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## **Mobbing and suppression: footprints of their relationships**

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## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Mobbing and Suppression: Footprints of Their Relationships

*Brian Martin and Florencia Peña Saint Martin*

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### Introduction

Organizations, including workplaces, deal on an everyday basis with talent, commitment, supportiveness, solidarity, niceness, friendship and working together for common goals. All too often, however, disagreements lead to harsh conflicts. Also, commonly, groups are formed within organizations, sometimes creating vested interests that lead to battles for power to control processes and resources as well as to impose certain viewpoints. Destructive power games linked to these interests are a common negative outcome because sometimes it is assumed that any means available can be used in these struggles. Too often, attempts are made to degrade persons and/or their work that threatens vested interests. This can lead to various forms of institutional counter-productive behaviors. To eliminate negative outcomes, these behaviors need to be clearly identified

and addressed, along with their interrelations and dynamics.

In recent years, important efforts in this direction have been made, dealing with discrimination (Cates & Dorsey, 2011), sexual harassment (LeMoncheck & Sterba, 2001), mobbing/bullying (Leymann, 1990a) and suppression of dissent/discontent (Suppression of Dissent, 2012). There continues to be confusion about terms (for example, mobbing versus bullying) and a lack of awareness and understanding of these problems. With few exceptions (Einarsen, Matthiesen & Skogstad, 1998; Bjørkelo, et al., 2008), these negative acts tend to be dealt with separately, one by one, not considering their overlaps and interactions. In this paper we focus on two issues – mobbing and suppression of dissent/discontent – to distinguish them from each other and to address some of their overlaps and interactions.

In mobbing,\* or “workplace bullying,”† a group gangs up on a target, who usually is considered a threat. Nasty or undermining comments, ostracism, unfair assignments, and many other techniques make their life miserable (for an assessment of the most common behaviors, see Leymann, 1990b; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011). Suppression involves attacks on dissidents, protesters, or the discontented, and on ideas or behaviors that challenge orthodoxy or powerful cliques. Mobbing sometimes involves suppression of dis-

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\* Defined by Leymann (1996) as “hostile and unethical communication, which is directed in a systematic way by ... a few individuals mainly towards one individual, who, due to mobbing, is pushed into a helpless and defenseless position, being held there by means of continuing mobbing activities” (p. 168).

† We especially want to call attention to this phenomenon in all kinds of organizations, not only at “workplaces.”

sent/discontent, but people also become targets of mobbing for other reasons. Suppression may involve mobbing, but can also occur using other techniques. We explain the overlap between mobbing and suppression as well as differences.

**Scenario 1:** At a staff meeting, Dr. Smith expresses disagreement with the hospital's policy on handling patients. However, Smith's views are not recorded in the official minutes of the meeting. Shortly after, Smith's access to patients is restricted, with the result that her performance figures become worse. Smith's contract is not renewed, though other doctors with similar performance figures have their contracts signed. Nothing is ever said directly to Smith about her views or performance, but she loses her job.

**Scenario 2:** At a staff meeting, Dr. Smith expresses disagreement with the hospital's policy on handling patients. A group of administrators feels threatened and, although not saying it openly, they agree that Smith has to go. But there is an obstacle: Smith has tenure. The director's position is about to end and the administrators want the position for one of their own group. Bad publicity at this time is highly unwelcome. Shortly after, Smith's access to patients is restricted. "The fault" is found: a complaint from a patient is registered, leading to an inquiry; and rumors are circulated about Smith's sexual behavior. The administrators scrutinize Smith's file in detail, finding "faults" they never bothered about before; they put together a panel to review the patient's complaint and the previous alleged faults. Double-checking, they find the same actions of the complaint in three of Smith's previous patients, who sustain them in writing. This new evidence is added to Smith's file. Nurses are instructed to pass information to the administrators about the "misbehaviors" of this "problematic and weird" doctor, and are warned not to be with Smith alone. Because Smith has been degraded officially and covertly, colleagues stay away. The nurses notice odd aspects in all that Smith does, which are reported to the administrators. This goes on for a year and a half, until the board dismisses Smith officially for "misconduct." One of the administrators who ganged up against Smith becomes the new director of the hospital.

In Scenario 1, Smith and her ideas (disagreement with the hospital's policy) were suppressed but not mobbed; in Scenario 2, she was mobbed as a means of suppression. Both scenarios involve the same goal: the social elimination of the individual ques-

tioning vested interests, who is perceived as a threat. In the mobbing scenario, social degradation of Smith as a person took place.

Attacks of suppression and mobbing can also happen because the target is in the wrong place at the wrong time, such as occupying a position that powerful administrators want for somebody else. Less frequently, efforts at social elimination are based on personal reasons, such as just disliking somebody or wanting to exercise revenge for personal or professional jealousy or former disagreements. Suppression can also happen as "collateral damage." For example, when a member of a committee wants somebody to win a prize or get a position and uses influence to prevent better-qualified candidates from getting it. In some cases, a target might not even be aware of suppression. However, a series of apparently independent suppression events can be part of a mobbing process. For example, one professor can have publications and promotions blocked, classes cancelled, students discriminated against and grants rejected, sometimes leading to denial of tenure or dismissal. Targets of mobbing are always very much aware of the attacks against them. It is not difficult to imagine the emotional distress that can arise from confronting these situations, with the potential to adversely affect mental, emotional and physical health (Einarsen, 1996; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Peña & Sánchez, 2007).

### **Connections between suppression and mobbing**

The processes and sequences of events in suppression and mobbing are remarkably similar worldwide and in many different organizations. Generally, an event creates a situation in which there is a clash of interests, usually in a context of unequal power with the future target of attacks in a weaker position. Afterwards, a process of degradation of the target begins, often through spreading negative and malicious rumors about the target and their performance (Einarsen, 1999), with the end result being stigmatization, ostracism and isolation. Also, the target's failings are secretly exaggerated and achievements ignored. Much of this occurs indirectly and out of sight, without directly challenging the target, although overt and obvious put-downs

usually happen too. Regarding mobbing, Westhues (2004) calls this the “preparation phase”.

Then “the fault” is found (or cynically created) and used to justify the initiation of open attacks, including formal complaints and/or administrative inquiries or sanctions (Westhues, 2004). At this stage, because the target is already alone and stigmatized as a consequence of the preparation stage, there is little or no collective protective action in response; most members of organizations respond to a group logic in which it is perceived as unwise to be on the side of a stigmatized person (Goffman, 1963). The mobbing gang is secure. In this situation, any of the emotionally abusive behaviors that have been identified (Leymann, 1990b; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011), as well as others, such as cyber attacks and threats, may be used openly against the target. Rumors and malicious gossip often continue too.

Going through this experience is incredibly stressful and harmful, in part because suppression and mobbing have the capacity to terminate long or promising careers, cause financial hardship, create family conflicts, and break up marriages, and in part because social degradation is often the origin of an ongoing sense of losing dignity and experiencing shame (Lewis, 2004), when targets are unable to stop the attacks.\* If the conditions make it impossible to suppress a target quickly, targets are degraded and made very much aware of the unfair situation in which they are placed.

Targets find it very damaging when colleagues, often even former friends, do not fight for truth and justice. Most colleagues do not speak out; they avoid being with targets in public due to the risk of stigma (Goffman, 1963). This creates in targets a feeling of isolation and unfairness that easily leads to obsessive thoughts about the situation and chronic anxiety (Vartia, 2001). Being treated unfairly and ostracized can create a feeling of shame (Lewis, 2004) and loss of personal pride. A chronic emotional discomfort can set in, whose health consequences need to be researched further, to add to the information already available (Einarsen, 1996; La-

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\* Einarsen states that they are unable to defend themselves. However, this overlooks strategies of resistance that are sometimes used (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

helma, et al., 2010): these consequences are very harmful and easily confused with unrelated problems.

What generally differentiates suppression and mobbing is the context that surrounds targets and their personal position within it. If one is in a vulnerable situation (as in Scenario 1), social elimination may follow quickly, with suppression occurring by dismissal or not renewing a contract. Suppression can target ideas, paradigms and lines of research too, not only individuals. For example, research data can be controlled, censored, distorted or discredited (Martin, 1999a). Mobbing is always performed against a human being, although the reason to attack can also include the suppression of his/her ideas and research/teaching agendas.

If targets have tenure, public prestige, or strong social support, mobbing becomes a process of degradation, almost as a ritual (Thérèse & Martin, 2010). The intention is to justify the perpetrator team’s actions for itself and for the context. This can wear down the target’s life and emotional, physical and psychological well-being (Westhues, 2004), and often does. Targets can be emotionally vulnerable and drained after a series of attacks, which makes it harder to defend themselves effectively.

Suppression and mobbing threaten two basic non-biological human needs of targets: (1) the feeling of belonging to a group (threatened by ostracism, isolation and devaluation); (2) self-recognition in the products of the tasks in which a person invests effort, creativity and skills (threatened by making targets feel that everything they are, do and say is a fault or a big mistake). Through humiliation, the perpetrators induce resignation, early retirement, dismissal, or even death due to poor health or suicide. Serious adverse health consequences, such as mental breakdowns, cardiovascular disease, and fibromyalgia (see Fuentes and Lara’s study in this issue) can occur as “collateral damage.”

### **Common targets**

Those perceived as different or a threat to the vested interests of groups with formal or informal power within organizations are more likely to be suppressed or mobbed. Likely targets include:

- Whistleblowers: people – usually employees or former employees – who speak out in the public interest, for example about corruption or hazards to the public (Glazer and Glazer, 1989)
- Dissenters from strong paradigms, accepted truths, or organizational dynamics
- Those who try to promote change
- Outsiders: those who stand out from cultural norms, expected roles (for example, in gender or sexual preference), social group, or competence (Osborne, 2009).

It seems that those who do not observe the unwritten canon of orthodoxies and prohibitions, which is socially, culturally and symbolically enforced, are at greater risk of being suppressed, mobbed or both.

### Emotional abuse

Because physical violence is widely seen as illegitimate and illegal,<sup>\*</sup> it is seldom used within organizations or in public debates. Emotional abuse, exercised though negative communication, is the preferred technique to both suppress and to mob. Such abuse can be extremely subtle and easy to deny, as well as very difficult to apprehend and denounce, making it difficult to document and to convince others of its significance.<sup>†</sup> This makes it ideal for attacking without repercussions. Negative and aggressive communication – verbal and nonverbal, repeated and sustained – is the “weapon” used in emotional abuse. If unchecked, it can get worse over time; some researchers say it always escalates. It includes not only aggressive words or body language, but a variety of techniques, such as discrimination, harassment, humiliation, rejection, intimidation, manipulation, coercion, constant criticism, denying emotional responsiveness, unfair accusa-

<sup>\*</sup> Except in special arenas such as boxing and warfare.

<sup>†</sup> Examples include: faces of disgust or ignoring the target at any personal encounters; systematically opposing his or her suggestions and ideas; criticizing his or her friends, family, partner, nationality or looks; publicly inviting others to a gathering and deliberately excluding the target; ignoring the target’s contributions but publicly acknowledging the same actions with much enthusiasm if somebody that belongs to “the group” does them.

tions, spreading rumors, denial, isolation, neglect, ignoring, ostracism, reprimands, slander, and stalking, among many others

There is some debate about whether emotional abuse should be considered a form of violence or whether “violence” should refer only to physical attacks.<sup>‡</sup> However, there is general agreement that emotional abuse can be very damaging to the target’s physical, psychological, and emotional health. Because it is repeated and sustained, emotional abuse can be experienced as a form of torture. New attacks are felt to be inevitable but are unpredictable. Leymann and Gustafsson (1996) demonstrated that emotional abuse can even lead to post-traumatic stress disorder.

*With emotional abuse, the insults, insinuations, criticism and accusations [can] slowly eat away at the victim’s self-esteem until she is incapable of judging the situation realistically. She has become so beaten down emotionally that she blames herself for the abuse.* (Hein, 2006)

Emotional abuse in organizations can be carried out by different sets of perpetrators. If the single perpetrator is the boss, it is called “bossing” (Kerfoot, 2008). However, groups of individuals can gang up together to “defend” their vested interests, guaranteeing power and control for themselves, and emotionally abusing in various ways those they perceive as a threat. Leymann and others named this planned, systematic and collective emotional abuse “mobbing.” Because of the connotations of the words “bully” and “mob,” it may be better to use other expressions, for example referring to the “instigator” and the “perpetrator team.”

### Suppression of dissent/discontent

The sorts of dissent/discontent that can trigger suppression are diverse. They include conducting or publishing research that gives results unwelcome to powerful groups,<sup>§</sup> teaching about sensitive topics, expressing views within an organization, and expressing views in the mass or social media. These

<sup>‡</sup> The World Health Organization (2002) includes in the equation the intention to damage as the critical point to define an action as violent.

<sup>§</sup> Regarding smoking see, for example, *Social Medicine*, 5 (2), 2010.

sorts of actions can be a challenge within a line of command in a hierarchical organization. Another sort of challenge is to a dominant orthodoxy (for example, criticisms of standard treatments for cancer) or to a vested interest (for example disclosures about private health services). Dissidents may be aware that what they do is threatening to powerful groups, or they may think they are just doing their jobs.

Reprisals against dissent/discontent are also quite diverse. Suppression can include ostracism, petty harassment,<sup>\*</sup> lack of communication,<sup>†</sup> blocked appointments, denial of research grants, rejection of articles, spreading of rumors, threats, reprimands, referral to psychiatrists, forced transfers, demotions, dismissal, or blacklisting. In authoritarian regimes or certain contexts, political dissidents can be physically repressed with beatings, imprisonment, forced psychiatric treatment, torture, or murder.

Sometimes it is not easy to determine whether suppression has occurred. Many applicants for jobs are unsuccessful, many articles submitted to scientific journals are rejected, and quite a few workers lose their jobs due to redundancy. Because some types of reprisals can be legitimate actions, additional information is needed before concluding that suppression is involved.

One indication of suppression is when reprisals start shortly after the first instance of dissent/discontent or after it becomes well known. In the late 1980s, Jean Lennane, a psychiatrist working for a state health service in Australia, spoke to the media about the adverse effect of government funding cutbacks on health care. Shortly afterwards, she lost her job. The timing suggests suppression. She became very active against suppression of whistleblowers. (See Lennane's article in this issue.)

Another indication is based on a comparison between what happens to a worker who speaks out and what happens to workers who do not. If the outspoken worker has the same work performance but is treated differently, this suggests that suppression is involved. This is called the double standard test: different standards are used to measure the perfor-

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<sup>\*</sup> Such as inconvenient changes in rosters or delays in processing routine requests.

<sup>†</sup> Such as not being told about important meetings.

mance of different workers. When Jean Lennane lost her job, other health service professionals who had not spoken out did not lose their jobs.

Yet another indication of suppression comes from seeing patterns in a particular organization or field. Healthcare is a perfect example of suppression related to the vested interests of pharmaceutical companies, health insurance companies and the ones that produce health infrastructure. Even Latin American social medicine, which addresses the consequences of embodiment (Krieger, 2011) of social inequality due to unfair economic policies, has been suppressed because it challenges the vested interests of governments and corporations. Think of any controversial topic, such as pesticides, cancer therapy, antibiotics, AIDS, genetic engineering, vaccination or fluoridation. If people who question the standard view – or the view backed by powerful groups – regularly come under attack, then it is plausible that suppression is involved (Martin, 1999b).

There are many possible reasons why someone suffers from ostracism, harassment, reprimands, or dismissal. A person can be targeted because of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, educational background, or accent. Sometimes poor performers are targeted, being treated in a disrespectful way and often much worse than they deserve. On the other hand, sometimes high achievers are targeted for attack because they are a threat to mediocre performers. It is also possible for people to come under attack almost randomly if they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. For example, they may be caught between two feuding groups in a workplace and mistakenly assumed to belong to the other group because of some coincidental factor such as clothing or who they were seen talking to.

The concept of suppression of dissent/discontent is closely connected with whistleblowing. Sometimes the reports made by whistleblowers are investigated, and that is the end of the matter.<sup>‡</sup> However, in many cases, whistleblowers are subject to the

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<sup>‡</sup> For example, at a staff meeting a worker might raise a concern that some funds are being misused. The boss orders an investigation and then fixes the problem. The worker who spoke out is thanked, or at least not penalised. (This is unlikely when the boss is responsible for the problem, or has done nothing to fix it.)

typical reprisals we have been dealt with here. Sometimes they are mobbed. These are exactly the sorts of methods used in suppression of dissent/discontent. This is to be expected, because whistleblowing is a type of dissent/discontent. However, suppression can occur without whistleblowing, such as when researchers obtain results that are unwelcome to powerful groups.

The concept of whistleblowing focuses on the whistleblower, whereas the concept of suppression focuses on the perpetrators of attacks and on the process of squashing dissent/discontent. In whistleblowing cases, attention is diverted to the whistleblower, which can mask the problem they blew the whistle about.

### **Mobbing**

There has been debate about the best way to refer to systematic and unacceptable group behavior in organizations of emotionally abusing a single target for long periods and causing or potentially causing deep harm. The two terms most commonly used are “workplace bullying” and “mobbing.” In this paper we choose mobbing for four reasons:

- a) Mobbing clearly denotes group behavior, whereas an individual can be a serial bully or be bullied by just one person.
- b) Mobbing is present in many different types of organizations, not only workplaces. Research so far has almost entirely focused on workplaces. A move to widen analysis of mobbing beyond workplaces has started, but needs to receive more attention.\*
- c) The word “bullying” is used in Latin America and other Spanish-speaking countries to refer to systematic collective aggressive behavior between peers at primary and secondary schools, causing conceptual confusion when bullying is used to refer to adult behavior in organizations.
- d) Mobbing is the term used worldwide except by some English-language researchers.

It is important not to confuse mobbing with other aggressive and emotionally abusive behaviors with-

in organizations, including bossing, harassment, discrimination, sexual harassment, personal conflicts, single events of emotional abuse (such as shouting or insulting), and long-term and systematic emotional abuse committed by individuals. However, frequently, diverse forms of abuse interlink and interact, although the connections have been overlooked for the most part. For instance, mobbing can be used in suppression processes and suppression might be a part of mobbing strategies, hence our interest in analyzing the two processes together.

As previously noted, mobbing is very often based on a power imbalance between the perpetrator team and the targets (Einarsen, 2000), although it also can be used to produce this imbalance and cause targets to have difficulty defending themselves. Mobbing always involves isolation, degradation and humiliation of the targets. Negative messages about them are mainly directed to their colleagues and bosses through seductive “talismán words” (Pares, 2007), emotive phrases presented to the general public as justification to attack. Targets can also be directly addressed in a negative way, both privately and publicly, with the latter also serving as a means of degradation.

In mobbing cases, aggression can be vertical, both upwards (subordinates to managers, chairs and organizers) and downwards (managers, chairs and organizers to subordinates), or horizontal (between managers, chairs and organizers or between subordinates) (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2007). It is also possible to find mixed patterns, especially in “toxic organizations” (Dyck & Roithmayr, 2001), where these negative behaviors have become part of everyday life.

Heinz Leymann, though not the first researcher to address the phenomenon,<sup>†</sup> was the one who made it a paradigm in academic and therapeutic contexts. Social and academic awareness of the prevalence and importance developed from his work, starting in the Scandinavian countries (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). Leymann created an instrument to assess the presence of mobbing within organizations, based on the systematization of his therapeutic experiences.

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\* In Peña and Sánchez (2009) there are several examples of mobbing in various types of organizations.

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<sup>†</sup> Carroll Brodsky (1976), author of *The Harassed Worker*, is commonly referred to as the first researcher to deal with the issue.

The Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror (LIPT) addresses 45 different behaviors, grouped into five categories: communication, social contacts, personal reputation, occupational situation, and physical health (Leymann, 1990b).

Although psychological approaches have established profiles for victims and perpetrators, “conspiratorial scenarios” can be created almost spontaneously.\* Both mobbing and suppression have the goal of socially eliminating something that makes perpetrators uncomfortable, whether the target is a person or a set of ideas. Targets are considered a threat to vested interests and are turned into outcasts by manipulating information about them in a dishonest and questionable way. By definition, mobbing and suppression involve the use of unfair methods.† Therefore, suppression and mobbing have ethical implications still to be addressed. However, suppression can be carried out by a single individual, it can happen in a single event, and the attacks can occur without targets being always aware of them. In cases of mobbing, a group performing the attacks has to be identified, and the attacks have to be regular and prolonged; neither emotional abuse by a sole perpetrator nor sporadically abusive events are considered mobbing. In mobbing scenarios, targets are always aware they are being isolated and “hunted,” creating a chronic state of anxiety with very harmful consequences.

### **Lessons from suppression to mobbing and from mobbing to suppression**

As we have said before, in mobbing various techniques are used to attack a target. This also happens in suppression: a dissident/discontented or a whistleblower is subject to reprisals, using many

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\* Between global markets, multinational corporations, national economic circumstances, the international division of labor, historic moments, international and national transitions, expansion or shortage of employment, international and national policies, historical or changing structures of organizations, local cultures, multicultural and multigenerational contexts, and personal biographies.

† For example, circulating distorted information, exaggerating or even inventing faults, making achievements invisible, spreading destructive gossip, denying tenure, promotions, publication, etc., and stigmatizing ordinary actions.

mobbing techniques. There is a considerable overlap between what happens in mobbing and suppression.

However, in some types of suppression, the target is not attacked personally, but his or her career is stymied. For example: A nurse says the hospital’s policy on washing hands should be better enforced, implicitly suggesting that some doctors are inadvertently infecting patients. Later on, she is passed over for a higher position; an inconspicuous candidate, less qualified and less experienced, is chosen instead. The nurse misses the opportunity but is not attacked in any other way. Suppression can apply to data and to ideas; some journals reject all submissions on certain topics or that reach certain conclusions. A dental journal, for example, might reject articles critical of fluoridation. No one is personally attacked, and the authors of the rejected articles might not even be aware of the cause of the rejections – after all, lots of other articles on other topics are rejected too. In this scenario, there is no mobbing, but there is suppression of ideas.

A pharmaceutical company can carry out numerous studies on a new drug, but only attempt to publish those studies that show the benefits of the drug – studies showing harmful side effects are not submitted for publication. The scientists working for the company, or whose research is funded by the company, do not come under attack. Indeed, they may be receiving generous payments and other benefits for their research on the drug. But important data are suppressed.

The concept of mobbing focuses on individuals, main instigators, perpetrator teams and their targets, as well as their interactions and the means used to attack. It gives special attention to the effect of mobbing on organizations and the targets, such as adverse life, work and health consequences. The concept of suppression encourages a wider consideration of methods used against both individuals and ideas. The implication is that when looking into problems within an organization, or more widely, it is worth paying attention to a wide range of methods, including ones not aimed at individuals, such as rejecting writing because of the ideas expressed.

The existence of suppression is often hard to prove because some of the methods used, such as blocking appointments or denying funding, often



occur for legitimate reasons. Therefore, criteria are sometimes needed to assess whether suppression is involved, including timing (attacks start after speaking out), double standards (others who did not speak out are not attacked; ignoring or awarding the same actions, depending on who performed them), and patterns (there have been other similar cases in the same field). The same criteria can be useful for assessing mobbing. In mobbing, due to the preparation stage, targets are told implicitly they deserve what is being done to them and observers might sense procedures are being applied fairly because the target has done something terrible. Targets and their supporters can use criteria (timing, double standards and patterns) to show that mobbing behaviors are unfair and are being used for an unstated reason (vested interests). Exposing vested interests can make it easier to build support from others who might be skeptical about mobbing claims.

Mobbing always involves degradation, namely words and behaviors that can induce feelings of shame. Condescending remarks, spreading of rumors, abusive verbal attacks, and public criticisms can be understood as degradation rituals. Suppression often involves degradation, but sometimes does not. For example, when well-qualified dissidents apply for jobs, they may be rejected because they spoke out, but no public remarks are made about the reason for the rejection. Therefore, there is no degradation. Even the decision-makers may think they are being fair, because they are using selection criteria that value orthodox achievements; dissidents/discontented simply do not measure up. The lesson for the study of mobbing is that there can be systematic bias – suppression of certain ideas and people who express them – without anyone explicitly coming under attack. Everyone might feel the system is okay, because no one is being humiliated, yet dissent/discontent is quashed.

Finally, there is the idea of self-censorship in suppression. A person, aware that dissent/discontent is risky, decides to stick to safe topics and cautious comments. Sometimes this process is unconscious; the person censors his own work and ideas and is not even aware he has done it. This can also be called self-suppression. It is far more powerful than

overt suppression, because nothing needs to be done in public, so there is no basis for complaint.

The idea of self-censorship can be applied to mobbing. This generates the notion of “learned helplessness” – to avoid being mobbed, people become passive and cautious, even though no one else does anything threatening. Fearful of being attacked, these people conform to what they think others want, take no initiative, give credit to others for their own work, and even start behaving in a weak and dependent way trying to always be “correct,” inadvertently giving power to the perpetrator team. When regular sorts of mobbing occur, bystanders may become frightened that they will be similarly targeted and start behaving in a frightened fashion to avoid being attacked. In this way, mobbing can induce self-censorship and helplessness, just as suppression can stimulate self-censorship, preventing struggles against suppression and/or mobbing.

### **Final remarks**

Literature about suppression and mobbing highlights several arenas where more attention, research and action are needed.

1. So far, mobbing has been addressed as a phenomenon only happening in workplaces. There is now strong evidence that it occurs in many other organizations (Peña & Sanchez, 2009).
2. Probably because of its subtleties, suppression is generally overlooked within organizations, which means low-key reprisals against the most vulnerable people may be invisible. There is a need to emphasize these actions.
3. Diverse forms of attacks against individuals, ideas or suggestions in organizations interlink and interact to protect vested interests. These connections have been overlooked. For instance, suppression of dissent/discontent or reprisals against whistleblowers can be transformed into mobbing if the target resists (Bjørkelo, et al., 2008). A series of suppression events directed at a single individual can constitute a type of subtle mobbing, and suppression might be also part of mobbing strategies.
4. Because of the emphasis on perpetrators, targets and actions, and their consequences on targets and organizations, the vested interests behind the aggression remain comfortably hidden. These interests

and the groups that enforce them should become part of the panorama of analysis and action against them.

5. Suppression and/or mobbing can become *the organizational culture* in toxic institutions, leading to serious ethical, human rights, and health implications.

6. Even if no one is being openly humiliated (mobbed), if dissent/discontent are always squashed to protect powerful cliques in an organization, basic rights can be systematically violated and profound health problems created in silence.

7. Disagreement is a normal occurrence in human interactions. Methods of dealing with it make the difference between health-promoting environments and toxic ones. To build egalitarian, inclusive, democratic and fair social systems linked to high levels of quality of life, supportiveness and solidarity, these are not minor issues from a social medicine perspective.

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