

ABUSE THROUGH POWER AND CONTROL IN HUMAN SOCIETIES – ESSENCE, CHARACTERISTICS AND EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

The object of the present scientific theoretical study is the abuse of power and control as a socially undesirable phenomenon in human behaviour and in human communities. The article examines the topics of power abuse and violence in a social structure, regardless of whether it is the workplace or another human community, the phenomena of harassment, mobbing, bossing and aggression as are considered as counterproductive social human behaviours. The scientific methodology used is a combination of an etymological review of the considered phenomena of violence, harassment, mobbing, bossing and aggression, content analysis of the concepts of the considered phenomena, combined with a critical scientific review. In conclusion, the idea of psychological safety is presented, which refers to the belief that being oneself, expressing oneself and one's positions is not only useful for a human group, organization, community but must be safe for the individual, emphasizing the creation of a safe surrounding environment.

KEYWORDS: aggression, bossing, harassment, human community, mobbing, power abuse, violence

1. Introduction

Extreme social environment is an intricate set of internal and external environmental factors resulting from the occurrence of contradictions and conflicts in the sphere of social relations. The modern stage of development of humanity is characterized by a radical, intense, deep, wide-specter and often unpredictable transformations of reality (Krastev & Angelov, 2016). Socially undesirable phenomena are an indicator of crisis in human behaviour in human communities. They are strongly expressed when norms and general human moral principles are violated and when the human factor and its management fail. Holátová & Březinová (2021) claim that, socially inappropriate behaviour is a collective term for unhealthy, abnormal and generally undesirable social

phenomena and methods that violate the social, moral or legal norms of society.

The abuse of power and control is a coercive act by a governing or managerial person on individuals and groups of individuals, with the aim of influencing their behaviour, its formation, or its modification. Any deterioration in the physical, psychological or emotional well-being of a person or group of persons that is caused by the use of various strategies by the abusive ruler (Baumann, 2020) is defined as the abuse of power and control. Abuse of power and control can have various motives, for example obtaining personal gain, personal gratification, devaluing the other, enjoying the exercise of power and control itself.

The abuser of power and control often has unpredictable and inconsistent

behaviour, emphasizing self-aggrandizement, belittling colleagues and subordinates, discouraging any initiative and using punishments. It is characteristic of the workplace bully and the abuser's mistakes are always covered up or blamed on other people or circumstances beyond his or her control; the abuser maintains constant stress and fear in the group; withholds, hides or distorts information; blames subordinates or colleagues for lack of competence or for character flaws; creates an unnatural work environment and introduces an organizational culture of harassment (Killoren, 2014).

The power and control abusers use a wide range of hostile behaviours directed at targets and exhibit behaviour that is aggressive, humiliating, and cruel to others while having a poor ability to control their own reactions. The goal of the abuser is to intimidate and influence the victim so that the victim forms the belief that he or she is on a lower professional, physical or spiritual level than the aggressor, and is therefore obliged to obey. In this type of abuse, those people in the community who are particularly vulnerable are most often chosen as victims or targets. The aggressor's manipulative behaviour involves alternating displays of affection followed by rejection behaviour, negative reinforcement, and punishment. Often, aggressors are initially careful and caring behaviour to gain the trust of the target, who subsequently becomes a victim. Over time, the aggressor becomes overly involved in a daily life and begins to impose rules to control the relationship with the victim. A traumatic relationship develops between the abuser and the victim, in which rewards and punishments directed at the victim alternate. This unhealthy relationship can develop into ongoing cycles of abuse, where the repeated use of substituting good for bad behaviour fosters highly conflicted emotional bonds and an atmosphere of fear and unpredictability

(Sanderson, 2008). In an attempt to explain such behaviour, the abuser may initiate legitimization and rationalization of his or her own actions, deny the abusive behaviour outright, or even blame the victim for it.

In everyday situations, people use various power tactics to induce others to take specific desirable actions. Some of these tactics include bullying, cooperating, complaining, criticizing, demanding, avoiding, using humour, inspiring, manipulating, negotiating, communicating, or pleading (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). Isolation, mind games, lying, misinformation, propaganda, destabilization, derision, ignoring, reminders of past failures, blaming, lashing out, tantrums, dividing and conquering are other options that are often used in human organizations.

Falbo & Peplau identify the following main ways that power and control abusers manipulate their victims as follows (Braiker, 2003):

- positive reinforcement: use of praise, charm, charisma, flirting, superficial sympathy, excessive apology, financial benefits, material benefits and resources, approval, gifts, attention, facial expressions and gestures such as fake laughter, public recognition;
- negative reinforcement: involves removing a negative situation in which the individual has found himself as a kind of reward;
- intermittent negative reinforcement: partial or intermittent negative reinforcement that creates a working climate of fear and doubt;
- punishment: includes nagging, yelling, intimidation, threats, emotional blackmail, use of rudeness, crying and others;
- traumatic expression: using verbal violence, anger or other intimidating behaviour (including physical) to establish or demonstrate dominance and superiority over the victim.

2. Violence and Harassment in Social Structure

In the etymological review of the word “violence” could be found an evidence of its use from the late 13th century with the meaning of “*physical force used to inflict injury or damage*”. The term originates from the Anglo-French and Old French word – “violence”, and respectively from the Latin language from “violentia”, namely – “*fury, rush, fierce, violent, violation*” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2001-2024).

Workplace violence is any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation or other threatening disruptive behaviour that occurs in the workplace. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even physical killing (US Department of Labor, 2024). It can influence and affect not only persons internal to the organization, but also external persons interested in the organization’s activities. Research has identified factors that may increase the risk of violence for some workers in certain workplaces. Such factors include work with money, with important resources, in isolated areas, provision of services and care where alcohol is served, work involving health activities and activities with risk groups, work with psychologically unstable people, etc. In addition, the time of day and location of workplace, such as working late at night or in areas with high crime rates, are also risk factors to consider when addressing issues of workplace violence (US Department of Labor, 2024). Those at higher risk include people who work with money, drivers, healthcare professionals, public service officials, security and defence officials, law enforcement officials.

Harassment is unwanted, aggressive behaviour that involves a real or perceived power imbalance, is repeated or has the potential to be repeated over time. To be considered harassment, the behaviour must be aggressive and include:

- power imbalance: individuals use their power to control or hurt others;

- repetition: behaviour occurs more than once or has the potential to occur more than once.

The word “harassment” dates from the 1610s with meaning – “to ravage” and could be found from the 1620s also with meaning “*to annoy by repeated attacks*”, originating from the French word “harasser” – “*to tire, annoy*”. The Online Etymology Dictionary mentions: “*Harass, as applied to mind or body, suggests the infliction of the weariness that comes from the continuance or repetition of trying experiences, so that there is not time for rest. Torment implies the infliction of acute pain, physical or mental, and is frequently used in the sense of harassing by frequent return*” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2001-2024).

Harassment is characterized by:

- repetition (happens regularly);
- duration (happens permanently);
- escalation (there is increasing aggression);
- power inequality (the target does not have the strength and power to defend himself or herself);
- deliberate behaviour is present.

Harassment and bullying in the workplace are a persistent pattern of behaviour towards colleagues causing physical or emotional harm that is increasing in our modern society, which has lost its traditional values, a moral and health problem. Bullying as “*insolent tyrannizing, personal intimidation*” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2001-2024) is a pattern of disruptive and intentional behaviour that demeans employees in an organization. It is repetitive, harmful behaviour that constitutes a threat, humiliation, intimidation or sabotage, or behaviour that prevents the individual from fulfilling his professional duties.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services distinguishes different

types of bullying. Verbal bullying involves saying and writing inappropriate and untrue, threatening and demeaning comments and remarks. Verbal bullying includes inappropriate teasing, inventing nicknames, inappropriate sexual comments, taunts, making threats to cause harm, etc. Social bullying includes harming one's personal or professional reputation, damaging an individual's good name, attempting and initiating the destruction of relationships within a team. Social bullying includes abandoning one person against another, directing other people not to maintain relationships with a person, spreading rumours about someone, embarrassing someone in public, telling lies about someone's private life, telling lies about someone's professional qualities, knowledge and abilities, etc. Physical bullying involves harming a person's body or belongings. Physical bullying includes hitting, kicking, pinching, spitting, stumbling, pushing taking or breaking someone's things, making mean or rude gestures, etc. (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).

Harassment is prosecutable when tolerating the offensive behaviour becomes a condition of continued employment, or the behaviour is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would find intimidating, hostile, or offensive. Petty insults, teasing and isolated incidents (unless extremely serious) do not rise to the level of illegality. To be illegal, one's behaviour must create a work environment that is intimidating, hostile, or offensive, and offensive conduct may include, but is not limited to, the use of offensive jokes, words, epithets or offensive names, threats, intimidation, ridicule, humiliation, offensive photos or physical attacks (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2024). Harassment in the group, organization or society may be based on race, colour, religion, sex, pregnancy, national origin,

age, disability or genetic information (including family medical history). Anti-discrimination laws prohibit harassment of individuals in retaliation for reporting or alleging discrimination, testifying or participating in any way in an investigation, proceeding or legal proceeding under those laws, or opposing known employment practices which have a discriminatory attitude (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2024).

3. Workplace Harassment, Bullying, Mobbing and Bossing

Here is the place to clarify the difference we make between the two related and undoubtedly close in meaning concepts – harassment and bullying. In the current scientific development, the author considers that harassment represents a broader and more general concept than bullying. Harassment is often defined as an aggressive pressure or intimidation (synonyms: persecution, harriving, pestering, badgering, intimidation, bother, annoyance, aggravation, irritation, pressure, pressurization, force, coercion, molestation), while bullying is to seek to harm, intimidate, or coerce someone perceived as vulnerable (synonyms: persecute, oppress, tyrannize, torment, browbeat, intimidate, domineer, coerce, pressure, bring pressure to bear on), i.e. the second term is much more specific to the first, elucidates and expands the first into new dimensions. In addition, bullying is primarily used for harassment in a work environment.

Although there is no universally accepted definition of workplace harassment, the following can still be noted:

1. In a broad sense, harassment in the workplace is *“a situation in which one or more persons systematically and over a long period of time perceive themselves to be negatively affected by one or more other persons, in which for the person, exposed to the effect presents a difficulty or*

impossibility to defend itself” (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2013).

2. Harassment in the workplace is *“an insult, social exclusion of someone or a negative impact on someone’s work tasks. Bullying is an escalating process in which a person finds himself or herself in a lower position than the aggressor and becomes the target of systematic negative social actions by the aggressor and his like-minded people”* (Einarsen, Hoel & Cooper, 2003).

3. Workplace bullying is *“a combination of tactics that use multiple types of hostile communication and behaviour”* (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik & Alberts, 2006).

4. Workplace bullying is *“persistent verbal and nonverbal aggression in the workplace that includes personal attacks, social ostracism, and a host of other hurtful messages and hostile interactions”* (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

5. Workplace bullying can also be defined as *“systematic aggressive communication, manipulation and actions aimed at humiliating one or more individuals, which create an unhealthy and unprofessional imbalance, lead to negative psychological consequences and cause enormous damage to the organization”* (Mattice & Garman, 2010).

Constant harassment and hostile communication on a systematic basis over a long period of time is defined as mobbing. It can lead to serious mental and physical problems in people who are victims of this type of violence. The victim would initially find it difficult to define certain types of actions aimed at him or her as malicious, but when such actions become a daily routine, it is mobbing. The mobbing situation in the workplace is usually related to attempts to discredit the person, to show how professionally unsuitable the person is and how the person does not possess the necessary qualities, knowledge and skills to perform his or her professional activity. For this purpose, information necessary for the

person work is hidden, resources, documents or other means necessary for carrying out the person professional activity disappear. The main objectives of mobbing are:

- to humiliate the victim;
- to discredit the victim;
- to deprive the victim of her privilege or her legal possession, which pass into the possession of the abuser;
- to influence the victim’s job position;
- to demotivate and reduce her productivity;
- to cause unwanted psychological or physical consequences for the life and health of the victim;
- to force the victim to leave the organization on their own.

Workplace mobbing refers to a group of people engaging in various types of harassment and behaviour against a colleague. In other words, it is group harassment in the workplace.

Mobbing occurs where there is a system that permanently damages a chosen victim – manager, worker, employee, i.e. mobbing is negative communication behaviour directed at a specific subordinate. It usually happens often and lasts a long time. These signs clearly indicate the relationship between victim and abuser. One of the main characteristics of mobbing lies in its secrecy (initially it takes place covertly, not directly) and duration. At the beginning of the mobbing situation, smaller attacks are carried out that appear harmless and random from the outside, but create a complex, organized and health-threatening phenomenon.

When co-workers choose to make someone the target of collective bullying, it can include anything from spreading rumours to deliberately sabotaging the victim’s work and future projects. Isolation, ignoring, and ridicule are mobbing techniques that involve changing people’s perception of someone. Mobbing can include leaving someone out of periodic

group sessions and group gatherings, as well as warning new recruits to stay away from and not associate with a particular person (Psychcentral.com, 2024).

Mobbing techniques include (Psychcentral.com, 2024):

- constant criticism;
- accusing without facts;
- lie;
- discriminatory behaviour;
- bullying;
- screaming;
- persistent ignoring;
- isolation;
- adding challenges and obstacles to one's work;
- use of unfair punishments.

Mobbing is a conflict that quickly escalates and usually results in great damage. It has 4 phases, as follows (Holátová & Březinová, 2021):

1. It is formed with a conflict in the workplace, between the people involved, which does not initially have to appear fatal, can claim to be a random and arbitrary action.

2. It turns out to be systematic psychological pressure, and the actions of bullies are planned and carried out with the intention of harming a specific colleague.

3. The terror becomes official, the attacks become more frequent, the crisis between the participants escalates, the victim begins to realize that he is being harassed.

4. The victim is excluded from the work group community, begins to make mistakes under pressure, and declines in performance. Urgent management intervention is required. If the intervention does not help, the victim has only one choice and that is to leave the job.

Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian ethologist studying animal behaviour, used the mobbing term in cases where he described the so-called territoriality of animals, namely, when an intruder appears in the animals' habitat, they do not hesitate

to attack (Psychcentral.com, 2024). According to Baber mobbing has been used to describe predatory animal behaviour in the past, but now describes a group of peers who humiliate, harass, and terrorize a targeted peer. "*Mobbing appears to be different from harassment in that it will affect upper and lower levels of workers equally*" (Psychcentral.com, 2024), Baber claims.

Conformity is one possible cause of mobbing in the workplace, but there are often more complex factors and a combination of these can lead to group bullying, for example (Psychcentral.com, 2024):

- low psychological security in the organization;
- heavy tasks;
- performance based on competition;
- short work terms;
- unclear or non-existent anti-harassment policies;
- group commissions or goals;
- racism, sexism or other types of group discrimination, stereotypes and prejudice.

Another behavioural factor is envy. A review in 2021 noted that bullies often had low self-esteem, leading them to envy colleagues who had admirable qualities or appear to be liked by others (Psychcentral.com, 2024).

In some cases, superiors or colleagues demand and compel the employee to work for their benefit by performing duties and responsibilities that are their own. There is a prohibition by a direct supervisor to a successful associate to communicate with higher-level managers who may notice his or her qualities. The victim must be well hidden, and the aggressor presents the victim's successes as own. When the victim succeeds in completing the set tasks, the aggressor presents the victim's success as the aggressor's success, and when the person is unable to cope with the tasks, the victim is mentally and physically ironized,

mocked and threatened. Mobbing continues until the physically and mentally exhausted victim voluntarily (metaphorically said) leaves the organization. The next victim is in line.

Workplace mobbing lead to a range of physical and mental effects, including muscular and skeletal pain, stiffness, cardiovascular symptoms, central or peripheral nervous system disorders, sleep disturbances, depressive symptoms, anxiety, fatigue and even – suicidal thoughts.

In relation to the work environment, mobbing can result in (Psychcentral.com, 2024):

- absences;
- higher workforce turnover;
- low team morale;
- poor customer service;
- low productivity;
- mistakes in the work;
- increased operating costs and training costs for new employees;
- potential for legal action.

Being the victim of mobbing at work can be stressful and painful. Every person deserves to be treated with respect and consideration. If individuals experience mobbing in the workplace, they should consider reporting it directly to the HR department or management team, providing evidence of the violations. Baber recommends asking yourself if we really want to be in this job and such workplace, and argues: *“It may not seem fair to you to walk away when you are not at fault and you are right, but if the situation is not managed by your management, you may not be able to do a lot to stop it. Bullying in the workplace can affect your mental health and quality of life, especially if you are a victim of violence”* (Psychcentral.com, 2024).

Bossing is a specific form of mobbing. It is a process in which a superior attacks a subordinate. Bossing is a mobbing coming from higher positions, often leading to the purposeful throwing out of inconvenient employees. In essence, this is

the same scenario, which is much more dangerous, given the significant powers of the superior, which they are granted by legal power. The superior may overwhelm the employee with work or assign a task that the employee cannot perform. Everything is accompanied with often ironic and derogatory behaviour, followed by a critical and derogatory assessment of the work. Harassment manifests itself as defamation, ridicule, humiliation, neglect, embarrassment, reputational and financial damage, etc. (Holátová & Březinová, 2021).

Studies indicate that up to 90% of the workforce has experienced bullying at some point in their career, and between 10 and 20% of the workforce experience bullying incidents each year. Abusers can be both men and women. Bullies often abuse their power, treat employees inconsistently, put their personal interest before the interest of the organization, and tend to have emotional outbursts. Victims often report receiving no support from co-workers, supervisors or HR, and just under 10% of abusers have been disciplined or fired (Gibson, 2012).

Fighting bullying *“can require almost heroic actions, so there are times when it requires determination, opposition and even confrontation”* (Killoren, 2014). People who stand up to workplace bullying are often labelled as disrespectful, unable to work in a team and under stress, or as disrespectful of the hierarchy. Euphemisms designed to downplay bullying and its impact include intransigence, disrespect, difficult people, personal conflict, inappropriate behaviour, bad manners, etc.

4. Aggression as Counterproductive Social Behaviour in Human Communities

If workplace bullying is not controlled and labelled as undesirable and reprehensible behaviour that should be punished, it could escalate into aggression.

Aggression:

- is a form of social behaviour involving the direct or indirect interaction of at least two human individuals;

- is any conduct containing a threat or causing harm to others, and aiming at such harm;

- exists when the victim of such behaviour does not want it.

According to Markov: *“Aggression implies actions in which a person intentionally causes harm to his victim. It can manifest itself both in a state of affect and emotional excitement, and completely cold-blooded”* (Markov, 2013).

In searching the roots of human aggressiveness, it could be outlined three main theories. According to biogenetic theory, aggressive behaviour is naturally inherent in a human nature and arises from human's need for violence. Psychology asserts that in the process of its development, a person develops tension and hostility towards the environment in which he exists, from which he or she free himself or herself at a certain moment through individual or collective acts of aggression. According to social theory, aggression is either induced or learned as a behaviour. In 1998, in order to delineate the boundaries of behaviour that is considered aggressive, Newman & Baron (1998) proposed the following dimensions that encompass the range of workplace aggression:

- expression of hostility – involves behaviours that are primarily verbal;

- obstructionism – behaviour designed to prevent a worker or employee from performing the work and professional activity or to prevent the achievement of the organization's goals;

- a manifestation of direct aggression which includes the use of physical acts and violent actions.

Workplace aggression is counterproductive behaviour and is defined as *“any act of aggression, physical violence, threats, behaviour or action that causes physical or emotional harm to individuals in the work environment”* (Rai, 2002). Aggression in the workplace includes a wide range of behaviours that

range from verbal acts (making remarks, spreading rumours) to direct physical attacks (assault). It is associated with behaviour and actions undertaken by one person (aggressor) with the intention of causing harm to another person (victim), and the aggressor expressly wishes that this behaviour will lead to negative consequences for the victim, i.e. his behaviour is conscious and purposeful. Aggressive behaviour can be directed directly at the source of the problem or, in the absence of such opportunity, at an alternative substitute.

Is there a typical victim that abusers target?

Although abusers may target a colleague who is perceived as a threat, many abusers target individuals who hold less power than they have. Bjorkqvist & Ostermon studied the “effect – danger” ratio, which refers to the aggressor's subjective assessment of the relative effect and danger of the consequences for the aggressor of committing a given aggressive act (Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Hjelt-Back, 1994). According to them, aggressors strive for the aggressive act to achieve the greatest possible effect with the relatively lowest risk of danger of negative consequences for themselves. Aggressors judge the time that is suitable for committing an aggressive act and are also fully aware of the illegality of their actions and deliberately seek to harm their victims, which distinguishes this type of behaviour from an isolated or random phenomenon.

5. Conclusion – The Idea of Psychological Safety

The topic of the power and control abuse in human societies is extremely comprehensive and complex, not only as a theoretical or experimental study, but rather as an internal acceptance and perception of basic human rights and freedoms and the problem of their protection and preservation. The article addressed the

topics of power abuse and violence in a social structure as a socially undesirable phenomena in human behaviour and in human communities, whether it is harassment, bullying, mobbing, bossing, aggression, offering content and etymological analysis and a critical scholarly review.

The idea of psychological safety refers to the belief that being yourself, expressing yourself and your positions is not only useful for a human group, organization, community but also should be safe for the individual. This gives the peace of mind that an individual can voice their opinions and concerns without fear of reprisal or humiliation. Creating a psychologically safe (work) environment means directly addressing these challenges, which in turn can reduce the likelihood of violence in all its forms (including harassment, aggression, bullying, bossing, etc.). Prevention is the best tool to eliminate workplace bullying. Managers should take appropriate steps to prevent and correct it. They must make it clear to all their subordinates that such behaviour is unwanted and will not be tolerated in the human community. They can do this by establishing an effective complaint or grievance process, providing anti-harassment training, and taking prompt and appropriate action when complaints are made. A manager can help reduce the likelihood of workplace violence by (Psychcentral.com, 2024):

- a zero-tolerance policy regarding acts of violence;
- promoting a positive work environment through employee benefit policies (vacation, mental health days, health care);
- conducting educational trainings regarding workplace violence and conflict resolution;
- conducting regular group and individual inspections;
- promoting collaborative projects;
- ensuring that all subordinates have read and signed the workplace violence policy;
- having a clear protocol on how to deal with violence in all its forms in the workplace;
- offering impartial mediation to parties in conflict;
- compliance with confidentiality;
- control and monitoring of any manifestation of violence;
- immediate adoption of policy-defined disciplinary protocols;
- punishments for acts of violence;
- monitoring the situation to ensure that disciplinary action has made a difference.

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