

## **Workplace Mobbing/Bullying: A Deviant Conflict Redirection**

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Research on mobbing (e.g. Leymann, 1993; Rammsayer & Schmiga, 2003) often tends to single out certain aspects of the phenomenon (e.g. process, motive, selection of the victim, context or personality). A concept, which can explain all those aspects of mobbing, would be quite useful for a deeper understanding of the mobbing process. The concept of deviant conflict redirection tries it.

According to Euler (1973), structural hotspots create cognitions about specific discontentment, i.e. cognitive dissonance. When an employee utilises his own disposable behavioural scope to reduce (or eliminate) the dissonance (e.g. performance restriction), workplace conflicts can arise. The structural hotspots emerge from contradictions between behavioural expectations to the working role and interests of the role taker plus other difficulties in exercising one's role.

Euler (1973) describes two different aspects of conflict displacement:

- Consideration of all persons involved in conflicts (social-psychological variant)
- Consideration of all structural contradictions and contents of the conflict situation (sociological differentiation)

The combination of these distinctive criteria – the person confronted by the attitudes as well as actions (addressee) and the specific role content – results in four analytic forms of workplace conflict:

1. Same person and same content: Direct conflict
2. Same person and different content: Conflict redirection by content displacement
3. Different person and same content: Conflict redirection by addressee displacement
4. Different person and different content: Conflict redirection by addressee and content displacement

Direct conflicts are dependent on hierarchical equality of the interaction partner, high chances for interaction and a relatively easy influence on the conflict content. Conflict redirections can be localised, where these requirements are not met (Euler, 1973).

Festinger (1957) postulates that »the presence of dissonance gives rise to pressure to reduce or eliminate the dissonance. The strength of the pressure to reduce the dissonance is a function of the magnitude of the dissonance« (p. 18) and that the »maximum of dissonance that can possibly exist between any two elements is equal to the total resistance to change the resistant element. The magnitude of dissonance cannot exceed this amount because, at this point of maximum possible dissonance, the less resistant element would change, thus eliminating the dissonance« (p. 28).

From this perspective, the occurrence of mobbing is not a sadistic act, but rather an attempt to (re-)establish consonance. And there are two basic ways, how mobbing can serve as a mean to reduce cognitive dissonance:

- Changing one's own situation by the means of deviant acts and thereby one's cognitions about the actual state (illegalities and instrumental mobbing)
- Changing the situation of others by the means of deviant acts and thereby one's cognitions about the social reference framework (affective mobbing)

Both strategies to reduce cognitive dissonance have one aspect in common: The attempt to reduce the dissonant elements finds expression in the deviant range of options. We will call this phenomenon »instrument displacement« because the individual utilises means (instruments) which are not to be considered as common in the role-conform repertoire of the individual's conflict behaviour.

Euler (1973) described role-conform conflict development forms. Introducing, instrument displacement as the third dimension of conflict development results in four new conflict development types: The deviant conflict development forms. Here, deviance means that the role taker offends against the customary role expectations (informally or individually deviant). Analyses of mobbing cases revealed that content displacement is essential. No mobbing case without content displacement was found. An invented example for a deviant direct conflict is a worker who believes that the foreman assesses his performance bonuses too low and blackmails the foreman to get the fair bonus. If the worker, however, steals the amount of a colleague who is supposed to get too high bonuses, it is conflict redirection with addressee displacement. Both deviant strategies without content displacement cannot be classified as mobbing; they are illegalities and characterised by an immediate cause-and-effect relation (in terms of sanctionability), which is easily traceable. Therefore, these strategies are not very attractive options.

Mobbing – as an attempt to create cognitive consonance – is characterised by content displacement. The perpetrator can disguise the motives (e.g. getting rid of a more talented colleague in order to get promoted) by creating other conflicts (e.g. creating the illusion that the victim is annoying or untalented and has to be fired). Conflict redirection which involves instrument displacement is a matter of certain conditions.

First, it can be assumed that individuals preferably apply conflict behaviour within their role-conform scope. Inherited expectations about one's own role and the risk of complications – such as social rejection or dismissal – might suppress the non-conform deviant options. The individual will take the line of the least resistance. The experience or expectation that utilising conform instruments does not hold the prospect of success, however, will make an individual vulnerable to apply deviant instruments.

Secondly, the individual has to experience a high magnitude of dissonance in the cognitive relationships of his role. As a result, the situation exerts a high pressure on the individual to eliminate or reduce this imbalance. Following Festinger (1957), the magnitude of the dissonance must be high enough to abandon the restraint to use instruments beyond the individual's socially legitimate range of options. The legitimate scope itself is defined by the individual's role. For instance, a jail guard has to permission to use violence to solve certain conflicts, whereas an industrial worker must not use violence at all.

The hypotheses that mobbing is a redirected conflict was empirically confirmed. For instance, significantly more victims are found in departments, where non-victims observe conflict redirection instead of direct conflict strategies ( $p(r_{xy}) < 0,05$ ).

The concept of deviant conflict redirection can help to formulate new hypotheses for research. Probably more important: The concept can serve as helpful instrument for mobbing intervention. Complaints of targets sound often incredible so that they are ignored. The concept of deviant conflict redirection helps the management to understand the mobbing situation and, hence, to intervene in a proper way.

### **References:**

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*Note:* Instead of the term »conflict redirection«, newer texts of mine use the term »conflict detouring« or »detouring of conflicts« as translation of the German term »Konfliktumleitung«.