

A Step Forward: Getting to Know the Mobber/Bully at Work

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So far empirical mobbing research faces one major problem. It is extremely difficult to grasp the perpetrator. Rayner and Cooper (2003) claim that the mobber is almost invisible to mobbing researchers. We gain almost all our data regarding the perpetrators from other people and events that happen around them.

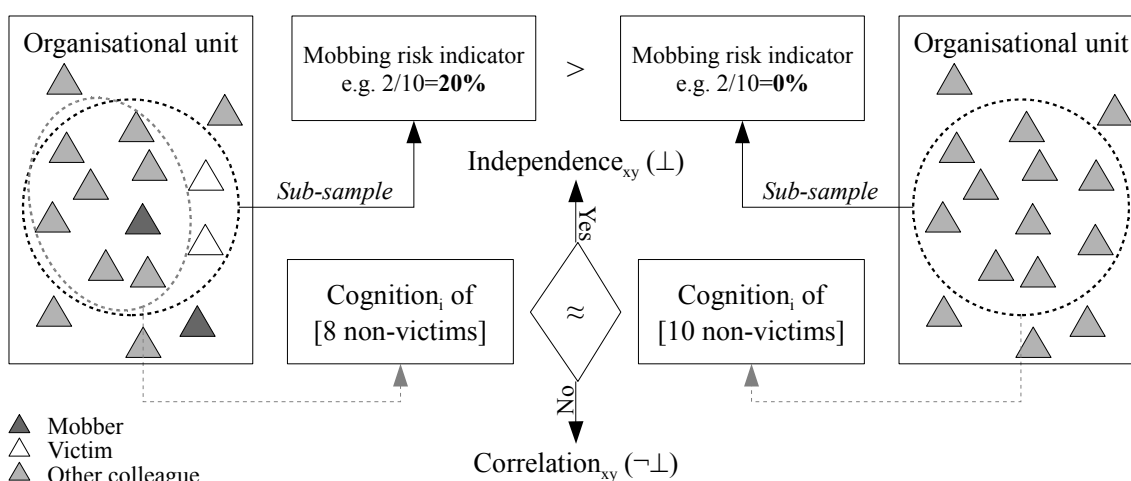


Figure 1: Method for the proof of differences between mobber's and the bystander's cognitions (e.g. attitudes or perceived work environment), by the comparison between the relative mobbing frequency in an organisational unit as mobbing risk indicator and the cognitions of non-victims (own source)

That is a very serious problem. We can assume that statements of a mobbing victim about the perpetrator are biased because of cognitive sensitisation processes¹. Additionally, respondents tend to attribute the causation of positive events internally and negative events externally (e.g. Miller & Ross, 1975). Accordingly, victims will try to ascribe the responsibility for mobbing to the perpetrators or to situational aspects.

Even relying on the responses of observers is very critical. First of all, observers have severe difficulties in providing valid information about the mobber (e.g. attitudes). Secondly, own research with 499 respondents from 57 Swedish and Austrian establishments reveals that victims and observers are most often identical ($p(\kappa) < 10^{-16}$): 59,6% of the self-declared targets reported that other colleagues have been exposed to mobbing, whereas only 11,9% of the non-victims observed mobbing.

Rayner and Cooper (2003) created a survey method for measuring bossing and the superior's attributes. Their methodology involved a two-stage approach. Data on the behaviour of superiors towards their subordinates was gathered from the subordinates themselves, in order to be most accurate. In addition, data relating to superiors (e.g. own

¹ For instance, Euler (1977) could prove that objectively identical workplace elements (e.g. noise level) are rated more negatively, if the respondents are confronted with other reasons for discontentment (e.g. high pace of work).

stress levels) was collected from the superiors directly. In order to protect confidentiality, a double-blind system was implemented using numbers for the superiors so that named superiors could not be identified with results. The subordinates' questionnaires were anonymous too and provided only the identification number of their superior.

However, such a system can only provide information on bossing. Mobbing between subordinates cannot be examined by this method. Figure 1 depicts a new method, which enables the examination of the perpetrator. This survey method is based on three premises: Mobbing is an interaction, and people of one organisational unit (e.g. work group, department or establishment) interact more often with each other than with people from other organisational units. Based on these two simple premises, we know: Any identified victim in an organisational unit increases the probability that every employee of the same organisational unit is a mobber. The third premise states that any mobbing victim is very unlikely to be a perpetrator due to a power deficit, which is part of many mobbing definitions (e.g. Björkqvist et al., 1994; Zapf, 1999; Eriksson, 2001; Salin, 2001). Thus, we can conclude that every mobbing self-declaration or observation increases the probability that any non-victim of the same organisational unit is a perpetrator.

Although we cannot identify any mobber, we can identify the risk that any non-victim is a perpetrator. The risk indicator is the ratio of victims in the department and the cluster size. For example, if there are two victims in an organisational unit with totally ten respondents, the mobbing risk indicator amounts to $2/10=20\%$ (Colleagues of the same organisational unit can be identified as colleagues by an ID-number for the organisational unit). The respective mobbing risk indicators are assigned to every member of any cluster.

We need the responses of the victims just to calculate the mobbing risk indicator. If we leave the self-declared victims aside, only »bystanders« (neither harassed nor harassing) and perpetrators are left. That gives us the chance to find out differences between mobber and bystander. The essence: If certain cognitions (e.g. attitudes) have an impact on the risk to harass others, non-victims with a higher mobbing risk indicator must be distinctly more often characterised by these cognitions than other non-victims. In other words: If there is a relationship between perpetrator's cognitions and mobbing, the mobbing risk indicator should correlate with cognitions which are typical for mobbers – a simple test.

If one regards mobbing as deviant conflict interaction, this new method has an enormous advantage. It is possible to prove conflicting interest of mobber and target. For example, the method allowed to prove that mobbers have a significantly more negative attitude towards performance than bystanders ($p(r_{xy}) < 0,005$), whilst the victim's attitude does not significantly differ from the average non-victim. The interpretation: Perpetrators who want to hang it out, must sabotage other's performance to hide their own low performance.

Similarly and in contrast to prior research (e.g. Vartia, 2003), it could be demonstrated that the perpetrator needs disposable time resources to harass others. Whereas victims more frequently than non-victims report working at a very high speed ($p(r_{xy}) < 5 \cdot 10^{-4}$), perpetrators are characterised by working at a lower speed than bystanders ($p(r_{xy}) < 0,05$).

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Christoph Seydl is a doctoral student in industrial and organisational sociology at the Johannes Kepler University Linz, Austria. From 2004 to 2005 he was guest graduate student at the Department of Social and Political Sciences at Örebro University, Sweden. He has conducted quantitative research on workplace mobbing both in Sweden and in Austria.

Note: »Bossing« is a German pseudo-anglicism for downward bullying.