



## **A REVIEW OF INDIVIDUAL COPING STRATEGIES IN CASE OF WORKPLACE BULLYING EXPOSURE**

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### *Abstract*

*This theoretical study aims to review the main coping strategies employed by the exposed employees to workplace bullying phenomenon. For this aim, a number of 49 studies have been reviewed and their main results have been emphasized within this paper. The results have shown that in the majority of the cases, exposed employees employ mental and behavioral disengagement strategies in order to cope with the negative effects of workplace bullying phenomenon. The results of this present paper have important practical implication for human resources practitioners in order to implement more effective training programs aimed at improving the coping strategies of the exposed employees.*

Keywords: workplace bullying; causes; consequences; coping strategies; mental health

### **Introduction**

Over time, several phrases have been used to define the same phenomenon, namely workplace bullying.

The term harassment is used by Brodsky (1976) to describe the phenomenon through persistent behaviors of demoralizing, frustrating, and intimidating a person. The phrase scapegoat is preferred by Thylefors (1987) when it comes to capturing the component of the phenomenon through which a culprit is found for unfolding events with a negative connotation.

Leymann (1990) studies the phenomenon under the name of mobbing,

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him being the first researcher who highlights in the international literature the fact that the aggressed people reach an inferior position, a position from which they can no longer defend themselves. According to the author, this is the main feature according to which the situation of workplace bullying can be differentiated from the classic case of interpersonal conflict.

A year later, Wilson (1991) talks about the trauma at work, a phrase that hides a process of disintegration of the employee's self as a consequence of frequent confrontation with negative acts from the hierarchical superior.

Two years later, Olweus (1993) uses the term bullying for the first time. This is understood to be a repeated exposure to a series of negative behaviors that do nothing but intentionally cause discomfort to the data subject. In the same vein, Bjorkvist, Osterman, and Hjelt-Back (1994), using the phrase harassment in the workplace, highlight the negative valence of repeatedly produced workplace bullying behaviors that have a negative impact on the employee's physical and mental well-being.

Leymann (1996) defines workplace bullying as a factor of social stress, a form of social stress that has dangerous effects on members of the organization in general. Similar, Zapf and colleagues (1996b) defined workplace bullying as a factor of social stress that has subtle psychological harassment behaviors produced almost daily.

There has been research that has shown that workplace bullying is a major stressor that produces negative effects on the health and well-being of both victims and observers (Bjorkvist et al., 1994a; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Niedl, 1996; O'Moore et al., 1998a; Vartia, 2001; Zapf et al., 1996b).

In general, most definitions capture a set of common elements: workplace bullying is manifested by a number of negative behaviors that are systematically repeated over time, intentional and can be seen as techniques for manipulating the reputation of the person concerned, performance and the quality of professional life. Workplace bullying cannot be considered a behavior with negative valence that occurred accidentally or randomly at work. Only those behaviors that occur systematically, frequently (*i.e.*, frequency of weekly occurrence) and last for about six months, can be considered acts of psychological aggression.

A definition offered in recent years in the Romanian space is made by Chirilă and Constantin (2013): "*Workplace bullying describes a situation in which one or more people are perceived as being exposed, in a persistent way, to several actions negative, actions from one or more persons especially, in the*

*situation where the one who is the target of these actions cannot defend himself. These actions are negative not only for the employees themselves but also for the entire organization”.*

#### *The incidence of the phenomenon of workplace bullying*

The importance of workplace bullying was revealed by Allan (2007) who, following a survey, obtained the following results: 38% of employees included in the study report having experienced one or more types of psychological aggression behaviors, and 42 % of them reported witnessing such events.

Moreover, Allan (2007) points out that 66% of those investigated were victims of such situations, and 83% of the aggressors were in leadership positions. These results were achieved in American firms during the 2000s, when the economy was stable in the United States, when these behaviors were little accepted by employees by the fact that, most of the time, they chose to change their place for work.

Compared to the current economic situation in Romania (economic instability, high unemployment rate, lack of jobs), the situation could be much more serious compared to the United States. In the case of Romanian employees, due to the small number of alternatives on the labor market, the option of changing jobs due to exposure to psychological aggression remains an unlikely option, which is why employees are forced to accept psychological aggression manifested in organizational context, studies indicating percentages of exposure between 7%-15% among Romanian employees (Chirilă, 2012; Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2014).

The literature has promoted the idea that the prevalence of workplace bullying varies depending on organizational contexts. In his doctoral dissertation, Vartia-Vartananen (2003) investigates the reporting percentages of acts of workplace bullying from 1,037 employees of official institutions, prisons and hospitals. The author highlights a reporting percentage of psychological aggression equal to 10.1%.

This percentage is not much different from that obtained in other Finnish studies (Piirainen, Elo, Hirvonen, Kauppinen, Ketrola, Laitinen, Lindstrom, Reijula, Riala, Viluksela, & Virtanen, 2000), in Norwegian public sector studies- 8.2% (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996) or in British studies that obtain a percentage of 14% (UNISON, 1997).

A study conducted in Romania (Chirilă, 2012), on a number of 220 employees in the services and education sectors, showed a reporting percentage

equal to 15%. The reporting percentage of workplace bullying differs depending on the sector of activity.

Vartia-Vartananen (2003) obtains a percentage of 5% among employees in the health sector; also in the field of health Einarsen, Matthiesen, and Skogstad (1998), Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) and Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001) highlight reporting percentages of workplace bullying between 3% and 5%. European studies have shown that the sector with the highest risk of workplace bullying is the health sector (Austria-26.5%, Niedl, 1996; Northern Ireland-46.9%, McGuckin, Lewis, & Shevlin, 2001). By contrast, Scandinavian studies have failed to highlight the health sector as a sector with a high risk rate in terms of the prevalence of workplace bullying. The discrepancies between the reporting percentages of the phenomenon can be explained by the methodological differences existing at the level of its measurement.

Although studies have used the definition of workplace bullying to capture exposure percentages, it is possible that these definitions capture different aspects of the same phenomenon (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005), and this has led to differences in the reporting percentages of behavioral behaviors. psychological aggression manifested in the health sector. For example, some definitions emphasized the difference in power between the aggressor and the victims, while others emphasized more the frequency of these acts.

A second sector highlighted by the literature as a sector with a high risk of occurrence and manifestation of workplace bullying is the penitentiary sector. Thylefors (1987) conducted a study on the frequency with which prison employees encountered hostile behavior from superiors or colleagues and obtained a reporting percentage of 22.6%.

Vartia-Vartananen (2003) obtains a 20.1% reporting of psychological aggression among employees in Finnish prisons. Hoel and Cooper (2000), using the same methodology as Vartia-Vartananen (2003), obtained a reporting percentage of workplace bullying among prison staff equal to 16.2%. A third sector considered to be at high risk of workplace bullying is the academic sector (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Leymann, 1992a; Sutela & Lehto, 1998; Paolli & Merllie, 2001).

Regarding the incidence of workplace bullying in Romania, there are very few studies published internationally or at least nationally that have highlighted the percentages of workplace bullying according to sectors of activity (*i.e.*, education, health, army / police).

A Romanian study (Chirilă, 2012) conducted on a number of 220

employees from the field of public institutions and from the field of private companies showed a general percentage of reporting bullying equal to 15%. Two years later, a second study (Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2014) conducted on a group of 313 Romanian employees that showed a percentage of exposure to workplace bullying of 1.6%. In this last study, 46% stated that they witnessed workplace bullying towards their co-workers.

Studies conducted in the field of workplace bullying have highlighted the sectors of activity with the highest percentages of reporting the phenomenon, sectors such as health, army, prisons and services.

Regarding the importance of the size of the organization for triggering the workplace bullying, the literature (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996) promoted the idea that workplace bullying is more common in large organizations compared to small organizations. However, these hypotheses have not been validated in Finland (Piiirainen et al., 2000).

### *Triggers of workplace bullying*

Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2003) propose a general framework for studying workplace bullying that provides a holistic perspective on the phenomenon.

Workplace bullying is seen as a combination of social, economic and cultural factors (status of actors, economic situation and culturally accepted practices), specific organizational factors (leadership style, organizational climate, job characteristics), organizational practices (norms of behavior in organization, tolerance towards abusive leadership and management practices) and socio-educational factors (the social situation of the basic family, early school experiences at the level of aggression). In addition, workplace bullying is also seen as a consequence of the victim's individual reactions (emotional and behavioral).

In general, the literature highlights two categories of antecedents, organizational and individual.

The first category includes factors such as culture, organizational climate, organizational change and leadership practices.

Organizational culture can foster psychological aggression in the workplace in several ways: through a hostile organizational environment (Vartia & Hyyti, 2002), through a low level of mutual support and understanding (Zapf et al., 1996), through - an exaggerated tendency towards conformity and discipline (Hoel & Salin, 2003), through exacerbated competition between

employees (Bjorkvist et al., 1994) and through a high level of tolerance towards the manifestation of workplace bullying behaviors (Rayner, Hoel and Cooper, 2002).

At the level of organizational changes, we mention the processes of restructuring, resizing or merging due to the influence of globalization, the expansion of new organizational philosophies, all generating uncertainty at the managerial level (Cramaruc & Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015), negatively affecting the organization by preference for the adoption of authoritarian practices (Hoel & Salin, 2003).

Regarding the role of leadership practices, Dieter Zapf states that *“leadership problems cannot harass an employee (...) but one way to explain this is by defining bullying in the workplace through unresolved conflict (...) If various organizational circumstances contribute to the total number of conflicts, then the number of unresolved conflicts should also increase, leading implicitly to a greater number of cases of psychological aggression within the organization”* (Zapf, 1999, p. 72).

The second category includes factors such as childhood experiences (both in the family and in primary school) both in the development of aggressive acts and in the reception of these behaviors, the personality of the victim and the aggressor, but also the biological gender.

Longitudinal studies (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002; Salin, 2009; Hetland & Einarsen, 2008) in the literature have highlighted the link between past experiences and their effects in the present.

The results of these studies showed that people who had the role of physical aggressor in primary school maintained their position of psychological aggressor later in the workplace. In the same vein, people who were assaulted as children by their colleagues maintained their role as victims in adulthood in the context of the workplace.

Regarding the profile of the aggressor and the profile of the victim, the first seem to be extroverted people, with early experiences of unsanctioned aggression, employees visible by the nature of the position they hold (generally positions that involve decision and coordination), people from tense family and social environments. People with victim status are introverted, conscientious, young and motivated to evolve in their profession through work (Cramaruc & Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015).

Regarding the biological gender of the person, the literature does not provide conclusive data to highlight the fact that there are gender differences in

the adoption of a certain role, victim or aggressor, in the process of workplace bullying (Salin, 2003; Einarsen et al., 2003) but shows that there are gender differences in the nature of the acts of psychological aggression carried out.

Studies (Einarsen et al., 2003) have shown that males prefer acts of direct aggression (ie verbal threat, persistent irony, underestimation of colleagues) while females prefer indirect techniques of workplace bullying such as manipulating social context (gossip, rumor, jeopardizing the victim's reputation, social isolation in the context of the workplace).

#### *The individual consequences of workplace bullying*

The consequences of acts of workplace bullying on an individual level are highlighted by Duffy and Sperry (2007).

In general, victims of workplace bullying experience feelings of embarrassment, shame and helplessness because they fail to identify what is happening to them at work. Aggressed people do not perceive these acts as acts of workplace bullying and are often assessed as responsible for the situation they are going through. Moreover, individually, authors such as Elder, Fox, Gater, and Johnson (2010) have shown that victims of workplace bullying generally have low levels of self-esteem. In the same vein, Bonanno and Hymmel (2010) showed that victimization correlates significantly and positively with suicidal thoughts, lack of general hope and correlates negatively and significantly with social support received from family and friends.

Bhagwanjee, Govender, and Pening (2010) tested the correlations between workplace bullying behaviors and psychological variables such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, anger and dissociation. The authors pointed out that regardless of the role played by the person (aggressor, victim, aggressor-victim, observer), psychological aggression behaviors correlated medium and significantly with anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, anger and dissociation. These results are convergent to those obtained by Quine (2001).

Garish and Wilson (2010) test a new relationship, namely the relationship between workplace bullying and self-injury behavior. The author obtains an average, positive and significant correlation between workplace bullying and self-injury behavior, which means that victims have more frequently manifested self-injury behaviors. Moreover, studies (Quine, 2001; Fox & Spector, 1999) have shown that experiencing workplace bullying is associated with low levels of job satisfaction, compared to how the organization manages the phenomenon, with high levels of burnout, physical symptoms and negative emotions

experienced by the employee.

While workplace bullying is caused by a number of external factors, it in turn contributes negatively to both the health of the employee and the health of the organization as a whole. Among the problems registered in people who have experienced a situation of workplace bullying are alienation, unemployment, alienation and legal issues.

At the level of organizational consequences, there have been studies (Baillien & DeWitte, 2009; Fox & Spector, 1999) that have shown that there are significant correlations between workplace bullying prevalent in organizations and organizational variables such as organizational change, job insecurity, role conflict, work overload, role ambiguity, social support received from colleagues, the frequency of conflicts at work and social leadership (Vartia-Vartananen, 2003; Salin, 2003; Chirilă & Constantin, 2014).

#### *The coping strategies employed in case of workplace bullying exposure*

Studying coping strategies used in response to the phenomenon of workplace bullying is very important given that a way to deal with a stressful situation can be effective for one person and inefficient for another person (Cramaruc & Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015).

The literature states that important information can be extracted regarding the severity and longevity of existing workplace bullying behaviors within an organization only if an analysis is made on the types of coping strategies implemented by employees who hold the position of victim.

Because the organization consists of a group of people, an effective way to improve the occurrence of workplace bullying starts from the individual to the organizational level. In other words, changing people's behavioral habits changes the nature of interprofessional relationships and improves the quality of the social climate at work.

Coping strategies have been defined as “*the thoughts and actions that individuals use to change their perception of a stressful event and also to control, reduce or tolerate the stress created by that event*” (Cramaruc & Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2015).

Among other things, workplace bullying behaviors can be seen as the consequence of inefficient adaptation strategies to a number of stressors that have emerged in the context of the workplace. Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, and De Cuyper (2009) talk about two categories of inefficient adaptation:

(1) *inefficient active coping*-transforming frustrations into aggressive acts

directed at colleagues, and

(2) *inefficient passive coping*-psychological distancing from work.

Previous research in the workplace has shown that there is a large discrepancy between what employees think they would do if they became victims of workplace bullying and what they actually do when faced with this stressor at work (Olafsson & Johansdottir, 2004). Rayner (1997) showed that a much smaller percentage of victims coped with this phenomenon by directly confronting the aggressor (active coping) or by communicating the manager on the conflict situation in the company compared to people who were not victims of psychological aggression but who replied that if they were in such a situation, they would directly confront the aggressor or notify the company manager.

The same differences were found in the strategy of seeking social support. The group of people unaffected by workplace bullying stated in a much higher percentage that they would use the social support of colleagues to deal with the situation compared to people who have experienced this stress factor at work.

Zapf and Einarsen (2005) pointed out that in case of workplace bullying, active coping (coping with the situation by approaching the problem directly) worsen the situation, while passive coping strategies such as secondment, relaxation techniques are those that do not have a negative impact on the worsening situation. Moreover, the positive reinterpretation strategy proved to be the most effective coping strategy both in the short term (lower levels of psychological and physiological stress) and in the long term (the approach of this strategy did not worsen the situation) (Hyung-Park & DeFrank, 2010).

Moreover, research has shown that victims adopt as an adaptation strategy the avoidance of the aggressor by resigning from the current job. Also at the level of this strategy, the studies indicated significant differences between the group of affected persons and the group of unaffected persons. In the first group, 14-36% of resignations were registered compared to the declared percentage of unaffected persons who stated that they would resign if they experienced psychological aggression at work (a percentage of only 7%).

For the most part, it seems that victims of workplace bullying rather adopt passive strategies to deal with the phenomenon and that unaffected personnel believe that they would rather adopt active strategies in such a situation (Cramaruc & Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015).

In the workplace context, Zapf and Gross (2001) used the model of the five types of coping strategies (Rahim & Magner, 1995) in the case of an existing conflict at work. The results showed a tendency for victims to use less dominant

strategies compared to the non-victim group and to use avoidance strategies more frequently to deal with conflicts at work.

Zapf and Gross (2001) suggested that victims will cope with the phenomenon, in its early stages, by adopting active coping strategies (direct approach to the problem, solving the problem, direct approach to the aggressor) but, over time and prolonging the phenomenon in over time, victims will rather adhere to passive coping strategies (most often they will leave the company or organization in which they work).

In order to provide an even clearer picture of how victims change their adaptation strategy according to the duration of manifestation of workplace bullying behaviors, Zapf and Gross (2001) conducted in-depth interviews with victims of workplace bullying in which they applied the EVLN model to analyze the content of four coping strategies (vociferation, loyalty, neglect and situation avoidance).

According to data obtained by Zapf and Gross (2001), victims of workplace bullying begin by adopting active strategies (assertive communication techniques in direct approaching of the aggressor) but, as the manifestation of workplace bullying lasts over time, victims of this phenomenon begin to appeal more and more to passive coping strategies (passivity, avoidance of the aggressor).

Moreno-Jimenez, Rodriguez-Munoz, Pastor, Sanz-Vergel, and Garrosa (2009) were interested in testing the moderating roles of psychological detachment and revenge thoughts. The results showed that psychological detachment moderates the relationship between workplace bullying and role conflict, and between workplace bullying and strain. Moreover, thoughts of revenge moderate the relationship between workplace bullying and role conflict. The effects of role conflict on workplace bullying were more pronounced for those who had thoughts of revenge.

Psychological detachment moderates the relationship between role conflict and workplace bullying. The effects of role conflict on workplace bullying were less pronounced for those who were psychologically detached. This result indicates that psychological detachment is a successful strategy in the management of stressors (Moreno-Jimenez et al., 2009). According to Moreno-Jimenez and colleagues (2009) these results are congruent with the theory of cognition-action-stress theory (CATS; Ursin & Eriksen, 2004) which suggests that individual interpretation of stressors should be the framework by which it can be understood the effect of these factors. From this perspective, the same

stressor can produce different individual responses depending on the individual interpretation of each person.

Moreno-Jimenez and colleagues (2009) state that when an individual faces a stressor, he will try to redirect his attention to other aspects in order to diminish its effects. The results of their study stated that psychological detachment moderates the relationship between workplace bullying and strain. Those people who used psychological detachment as a strategy to adapt to the stress factor had lower levels of psychological stress.

Research on the effectiveness of coping strategies in the case of workplace bullying is useful for practitioners because they can provide information support to employees who experience this phenomenon from a victim position.

Overall, studies in the field of psychological aggression at work have shown that adaptation strategies such as positive reinterpretation of the situation, cognitive restructuring of the situation, relaxation techniques, spiritual practices, seeking social support, techniques for manipulating the professional context and more are more effective. ineffective coping strategies such as direct approach to the problem, mental and cognitive detachment from work tasks, avoiding the aggressor, neglecting the situation or denying it.

Practitioners can intervene beneficially by informing employees on effective adaptation strategies depending on the severity of psychological aggression behaviors. Moreover, they can also provide support by informing employees about the influence of environmental factors in the occurrence, manifestation and maintenance of aggression behaviors.

### **Conclusions**

The present theoretical paper aimed to present the characteristic aspects of psychological aggression in a professional context, the presentation of psychological theories that can explain this phenomenon and, last but not least, how to deal with prolonged stress.

This phenomenon is different from interpersonal conflict in that it is prolonged in time as duration of manifestation (its manifestation is felt for at least six months in the organization), has a frequency of systematic occurrence (at least weekly), involves the perception of an imbalance of power (usually the affected person feels helpless) and a worsening of the psychological well-being of the affected employee.

The phenomenon of workplace bullying occurs more frequently in organizations that have undergone recent organizational changes, in large organizations, with a diffuse organizational culture and a rigid organizational climate.

Empirical research has shown that the most effective coping strategies for the early stages of psychological aggression are positive reinterpretation techniques, cognitive reframing, personal relaxation techniques and seeking emotional support from family and close friends, and are effective for advanced stages of the phenomenon. techniques for seeking instrumental support from the departments of human resources, occupational medicine and even from the legal authorities.

Until now, there is no law in Romania to sanction workplace bullying. For this reason, legal sanctioning of this phenomenon is impossible or partially possible by assimilating the phenomenon to various forms of discrimination or psychological harassment.

The paper in question contributes to the evolution of research in the field by introducing the phenomenon among local publications creating a much clearer picture of the phenomenon and its forms of manifestation, presents the most vulnerable sectors of activity, summarizes the main triggers and its main consequences . The last part summarizes a series of psychological theories explaining the phenomenon and promotes the most effective strategies for survival in the face of the phenomenon of psychological aggression at work.

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