

UNEASE IN ORGANIZATIONS: A STUDY AMONG USERS OF AN ANTI-MOBING WINDOW

ROBERTA MAERAN
MARCO MARCATI
UNIVERSITY OF PADOVA

MASSIMO DE FELICE
FEDERATION OF ITALIAN TRADE UNIONS IN VENEZIA MESTRE

This study analyzes mobbing, a particularly relevant phenomenon nowadays, as the attention given by media shows. The research involved the users of a trade union's anti-mobbing window set up in an Italian town in 2006, with the aim to provide assistance and support to the workers seeking help. After an examination of the literature, the models, causes, and effects of mobbing on the individuals, their families, and the organization, we presented the intervention methodology implemented at the window. The intervention envisaged an initial interview, administering the Leyman Inventory of Psychological Terror (LIPT; Leymann, 1990) adapted by Ege (2002; LIPT Ege), and determining the professional harm that mobbing causes. A qualitative and quantitative analysis provided a snapshot of mobbing regarding the data collected through the LIPT on a sample of 106 workers, and identified possible areas of intervention from a psychological and legal point of view.

Key words: Mobbing; Organizations; Anti-mobbing window; Psychological terror; Double mobbing.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Roberta Maeran, Department FISPPA – Section of Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Via Venezia 14, 35131 Padova (PD), Italy. Email: roberta.maeran@unipd.it

The phenomenon of mobbing has recently become relevant in different research fields, attracting the attention of many investigators and experts and of the media as well. Research previously conducted to register how and how often seven national and local newspapers discussed the phenomenon, revealed knots in the interpretations and an abiding shortage in definitions (Maeran & Bavarone, 2007).¹

A more accurate review of the phenomenon was the subject of services covered by the national news and the economic pages of some newspapers.² These news reports presented real cases of mobbing victims in various work contexts (from public to private), placing importance on the experiences of unease caused and their impact on a personal, family, and professional level. Media's recent attention to mobbing underlines how the phenomenon has spread to various organizational contexts, allowing a broader public to understand this insidious form of organizational discomfort. This treatment, however, does not highlight that mobbing is mainly an organizational problem and that it concerns not only the people involved. According to Leymann (1996), mobbing is not to be intended as a disorder of interpersonal relationships, rather it has to be considered in the larger system of organizational factors. That said, one's workplace, living

together, can turn into a relational hell in a particularly significant sphere of human existence (Dejours, 1998; Williams, 2001; Zamperini & Menegatto, 2013).

The spreading of organizational models, in which the ability to win the competition between individuals is considered a value and a management style, generates a working condition that is increasingly marked by a limited sense of belonging; the latter is inevitably reflected in the organizational climate, interpersonal relationships and, possibly, individual and group performances. In these contexts, workers are not only deprived of their control over their workplace, but also of the chance to respond properly to the demands of everyday social life. An organization that forces teamwork without favoring participation and trust, instead encouraging internal competition with benefits and rewards, can be considered a context in which mobbing may arise (Zapf & Kulla, 1996). From these premises and the analyses of the main models and definitions of mobbing, this study aims to investigate episodes of unease and organizational discomfort through the anti-mobbing window activities set up by a trade union in a town in Northern Italy in 2006.

MOBBING: SOME DEFINITIONS

A definition, among those given for mobbing, is by Leymann (1996), mobbing or psychological terror on the workplace consists of a hostile and not ethical communication carried out consistently by one or more individuals usually against a single individual, who, being forced into that position by continuous harassing actions ends up being defenceless and unable to get any help. These actions occur with a standard high frequency and endure for a long time. The high frequency and the duration of a hostile behaviour cause serious psychological, psychosomatic and social problems (pp. 168).

According to Ege (2001),

mobbing is a war on the job in which, through psychological, physical and/or moral violence, one or more victims are forced to fulfil the will of one or more attackers. This violence is expressed through frequent and persisting attacks that are intended to harm the victim's health, communication channels, information flows, reputation and/or professionalism. The psycho-physical consequences of such an aggressive behavior are unavoidable for the one being mobbed (p. 33).

Analyzing the Italian situation, with the specific aim of better defining mobbing events, Ege (2002) developed a model consisting of six stages that are logically related to one another: "condition zero" or generalized conflict; Stage 1: targeted conflict; Stage 2: mobbing start; Stage 3: first psychosomatic symptoms; Stage 4: management errors and abuse; Stage 5: serious worsening of mental and physical health of the victim; Stage 6: exclusion from the labor market. Mobbing is defined as an "organizational virus" for its ability to create vicious circles within the organization, poisoning the climate and work relations, and contributing to lower performance; it can also produce new cases of mobbing and generate other unfair actions (Giorgi & Majer, 2009; Spector & Fox, 2010). Beyond the motivations that can push individuals to harass a colleague or an employee (fear of losing their position, mutual intolerance, envy, career associated anxiety, sexual overture), the climate that dominates in the workplace and the quality of relationships are essential aspects (Arthur, 2011; Caiozzo & Vaccani, 2010; Duffy & Sperry, 2012). The cultural medium for mobbing is almost always a workplace where: a) there is no clear set of rules, on the

contrary changing and unpredictable standards of behavior apply; b) the rules are not complied with or compliance is expected for some but not for others; c) there are highly unsatisfactory work situations for which personal conflicts degenerate until up to the point of a lack of respect for people's right to their own dignity (Oliverio Ferraris & Oliverio, 2009). According to Leymann (1996), mobbing arises in organizations that do not know how to achieve a rational structure and do not ensure their employees' positive social relationships.

An organization is dysfunctional when conflicts erupt easily and their destructive force is not softened by any cushion. When conflicts are poorly managed, they steer toward courses of intensified violence and the psychological pressure that weighs on all workers can lead to identifying innocent victims (Verdarelli, 2013). The aspect of legitimizing violence was studied by Einarsen (2000): mobbing spreads more easily if tolerating harassment of any kind is part of the organizational culture. By not punishing violence, the organization is, in fact, legitimizing it, not sanctioning it, authorizing anyone to practice it, an extremely negative signal that can be picked up by anyone capable of reading it (Verdarelli, 2013). By not perceiving the risk of being condemned and punished, the attacker perpetrates negative actions more freely, while the victim may face persecution (Giorgi & Majer, 2009; Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). The "targeted ones" inevitably conclude that the mobbers do not value their relationship with them. Otherwise, they would not be systematically tortured. So, jointly to the feelings of fear and humiliation that accompany these victims, the perception of being rejected is also usually manifested (Zamperini & Menegatto, 2015).

According to Depolo (2003), the organizational climate (team size, communication, leadership, and freedom) has a substantial connection with the existence of episodes of mobbing. In other studies, some aspects in the job design, such as conflicts and role ambiguity, were found to have a direct effect on the perception of mobbing (Notelaers, Einarsen, Vermunt, & De Witte, 2005). As for conflicts, Tessarolo (2007) argues that possessing a "quarrel culture" does not mean developing new ways to react to conflict, rather picturing it better. Making it clear would allow us to manage it without ideologies, de-moving and facing it properly. The variables that are prerequisites for mobbing would be wiped out.

Mobbing is not a passing and temporary hostile situation or a short period of crisis, rather a long and painful experience that can last years, inevitably affecting the immediate family of the victim (Favretto, 2005). Since the family's stamina tends to run out (Ege, 2001), it gets tired, worn out by the hardship and suffering of the mobbing victim. When the family reaches saturation point and a crisis must be faced, the family ceases, more or less consciously and suddenly, to provide support to the victim, now seen mostly as a threat to the family balance and harmony. This may determine double mobbing (Favretto, 2004).

The consequences a case of mobbing can have on a personal level are somehow difficult to define. Given the clinical profile a victim may present, there is a variety of different symptoms and consequences on a personal level: anxiety problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, adjustment disorders, psycho-physiological balance disorders, behavioral disorders, and social balance disorders (De Carlo, Falco, & Capozza, 2013).

Mobbing, especially when perpetrated for a prolonged period of time, may also imply learnt helplessness, a condition that occurs when the subject is protractedly exposed to a stressful situation from which there is no way out (Alloy, Kelly, Mineka, & Clements, 1990). Following this line, Scott and Stradling (1994) proposed an additional diagnosis, Prolonged Duress Stress Disorder (PDSD), which could be considered for the symptoms some individuals exposed to

stress manifest, caused by one or more stressors of a relatively lower intensity in comparison to typical traumatic events.

From occupational stress and before culminating into mobbing, one can experience a condition of *straining*, that is, a type of forced stress, superior to that related to the nature of work and intentionally directed against a victim or group of victims in a discriminatory manner, so as to cause a permanent worsening in their work life, even before deteriorating their physical and mental condition (Gullotta, 2007). Typical straining actions are often the same as mobbing, yet without a strong harassing or vexatious content, rather they are aimed at establishing disparities in the workplace by means of systematic isolation, change of duties (resorting, in particular, to assigning meaningless or irrelevant tasks), demotion, confinement in remote work stations, removal of the working tools (Tronati, 2008).

In particular, Tronati (2011) argues that the problem must be tackled on a collective and trade union base and not alone, avoiding resignation. On the contrary, the victim must not feel guilty, remain passive, but rather react properly to mobbing from the very beginning, preferably by contacting the union. It is also important to record and collect any single evidence of oppressive behavior chronologically and treat any associated diseases. In this direction, support services for victims of mobbing have spread within local and institutional contexts, especially since the year 2000. Their core activity is to listen and support and they represent a response to mobbing actions in the workplace. This study analyzes the experience at the anti-mobbing window of a trade union in a Northern Italian city, where the issue of psychosocial discomfort in the workplace is central to their service. The window started operating in 2006 and over the years has responded to more than 300 calls for help from workers.

THE STUDY

Method: Assessing the Damage Caused by Mobbing

Participants and Procedure

Determining a mobbing experience involves two important aspects that are essential to one another: grasping the profound meaning of human experience and representing this experience in a clear and unequivocal manner. The procedure followed by the window consists of an interview and the administration of the Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror (LIPT; Leymann, 1990), in Ege's (2002) adaptation (LIPT Ege). In this work, the responses given to LIPT Ege are analyzed.

The study involved 106 people who turned to the window between 2006 and 2015 for mobbing-related issues: 33 males (31%) and 73 females (69%); 51% were aged between 45 and 65 years, 35% between 35 and 45 years, 14% between 25 and 35 years. They were employed in the private (75%) and public sector.³

The interview was the first step for assessing the case, allowing us to grasp the profound meaning of the person's experience. Being the first form of contact, it also served the purpose of discriminating between possible situations of mobbing and other kinds of discomfort. Indeed, the interview sets up a relationship of "shared sense" that allows the person to share, even overcoming that sentiment of shame victims of harassment normally experience, not only the events that

have painfully marked their working life, but also the deep emotions underlying these events. One of the deep needs of the victims of harassment is to be heard, understood, and acknowledged. The listening part itself also allows us to grasp the profound meaning of this experience.

The next step is to compile the LIPT Ege.⁴ The LIPT, elaborated by Leymann in the early '90s, is considered the precursor of all mobbing questionnaires. From the beginning, Ege (1997) considered it inapplicable to the Italian reality and brought some translation changes, resulting in the Italian version called "modified LIPT." Since 1998, the questionnaire has undergone a number of changes and subsequent extensions, due to the various needs arising as the research on mobbing evolved. A conversation with a psychologist may follow to integrate and clarify the responses collected and to acquire the elements of the subjective perception related to the actual job story. The LIPT Ege is the most suitable tool to check the seven basic parameters for identifying mobbing and its extent: it was, in fact, specially tailored to these two objectives.

The LIPT Ege instrument consisting of 30 questions is divided into three sections.⁵ The first section concerns the framing of the subject at a personal and professional level (gender, date of birth, position within the company, sector, company type, professional qualification, annual income). The second section investigates the type of hostile action suffered (attacks on human contacts, systematic isolation, changes in work tasks, attacks on reputation, violence and threats, other hostile actions). The third section analyzes the consequences for the subject, as a result of the hostile treatment and persecution, the symptoms experienced, the impact on family life, self-confidence, and self-esteem. In the questionnaire, a specific question (number 21) covers the direct consequences on the worker's mental and physical health: the symptoms mentioned, mostly of a psychosomatic origin, are largely taken from the original LIPT (Leymann, 1990) and are systematically involved in mobbing. The additions relate mainly to sexual issues and allergic reactions and/or skin breakouts. In this third section, there is a new part in relation to the original LIPT, in which questions are developed to obtain specific information about the victim, on his/her psychological state and his/her private life. The purpose of these questions is twofold: on one hand to evaluate, if present, the extent of the individual's loss of self-esteem (his/her capacity to face new challenges, expectations for the future), on the other hand, to determine how rapidly mobbing at work has had an impact on private and family life (double mobbing). All the questions (from 22 to 30) are functional to both purposes.

Results

The answers given to the LIPT Ege were statistically processed using SPSS. In this contribution, we consider: a) the descriptive statistics related to the main questions in the three sections; b) the differences (ANOVA, *t*-test) among various subsamples referring to the total mobbing score; and c) the correlations (Pearson *r*) between the most salient items included in the tool. Results are presented and discussed referring to the three sections of LIPT Ege.

Section One

Confirming what Ege (1997) defined as an apparently typical "white collar plague" in Italy, also our sample is mostly made up of this category of workers (employees: 52.9%; execu-

tives: 4.7%; and blue-collar workers: 42.4%). The average score for mobbing⁶ in our sample was 34.29 ($SD = 20.70$), the most affected areas being industries and the administrative sector, followed by schools, healthcare organizations, and banks. We also observed some significant differences among the various departments in companies, $F(4, 97) = 4.35, p = .003$. Particularly in the “services” department, mobbing scores were higher than in other departments, as already pointed out by Ege (1997). The workers belonging to a union who turned to the anti-mobbing window were 78% of our sample; members seem to have more information and access to the service offered by the union, while we cannot assert that being a union member can constitute a critical variable for a mobbing attack. Conflicts are developed mainly in private companies (44%) and in the goods and services sector (48.1%), with a total number of employees of less than 50 people.

Section Two

The results of the second section of the questionnaire showed that 97.2% of the participants claimed to have suffered attacks against their reputation; 77.4% reported problems in human contacts and communication at work; 76.4% reported changes in work tasks, while 55.7% reported violence or threats of violence. The high percentage of attacks against one’s reputation confirms what is described in the literature (Ege, 2002).

The difficulties and obstacles related to humiliations even emerged from reports⁷: “when company memos arrive, my supervisor meets up with my colleagues to share their interpretations and I’m absolutely excluded . . .” Or as in another case “my colleagues make my workday hell, with their arrogant manners, shouting, words, insults, their way of discriminating against me in front of everyone, picking on me for anything, even something irrelevant, wearing me down . . . almost all my colleagues have no respect and consideration for what I do anymore, my decisions are constantly being criticized.”

The frequency and duration of harassing actions were required afterward. About the frequency, 46.2% reported to have suffered hostile actions on a daily basis, 36.8% almost daily, 1% weekly, 8.5% rarely, while 7.5% a few times a month. The key element of the “repetitiveness of the attacks” and the fury with which the mobber seeks to eliminate the victim are the main parameters by which an action of mobbing is described. The criterion of the frequency of attacks marks the border between mobbing and other phenomena related to organizational discomfort such as, for example, straining. About the duration, data show that in 29.2% of the cases the actions occurred over a period of one and two years, in 27.4% over a period of two and five years, while in 11.3% for more than five years. Finally, 21.7% over a period of six and 12 months and 10.4% for less than six months.

With regard to the hierarchical level, in 74.5% of cases “vertical mobbing” occurred, that is, the mobber was a person in a higher hierarchical position than the victim, and, in 48.1% of cases, the mobbers were between two and four people. The reasons for which the person believed to have suffered mobbing actions can be summarized as follows: in 66.0% of the cases, the goal was to get rid of the worker by inducing him/her to resign; in 25.5% of the cases mobbing was expressed through attacks against the person (the victim believed that the cause of hostile actions was triggered by hostility, expressed in the form of envy, jealousy, and anger) or the organization’s rules (the victim felt to have questioned some “unspoken” rules within the organization). Finally, 8.5% of the cases was attributed to issues related to injuries or illness.

Section Three

Section three concerns the consequences the person suffered as a result of hostile and harassing treatment at work. About looking for a new job after being mobbed, 62.3% of the people declared “the idea creates anxiety, fear, and concern,” while 34% answered “no one would hire me.” Following, responses such as “I would not stay too far from home” (31.1%), “I do not feel I can start all over again” (27.4%), “I do not know if I could do my best” (25.5%), are expressions of insecurity and fear of change.

Being mobbed pushes an individual to describe him/herself as “sad and depressed” (68.9%), “everything seems absurd” (47.2%), “I feel useless” (39.6%), “I have to try hard to do something” (35.8%), “I do not have much hope for the future” (34.9%), “I feel guilty” (29.2%). Specifically, for the answer “everything seems absurd” ($M = 39.23$, $SD = 23.16$) there was a significant difference, $t(89.76) = 2.34$, $p < .05$, compared to the average score of mobbing ($M = 34.29$, $SD = 0.70$). The fact that the answer to this item was linked to a higher rating can be explained in the light of the rapid change of life that mobbing inflicts on the victim, who cannot believe it is actually happening.

A second analysis shows some significant correlations between what the person thinks of him/herself and possible ways to find a new job. In detail, the following items are relevant: “I do not have much hope for the future” (Question 23) and “looking for a new job would be a disaster” (Question 22) ($r = .20$, $p < .04$). Another interesting correlation concerned the items “I am sad and depressed” (Question 23) and “I do not dedicate any time to family and/or friends anymore” (Question 28) ($r = .31$, $p = .001$), confirming that the vortex of mobbing can have an impact on the person and his/her family at the same time. As for the actions that the victim is willing to implement, 69% claimed to be likely to quit and 66% planned to start a lawsuit and press charges against the mobber.

Another worrying figure that results from the descriptive statistics is the high percentage of people who claimed to take sleeping pills (63.2%), anxiety pills (62.3%), and antidepressants (47.2%) as a result of conflicts at work: “I began not to sleep at night and to have actual nightmares in which I dreamt of being chased by my employer and my colleagues . . . the very idea of going to work made me feel very sick.” Following this situation, 79.2% reported being absent from work for a state of anxiety, 52.8% for depression, while only 18% of the respondents did not avail themselves of any sick leave.

Conflict in the workplace linked to mobbing created a number of consequences on people that were manifested through a change in some behaviors: 69% said they smoked more, or had started smoking; 52% drank more alcohol; 40% said they had become more aggressive than usual. In addition, eating disorders, such as eating more than usual (34.9%) or eating too little (29.2%), occurred. As is clear from an excerpt, “I could not digest my lunch, I was so nervous, I alternated between moments of convulsive hunger to having my stomach in a knot.”

Determining the Mobbing Score and the Ascertained Damage

Once the preliminary stage determined a typical case of mobbing based on the seven parameters, we proceeded by assessing the resulting damage. This second phase followed three

consecutive steps: a) the score for mobbing; b) the partial established damage for mobbing; c) the total permanent established damage for mobbing. Using the Ege Italian model, the work history of the subject was then examined to determine the stage of the case. After that, the partial percentage of the established damage for mobbing was calculated.

The partial damage for mobbing must be added, where feasible, to two percentage increases. The first increase relates to self-esteem, meaning the prejudice on the opinion that the individual has of him/herself and his/her skills. It also includes the sphere of expectations and mental attitudes toward the future, of great importance if compared to the possibility of outplacement. The second increase refers to the particular situation of double mobbing, that is, the negative impact of mobbing on the victim's private and family life, which is of a typically existential nature. The repercussions of work on the family emerge primarily through more frequent quarrels at home (45.3%) and the manifestation of sexual problems in married life (35.8%); 33% feel misunderstood at home, while 25.5% reported to have faced problems related to divorce/separation. Regarding conflict in the family and the search for a new job, a significant correlation between the items "I would not stay too far from home" and "Often quarrel with my family" ($r = .25, p < .02$) is found, as is clear from these answers: "Even my relations at home with my husband and my son have worsened" or "I had a tremendous psychological breakdown, I went through a very, very, very hard period of total and absolute apathy toward the world and toward everyone."

The total score is the sum of the two increases and the partial established damage for the previously calculated mobbing percentage, reaching the final percentage of the damage suffered by the subject due to mobbing. Having established the permanent total damage for mobbing, the quantification of compensation that will be relevant to the damage suffered by the subject is worked out. The result is called "damage for mobbing," which is equivalent to the economic loss resulting from the reduction of one's specific work skills, as well as any possibility of outplacement after judicial proceedings.

DISCUSSION

Mobbed workers, whatever the harassing strategy is, will mainly suffer damage from the professional point of view, whether it is damage to their image, missed promotions, demotion or an improper removal. The damage will invest, above all, their economic security and will have asset and income effects (Ege, 2002). The close dependence between the damage from mobbing and the subject-victim's professionalism causes a potential financial loss that occurs through the loss of skills acquired or acquirable. A good proportion of mobbed workers were unwillingly forced to resign, to apply for mobility or early retirement with subsequent difficulties in re-inventing themselves in their profession, to cope with forced unemployment, to enter the labor market from square one again, or to wait to be eligible for an often still distant retirement.

The relationship between work and psychological distress has been investigated by several studies that have shown that working conditions can be considered among the main variables related to mental health (Wall et al., 1997) and that mobbing mainly affects supervisors and office staff, while executives appear to be less involved in the phenomenon. In most cases, there is

“vertical mobbing,” where it is the leader or “the chief” who fills the role of the mobber toward his/her employees.

A very high percentage of the sample reveals to have experienced attacks on their reputation during the harassment. Undermining one’s credibility and reputation seems to be the most frequent and sneaky behavior for a mobber. This study shows a detailed analysis of the explanation that victims give of the attacks. For our sample, harassment primarily originates from the desire to oust the victim from the workplace by trying to get him/her to quit. According to this interpretation, mobbing would be a behavior aimed at getting a result and would not merely consist of pure hostility and aggression poured onto the victim. It is otherwise thought that hostile manifestations may be caused by recent requests for sick, maternity, and parental leave. Other reasons mentioned by the victims refer to feelings of envy, jealousy, and anger that the mobber may hold against them.

The impact on the victim may be of different degrees involving various spheres of existence. However, what seems to emerge from the results is that mobbing can destroy the personal resources that are necessary to resolve the conflict. In addition, it may be noted that the effects of mobbing are not only limited to the negative consequences on the current state of the subject, but they may also affect his/her possibilities and future choices. It results from both descriptive statistics and, above all, from the correlations estimated with the final mobbing score. The damage that is reflected on the future following harassment is comprised in the methodology prepared by Ege to assess professional and financial damage. The research also found the effects of occupational stress on family life, which mainly occur in the form of difficulties in the couple, quarrels, and misunderstandings.

Finally, this research shows how the anti-mobbing window is a type of first aid in the territory for dealing with such forms of unease making use of qualified consultation, both psychological and legal. Being able to go to a window that first allows the person to share his or her discomfort, be listened to and understood and then subsequently supported, using specific mobbing assessment tools, has proven to be a precious opportunity for workers.

Overall, mobbing is configured as a complex phenomenon in which we can trace a number of variables related to the organization, to the characteristics of the victim and the mobber, as well as the social group. Because mobbing can be triggered by a large number of variables, it should be investigated with a multidisciplinary contribution by using a precautionary approach. Failure to promptly recognize and fight the contrast of variables that trigger mobbing can result in significant consequences on the welfare of workers in organizational contexts. In conclusion, we can affirm that the LIPT, in the version updated by Ege (2002) and adapted to Italy which we used in this research, allows us to identify a series of indices expressing the unease experienced by the subject, which will enable the consultant not only to identify the mobbing in a precise manner, but also to quantify the damage it caused.

NOTES

1. Newspapers show limited interest in the topic, whereas the judicial phase, compensations, and convictions are reported the most.
2. For instance: RAI Television, TG2 News dated February 17th 2015 and national newspaper – Il Sole 24 Ore – dated June 11th 2015 reported court sentence no. 22635/2015.

3. About 70% of the people who compiled LIPT then turned to the union's legal office or to a lawyer. They did not always opt for a lawsuit.
4. LIPT Ege was published for the first time for educational and explanatory purposes in "The expert assessment of the damage of mobbing" (Ege, 2002). Although both "LIPT Ege modified" and "LIPT Ege" clearly derive from Leymann's work, they are exclusive and original questionnaires, protected by copyright and subject to the Italian copyright law (LDA No. 633/41 and subsequent modifications). The tool can only be used by psychologists who have attended a specific training course with the author in order to learn the correct scoring method.
5. Each question has a multiple choice answer; more than one answer can be given.
6. To assess a mobbing score, the following four parameters derivable from LIPT Ege need to be considered: a) the number of categories of hostile actions against the victim (C, Question 13), b) the frequency rate and/or the systematic nature with which these hostile actions have been perpetrated over time (F, Question 15), c) the chronological data concerning the duration of mobbing (D, Question 16), d) the subject's income (R, Question 7). Once these four factors C, F, D, and R have been acquired, the mobbing score can be calculated. The mobbing score is the product of the four indexes.
7. We report some excerpts from the interviews.

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