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Severe Workplace Conflict: The Experience of Mobbing

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Keywords
workplace conflict, workplace mobbing, organizational justice, procedural fairness.

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Abstract

Workplace mobbing is a particularly serious phenomenon that is extremely costly to organizations and the health of those targeted. This article reports on a study of self-identified targets of mobbing, which advances understanding of the way the problem is conceptualized, including associated informal and formal power relationships with organizations. Participants report a number of experiences, such as lengthy investigations and escalation of conflict, that result in an increasingly unbalanced sense of power away from the individual and toward the organization. Revealed is a mismatch between the expected organizational justice processes and support and the actual experience. Findings support a five-stage process of mobbing, which commences with unresolved conflict and leads ultimately to expulsion from the organization. The study contributes an understanding of a sixth transformational stage that allows the development of personal agency and a rebalanced sense of power. Recommendations of strategic approaches to address the phenomenon of mobbing are discussed.

Severe Workplace Conflict: The Experience of Mobbing

Severe workplace conflict has detrimental effects on both individuals and their workplaces in the short and long term (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2012). The costs involved relate to the significant negative health and economic consequences for individuals and associated detrimental effects on engagement and productivity for workgroups and organizations (Branch et al., 2012). In terms of academic understanding, workplace aggression has been referred to by a wide range of terms, which has caused serious fragmentation in the area (Hershcovis, 2011). Nevertheless, in the quest for clarity, Hershcovis has encouraged researchers to further examine the various conceptualizations mentioned within definitions. In particular, research on specific features, such as intent to harm, intensity, frequency, perceived invisibility, perpetrator–target relationship (e.g., power), is needed. In the case of workplace mobbing, the outcomes include the eventual expulsion of an individual from the workplace. Thus, it is especially important to examine the processes involved in mobbing and ultimately work to prevent this extreme example of workplace conflict (Shallcross, Ramsay, & Barker, 2010).

While interpersonal conflict has traditionally been considered the cause of workplace aggression, organizational environments that are negative, competitive, or demanding are increasingly seen as being heavily involved in negative outcomes (Branch et al., 2012; Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2010; Salin, 2003). Similarly, the role of group norms and processes has been investigated, including the identification of powerful informal alliances that can take control of seemingly objective processes

(e.g., promotions), highlighting the importance of understanding negative group processes that can be largely invisible and distant from formal operations (Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2006; Ramsay, Troth, & Branch, 2011). An area that has received more limited attention is that of the role of the organization itself in the power relationship. The mobbing phenomenon provides a particularly powerful medium for studying the role of the organization because, in this case, the organization itself appears to play a major role in the outcomes, including the departure of an employee under its pressure. The focus of this article is on the processes of mobbing through the lens of power, and in particular, the question of how the mobbing process is experienced by targets over the longer term.

The article identifies unbalanced power resources, which can fluctuate across time as, for example, an individual may make many attempts to redress this imbalance of power, such as deontic retaliation, a particular focus of this article. Deontic retaliation refers to those actions undertaken in an effort to restore justice to those adversely impacted upon (Folger & Skarlicki, 2004). Moreover, the article also examines the role of informal and, more identifiable, formal aspects of organizational power that essentially can strengthen the position of the organization and simultaneously weaken that of the individual. Additionally, we contribute to knowledge about how individuals attempt to understand their situation and to ultimately regain personal power once outside the particular organization (6th phase of mobbing). In focusing on power, this article discusses several key ideas that emerged from this research, namely participants' conceptualization of mobbing and in particular how it differs from workplace bullying. Further, it highlights different perspectives on power and the lack of neutrality of support systems, and presents recommendations for improvements in organizational processes. Following an explanation of the method, various key findings, including quotes from participants, will be linked to explanatory literature.

Overview of Research and Method

The aims of the study are threefold. First is to explore the lived experience of those who self-selected as targets of workplace mobbing in order to identify any commonalities that might typify the phenomenon. Second, the study explored the actions of individuals through their responses, and third, it examined the actions taken by organizations to identify any patterns of response. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions: (a) How is workplace mobbing experienced by those targeted? (b) How do targeted individuals respond to workplace mobbing? (c) How do organizations respond to workplace mobbing? and (d) How can organizations prevent and address workplace mobbing?

This article aims to examine the contribution of unresolved conflict to the workplace mobbing process and, in particular, the important role of power differentials and the acquisition of power by involved parties during conflict escalation. Also discussed are the contingencies during escalation that may represent leverage points for intervention and ultimately the prevention of mobbing, which left unchecked has very negative implications for individuals, groups, and organizations. As such, it addresses a gap in the literature wherein the understanding of such escalation has often been overlooked (Keashley & Jagatic, 2003) and focuses attention on practical solutions, another area of need (Georgakopoulos, Wilkin, & Kent, 2011). The findings and discussion are grouped around the two main areas of the conceptual understanding of mobbing and the increasingly formal role of the organization.

Research Method

The exemplarian action research method is inspired by concepts of transformation and agency and requires the achievement of positive outcomes for participants at the individual, organizational, and community levels (Coenen & Khonraad, 2003). It is a process of transformation whereby participants or those adversely impacted upon by a problem or phenomenon, which in this study is workplace mobbing, exercise their agency through an action research process to achieve positive or emancipatory outcomes.

The process is characterized by three stages comprising the thematic stage, the crystallization stage, and the exemplar stage (Boog & Logger, 2003) as depicted in Table 1. In the thematic stage, the researcher explores the problem through processes of experience, observation, and questioning, leading to a broad view of the problems. In this study, this stage occurred with 212 public sector employee participants who self-selected and agreed to contribute to this study and to engage with the researcher through e-mail in the first year of the study. An identity number (ID) was allocated to each participant, and these were listed in chronological order from the date of initial contact. The gender of participants was also recorded.

These participants made initial contact from an e-mail link on the www.workplacemobbing.com Web site that was published to address the frequently asked questions arising in the early stages of the first year of the study. The site had been promoted in the electronic and print media (see, e.g., Passmore, 2003) resulting in 10,339 unique visitors to the site, with 1,720 of those consisting of return visits during the second and third year of the study as indicated in Table 2.

The crystallization stage is where the participants consider the accuracy of the common problems and engage in problem-solving options. In this study, this stage was undertaken with 62 participants in the second and third years of the study through an online virtual community, which the participants referred to as *the black sheep* support group, where common threads were further explored and clarified. These participants were selected to continue in the study because they provided evidence in the form of correspondence with workplaces, legal documents, medical professional reports, and media reports to validate their claims. As such, these 62 participants were matched across the first two phases of the research. The exemplar stage takes place after the participants have achieved emancipatory outcomes that can be applied by others in similar circumstances. In this study, 15 participants were selected for interviews using theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) where participants provided evidence to validate

Table 1
Three Stages of Exemplarian Action Research Methodology

Research stages	Goal	Purpose
Researcher role: Active		
Stage one: Thematic	Identification of common problems by the participants and the researcher	Problem formulation Problem listing
Researcher role: Passive		
Stage two: Crystallization	Identify the exemplars selected from the group Identify individual actions, plans, observations, and reflections as shared with the group	Diagnosis (of the problem) Blueprint (action plan)
Researcher role: Critical		
Stage three: Exemplarian	Identify the outcomes for the research parties Identify exemplars that are likely to achieve similar outcomes in situations outside of those in this study	Operations (actions) Evaluations (reflections and observations)

Adapted from Coenen and Khonraad (2003).

Table 2
Web Site Visitors and Page Loads During Second and Third Years of the Study

Year of study	Page loads	Unique visitors	Returning visitors
2	18,778	5,388	985
3	16,120	4,951	735
Total	34,898	10,339	1,720

their claims of achieving positive outcomes. Theoretical sampling is described as sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through this process, the 15 interviewees had been matched across the three phases of the research.

Interviews were guided by the episodic narrative interview method (Flick, 2002) and were conducted over a 12-month period. Episodic interviewing is a technique that elicits descriptions of particular episodes or incidents from the participants (Flick, 2002). The method has some flexibility because it does not require the same questions to be asked of each participant and permits the interviewer to interrupt and bring the discussion back to a particular issue if necessary. During the 2-hour interviews, participants were asked to explain their experience of workplace mobbing and to reflect on how they had responded. They were invited to outline the process for achieving positive outcomes and to explain why and how these were transformational.

The multisource data included over 10,000 e-mails archived on a Web server: from the first year of the study, which involved 212 participants, and the second and third years of the study, which involved 62 participants, 15 interview scripts, and over 600 validating confidential document texts, including medical reports, legal documents and court transcripts, and correspondence from a range of agencies. These documents were sighted and signed by a Justice of the Peace to strengthen the validity of the data.[1]

The experiences of some participants were reported in the print and electronic media, and these documents were also included as important sources of data. Interviews were conducted to explore the experience of some participants in more detail, with all interview data transcribed in full. This article highlights the various forms of workplace conflict arising from the way in which complaints were investigated, and during the course of the study, it transpired that 15 of the 212 participants had been unjustly accused of workplace bullying, as shown in the outcome of formal investigations including court procedures.

The process of coding vast quantities of multisource data was facilitated with the use of MAXqda computer software (Given, 2008) to code, sort, and categorize textual data. The software does not replace the grounded theory inductive process but rather assists with the management and organization of data. The software involves coding the text through a process of scrolling through each document and color-highlighting relevant text passages and assigning codes and memos to them. The software application generates lists of codes that can later be opened to retrieve the text segments indexed at that code. The systematic process allows for sorting of different sets of data; for example, a number of text segments at a code can be quickly sorted and saved into a text document.

As indicated by grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the data were categorized using open-, axial-, and selective-coding processes, and a sample from this study is listed in Table 3. The raw data were first coded to discover concepts that were then categorized using a process of axial coding. The grounded theory approach, through a process of systematic data collection and analysis, allows themes to emerge. Consistent with systematic grounded theory–building frameworks (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), the process of coding in this study commenced with first the identification of concepts, second the formation of categories, third the emergence of propositions, fourth the identification of themes, and fifth the emergent propositions, a process depicted in Figure 1.

To check reliability, the coding scheme was explained to and an interview transcript was coded by an independent rater with research training. Once completed, both sets of coding were examined independently by a third person with research training and content knowledge. Overall, consistency was very high. On the few occasions where disagreements occurred, the third person examined the relevant transcript section and made a decision in relation to the code(s). Coding accuracy was confirmed, with consistency well over 90%, indicating an appropriate level of interrater reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

[1]A copy of this signed register document may be obtained from the first author.

Table 3
Sample of Open Codes, Axial Codes, Themes, and Proposition Identified in this Study

Open codes	Axial codes (categories)	Themes (selective coding)	Proposition
Constant undermining	Abuse	Organizational culture	Organizational culture is dysfunctional
Hostile culture	Abuse		
Hostile meetings	Abuse		
Covert behavior	Abuse		
Silent abuse	Abuse		
Singled out	Abuse		
Constant criticism	Abuse		
Unfounded criticisms	Abuse		
Surveillance	Fear		
Rules and procedures	Fear		
Human resources	Fear		
Performance plan	Fear		
Hostile letters	Human resources (fear of HR)		
Lack of due process	Human resources (fear of HR)		
Counseling (organizational)	Human resources (fear of HR)		
Corrupted processes	Human resources (fear of HR)		

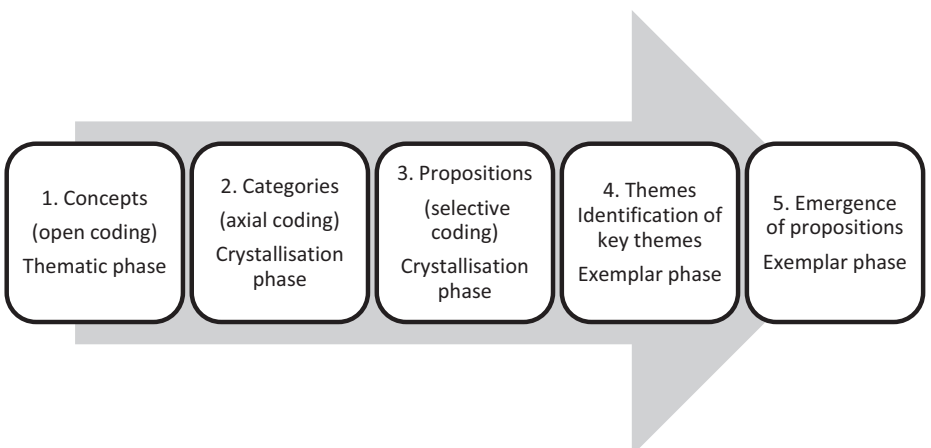

Figure 1. The theory-building process during this exemplarian action research study.

Results

Conceptual Understanding of Mobbing

In the study, participants explained a range of behaviors that they associated with workplace mobbing as they developed their understanding of their experience and the phenomenon. They saw their experience as different to, or not associated with, workplace bullying. They tended to understand bullying to mean a situation where a more senior person with positional power directed open hostilities and aggressive attacks toward the staff they supervised. However, in their experience, seniority of position made little difference, and sometimes more junior members of staff had more influence with powerful decision makers. This was particularly evident if two or more perpetrators had covert discussions with more senior managers to build an argument against the target.

In some cases, participants described having been removed from their positions instantly on the basis of unsubstantiated accusations of bullying. A group of 15 participants claimed that unfounded accusations of bullying were used by perpetrators, because the perpetrators were well aware of the consequences for managers in a political climate where bullies, so-called, would not be tolerated. Making the distinction between mobbing and bullying is important to those experiencing the problem if they are to retain their employment or reduce the adverse impact of the phenomenon of mobbing. It is also important for organizations to reduce the significant costs associated with deontic retaliation, a focus of this article, as discussed further on.

Mobbing Defined and Described

This study highlights the inadequacy of some definitions in relation to the characteristics of bullying and mobbing. The participants explicitly commented that they were unable to name their experience and did not associate it with bullying. The following quote from one of the participants is typical of the many received that explain this problem:

> I could not find a word or definition for what was happening. There was some very direct bullying by men … women should work but not speak or else, but there was this other phenomena, we could not put a label [sic] to it. The male overt bullying was really an emotional and psychological form of domestic violence at work (all the behaviours except physical violence). The education faculty was mainly women with all men in charge except for me, we had this other phenomena where certain women worked on getting the most powerful man on side and began this process you have called mobbing. I can describe the process in detail—I know the behaviours but I am so glad we have a label at last. (Participant ID 193).

The distinguishing features of the two concepts they identified can be summarized as listed in Table 4. These perceived distinctions, however, are not widely recognized. Rather, the terms *mobbing* and *bullying* are most often used interchangeably in the literature to mean exactly the same type of behavior as indicated in the following definition:

> Mobbing at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label mobbing to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly), and over a period of time (e.g., about 6 months). Mobbing is an escalated process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict can be called mobbing if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal "strength" are in conflict. (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; cited in Einarsen & Zapf, 2005, p. 241)

Table 4
A Comparison of Mobbing and Bullying Behaviors at Work as Distinguished by Participants in this Study

Workplace bullying	Workplace mobbing
More powerful members of senior staff are the perpetrators, for example managers or supervisors	Staff at any level, including those with less perceived power at more junior levels, can be perpetrators
The perpetrator has positional power due to his or her location in the higher levels of the organizational hierarchy	The perpetrators tend to use informal power (for e.g., spreading rumors, malicious gossip, and unfounded accusations) to influence others
Single aggressor	Multiple aggressors
Overt and direct	Covert and indirect (silent)
Physical and verbal abuse	Psychological abuse
Typically male	Typically female

This definition does not adequately address the mobbing experience reported by the participants in this study. This is important in practice because, while the problem of bullying is increasingly recognized, the problem of mobbing is not well understood. This study identifies workplace mobbing as a distinct form of workplace violence. To give voice to those targeted, the phenomenon first needs to be recognized and understood.

The experience that resonates with the participants in this study is the definition, provided by Davenport, Distler-Schwartz, and Pursell-Elliott (1999), which extends the concept of mobbing beyond group psychological harassment to include organizational behavior:

> The mobbing syndrome is a malicious attempt to force a person out of the workplace through unjustified accusations, humiliation, general harassment, emotional abuse, and/or terror. It is a "ganging up" by the leader(s)—organization, superior, co-worker, or subordinate—who rallies others in to systematic and frequent "mob-like" behaviour. Because the organization ignores, condones or even instigates the behaviour, it can be said that the victim, seemingly helpless against the powerful and many, is indeed "mobbed." The result is always injury—physical or mental distress or illness and social misery and, most often, expulsion from the workplace. (Davenport et al., 1999, p. 40)

The two key areas of difference include the end result for the target in having been forced out of the workplace through unjustified accusations and being diagnosed with a psychological injury as a result. Instead of dealing with the situation as workplace bullying, as might be expected, the participants in this study identified that the organization tends to join in with the perpetrators until the target is no longer able to continue in his or her position due at least in part to a diminished sense of power and personal agency. Moreover, the four mobbing phases, first introduced by Leymann (1996; i.e., unresolved conflict, psychological assaults, management's escalation of conflict, and expulsion) and with an additional phase identified and inserted by Davenport et al. (1999, p. 38), where those targeted are labeled as "mentally ill" or blamed as the one at fault prior to expulsion, reflect the experience to which the participants in this study refer.

The phenomenon commences with an unresolved conflict in the first phase that escalates to psychological assaults against those targeted during the second phase. These are malicious and perpetrated with deliberate intent to cause harm and to "psychologically terrorize" (Davenport et al., 1999, p. 38; Leymann, 1990) those targeted. The third phase commences when management becomes formally involved, and the situation becomes a problem case. During this phase, management tends to escalate the conflict by siding with the perpetrators. In the fourth phase, those targeted are blamed as at fault and are often labeled as "mentally ill" (Davenport et al., p. 38). Their reputations are discredited to the extent that they are expelled from their workplace. For the targets, this is often a very painful period in which they feel "incapable of successfully fighting injustice" (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010, p. 529), where they may face months and even years of "dealing with the perceived loss of professional reputation, organizational identity and self-confidence, and the long-term loss of core beliefs in justice of fairness" (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008, p. 110).

During this phase, colleagues and management tend to focus on the personal characteristics of the target rather than the broader social, economic, organizational, and cultural factors that may be involved. In this fourth phase, the target appears to be particularly powerless compared with other organizational representatives, and it is at this point where the organization seeks to augment its power through, for example, gaining external experts to assist with their process of expulsion, thus indicating an identifiable organizational role in the fifth phase. These five phases were identifiable in the present research, with Table 5 giving an example of one participant's experiences mapped against the mobbing phases, which supports previous research into the area.

Additionally, this study seeks to address a gap in the research, which relates to experiences beyond the fifth phase. Leymman (1998, in his foreword to Davenport et al., 1999) commented that

Table 5
One Participant's Example of Incidents of Organizational and Employee Responses (Participant ID 101) and the Corresponding Phase of the Mobbing Process

Year and date	Number of incidents	Type of organizational and employee responses	Mobbing phases
Year 1			
3-Apr	Org 1	Critical incident 1	Phase 1
3-Apr	Emp 1	Conciliatory efforts from employee rejected	
26-Apr	Org 2	Critical incident 2	
12-Aug	Org 3	Direction 1: Psychiatrist A for compulsory psychiatric ill-health retirement	Phase 2
13-Aug	Org 4	Expulsion from workplace	
10-Sep	Org 5	Psychiatrist A: report to department	
7-Oct	Emp 2	Grievance 1 from employee to public service commissioner	
7-Oct	Emp 3	Claim for worker's compensation lodged by Employee	
10-Oct	Emp 4	Application for income protection benefit lodged by employee	Phase 3
23-Oct	Org 6	Direction 2: Psychiatrist B for compulsory psychiatric ill-health retirement	
2-Dec	Emp 5	Department: Grievance 2 from employee	
4-Dec	Org 7	Psychiatrist B: report to department	
18-Dec	Org 8	Grievance 2 response to employee (from investigator)	
Year 2			
8-Jan	Emp 6	Complaint 2: From employee regarding departmental grievance process	Phase 4
13-Jan	Org 9	Departmental response to Complaint 2	
28-Jan	Emp 7	Department indicates return to work option	
28-Feb	Org 10	Investigator report on Grievance 2 (negative)	
7-Mar	Emp 8	Department: Grievance Stage 3	
13-Mar	Org 11	Worker's compensation claim rejected	
27-Mar	Org 12	Departmental reply to psychologist	
15-Mar	Emp 9	Freedom of Information (FOI) application process commenced (8 months)	
24-Apr	Emp 10	Appeal to regarding worker's compensation rejection	
25-Apr	Emp 11	Grievance to public service commission	
22-May	Emp 12	Employee's response to grievance report	
10-Jun	Org 13	Worker's compensation rejection upheld by review employer	
15-Jun	Emp 13	Employee's unfair treatment appeal upheld by public service commission	
8-Jul	Org 14	Commissioner response to Grievance 1 (made by employee 9 months previously)	Phase 5
3-Aug	Org 15	Direction 3: Psychiatrist C regarding compulsory psychiatric ill-health retirement	
12-Aug	Emp 14	Complaint 1: Commissioner re abuse of compulsory psychiatric ill-health retirement	
18-Aug	Org 16	Department: Response to complaint regarding abuse of compulsory psychiatric ill-health retirement	
24-Sep	Emp 15	Public service commission suggests negotiated separation	
31-Oct	Emp 16	Media: Psych tests dished out as punishment	
5-Nov	Org 17	Direction for assessment: Psychiatrist D at the request of income protection Emp	
14-Nov	Emp 17	Media: Storm grows of psychiatric tests—"hitmen"	
21-Nov	Emp 18	Media: Call for ban on psychiatric testing	
23-Nov	Emp 19	Hansard Queensland parliament: Public servants psychiatric testing	
8-Dec	Emp 20	Media: Public services bosses hear darkest secrets	
12-Dec	Org 18	Report from Psychiatrist D recommending return to work	
20-Dec	Emp 21	Application for total and permanent disability superannuation benefits	
Year 3			
18-Dec	Org 19	Departmental advice refusing return to work option	
12-Jan	Org 20	Unexpected cancellation of income protection benefit	
19-Jan	Emp 22	Appointment with Psychiatrist E	
6-Feb	Org 21	Cessation of income protection	
20-Feb	Emp 23	Voluntary early retirement package accepted upon resignation (exclusion)	

> Today, research is confronted with the challenge to produce more information about the after-effects of the victim's expulsion from the job. Following years of having been stigmatized, victims often do not see any possibilities to help themselves. They feel totally alone. Their social environment has been dissolved. They have no way to make a living. As yet, we do not know enough about these ramifications. (Davenport et al., 1999, p .16)

Because of the longitudinal nature of this study, which allowed for matching of participants across three research phases, a detailed examination of workplace mobbing experiences could emerge. This research identified a sixth phase of mobbing (see Figure 2).

Sixth Phase of Mobbing

Significantly, this study adds a sixth phase of mobbing that goes some way to exploring the after-effects of expulsion. In this phase, as indicated in Figure 2, those targeted can ultimately fight back with the benefit of support and undergo a process of transformation whereby they can help themselves and explore the possibilities for making a living. This sixth postexpulsion phase was identified during the crystallization phase of the exemplarian action research process where the resilience of the participants increased through their participation in the *black sheep* support group. Their capacity to understand and resist organizational attacks (during or following the process of eviction from the organization) contributed to their transformation. During this phase, senior management appears to draw upon the full resources of the system in an effort to procure a state of silent acquiescence from those targeted. These management resources are listed on the left side of Figure 3, under the heading *the perpetrators*, and include engaging the services of crown law and psychiatrists, carrying out investigations, appealing against unsuccessful workers' compensation claims, engaging in unfair dismissals, and instigating compulsory ill-health retirement processes to end the employment of those targeted. The sixth phase, from the participants' perspective, is transformational, because this is where they can exercise their agency to reduce the adverse impact of mobbing, including, for example, accessing emotional support, as well as practical information about how to legally seek redress and also to improve their career advancement opportunities through, for example, further study. However, as reported by participants, when this stage continues to involve the organization (e.g., participant seeking compensation), this sixth phase is more likely to be described as a form of deontic retaliation, or severe workplace conflict on the part of the organization.

This study suggests that transformation, indeed the survival of mobbing, requires those targeted to take what could be considered personal risks and to exercise their agency in the pursuit of problem-solving options (Coenen & Khonraad, 2003). Individual acts of agency include lodging grievances, pursuing workers' compensation claims, and seeking assistance from medical, health, and legal professionals as listed under the heading on the right side of Figure 3. Notably, the media was also contacted on occasions to progress the achievement of outcomes. To alleviate the severity of their financial circumstances, the participants attempted to access support systems for injured workers, including workers compensation, rehabilitation programs, and social welfare benefits. However, the participants found that they were unlikely to receive assistance; for example, of the many participants claiming workers compensation, only three were successful. Their experience with support systems led participants to conclude that they had been naïve in their assumptions that they could rely on commonly accepted standards of ethical and fair behavior. For example, although they would have preferred conciliatory methods of resolution, these options were not made available to them. Rather, they were subjected to adversarial processes, including suspensions and investigations that escalated conflict. Consequently, the participants realized that if they were to survive financially, they would need to engage in the adversarial methods. However, exercising agency takes courage in difficult circumstances, as indicated in the attached quote by one participant to another in encouraging her to fight back:

> If I had been told that I was going to take this path a few years ago, I would have said absolutely no way but after the system deals you a few blows during an investigation process, things change. It is like playing a game

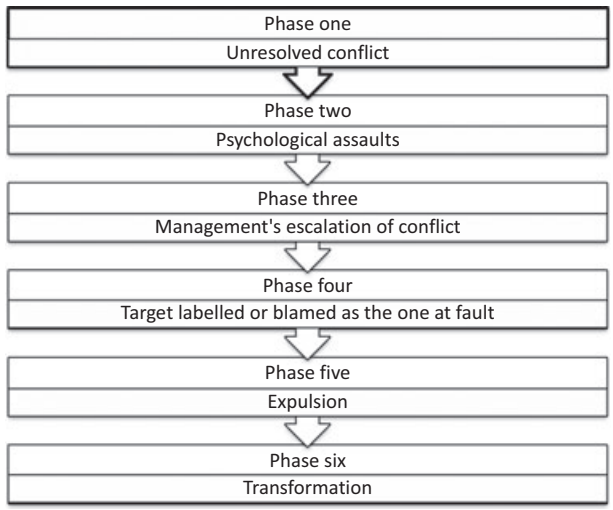

Figure 2. Six phases of mobbing from the perspective of the participants.

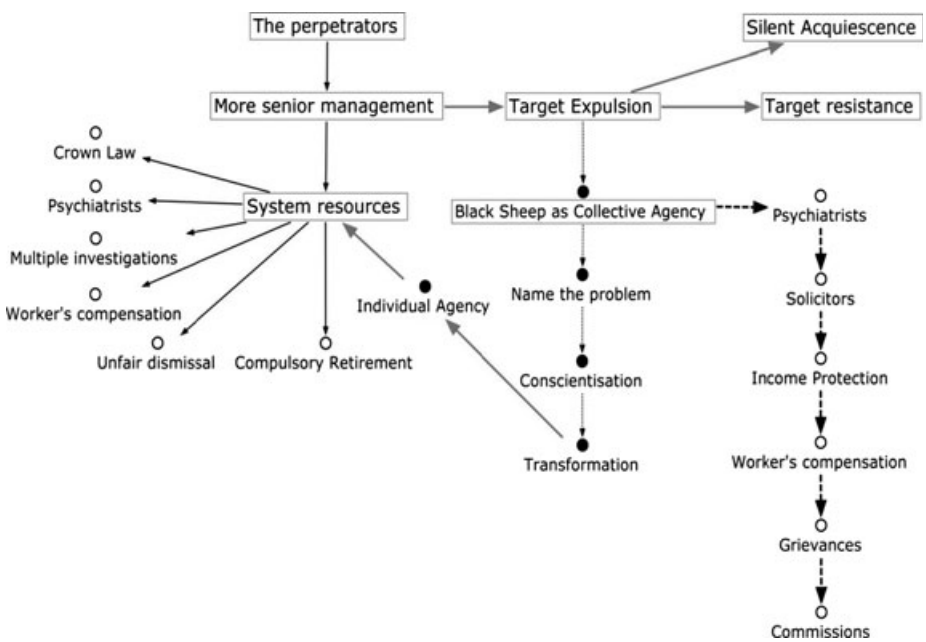

Figure 3. A conceptualized model of the postexpulsion sixth phase of mobbing.

> now as you need to fight back using the system to your advantage. Most of us have been brainwashed not to do this sort of thing but many of us have learned that no one else is going to look after us, so we have to do it ourselves. This means worker's compensation and superannuation, as well as other strategies. (Participant ID 9)

The outcomes achieved during this sixth phase mostly surpassed the participants' expectations with several achieving financial settlements and others achieving higher education goals and changed organizational practices in some instances. These were achieved through individual acts of agency including lodging claims for compensation, filing grievances, and seeking legal remedies.

While the emphasis so far in this discussion is on the achievement of financial outcomes, another highly beneficial outcome is the health benefits gained. Typical comments made by participants upon gaining an understanding of workplace mobbing include the following:

> [Your information] has done more for me than anything else. I guess just knowing I was not being a drama queen, this sort of thing has happened to many others, and it has been acknowledged by someone in the know [sic]. I am now in the phase of just trying to get on with my life. (Participant ID 156)

This participant reported to the workers compensation agency that, "Out of all the help and assistance I have received from anyone, this information about workplace mobbing has been the most worthwhile." Subsequently, the agency replied that they understood there had been a "good therapeutic outcome" and on that basis agreed to fund an assessment of her workplace mobbing experience.

At the community level, outcomes included an increased awareness of the problem as measured by the number of visits to the workplace mobbing Web site and an increase in requests for information and assistance. Outcomes were further achieved with the publication of information through the electronic and print media and debate, for example, in the Western Australian Parliament *(Royal Commissions (Powers) Amendment Bill 2004),* calling for organizational change to prevent workplace mobbing. Some other outcomes achieved at the public sector government department level included revised guidelines for compulsory ill-health retirement, revised guidelines for carrying out investigations, and the inclusion of mobbing-type behaviors in workplace harassment guidelines, for example identifying the spreading of unfounded rumors and gossip. Following this examination of the sixth phase of mobbing, several other themes that highlight power relationships and the experience of mobbing are presented, which ultimately lead to the recommendations presented toward the end of the article.

Informal Power

Workplace mobbing can be perpetrated sideways between peers, described as *horizontal violence*, or directed upwards against managers, as well as directed at subordinates (Davenport et al., 1999; Leymann, 1996). There are effective forms of informal power where holding a senior position provides little protection for those targeted. For example, claiming *victim status* is one method whereby perpetrators can influence their social network to psychologically abuse those targeted, including managers and supervisors. Informal means of power and influence can be gained through length of experience in a workplace or through access to powerful or influential social networks (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). This form of power is recognized in some of the literature, and it is suggested that it is not to be underestimated (Einarsen et al., 2003), as indicated by the following quote from the present research:

> The ED wouldn't make a decision, she would, you know, dig her heels in on something that would embarrass her or something a little bit, about initiatives or grants or anything HR, she just did whatever it was that Jane says, and then Christine, another member of the more junior staff, they were very good friends with each other, they would come together most Friday nights, into their own homes having a drink, you know. Jane and her partner, and another member of the more senior staff, Susan, and her partner, you know, go on holidays together, they sit, you know, with wine on the verandah every Friday night, I mean that's the sort of inherent power I have to face. (Participant ID 06)

> It is terrible to say that, you know, I can't trust them, because who am I, my only relationship with more senior staff is with Susan, that is I work with her. I don't have a partnership in a personal context, even though she has been very, she acknowledges me as an expert in my field but that's as far as it would go. See, they are political people, they have political power, they know people, basically they know the politics of it. (Participant ID 06)

However, by contrast, workplace bullying is more often recognized in the literature as occurring where there is a power imbalance due to the positional power of the perpetrator. In practice, this means that senior staff target those who are not in a position to defend themselves due to potential victimization

(Einarsen et al., 2003). However, the present study highlights the effectiveness of *informal* power, compared to that gained through holding a senior position. This seems to be the case particularly in public sector organizations.

Perpetrator and Target Personality Types

While recognizing that there may be perpetrator and target personality types, these were not key problems that participants in this study identified. This contrasts with the literature that identifies the personality of targets and the dysfunctional behavior of the perpetrator as being at fault (Einarsen et al., 2003: Moberg, Ritter, & Fischbein, 2003; Randall, 1997; Sheehan & Jordan, 2003). A range of deficient individual personality traits are suggested, which indicates that potential perpetrators and targets can be identified (Einarsen et al., 2003; Leymann, 1996; Zapf, 1999). For example, targets are seen as being less independent, less stable, and more conscientious than others in the workplace, providing possible reasons for attracting psychological aggression from others (Moberg et al., 2003; Olaffson & Johannsdottir, 2000; Seigne, Coyne, & Randall, 2000; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003).

However, this study identified that the targets discussed a range of other possible causes for their experiences, including in particular that they were somehow different to the dominant group on such grounds as their race, age, sexual orientation, and impairment. Furthermore, sometimes they were in positions with direct accountability for highly sought-after items, for example responsibility for the allocation of vehicles and car parks, suggesting that participants may have been targeted because of their specific access to a desired aspect of the work environment. Also, participants in this study included those with responsibility for ensuring ethics and integrity, or they were employed to act as change-agents to improve organizational culture, suggesting that they may have placed pressure on prevailing norms to some degree (Ramsay et al., 2011).

Unresolved Conflict

While conflict within workplaces is commonplace, it can be quite complex with various facets and outcomes. Although conflict is often negative, management literature suggests it can sometimes be used constructively in the development of a dynamic work environment focused on innovative solutions (De Dreu, 2008). However, in the case of mobbing, the conflict remains unresolved. The literature indicates that this may be because task conflict that is not managed constructively can lead to relationship conflict (Choi & Cho, 2011). Relationship conflict is very difficult to rectify and can develop initially for many reasons that go beyond task conflict, including possession of diverse backgrounds and perspectives (Lewis & Gunn, 2007). In the present study, negative, unresolved conflict was evident. In one case, for example, staff had distributed a poster to portray this participant as Godzilla. Although she raised her concerns with management, she claims that "nothing was done." The reason for the behaviors directed toward her was expressed by one of her colleagues in a witness statement as follows:

> I have experienced similar conflicts in the various legal offices throughout the department where an Administration Officer has authority to give some direction to a Lawyer such as the allocation of a vehicle, a caseload or annual leave, without the necessary full support by senior management to exert that authority. I recall putting to her at the time that her situation was difficult. (Participant ID, 210)

The findings also indicate that the conflict is likely to escalate, as occurred in this example where a seemingly trivial incident, occurring years earlier and remaining unresolved, escalated until this participant was eventually forced out of her employment and was later successful in making a claim for worker's compensation. Using the Conflict Escalation Model of Glasl, 1994 (as cited in Zapf & Gross, 2001) and a series of quantitative and qualitative studies, Zapf and Gross found that most bullying or mobbing cases could be tracked through various phases, commencing with attempts to cooperate and moving over

time to increasingly higher levels of dysfunctionality, which was also identified in the present study. This study also indicates that conflict can remain unresolved and escalate on the basis of several processes that will now be addressed. Integral to these processes was the notion of power, which shifted toward the organization and its untargeted employees, diminishing the perceived power of the target.

Deontic Retaliation or Individual Agency

During the course of the study, participants became increasingly aware of their perception that to survive their experience they were compelled to retaliate. That is, the decrease in power of participants and their increasingly urgent attempts to regain some power was evident. The duration and intensity of organizational assaults against one participant is provided here to highlight employee retaliation that typifies the experience of many others in this study. These acts of retaliation can alternatively be described as exercising individual agency to overcome the adverse impact of the ongoing workplace conflict. An example from this study is one participant who reported, and with substantiating documentation, as follows:

> …the department was trying to terminate my employment on the grounds of "trumped up" mental illness…. Although, I did suffer extreme emotional trauma over a very long period, that is why I was off work for more than two years. All of the trauma I suffered was a direct result of the conflict in the workplace. (Participant ID 101)

This comment was made in reference to organizational attempts to refer this participant for compulsory psychiatric assessment. She was directed to attend three appointments with psychiatrists for this purpose over a period of two years as indicated in the chronological list of incidents referred to in Table 5. The first direction was in August, the second in October of Year 1, and the third in the following August (Year 2). The number of incidents of deontic retaliation by this one participant (ID101) in response to perceived organizational assaults over the three-year period is indicated in Figure 4.

In Year 1, there were eight organizational incidents to which this participant made five retaliatory responses. For example, a complaint was lodged with the public service commissioner, and she later lodged a claim for worker's compensation. These actions required two separate investigations to be undertaken into the workplace. This was followed up in Year 2, with ten organizational assaults and 17 responses, including an unfair treatment appeal that was upheld by the public service commission and other letters of complaint. This participant also commenced an 8-month process to access her staff file under Freedom of Information legislation provisions, requiring further investigations by the department. In Year 3, incidents decreased with two organizational assaults and three responses, including acceptance of a voluntary early retirement (VER) payment. Later, she followed up the issue of the abusive application of the compulsory psychiatric assessment process and was successful in having the matter discussed in the Queensland Parliament as follows:

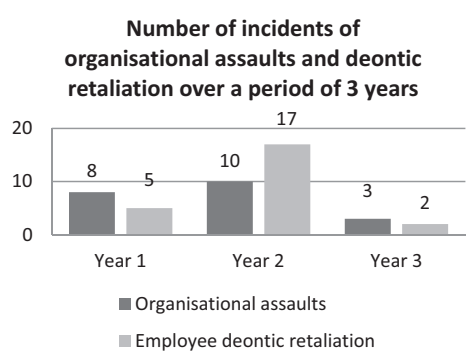

Figure 4. Incidents of organizational assaults and deontic retaliation.

> We see the misuse of Section 85 of the Public Service Act to enable departmental officers to compulsorily force public servants to undergo psychiatric testing, compelled to have a degrading and highly personal six-page psychiatric questionnaire and allowing reports of the most intimate aspects of people's mental health to be reported back to other members of the Public Service. (Flegg, 2005, p. 45)

The public criticism generated through the media (Dirou, 2004) and the parliament about compulsory psychiatric assessments resulted in the introduction of new guidelines, at least in the jurisdiction of Queensland, providing advice on how to apply Section 85 of the *Public Service Act 1996 (Qld)* regarding the mental or physical illness or disability of public service employees.

Organizational Justice and Procedural Fairness

Leymann (1996) identified that those targeted tend to be demonized as being unworthy of basic human rights to the extent that management, in their desire to be rid of the target as the source of the problem, will violate fundamental rights to fair treatment, such as denying the right of reply to those accused of wrongdoing. The role of fairness has been identified as fundamental to maintaining a productive work environment (Folger & Skarlicki, 2004). In fact, it is argued that outcomes that are actually unfavorable are more likely to be accepted when the processes are seen to be transparent and fair (see, for e.g., Gensler, Spurgin, & Swindal, 2003). When perceived injustices or unfairness occur, or when moral assumptions are undermined, this can lead to a situation referred to as *deontic retaliation*, discussed in the previous section. This is indicated in the following comment from another participant in defending her choice to fight against injustice.

> Most victims walk away without taking any action as the system is not sympathetic. Others like me who choose to stand up for our rights and our careers can spend years fighting the injustices that we have been subjected to. It is not simply a case of finding a lawyer and running to court. (Participant ID, 126)

The findings of this study highlight the lack of justice and the follow-on incidents of deontic retaliation that can be expected when procedural fairness principles are absent.

Moral Exclusion and Deserving Targets

The reason organizations may not follow good practice procedures can be connected to the concepts of deserving targets (Einarsen et al., 2003) and moral exclusion (Gerson, Woodside, & Oportow, 2005). Moral exclusion is the perception held by some that others do not deserve to be dealt with fairly because they fall outside of their *boundary of fairness*. An example is when Muslims as a group were widely perceived to be deserving of any unfair, unjust, or harmful treatment for some years after the 9/11 twin towers attack in New York City (Coryn & Borshuk, 2006).

Forms of moral exclusion also extend to the workplace where some individuals are targeted, demonized, and discredited to the extent that they are perceived as being deserving of harmful treatment. These people are not protected, regardless of guidelines and organizational fairness principles. In reality, there is little compunction to follow these principles, and implementation is most likely dependent on individual goodwill because surprisingly there are few legal requirements for compliance with natural justice (see, for e.g., Calvey & Jansz, 2005; Jamieson, 2005).

Participants identified that workplace conflict escalated during the third phase of mobbing once management became involved (see Figure 3). The combined forces of the system continually assault the target over a period of years until their expulsion is achieved. The systems deployed by management during Phases 3, 4, and 5 of the mobbing process include multiple investigations into vague and spurious accusations, disciplinary action, compulsory psychiatric assessment, and rejection of claims for compensation, which all made the formal power of the organization very salient. The impact and intensity on those targeted is depicted with the assaults identified with the dotted black arrows in Figure 5. When

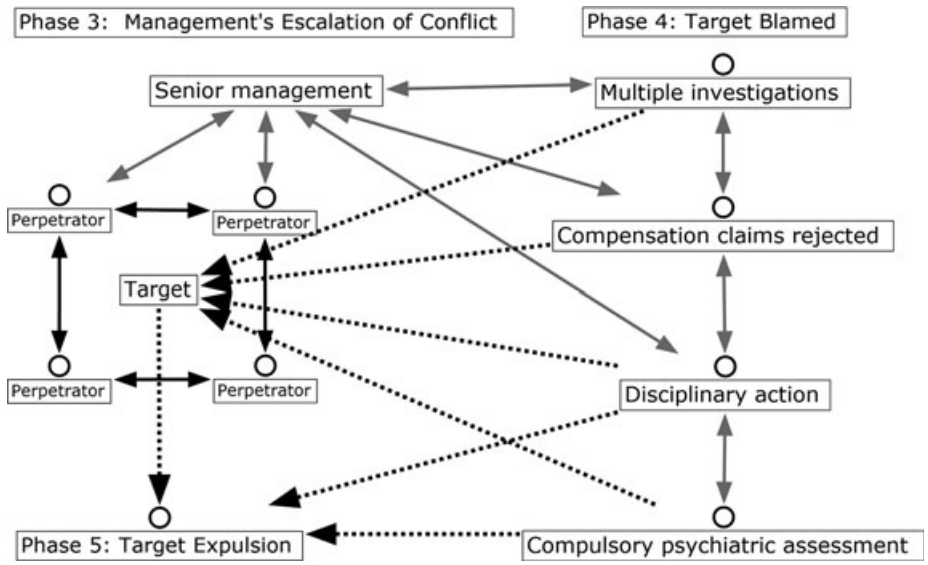

Figure 5. Mobbing phases 3, 4 and 5.

upper management eventually steps in, the situation becomes a formal case. Due to previous stigmatization, it is very easy to misjudge the situation and place the blame on the mobbed person. This most often results in serious violations of the individual's civil rights. In this phase, the mobbed person ultimately becomes marked or stigmatized, as explained by Davenport et al. (1999).

During the fourth phase (see Figure 3), senior management is identified as perpetuating further harm by blaming those targeted as the source of the problem. For example, one participant (Participant ID 126) reported that she was subjected to "daily intimidation, harassment, isolation, and discrimination" by senior management until she was "forced to leave" as she was at the point of "near collapse." During this phase, the perpetrators appear to be protected and are sometimes even promoted into the position vacated by the target's expulsion, commented upon by one participant as follows:

> The complainants did not have to reveal their identity or give specifics to their vague accusations and were able to hide behind their claims that they feared reprisals, without any explanation as to why they feared me. The complainants remained in their positions, and two were promoted to my position [at different times] while the matter was still under investigation, thereby creating the impression that they were innocent victims of a bully boss. (Participant ID 09)

Lengthy Investigations

Another practice contributing to workplace conflict is that investigations can take 2 or 3 years and, factoring in appeal processes, can sometimes extend to four or more years. While allegations of workplace bullying were sometimes made, these were later found to be without substance. While unsubstantiated complaints do not necessarily mean that complaints are false, in this study they were nevertheless found to be seemingly baseless. A commonly accepted standard for proving vexatious complaints is that the complainant has knowingly made false statements (Vickers, 2006). Some of the participants provided documentation to prove that false complaints had knowingly been made, although this evidence tended to be disregarded by investigators who were seemingly more interested in establishing their guilt. Although this approach might appear to be unjust and unfair, it is not unlawful, and it appears that complaints, at least in the public sector, no matter how trivial or vexatious, are open to investigation.

Some good practice guidelines for dealing with complaints of workplace bullying explain that malicious and vexatious complaints have the potential to undermine efforts to deal with the problem successfully (Clarke, 2003). While some guidelines suggest that there should be consequences for those making malicious accusations, this was not the experience of those falsely accused in this study. Rather, in some cases, the perpetrators were promoted, sometimes into the position vacated by the target. Additionally, the burden of proof about the validity of the complaint rests with the accused person who is required to prove that the claims are false. When accused of workplace bullying, many of the participants claimed that they were not given the specifics or particulars of the allegations made against them. The following quote is from correspondence made by the union in an unsuccessful attempt to obtain the allegations on the basis of which one of the participants had been suspended.

> We again remind the University that during the past two months, [name] has not received any information pertaining to the allegations against her or what is being investigated. We believe that the University has not afforded natural justice to her. (Union correspondence to the University, Participant ID 156)

Escalation of Conflict

Alternative dispute resolution processes of conciliation and mediation were unlikely to be made available to those accused of workplace bullying. Rather, they were subjected to adversarial processes, including suspensions and investigations, that escalated conflict rather than seeking a resolution through a more "peaceful settlement" (Vickers, 2006, p. 267). However, three participants who had participated in mediation reported that the process created additional conflict rather than made progress toward a resolution. The mediator, in one example, was perceived to be overstepping her role, in pursuing an exit strategy rather than a return to work strategy. The participant invited the mediator to explain whether or not the exit strategy idea had been suggested by more senior management. The mediator replied, "Well, I have to say yes, there are some managers who feel that it would be better if you went" (Participant ID 126).

The experience of another participant highlights some other problems that may arise when mediators are not trained or experienced. This participant reported that the people who mediated at the workplace

> had no idea what they were doing…she tried her best, but she burst into tears during the mediation …had a second meeting, and she burst into tears again… the two of them i.e., the mediator and [the perpetrator] ended up in tears during the mediation and they said, oh if you would just come and have a hug with us, everything would be alright. And I said I can't hug the perpetrator, I have been injured. (Participant ID 126)

The participants claim that despite departmental assurances that consultants were independent and impartial, in practice, investigations seemingly defaulted to a complaint gathering exercise, described metaphorically by some participants as "witch hunts." Consultants were also described by some participants as "hired guns," a term suggesting that consultants were appointed by departments to deliberately gather complaints against those targeted using biased methods that tended to favor complainants over respondents. That is, organizations appeared to augment their power through the use of people outside. The following comments from two different participants explain why some consultants are described as hired guns:

> I refer to [psychiatrist] as a hired gun for several reasons. One is that he is very well known around [the state] in legal circles and by the union. He has a reputation. While he does not go as far as giving employers everything they want, like retirement recommendations straight off, he does give them part of what they want. What he can be relied upon to do is remove a person from the workplace temporarily. I base this claim on my knowledge of other … cases as well as mine. (Participant ID 28)

> Sometimes these extreme hired guns … go as far as labelling the employee with a mental illness they don't have, without any diagnostic reasoning. The psychiatrist I described that [the employer] wanted to send me to is the worst, and she is also used by some departments for compulsory ill health retirement purposes. I know of others who are almost as bad. (Participant ID 101)

Additionally, consultants do not seem to be formally held accountable for their methods. In those cases, where a psychologist or psychiatrist is employed to carry out workplace investigations, they are able to avoid accountability with their professional associations by arguing that they were not acting in their professional role. The comments of one participant typify those of others as follows:

> [consultants]…market themselves as psychologists but then if complaints are made to the Psychologists' Registration Board, as I did, they then argue that they were not acting as a psychologist but merely as an investigator. (Participant ID 09)

The participants discovered that, in practice, the term *independent*, which they assumed to mean *impartial*, simply meant that a consultant, external to the department, had been employed. Another problem identified is that consultants do not appear to be trained or qualified in conducting procedurally fair investigations. Consultants are seemingly contracted based upon their reputation and previous experience in undertaking a variety of human resource management roles. While this may appear to be a reasonable course of action from a management perspective (O'Grady, 2006), the process appears fundamentally flawed as it can be argued that consultants may have a vested interest to achieve departmental outcomes to secure future contract employment. This perception was supported by one consultant contributing to this study with her comments that

> …DGs make it very clear what outcome they're after…and if…you give them a report based on natural justice principles, they'll shake your hand and say thanks very much, but you'll never hear from them again. (Participant ID 29)

Thus, in effect, the organization has added to its formal power by bringing in other parties who, for political and financial reasons, are likely to contribute to the imbalance of power experienced by the target.

Investigation Reports

One aspect of investigations that some of the participants found to be a devastating experience was the style of report that was provided to them by departments at the end of the investigative process. After many months or years of investigation, participants were eventually provided with a substantial report, ranging from 200 to 1,000 pages, with little analysis, documenting the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of any complainant that were perceived by the participant as a method of demonizing and discrediting them. The double standards evident during investigations are demonstrated on the one hand, with the concern and support shown to the complainants, regardless of the validity of their complaints, while on the other hand, the feelings of targets arising from false accusations, one-sided reports, investigations, suspensions, and psychological assaults are seemingly of much less concern. This blatant imbalance is reflected in one participant's comments (Participant ID 96) made by way of complaint to the department that the report from the investigator was "biased and inaccurate and flawed" and that "while all other interviews were included, the views of anyone who supported me were disregarded."

Any refusal to include any supportive statements and supplied evidence on behalf of the accused person has a devastating impact. The denial of justice is particularly threatening because targets seem to be singled out for unfair treatment and because they are unable to influence the outcome no matter what they do. Investigation reports were invariably described as devastating, and in some cases, participants described that they were "pushed to the brink of suicide" (Participant ID 184). For example, after receiving the investigator's report, one participant made the following comments:

> I am still having days that are ok and days that are very bad. I had a very bad day yesterday; crying all day. When I have very bad days I think of things I shouldn't—if you know what I mean. I think I am still in shock about not only the report but the entire matter. (Participant ID 199)

This study also reveals that consultants are not morally or legally accountable to either the employing department or to their professional bodies for the integrity of their investigations. For example, in this study, participants claimed that consultants were appointed to gather complaints against them using methods that were psychologically damaging to them. This included lengthy investigations based on flawed processes that denied them justice. In addition, allegations made were most often based on the perceptions and feelings of the complainants rather than upon substance or tangible incidents. For example, sworn affidavits and witness statements supporting those accused were dismissed, while the perceptions and feelings of the complainants were paramount to investigators.

Discussion and Recommendations

Together, the above findings replicate yet extend prior work on the phases of mobbing as depicted in Figure 1. This section briefly outlines the key findings and associated recommendations and also comments on strengths and limitations of the research and makes recommendations for future research. The five phases of mobbing, previously identified in the research and substantiated within the current findings, communicate that unresolved conflict is the key to the mobbing process, which moves through progressively negative stages to expulsion from the organization. Participants indicated that they were disappointed by a disconnect between ideal organizational processes of fairness and due process and their actual experiences. As participants moved through the stages of the mobbing process and experienced many difficulties, such as the lengthy investigations and sense of exclusion, they felt a rapidly growing imbalance of power away from themselves, including an overwhelming experience of the formal power of the organization. While guidelines detailing principles of natural justice and due process had been developed, there tended to be a serious mismatch with public sector practice in their experience, and support systems for targeted workers tended to act on behalf of the employer to the detriment of the employee, as the power of the organization prevailed. The costs to the individual and the organization are clearly large.

Importantly, this study contributes understanding of the sixth stage of mobbing, essentially a postexpulsion phase, which is revealed through the attempts of individuals to improve their emotional and financial health through various support processes. As such, participants seemingly gained some relief from their distress, and ultimately, through insights, actions, and support processes, many were able to move on with their lives in a satisfactory manner after a length of time (Shallcross, Ramsay, & Barker, 2008). In achieving positive outcomes, this study suggests that survival of mobbing requires those targeted to take risks and to exercise their agency in the pursuit of problem-solving options (Coenen & Khonraad, 2003). Therefore, a recommendation is that targets gain access to appropriate informational, practical, and emotional support, preferably at an early stage.

Individual acts of agency include lodging grievances, pursuing workers compensation claims, and seeking assistance from medical, health, and legal professionals. The media was also contacted on occasion to progress the achievement of outcomes. The present research indicated an increased awareness of the problem as measured by the number of visits to the workplace mobbing Web site and increasing requests for information and assistance. Outcomes were further achieved with the publication of information through the electronic and print media and debate, for example, in the Western Australian Parliament *(Royal commissions (powers) Amendment Bill 2004)*, calling for organizational change to prevent workplace mobbing. Some other outcomes achieved at the public sector government department level included revised guidelines for compulsory ill-health retirement, revised guidelines for carrying out investigations, and the inclusion of mobbing-type behaviors in workplace harassment guidelines, for

example identifying the spreading of unfounded rumors and gossip. However, real progress would relate to improved organizational functioning and processes that are essential to the prevention of workplace mobbing, an area recommended for future research.

As discussed above, the severe, negative outcomes reported by participants indicate the importance of avoiding the onset of the mobbing process, which begins with unresolved conflict, a primary consideration in the following recommendations. In terms of prevention, there are several important organizational processes that need to be considered. These may be broadly grouped into perspectives around the job and wider organizational processes. First, at the level of the individual and their job, the importance of several core characteristics (Job Characteristics Model: Hackman & Oldham, 1976) have been identified as quite robust. These include skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback, which link to meaningfulness, sense of responsibility, and knowledge of results, which in turn impact motivation, performance, satisfaction, and low absenteeism. Of these features, the experienced meaningfulness of work is a particularly strong feature in rewarding jobs (Johns, 2010). Therefore, jobs need to be carefully reviewed in terms of these characteristics, the skills and roles of organizational participants, and the potentially changing environment, all of which need to be considered in openly participative ways (Oldham & Hackman, 2010). Further, as Notelaers, De Witte, and Einarsen (2010) found, role ambiguity (which involves unclear tasks or responsibilities), job insecurity, changes in the job, and the receipt of insufficient task-related feedback are significant predictors of stress, conflict, and workplace bullying.

Especially with the growth of teamwork in organizations, social and communicative dimensions, such as social support, feedback from others, and task interdependence, have been demonstrated as essential in creating effective work environments (see meta-analysis by Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). Within team contexts, effective goal-setting and leadership skills have been associated with reduced levels of stress and bullying in team contexts (Ayoko & Callan, 2010). Thus, bullying tends to thrive where employees perceive their jobs to be unclear and open to conflict and strain (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Moreover, task conflict has been found to quite often precede relationship conflict (Gamero, Gonzalez-Roma, & Peiro, 2008), which is especially difficult to restore. Therefore, the design of jobs and the use of effective communication and leadership skills (Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2011) are important in the prevention or at least positive management of initial task conflict (and the ultimate avoidance of any need for retaliatory behaviors) that can lead to the unresolved conflict involved in the precipitation of mobbing processes.

Additionally, explicit, formal organizational processes, and procedures that encompass fair practices, are vital to demonstrate to organizational members that there is an understanding of the complexities involved and the potential for a fair and systematic approach to issues. However, consistent with other studies (e.g., D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010), targets have expressed disappointment with formal processes once they try to access them. Indeed, informal measures, such as support from colleagues, have been identified by targets as most helpful in their situation (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010). Therefore, a work environment that involves a positive culture of proactive problem-solving and interpersonal norms (Ramsay et al., 2011) and sound leadership (Ayoko & Callan, 2010) appears to be very important, in association with formal policies (e.g., an antibullying policy), awareness training in relation to responsibilities and obligations of employers and employees, and a system for complaints (McCarthy & Mayhew, 2004; Shallcross, Ramsay et al. 2008). Thus, a combination of informal and formal processes may help to reduce the likelihood of the commencing of mobbing processes and give the ability to intervene in early stages of conflict. However, further research that focuses on longitudinal data is needed to more fully understand the value of written policies and their association with other preventive and management measures (Salin, 2008).

A strength of this study is that it gained rich details of participants' experiences, as well as access to additional sources of substantiating information such as relevant legal documents, court transcripts, and correspondence from organizations to targets. Participants in this study self-identified as targets of

mobbing and were willing to share their experiences. Consistent with other studies (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), very considerable impacts on individuals' lives and careers were shown. While this study has the limitation of using retrospective memories, which meant that aspects of the context, including the perspectives of colleagues, were not available, inferences may be drawn. In essence, some organizations can clearly become quite negative, to the detriment of at least some employees and to the functioning of the organization itself. Therefore, prevention measures need to be considered and indeed researched further.

Conclusion

The research study has examined the important phenomenon of workplace mobbing processes. Findings indicate that the unresolved conflict can readily escalate on the basis of a number of processes, including lengthy investigations and various methods of escalating conflict. These processes also allowed the diminution of power on the part of the target and the corresponding advancement of power on the part of the organization, including through the deliberate addition of outside parties to supplement their power base. While there is a great need for targets to receive support, several recommendations for interventions that may prevent the onset of mobbing processes were proposed, with particular emphasis on developing well-designed jobs, effective communication skills, and an organizational culture based on a fair set of formal and informal processes and procedures. The article has made a particular contribution to the understanding of workplace mobbing processes, especially from the perspective of targets, and the complexities of unresolved conflict and use of power in organizations.

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