

Downward Workplace Mobbing: A Sign of the Times?

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ABSTRACT. This paper offers a speculative elaboration on downward workplace mobbing – the intentional and repeated inflictions of physical or psychological harm by superiors on subordinates within an organization. The authors cite research showing that workplace mobbing is not a marginal fact in today's organizations and that downward workplace mobbing is the most prevalent form. The authors also show that causes of and facilitating circumstances for downward workplace mobbing, mentioned by previous research, match current organizational shifts taking place within a context of globalisation. This paper argues that it is not the organizational shifts themselves which are to "blame", but an inadequate transformation of leadership and power in reaction to those shifts. Using Foucault's power-knowledge-rules of right triad, the authors offer an explanation for downward workplace mobbing beyond the organizational changes themselves. More precisely, as the organizational changes can be characterized by a new power/knowledge bond calling forth new rules of right, downward workplace mobbing could be seen as manifestations of power outside of the delineations drawn by these new rules of right. In other words, downward workplace mobbing is pathology of current organizational shifts, resulting from not acting out the full ethical potential of the discourse of excellence, adventure, creativity and responsibility, which characterizes these shifts.

KEY WORDS: bullying, business ethics, change management, globalisation, mobbing, organizational ethics

1. Introduction

It is only since the last decade of the twentieth century that organizational scholars have used the words "bullying" (Adams, 1992) and "mobbing" (Leymann, 1990) to describe phenomena of repeated workplace aggression by individuals to harm others with whom they work. Leymann (1997) distinguishes bullying from mobbing in stating that the use of the bullying concept in research on workplace aggression stems from research on bullying at school, which is very often strongly characterized by physically aggressive acts. Mobbing on the other hand, is characterized by more sophisticated behaviours, which better describes the phenomenon found at workplaces, and consists of harmful treatment of or putting harmful pressure on an employee. We will use the term "workplace mobbing" as repeated behaviour of individuals or groups, which intentionally harms others with whom they work.

In this paper, we wish to explore a distinct part of the workplace mobbing phenomenon. More precisely, it is the downward mobbing which we will focus on. This form of workplace mobbing consists of mobbing by a superior against a subordinate. Other forms of workplace mobbing are upward mobbing – mobbing up the ladder – and horizontal mobbing, which is mobbing by employees against a colleague.

In Section 2 we argue the relevance of our article on downward workplace mobbing by

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looking at its prevalence and by pointing at the failure of authority as a worrying aspect of downward workplace mobbing beyond the mobbing itself. Section 3 argues that causes or facilitators for downward workplace mobbing, mentioned by previous research, match the current organizational context. This context is determined by a globalisation process which could be characterized by increased competition from foreign industries, rapidly changing product markets, deregulation (Du Gay and Salaman, 1998), flexible capitalism (Sennett, 1998), structural adjustments, efficiency gains, competitiveness, increased productivity (Dahrendorf, 1998). However, it is not the organizational problems themselves which mob people, but people reacting (inadequately) to these shifts. This paper is an attempt to offer an explanation that does not “blame” the current organizational shifts, but goes beyond and looks at the people working in shifting organizations. Hence, Section 4 draws on Foucault’s power-knowledge-rules of right triad to claim that downward workplace mobbing is a result of inadequate manifestations of power in regard to the new rules of right which are required by a new power/knowledge bond. In Section 5, we revisit the causes of downward workplace mobbing mentioned in Section 3, using the explanatory model developed in Section 4. Section 6 draws conclusions and mentions directions for future research.

2. The prevalence of downward workplace mobbing

It is so obvious that we take it there is an overall consensus that workplace mobbing – repeatedly and intentionally inflicting harm on people you work with – is unethical behaviour. Even though all three forms of workplace mobbing – upward, horizontal and downward – deserve attention, prevention and cure, it is downward mobbing which takes a special place within the frame of business and organizational ethics. Why?

Empirical research on the prevalence of workplace mobbing in Europe and the U.S. shows two things. First, the research indicates that workplace mobbing is not a marginal phenomenon. In the

U.S., approximately 1 in 6 (16.8%) workers are victim of workplace mobbing (Namie, 2000). In Europe, that is 11% (Paoli and Merllié, 2001). The second conclusion to be drawn from this research is that downward workplace mobbing is the most prevalent. According to a U.S. study (Namie, 2000), it makes up for 81% of all workplace mobbing cases. In Europe, although most research suggests it is slightly lower, the downward form is still the most prevalent: 57% (Quine, 1999), 47% (Kistner, 1997).¹ A U.K. survey (Unison, 1997; Rayner, 1998) shows that in 63% of mobbing cases, there is but one mobber, and 83% of them is a manager.²

Consequences of workplace mobbing for mobbed persons are a loss of income due to being sacked or leaving the job, and health hazards such as severe anxiety, unable to concentrate, sleeplessness, depression, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) (Leymann, 1993, 1997; Quine, 1999; Namie, 2000; Neuman, 2000). Consequences for the organization are lower productivity due to sick leave and lower motivation (Rayner, 1998; Neuman, 2000).

Besides empirical grounds, there are also ethical reasons why downward workplace mobbing deserves special attention. Our claim that downward workplace mobbing is ethically worrying beyond the mobbing itself does not mean that we consider other forms of workplace mobbing less severe or less harmful to victims. What we state is that the prevalence of downward workplace mobbing – precisely because of its downward direction – points at a failure of authority. We understand authority here as legitimate power. The ethically worrying aspects of downward workplace mobbing lie in the ethical nature of organizational power. Downward workplace mobbing could also be defined as repeated hierarchical abuse of power, which Vredenburg and Brender (1998) define as acts which manifest disrespect for a subordinate’s dignity or provide obstacles to a subordinate’s performance or deserved rewards. Thus, downward workplace mobbing is both harmful (dignity) and dysfunctional (performance/rewards). Its abuse of power lies in the use of formal power status for organizationally non-rational behaviour. For example, providing

obstacles to a subordinate's performance or deserved rewards is organizationally nonrational because it breaks down on the premises of job evaluation and it results in nonoptimal promotions. According to Leymann (1997) and Rayner (1998), as the mobbing process becomes undeniable, top management tends to get rid of the problem by removing the victim, whom is regarded as the "troublemaker". Harassed persons rarely get any chance to speak out on behalf of themselves. The perception of them as troublemakers is being fed by gossip and by the fact that top management in most of the cases chooses the side of the middle management or the team leader.

3. Downward workplace mobbing as pathology of contemporary organizations

In arguing that the conditions research points out as causing or as facilitating workplace mobbing match the current organizational context, we must not forget that even though the prevalence of mobbing is by no means marginal and as such it is worrying, 11% (Europe) and 16% (U.S.) are by no means overwhelming. It follows that the prevalence of workplace mobbing cannot be caused by the organizational context of globalisation itself. Indeed, as Zapf (1999) argues, organizational problems do not harass an employee, but people do. However, according to Zapf, people manifest mobbing behaviour as a reaction to leadership problems and organizational problems. In this sense, mobbing behaviour appears as an extreme reaction to a stressor. The impact a given stressor has, depends on stress mediators at play. One of those stress mediators is predictability: predictable stressors tend to have less impact than those that are unpredictable (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Another mediator is control: if people believe they can exert some control over the stressor, it usually has less impact (Bandura et al., 1988; Wiedenfeld et al., 1990). A third mediator consists of coping skills. These are either problem focused, which means they try to alter or eliminate a source of stress, or emotion focused, which means attempting to regulate the

negative emotional consequences of the stress (Folkman et al., 1986). In general, we could say that the interpretation of stressors is constitutive for the impact a given stressor will have – the behaviour manifested in reaction to that stressor. Mobbing as extreme behaviour then indicates a lack of stress mediators or an inadequacy of the individual to reduce the pressure.

Out of 800 case studies, Leymann (1996) purified two conditions for the prevalence of workplace mobbing: extremely poorly organised production and/or working methods, and second, an almost helpless or uninterested management. Davenport et al. (1999) somewhat make the vagueness of Leymann's conditions more concrete: dysfunctional organizational structure or culture, lack of communication, and outside influences. Zuschlag (1994) mentions fear related motives for downward workplace mobbing. For Zapf (1999) lack of job control is an important organizational problem facilitating mobbing. In what follows, we will link these causes or facilitators with research on workplace pressure and with the contemporary organizational context. Although these authors treat the cited causes or facilitating circumstances as relating to workplace mobbing in general, we shall elaborate on aspects that directly or indirectly implicate leadership.

Dysfunctional organizational structure or culture can be perceived as bad management, confusion and no clear line of authority. A U.S. survey (EOA, 1997) on workplace pressure shows that 57% of workers feel more pressure than five years earlier and 40% feel pressure has increased since the previous year. Cited factors contributing to workplace pressure and pointing towards a dysfunctional organizational culture are: poor leadership (51%), little or no recognition of achievement (46%), work hours and work load (51%), lack of management support (48%). A U.K. survey (Rayner, 1998) also indicates organizational changes as a main source of pressure. What's more, the pressure to reform into flexible and competitive organizations is met with a decentralization of the organization. However, a mere focus on decentralization can imply neglecting useful aspects of centralization, such as maintaining strategic cohesion, manage inter-

dependencies, and reduce the time lag between decision and action (Bahrami, 1998). While decentralization improves the capability for creative initiatives and rapid responsiveness, centralization keeps an organization from chaos and confusion. For example, research at the NHS in the U.K. during a decentralization experiment showed managers reporting problems with the resulting lack of a clear structure (Ferlie and Pettigrew, 1998).

Lack of communication. This adds to the confusion inside organizations and is responsible for increased workplace pressure, as pointed out by a U.S. survey: 51% of the workers cited poor internal communications as a source of pressure (EOA, 1997). Arguing with Sennett (1998), a flexible organization has only become possible because of new communication technology. However, people seem reluctant to put comments, points of critique, or informal advice on email (or more generally into a computer) because it is too formal in the sense that they do not wish to leave anything behind which could make them accountable. Bahrami too emphasizes that an effective contemporary organization should rely “on formal and informal bridging mechanisms which establish direct communication channels between the leaders and the doers,” including “electronic-based communication, planning sessions and review meetings, informal opportunities for interaction, . . .” (Bahrami, 1998, p. 196).

Outside influences. These are influences beyond an organizations control. An overall climate pressuring companies to provide good revenues for shareholders increases workplace pressure (Davenport et al., 1999), as CEOs confronted with that pressure, start a downward passing on of that pressure: 46% of U.S. workers state that the need to meet goals (e.g. sales) is a source of increased workplace pressure (EOA, 1997). Even though “outside influences” is too broad a concept to be an explanatory factor, it does point at the importance of the globalisation process in creating a climate in which it seems vital to produce good short-term results – and keep producing them.

Fear related motives mentioned by Zuschlag (1994) are: fear of being made a fool of, fear of being regarded as insufficiently informed, as ignorant or as stupid, fear of giving the impression of not being able to perform the task, fear of not having the required pedagogical abilities to motivate, control and lead subordinates, fear for loss of image in regard to both subordinates and superiors. This is confirmed by U.S. research (Namie, 2000) which shows as the top 3 mobber motivations a target who refused to be subservient or resisted control (58%), a mobber who envied the target’s competence (56%), and a mobber who envied the target’s social skills (49%). One could argue that in contemporary organizations, there are more reasons for these fears to exist. Decentralization or flattening of organizations implies responsabilization of smaller teams and departments. With an increase of autonomy comes an increase of accountability. Being a team leader, head of office or manager does not mean you’re in a safe seat.

Job control. Zapf’s research (1999) showed that from the viewpoint of the person being mobbed, less task and time related control and uncertainty had strong effects on the prevalence of mobbing. At first sight, this might seem in contradiction with the outset of this paper, as current organizational shifts tend towards more autonomy and thus more job control. However, this paper develops an argumentation that fully validates Zapf’s findings. It is from the viewpoint of mobbed persons that lack of job control is stated as a cause of workplace mobbing. This paper does not argue that the organizational shifts themselves – shifts towards more job control – are to blame for downward workplace mobbing, but the failure to fully act it through, in all its aspects, potentials and implications. Paoli and Merllié (2001) found that, between 1995 and 2000, there was an increase in workers negative perception of their work autonomy. One of the reasons why the full potentials of organizational shifts are not carried out, might well be – as we will argue – closely linked with Zuschlag’s fear related motives.

4. Towards an explanatory model of downward workplace mobbing: power, knowledge and rules of right

We spot some shortcomings in research analysing workplace mobbing, which we've reviewed in the previous section. First, in its analysis and solutions, the research focuses basically on horizontal workplace mobbing, whereas downward workplace mobbing is the most prevalent form of workplace mobbing. Second, the current solutions draw from cognitive psychological techniques which come down to problem-solving approaches but leave the causes of the problem untouched. Also, the solutions to the workplace mobbing phenomenon are sought in counselling. This reduces workplace mobbing to a conflict management issue which should be dealt with by the human resource professional or by the ombudsperson.³ A third shortcoming follows from the previous two. An explanation of downward workplace mobbing is not offered, which leads to the assumption that it is either a case of good guys/bad guys, or that the organizational shifts as such are to blame. With Wornham (2003) we believe that adequate solutions can only be attained when integrating ethical considerations into the discussion.

An explanatory model for downward workplace mobbing should overcome the shortcomings we've just mentioned. This means the model should contain the concept of power and incorporate current organizational shifts as well as their ethical implications. We believe a Foucauldian perspective on downward workplace mobbing is suited for that.

Foucault focused on the power relationships deeply ingrained in organizations and institutions (Foucault, 1975, 1976a).⁴ As Foucault – methodologically – started his research at the micro level – the organizational activity –, his exploration of the workings of power in modern life is able to provide us with a basis for insight into the subtleties of power-in-action in the workplace (Burrell, 1988; Clegg, 1989; Barker and Cheney, 1994).

For Foucault, power is always at work – or at play –, and never a possession of a certain class who would have acquired it. Therefore, we

should not ask “Who?” but “How?” (Barker and Cheney, 1994). Also, power is not monolithic, it is never exercised from one single point onto its environment; Foucault's concept of power does not fit in a dualistic scheme of activity-passivity. In Foucault's view there is no Power written large, there are only power relationships originating ceaselessly as an effect of and a condition for other processes. Hence, power is not solely repressive; on the contrary, power is primarily productive (Foucault, 1975). It makes things possible. Power produces things, pleasure, discourses and knowledge. It is precisely the interrelation of power and knowledge – *savoir/pouvoir* – which lies at the crux of Foucault's analysis of the workings of power. For Foucault, knowledge and power are inextricably bound up with one another.

Exactly here lies the potential of Foucault's perspective. Today's “system” to which all have to submit is the “system” of globalisation (Hardt and Negri, 2000). In order to enhance their competitiveness, companies (private, privatised or about to be privatised organizations) have to render themselves flexible so that they can boost their production (Hammer and Champy, 1993; Forrester, 1996; Dahrendorf, 1998; Sennett, 1998). However real these globalisation pressures on organizations are, there is no point in asking who is responsible for this process, who decided it or who had the power to start it. The better question would be – with Foucault – “how?” and look for the power-knowledge bond. The forms of knowledge which are being produced inside the contemporary under-pressure-organization, include quality norms (ISO standards), organizational decentralization and responsabilization of teams, quality circles, personality profiling. These instruments of evaluation, classifying and ordering produce the data (knowledge) through which the organization can be rationally remodelled and adjusted (power).

For the people inside the organization, this power-knowledge bond is experienced in the shifts from a fixed job description to project oriented tasks, from promotion based on years with the company to promotion based on certificates, formation and performance, from the horizontal to the vertical career, and in general

a shift from security to risk (Sennett, 1998). This goes for the work floor employee, the line manager, the team manager, the head of sales, and just as well for the CEO. In other words, the system is sovereign. Besides that, every kind of “boss” is also, in one way or another, a subordinate, who does not have to decide on what to do – for the “what to do” is simple: growth in productivity, cost reduction, giving shareholders good return on investment, or simply meeting the goals (numbers) – but rather how to do it. It is the production of the new forms of knowledge that should enable them to do so.

However, another element seems to be just as crucial as the integration of power and knowledge: the production of norms (Foucault, 1975, 1976a), or *rules of right* (Barker and Cheney, 1994). These set the power-knowledge relationships in motion. They create, identify, define and constrain power and knowledge between and among people acting in organizations. “Rules of right, as Foucault conceived of them, form the contours of authority, the formal delineations of power governing life within a social system” (Barker and Cheney, 1994, p. 24). “*C’est à condition de masquer une part importante de lui-même que le pouvoir est tolérable*,” writes Foucault (1976a, p. 112). Power is only bearable when it succeeds in hiding itself. The rules of right are what hide power. If power is manifested outside the required rules of right, that which has to be done – remodelling and adjusting the organization through new forms of knowledge – will not be done unobtrusive, but – as it *has* to be done – in an overt way. Downward workplace mobbing is exactly overt power. It is power, which has lost its legitimation and has become coercion.

One of the moral issues Wornham (2003) sees relevant is the nature of the distinction between systemic and individual victimisation along with what he calls the weak argument that work pressure is a natural if not legitimate result of the exigencies of globalisation. Our Foucauldian model would answer first that the distinction between systemic and individual victimisation should not be made, because downward workplace mobbing is not a question of good guys/bad guys. Secondly, the work pressure resulting in workplace mobbing is not a legiti-

mate result of the exigencies of globalisation. Rather, our Foucauldian model suggests that it is not the organizational shifts as such, nor the accompanying discourse which are to blame, but the incomplete realization of the ethical potential of that discourse.

5. Current rules of right and the ethical potential of the organizational discourse

The two remaining questions then are: what are these rules of right, and what do we mean by power being manifested outside the required rules of right?

For Sennett (1998), the current organizational shifts call forth a work ethic built on excellence, risk, adventure and responsibility, leaving behind a work ethic based on stability, loyalty, hard work and compliance. A similar analysis is made by Du Gay and Salaman (1998), who describe the re-imagining of the corporation through the culture of the customer as encouraging organizations and their participants to become more enterprising. The discourse of enterprise then, involves empowerment and responsabilization of all members of that organization to add value, both to the organization and to themselves.

Rules of right as delineating the power/knowledge bond, as that aspect of discourse which controls power – or in other words, which masks a certain manifestation of power and therefore, makes that power bearable – are the normative implications of the new work ethic: excellence, risk and responsibility imply empowerment and autonomy. With Whetstone (2002) we see these implications present in the paradigm of servant leadership, which he describes – drawing from Greenleaf (1977) and Spears (1995) – as a management philosophy stimulating good performance by all employees by enhancing the conditions favourable to individual responsibility, participation, and a sense of belonging. Whetstone argues that servant leadership is the type of leadership which fits best with the personalistic anthropology. This is relevant, as a personalistic anthropology fully merges with a work ethic built on excellence, risk, adventure

and responsibility (Vandekerckhove, 2002; Felice, 2001).

Wornham (2003) mentions three quotes which show the importance of our Foucauldian model as explanatory for downward workplace mobbing: (1) “the importance of marketplace philosophies into an under-resourced school setting has been deeply damaging to manager/managed relationships, have fostered an atmosphere of bullying and has led to a stressed and disillusioned workforce”, (2) “participation becomes purely functional to meet the performance needs and stipulated targets of the organisation”, and (3) “in schools, there is no real scope to engage in a proscribed, managerialist discourse . . . where . . . performance is controlled, dissent not allowed and the notion of empowerment to meet predefined targets a hollow claim.” Using our Foucauldian model we would analyse these remarks as an expression of the acknowledgment that a new power/knowledge bond is at work – marketplace philosophies, participation, managerialist discourse – but that the rules of right which go along that bond are not acted on – under-resourced schools, lack of coaching participation, lack of autonomy and listening skills.

The case narrative of Anna O’Leary (Wornham, 2003), a mobbed teacher, is also an illustration of our Foucauldian model. Anna is given responsibilities in addition to teaching a class of children. She will be leading the teaching team, she will be developing the science curriculum, she will be mentoring student teachers, and she is asked to stand in for the headteacher when he is absent. However, Anna’s case shows an awful lack of empowerment, autonomy and adequate communication to comfortably carry that workload and fulfil those responsibilities. Anna doubted the real contribution of some of the many bureaucratic processes accompanying the role of teacher. She found the leadership by the headteacher difficult in the sense that there was extremely unclear communication of requirements and policies, observation was unannounced and intrusive and responsibilities were frequently transferred. What’s more, Anna’s dissent with this was answered with a threat to her future career. Again, an analysis from our

Foucauldian model would state that it is not the organizational shifts, nor the responsabilization of Anna which caused the mobbing, but the failure of management to act on the adequate rules of right, more precisely the failure to empower Anna.

Let us now look back at the causes or facilitators of downward workplace mobbing discussed in Section 3. In regard to *dysfunctional organizational structure and culture* (lack of clear line of authority, bad management and confusion), it becomes clear that the new rules of right call for clearly defined channels for support and advice in addition to clear reporting standards, times and lines. Not surprisingly, this merges with a higher concern for *communication*. Ferlie and Pettigrew (1998, p. 219) point at the need for new managerial skills such as strong interpersonal, communication and listening skills and an ability to engage in reciprocal rather than manipulative behaviour. The *fear related motives* appear as a hesitation to distribute and exercise power along the lines of the seized discourse, as unease with the transformation from authoritative and commanding power to exemplary and servant power. As far as *job control* concerns, Liden et al. (2001) argue that disciplinary actions towards a poor performing team member can best be taken by the team itself instead of a manager, for two reasons. First, because of downsizing and flattening of organizations, the scope of activities a manager overviews has increased, with the result that groups, when compared to managers, might possess much richer information on the work behaviours and performance of each group member. And second, groups will be less influenced by any one individual’s biases.⁵ In a case study by Barker and Cheney (1994, p. 35) on discipline in self-managing teams, they show that team members no longer feel accountable to one person, but to the whole team.

6. Conclusions and directions for future research

At the outset of this paper, we reviewed research showing that workplace mobbing is not a marginal fact in today’s organizations and that

downward workplace mobbing is the most prevalent form. Hence, downward workplace mobbing is worrying, also because it is non-rational organizational behaviour. We also showed that causes of and facilitating circumstances for downward workplace mobbing, mentioned by previous research, match current organizational shifts. This paper argued that it is not the organizational shifts themselves that are to “blame”, but an inadequate transformation of leadership and power in reaction to those shifts. Using Foucault’s power-knowledge-rules of right triad, we were able to offer an explanation for downward workplace mobbing beyond the organizational changes themselves. More precisely, as the organizational changes can be characterized by a new power/knowledge bond calling forth new rules of right, downward workplace mobbing could be seen as manifestations of power outside of the delimitations drawn by these new rules of right. An adequate form of leadership and power might be servant leadership. In other words, downward workplace mobbing is a pathology of current organizational shifts, resulting from not acting out the full ethical potential of the discourse of excellence, adventure, creativity and responsibility, which characterizes these shifts.

Wornham poses the question what the ethical debate has to offer those engaged in combating workplace aggression and harassment. In this article, we have shown that using a Foucauldian perspective on downward workplace mobbing, we are able to focus on the discourse used alongside current organizational shifts. A discourse which, when its ethical potential is left unrealised, is nothing more than illegitimate and manipulative rhetoric. Management audits as well as policies towards workplace mobbing should bear attention for this. Future research obviously has a task here. The rules of right which go along the new power/knowledge bond should be fine tuned as to their organizational implications. This will entail a search for best practices of institutionalising empowerment and autonomy in organizations.

Notes

¹ The data of Kirstner shows 37% mobbing by superiors and 10% mobbing with superiors involved, 44% mobbing by colleagues, and 9% mobbing up the ladder.

² Due to methodological differences, the data is merely indicative, and does not allow for comparing analysis.

³ For example, a Belgian law voted early 2002 on the prevention of workplace harassment stipulates just that: companies and organizations have to appoint an internal or external ombudsperson for cases of harassment.

⁴ We refer to Foucault’s perspective of power as developed through his cited work, and an interpretation of this oeuvre backed by Lambrechts (1980), Foucault (1976b, 1978) and also Hardt and Negri (2000).

⁵ Our point is not to promote self-managing teams, but solely to argue that self-managing teams are a normative implication of the new power/knowledge bond.

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