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# MOBBING IN CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS: WHEN ABUSE IS SPIRITUALIZED

## **Abstract**

Mobbing in the workplace has been the subject of intense research in the last 15 years. Little is known about if and how it manifests itself in Christian organizations. This study was conducted as an exploratory multiple-case study with the purpose of understanding how mobbing is experienced in Christian organizations and institutions. The research participants were 10 employees who told their stories. Findings show that mobbing exists in Christian organizations and that the abuse is frequently “spiritualized.” Christian leaders need to become aware of the existence of this phenomenon, as well as devise ways to prevent it.

**Keywords:** *Workplace mobbing, bullying, Christian organizations*

## **Introduction**

In the last decade, workplace mobbing or bullying (as it is referred to in European and American research respectively) has been the subject of increased interest (Carnero & Martínez, 2005; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; González & Graña, 2009; Leyman, 1996). The term refers to a specific type of psychological abuse in the workplace and is becoming increasingly common in a wide variety of organizations (Agervold, 2007; Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 2005; Yildirim & Yildirim, 2007). Mobbing should not be confused with the routine disagreements, misunderstandings, and mistakes that occur between individuals in all organizations. While disagreements occur spontaneously, without the intention of inflicting systematic harm to another person, mobbing is intentional and constitutes the systematic mistreatment of an individ-

ual, designed to cause him or her to resign (Agervold, 2007; Pastrana, 2002).

Mobbing can manifest itself in subtle forms, often difficult to detect, or in incidents as serious as homicide (Fleming & Harvey, 2002). It can be seen in situations of humiliation, intimidation, psychological torment, undue pressure, discrimination, exclusion, and manipulation (Ehrenreich, 1999). Even subtle forms of emotional harassment or abuse, which some people consider normal in the workplace, can constitute mobbing when they produce a negative effect on the employee's psychological health and ability to perform productively.

The Spanish researcher Piñuel (2001) has launched probably the most complete research project about mobbing in Spain with his "Cisneros" studies during the last 10 years. He provides the following definition of mobbing, which highlights many of its fundamental elements:

[Mobbing is] the continuous and deliberate verbal and behavioral mistreatment that workers receive from others, who deal with them with cruelty, with the purpose of causing their psychological annihilation or destruction, forcing them to leave the organization, through different procedures that are illegal, illicit, or devoid of a respectful and humane treatment which undermine the dignity of the worker.

The objective of mobbing is to intimidate, subject, reduce, suffocate, terrorize, and consume the victim, emotionally and intellectually, with the aim of eliminating the employee from the organization; or to satisfy the unquenchable need to fight, control, and destroy that the perpetrator usually presents, and who, benefitting from a particular organizational context ( i.e. reorganization, cost reduction, bureaucratization, rapid changes, etc.) manifests a series of psychopathic impulses and tendencies (p. 55, all Spanish authors have been translated from original text by Sylvia Gonzalez).

According to Piñuel's definition, to be properly defined as mobbing, the aggressor's behavior must be continual, rather than a single, isolated episode. The "intent to cause injury" is at the core of the serious implications and consequences of mobbing (Agervold, 2007). This psychological aggression may cause the employee to abandon employment or to become less efficient on the job. It destroys the employee's dignity, aiming at emotionally consuming him or her. Perhaps most significantly, mobbing allows the abuser to utilize the bureaucratic context of the organization in order to perpetrate the abuse. "Abuse of power" takes place when the abuser has the precise organizational conditions in

which to operate (Hodson, Roscigno, & Lopez, 2006). Some Christian organizations offer just such conditions. They tend to be closed systems in which people work for those they trust, but who also have the all organizational power—administrators. Where there are no mechanisms for objective and independent checks, workplace abuse is more easily possible and rationalized without employees being able to find help when the system mistreats them.

Here are some concrete situations where the phenomenon of mobbing is either clearly manifested or occurs in a more subtle or hidden way that is still abusive behavior:

- Assigning objectives or projects with deadlines that are intentionally unreasonable or impossible to finish on time
- Taking away from the employee key areas of responsibility, and instead offering uninteresting or routine tasks, or worse, no tasks at all, with the purpose of provoking discouragement that will lead the abused employee to resign
- Ignoring or excluding the employee, talking only to a third person, as if he or she were not physically present at the meeting
- Retaining information crucial for the employee's job or manipulating it so that errors will be committed in his or her work performance, leading later on to accusations of negligence or professional mistakes
- Disseminating malicious or slanderous rumors that harm the employee's reputation, image, or professionalism
- Lessening or failing to value the effort put forth by the employee, denying that a job has been well performed or being reluctant to periodically and objectively evaluate the employee's performance
- Ignoring the employee's professional successes or maliciously attributing them to other people or other factors, such as luck, randomness, or a situation that is unrelated to the performance of the employee
- Constantly criticizing the employee's performance, ideas, propositions, solutions, etc., considering them ridiculous or useless
- Severely punishing any form of personal decision or initiative in the course of performing the job and reporting it as a serious lack of compliance to the hierarchy of the organization
- Ridiculing the employee's work, ideas, or the results obtained, in front of other employees
- Encouraging other employees to participate in the above-mentioned actions through persuasion, coercion, or abuse of power

- Invading the employee's privacy, by tapping into his or her mail, email, phone, documents, closets, drawers, etc., or in any other malicious manner obtaining key elements of the employee's work. (Piñuel, 2001)

Experts on the subject of mobbing show that any abusive behavior that is expressed in non-verbal cues, words, behavior, or attitudes which are systematically repeated, destroying the mental dignity of a person, and thus, jeopardizing employment or degrading the organizational climate, constitutes mobbing (Hirigoyen, 2001). Yildirim and Yildirim, (2007) who conducted a study of mobbing with 505 nurses in healthcare facilities in Turkey, posit that “psychological abuse has become more widespread because of legal regulations... against physical violence” (p. 1445). As governments and agencies tighten legal regulations to combat physical violence, more subtle forms of mobbing are occurring (Einarsen, 2000; Leymann, 1990).

While we know today what constitutes mobbing, researchers indicate that what is now needed is more qualitative studies that analyze the possible causes and consequences of workplace mobbing (Agervold, 2007). This is especially true for Christian organizations. At this time, the authors have been unable to find empirical studies of mobbing in Christian organizations. Thus, this article is an exploratory study into the ways in which mobbing is manifested in religious contexts, particularly in Christian organizations. It includes specific stories illustrating the ways in which abuse is present in these institutions.

## **Mobbing in Religious Organizations**

Mobbing is often dependent on situations of power. Employees are often powerless in situations where their paycheck is dependent on the superiors paying their salary. Power and its use are not a static phenomenon (Hodson, Roscigno, & Lopez, 2006). In organizations, power generally rotates among different people who, for various purposes, transition between leadership of different groups. Those with less power in an organization are more vulnerable and prone to live through situations of harassment and mobbing, because of their precarious situation (p. 385).

While one might think that churches and religious entities organized with the purpose of disseminating ethical values and principles based on the Bible would be exempt from mistreating employees, no human enterprise is free of workplace harassment—not even organizations that by definition and vocation should manifest more ethical behaviors.

Because of the values Christians are supposed to hold, mobbing in Christian denominations and organizations tends to come as a shock to employees and has the potential to create even greater devastation for the targeted individual.

Since employment is often entwined with spiritual values, employers have the added possibility to maliciously use spirituality as a tool with which to abuse targeted individuals. Employees may be made to feel that they must endure the abuse in order to be “good Christians” and may be reluctant to seek legal advice. The complex feelings Christian employees have toward their personal mission and their employers can create an ideal situation for mobbing to thrive. Spiritual reasons are given to justify mistreatment—and workers often suffer severe loss of self-esteem as a result of their failure to live up to unfair expectations created with the intentions of harm. At this point, the abuse can be said to be “spiritualized.”

### *Spiritualizing Mobbing*

In a Christian workplace, mobbing may become “spiritualized” when illicit behaviors are rationalized by the superior objective of fulfilling the mission of the institution. As a result employees may face internal tensions producing psychological effects that are more pronounced than those suffered by employees in other kinds of organizations. The employing organization is further able to use the employee’s faith as a tool for abuse, quoting Bible texts that encourage him or her to be compliant or submissive. The following are examples of the kind of mobbing that tends to take place in Christian organizations.

#### **Biblical Concepts Used to Exclude**

Often, abusers in Christian organizations will quote religious or biblical concepts—such as being “called” to a specific line of work—to convince the employee that he or she is not fit for a particular job. Implied, of course, is that the employer is the sole barometer used to measure the individual’s talents and abilities and that the employee should defer to this superior judgment.

#### **Typcasting an Individual to Restrict Growth**

Individuals that manifest abusive behavior in Christian organizations may decide that a particular employee does not have the right profile for

a specific position, even though this has never been previously discussed as an issue. The individual's unsuitability is communicated clearly, loudly and consistently; however, no opportunity is given to make necessary changes.

### **Punishing Individuals**

Abusive superiors may assign tasks that are outside the employee's capabilities, with the intent of discouraging or degrading them in their own eyes or in front of their peers. The sole purpose is to put pressure on the individual to resign. A pastor who is not "productive enough," for instance, might be sent to sell religious publications or to teach school, without having the skills or background for either task. It is common to hear pastors talk of being "punished" in reference to their work as chaplains, teachers or colporteurs. They perceive such assignments as a demotion caused by a disciplinary action.

### **Demotion or Salary Reduction**

Abusive employers may try to pressure individuals to resign by lowering the employee's salary or changing his or her position in an attempt to create discouragement.

### **Biased Information**

Individuals that engage in abusive behaviors will sometimes provide biased information regarding an employee's productivity in an administrative meeting. As a result, decisions about the future of the employee will be made, knowing that the employee will be negatively affected and forced to eventually resign.

### **Withholding Recognition**

Abusers will refuse to recognize the work done by an employee, emphasizing only mistakes made and claiming that recognition for a job well done could cause the employee to become arrogant and fall into the "great sin" of pride. Lack of recognition tends to turn into harassment over time.

### *Hiding Mobbing Behind a Christian Façade*

The recognition of mobbing is complicated by the fact that Christian organizations, like any other organization, have to deal with unproduc-

tive employees or human weakness. Addressing these problems, however, needs to be done without resorting to mobbing tactics.

Even when employees in Christian organizations may realize that they are being mistreated, they are often reluctant to take legal action against their employers because they have been taught that Christians should not air their differences in justice halls (cf. 1 Cor. 6:1-8). When religious employers take advantage of this interpretation and use it as a harassment tool, implying or outright stating that anyone who takes another Christian to trial should not be forgiven, they create an atmosphere favorable to mobbing, as it removes social support from the abused individual.

The basic element present in mobbing is “lack of respect toward another person” (Pastrana, 2002). The psychological consequences of this disrespect are serious for the individual, causing depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, burnout syndrome and career abandonment. Leyman and Gustafsson (1996) point out that the psychological effects of mobbing are similar to those experienced by people with post-traumatic stress syndrome.

While mobbing is clearly unethical behavior for any human being, for Christians who have a view of individuals as specially created and loved by God, it is even more unacceptable. Regardless of the importance of its mission, a Christian institution cannot put aside the rights and dignities of the individuals it employs in the service of that mission. To do so is ultimately un-Christian—and yet, there is ample anecdotal evidence that mobbing happens all too frequently within Christian organizations.

## **Case Studies**

This study is an attempt to explore the phenomenon of mobbing in Christian organizations. A purposeful sample of 18 people from four different countries was developed, based on reports that they had encountered situations of mobbing in their Christian workplaces. Individuals were contacted by phone, email, or in person. Four of the 18 declined to participate for personal reasons or fear of the consequences if their story was mentioned, in spite of confidentiality assurances on the part of the authors. One of the key reasons that the majority shared their stories is the fact that this research study had the purpose of seeking to understand this phenomenon in order to take steps towards possible solutions.

After listening to their stories, three participants were eliminated because their stories contained other elements that could contaminate the evidence, such as personal, family, or health problems. In fact, one of the participants was eliminated because of a strong manifestation of bitterness against the Christian organization that employed her. Based on Piñuel and Oñate (2006), we determined a set of behaviors that would indicate the presence of mobbing. The interviews were analyzed for the presence of these mobbing behaviors. Two more participants were eliminated at this stage because the mobbing behaviors they talked about were only present in weaker ways. One additional participant was added at the end of the study on the recommendation of one of the people interviewed. His story revealed strong characteristics of mobbing behavior in his workplace.

Thus the purposeful sample consisted of 10 participants, from three different countries, and different Christian organizational contexts. The authors made sure that all the people interviewed were Christians, that they worked or had worked for Christian institutions, and that they had a positive attitude towards their church. As far as the authors know, all of the participants remain firm in their Christian faith.

The stories that follow are based on the subjective account of the victims of mobbing. It is true that while a behavior that could be perceived as abusive was in reality a rational action on the part of a supervisor or an administrator, in practice it is not always possible to determine whether or not mobbing has taken place. How did we decide whether a person was being subjected to mobbing? After we had collected the stories, we carefully analyzed them for the presence of mobbing factors. This is not an easy process. Researchers struggle with this issue. They recognize that there may be some degree of misconception on the part of the victim, yet it is these “negative social acts that are deliberately directed against a person with the intent of injuring him [or her that] may thus form the basis for registering whether a person is being subjected to bullying” (Agervold, 2007, p. 163). Salin (2003) and Einarsen (2000) underline that any attempt to measure mobbing must take into account the victim’s perception that these acts are deliberate and intentional.

The following true stories, based on both interviews and situations observed by the authors, give some idea of the scope of this problem. All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality. There are no

details provided that will allow the reader to identify people, organizations, or countries.

### *Demotion Without Explanation*

One of the most pervasive forms of mobbing is changing an employee's job description, duties, or even salary, without explanation or consultation. Samuel, a young seminary graduate, had been working as a chaplain in an educational institution. When he returned from a vacation, he discovered that he had been transferred to another institution and his salary had been reduced by fifty percent. In addition, he had been assigned new extra duties that were impossible to fulfill as part of his already excessive workload. When he inquired as to the reason for those changes, and to see if he had done something wrong, his superior informed him that he had no right to ask, and that the fact he was questioning the decision showed that he was unqualified to be an employee of the organization. Samuel was also told repeatedly that the best thing he could do was to resign. Finally, he did. Afterward, he discovered that his previous job had been assigned to a friend of the administrator, and that this person was paid the salary Samuel had previously enjoyed. The abusive treatment Samuel received caused him to suffer from insomnia and depression, requiring specialist medical treatment.

### *Refusal to Grant Medical Leave*

Mobbing can be seen in an employer's refusal to make reasonable accommodation toward an employee's personal needs, instead putting pressure on the person to comply with unreasonable demands or risk losing their job. Maggie, a specialized health worker in a Christian medical institution, took leave from work to take her seriously ill daughter to another city for treatment. When she returned, her boss gave her a stern lecture, saying, "Due to the work and the mission of this institution, you should not take any other leave of absence." When she tried to explain that she was dealing with an emergency, he shrugged his shoulders and refused to listen. Three months later, Maggie became sick with pneumonia. When she approached her boss to ask for a medical leave of absence, he pointed to a pile of papers and said, "Do you know what I have here? Résumés. If you do not show up for work, even if you are sick, another person is going to occupy your position." Maggie felt she had no choice but to continue working while sick. She currently feels

that she has lost something very important in her life: the trust that she had for an institution that has failed her.

### *Creating an Environment of Failure*

When an individual is targeted for abuse, for whatever reason, his work performance typically suffers, his motivation is impaired, and often depression sets in. The employer is then able to use the lackluster performance as further evidence that the employee is of no value. Robert, a pastor, looks older than he is, and has aged especially during the last year in which he reports that “it feels like I’ve aged a decade.” Considered one of the most successful pastors in his district, Robert’s systematic harassment began when he disagreed with an administrator on a pastoral strategy being used in his area. First, he was transferred by his denomination to another area without explanation. There were no church schools for his children, and his wife had to leave her job at a time when it was difficult to find another one. In addition, Robert was assigned impossible goals seemingly designed to demoralize him. One administrator told him, “In God’s work there is no place for insubordinate people who do not do what they are told to do.”

While Robert has not visited the doctor, he displays the symptoms of a person suffering from depression and deep emotional anguish. While still employed, he no longer talks or expresses his opinions; he does not propose new plans. For all practical purposes, he is invisible. Feeling that at any given time he might be fired, his work—which previously had been highly successful—has become mediocre, giving his employers even more reason to abuse him.

### *Destroying Self-Esteem*

One of the collateral effects of mobbing is the harming of an individual’s self-esteem to the point that the person becomes convinced that the employer is right and that he or she is of no value. George, an enthusiastic young man, full of energy and dreams, discovered that he was not provided with a fair salary in his workplace. Furthermore, he was assigned tasks inadequate to his level of ability. Consistently, he heard the organization motto: “Here, the one that survives is the one that remains in the job.” The organization had a clear culture of weeding out anyone unwilling to put up with mistreatment. Co-workers who had been through the same circumstances would say to him, “Well, it’s a matter of two or three years.

When they see you are submissive, everything will change.” His workplace friends encouraged him to say yes to everything and to never disagree with anything. He finally broke down and left the job.

Now George is convinced that if he had been sufficiently humble, he would have accepted the situation. Like many employees in church settings, he does not understand the psychological damage he endured and constantly spiritualizes his sufferings, blaming himself for failing to be good enough.

### *Threat to the System*

In mobbing, harassed workers often represent a threat to the system (Piñuel & Oñate, 2003). Thomas, a Christian teacher, dreamed not only of teaching his specialized courses, but also of sharing his faith with others. Unfortunately, the principal was extremely demanding and constantly insisted that Thomas and other teachers remain at the school after hours. After a hard day, dealing with children and teenagers, Thomas was required to visit parents and give Bible studies. Leaving home at 6:00 AM and returning at 11:00 PM on a fairly consistent basis took a toll on his family life, and left his wife and children resenting his job. He rarely saw his own children except for a few brief moments during the weekend. Even on his days off, he was regularly required to do assigned tasks at the school. The message from the principal was always the same: “God and his work are first. Everything else is second, including the family.”

Hearing the principal speak with so much conviction made Thomas feel guilty, but even so, he gradually gathered the courage to start opposing the system. As a result of this opposition, the principal gave an order that no one should interact with Thomas, and a negative report was sent to the organization’s headquarters. During faculty and staff meetings, Thomas would raise his hand to say something, but was never given the chance to talk. His colleagues, fearful of losing their jobs, avoided him, a marker of mobbing. The abuser makes it clear that there could be a loss of job, producing great emotional instability in the employee (Salin, 2003). When Thomas finally decided to resign, the principal said to him: “It is for the best. You do not fit in this school.”

### *Harassed for Showing Weakness*

Individuals often experience mobbing as a result of demonstrating some

weakness that enables abusers to attack them. Alex, normally a likable, agreeable person, began to suffer deep depression, resulting in psychiatric treatment and psychotherapy. While doctors are not sure what caused his depression, they suspected an accumulation of factors such as stress, an underlying medical problem, a distressing feud with his parents and the consequences of burnout from intense emotional situations he faced in his last pastoral district. The accumulation of all these situations left him emotionally destroyed. Most devastating, however, was the final conversation he had with his supervisor, who gave him a one-month leave of absence and bluntly told him, “You are not fit to be a pastor. A religious leader cannot be depressed. What is happening to you shows that you are not capable of holding this position. Either you improve or you leave your job in the next few weeks.” Most distressing for Alex was the fact that all the good years in which he had worked with energy and enthusiasm, never having a problem, were forgotten entirely. Alex now asks himself, “Where are the congratulatory words that I kept hearing with regard to my work before I got sick?” His wife is certain that Alex’s sickness has been exacerbated by the attitude of his former boss and the way he was treated once he became ill.

### *No Independent Voice*

Research at a Mexican university in 2003 showed that one of the prevalent manifestations of mobbing in an educational setting is characterized by what Leymann (cited in Gonzalez & Rodriguez, 2003) identified as imposition of the authority of the abuser on what to do and what to say, and the consequences to the victim of the abuse if he/she persists in expressing his or her own opinions or ideas (Acosta, Pando, Aranda, & Aldrete, 2005).

Brenda worked for a Christian higher education institution and, over the years, was promoted to different positions. Her problems began with her most recent job assignment as director of an administrative department with thirty employees and a considerable budget to manage. She immediately realized that she was not allowed to have a voice of her own, being considered merely “a hand to execute orders from above.” Her efforts at bringing in new ideas or challenging established ideas were met first with skepticism and later with open antagonism.

Brenda learned that the only way to keep her job was to “go with the flow,” and become a “yes-person.” This resulted in a deep conflict with-

in herself as she struggled between being true to the Christian organization she served and remaining true to her own personal beliefs. Brenda decided to remain in her job until she could see the possibility of another position. Meanwhile, her influence, her work performance, and her self-esteem suffered to the point that she became a non-entity within the organization. This prompted the administration to relegate her to a lower level position, for which she is overqualified.

The unfortunate situation in all of the above cases is that those involved—both abusers and abused—have assumed that these behaviors are normal, that they are part of the cost the employee has to pay in order to have a job. Even more disturbing is the seemingly widespread acceptance in these organizations of the idea that one also has to tolerate abuse in order to be a good Christian.

## **Conclusion**

Mobbing represents a fundamental breach of the employee's right to be treated with dignity and as a relevant element in the workplace (Piñuel & Oñate, 2003). While many employees in Christian organizations are privileged to work with competent employers who exert a fair and balanced leadership, sporadic cases of abuse that do exist should alert Christian communities and religiously-oriented institutions to create structures that prevent these kinds of situations.

Nothing justifies mistreatment. The important spiritual mission of a Christian institution does not negate the need to preserve the dignity and value of the individuals who work there. When mobbing is justified in a spiritual context, it creates confusion about Christian values and what is truly important in an organization that claims to work for the glory of God. All people merit respect, consideration of individual differences, and human dignity.

Considering the severe consequences of mobbing for both the individual and the organization—and even more so for a Christian institution or organization—it is important that this issue be addressed openly. It is recommended that both qualitative and quantitative research be conducted in Christian organizations and institutions to determine the possible presence and extent of mobbing. With open information, the workplace should ideally institute mechanisms for prevention and intervention of mobbing, independent of the administration. There is also a

need for the development of theoretical models that will help explain what organizational factors influence the prevalence of mobbing in the workplace and why and how they do so, with the aim of providing a safe and healthy organizational culture where employees are treated with dignity and respect.

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