
Role Conflict	18	0.91	2.49	.75	1.17	2.00	2.50	3.04	3.72
Role Ambiguity	15	0.91	3.58	.68	2.42	3.13	3.67	4.00	4.77
Boundary roles	9	0.91	3.25	1.13	1.00	2.44	3.44	4.11	5.00
Mobbing	6	0.86	1.73	.66	1.00	1.00	1.67	2.17	2.83
Leadership	6	0.83	3.27	.83	1.83	2.67	3.33	3.83	4.67
Org. Communication	8	0.86	3.46	.81	2.00	2.88	3.50	4.00	4.87
Quality, Safety & Ecol. Inv.	7	0.83	3.38	.75	2.00	3.00	3.50	3.83	4.65
Satisfaction	32	0.94	3.42	.64	2.35	2.97	3.46	3.85	4.50
Psychological Health	12	0.85	3.84	.63	2.74	3.42	3.92	4.27	4.75
Tension	17	0.93	2.48	.77	1.24	1.94	2.41	3.06	3.71
Burnout	5	0.81	2.27	.84	1.00	1.80	2.20	2.80	3.78
Propensity to Leave	8	0.82	2.46	.81	1.00	1.88	2.50	3.00	3.88
Performance	5	0.78	3.90	.56	3.00	3.60	4.00	4.20	4.80

RESULTS

Although the mobbing indicator has a small mean (1.73) and SD (0.66), and their 95 percentile is 2.83, it shows a consistent relationship with the psychosocial indicators (table 3) and also with the accident indicators (table 4).

The Mobbing indicator correlates as follows with the psychosocial indicators: Role conflict $r=.48$; Role ambiguity $.33$; Organizational communication $-.33$; Leadership $-.40$; Tension $.42$; Burnout $.54$; Psychological Well-being $-.38$; and Propensity to leave $.49$.

The mobbing behaviours are associated with less satisfaction, worse psychological health, more tension, greater propensity to leave the organization, less performance and the presence of symptoms of the burnout syndrome. Also, mobbing behaviours are significantly associated with individual work accidents without time off and with the number of accidents in the company.

Table 3. Pearson correlations (r) and related probabilities (p) among stress factors (rows) and psychosocial correlates (columns).

		Satis.	Ps. Health	Tension	Burnout	Prop.Le.	Perf.
Role Conflict	r	-.526	-.519	.701	.554	.471	-.273
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Role Ambiguity	r	.587	.339	-.197	-.361	-.297	.490
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Boundary Roles	r	.187	.094	.109	-.106	-.106	.084
	p	.000	.040	.017	.021	.021	.069
Mobbing	r	-.378	-.381	.422	.545	.494	-.324
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Leadership	r	.685	.372	-.394	-.546	-.499	.277
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Communication	r	.752	.370	-.281	-.452	-.378	.371
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Qual., Safety & Ecol. Inv.	r	.700	.294	-.231	-.382	-.352	.347
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

Table 4. Pearson correlations (r) and related probabilities (p) among stress factors (rows) and work-related accidents (columns): workers accidents (C1 to C4) and company accidents (C5 and C6)

ACCIDENTS		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
Role Confl.	r	.123	.136	.056	.122	.213	.231
	SB	.008	.004	.234	.009	.000	.000
Role Ambig.	r	-.120	-.112	-.057	-.072	-.193	-.203
	SB	.009	.017	.223	.125	.000	.000
Boundary R.	r	-.059	-.018	-.012	.011	-.129	-.152
	p	.217	.705	.797	.818	.012	.004
Mobbing	r	.126	.127	.044	.081	.223	.220
	p	.006	.007	.350	.082	.000	.000
Leadership	r	-.185	-.165	-.054	-.130	-.187	-.221
	p	.000	.000	.252	.006	.000	.000
O. Commun.	r	-.133	-.112	-.060	-.122	-.207	-.248
	p	.004	.017	.200	.009	.000	.000
Q. S. & E. I.	r	-.155	-.155	-.073	-.118	-.156	-.184
	p	.001	.001	.118	.012	.002	.000

In order to identify the best predictors of mobbing behaviours, for each psychosocial indicator a regression analysis was performed using the items as predictors and the mobbing indicator as the dependent variable. 46 items were identified as the best predictors of mobbing. These 46 items were factor analysed, yielding 10 principal components. The factorial scores on the 10 principal components

of the best predictors were saved, and a linear multiple regression analysis was performed to identify the best components. Finally, 8 components were retained and again included in a multiple regression summarized in table 5. The result is a set of 8 principal components measured by 42 items that sustain a very high predictive relationship with mobbing behaviours (Multiple R = 0.72; Multiple R square = 0.52). These components include:

- (1) Superiors' Support and Consideration (negative sign),
- (2) Work-related tension,
- (3) Work Quality and Well-being (negative sign),
- (4) Propensity to Leave,
- (5) Co-workers' healthy relationships (negative sign),
- (7) Satisfaction with the participation (negative sign),
- (8) Self-depreciation, and
- (9) Contradictory demands.

All of them contributed significantly to mobbing prediction.

Table 5. Linear Multiple Regression VD: Mobbing indicator; VI: Best Psychosocial Mobbing Predictors. R = 0.72; R-square = 0.52; Adjusted R-square = 0.507

Model		Coefficients		St. Coeff.	t	Sig.
		B	St. Error	Beta		
1	Constant	1,735	,029		60,764	,000
	F1 Superiors Suport and consideration	-,117	,029	-,181	-4,100	,000
	F2 Work-related Tension	,208	,029	,322	7,281	,000
	F3 Work Quality and well-being	-,112	,029	-,173	-3,908	,000
	F4 Propensity to leave	,178	,029	,275	6,225	,000
	F5 Co-workers healthy relationships	-,210	,029	-,325	-7,351	,000
	F7 Satisfaction with the participation	-,110	,029	-,171	-3,854	,000
	F8 Self depreciation	,224	,029	,347	7,837	,000
	F9 Contradictory demands	,102	,029	,158	3,565	,000

CONCLUSIONS

This paper shows how Mobbing behaviours can be measured in a reliable and valid way and incorporated into a psychosocial risk assessment, such as the Battery of Psychosocial Factors. This paper also illustrates the identification of the correlates of mobbing using the Battery of Psychosocial Factors (Melià, 2003a) and the Valencia PREVACC Battery (Melià, 2003b). The identification of mobbing behaviours and their psychosocial and organizational correlates should be the kernel of a preventive view of mobbing, instead of the post-hoc view centred on the prevalence and consequences of mobbing.

Selected items from the Battery of Psychosocial Factors can be considered good predictors of mobbing behaviours. Thus, they can be used in preventive assessment and intervention safety and health programs. These items have been factor analysed

and later included in a regression analysis that shows a high predictive power for 8 principal components (Adjusted R square = 0.507).

Although these results need to be replicated in a new sample because of chance capitalization, and the design does not allow us to make causal inferences, it is clear that some psychosocial factors can be used as indicators or predictors of the presence of mobbing behaviours. Therefore, they should be considered in a preventive approach to this psychosocial pathology.

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