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### **Author**

Shallcross, Linda, Sheehan, Michael, Ramsay, Sheryl

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# WORKPLACE MOBBING: EXPERIENCES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Linda Shallcross  
Michael Sheehan  
Sheryl Ramsay

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the counterproductive behaviour of 'workplace mobbing' where gossip, rumour, innuendo, and malicious accusations are reported to unfairly target and discredit targeted workers. The discussion is based on an Australian study of reports from public sector employees who self identified as targets of workplace mobbing. The behaviours are typically covert and are sometimes instigated and perpetuated by management. In focusing on three themes that emerged from the interview study, the paper discusses the sometimes toxic nature of public sector culture, mobbing behaviours and workplace expulsion. It also discusses some recommended regulatory and organizational responses that could potentially reduce the occurrence of such behaviours.

**Keywords:** mobbing, bullying, harassment, employment, discrimination and management.

## INTRODUCTION

Workplace mobbing is a complex phenomenon with negative outcomes for individual, group and organizational effectiveness. Greater theoretical and practical understanding is required to help establish better processes that could ultimately deter workplace mobbing and reduce the impact on those targeted. Workplace mobbing behaviour has been described as 'group psychological harassment' (Chappell & Di Martino, 2001, p.4), where the behaviour includes 'ganging up' against someone or 'psychologically terrorizing' others at work (Leymann, 1996, p.165).

Typically, mobbing behaviours include covert forms of rumour, gossip and innuendo that are used to discredit and demonise targeted co-workers until they are forced to leave their employment. The target's 'expulsion' from the workplace is a critical phase in the mobbing process (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, p.4; Leymann, 1996, p.171) and often results in long term psychological damage, post traumatic stress disorder, loss of employment, social exclusion, and sometimes suicidal and homicidal reactions (Groeblichhoff & Becker, 1996, p.277; Leymann, 1996, p.180).

The key research question here is; "How is the mobbing experience perceived by self-identified targets?". This paper is based on a study of employees from a public sector agency in Australia, discussing the adverse impact upon them as a result of workplace mobbing. The findings signal that the risk of damage to staff may be high in the public sector, and possibly

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Dr Linda Shallcross ([Linda.Shallcross@griffith.edu.au](mailto:Linda.Shallcross@griffith.edu.au)) is Outreach and Research Officer, Student Services, Griffith University; Professor Michael Sheehan ([msheehan@glam.ac.uk](mailto:msheehan@glam.ac.uk)) is employed in the Business School, University of Glamorgan, Wales, and Dr Sheryl Ramsay ([s.ramsay@griffith.edu.au](mailto:s.ramsay@griffith.edu.au)) is employed in the Griffith Business School, Department of Management and is a member of the Work and Organisational Wellbeing Research Centre.

other organisations, where credence is seemingly given to malicious gossip, rumour, slander, innuendo, and hearsay, and where management was often perceived to join with the groups until expulsion from the workplace occurred.

The paper first reviews the key themes arising from the literature, and then provides a description of the study, followed by a discussion of the findings and recommendations. A definitional overview and an explanation of the phases of mobbing are first provided from the literature. Then a number of contextual themes are discussed including the effectiveness of the informal power base of the perpetrators where the seniority of position offers little protection for those targeted. The study concludes that those who are different to the dominant group appear to have an increased risk of being targeted in a public sector culture that seemingly encourages conformity rather than valuing difference. The study also suggests that women are at particular risk of becoming either perpetrators or targets, particularly in female dominated organisations.

### **Definition**

The term ‘mobbing’ is preferred in this study to distinguish the behaviour as a form of group behaviour, instead of, for example, the term ‘bullying’ that implies ‘individual acts’ of physical aggression (Davenport, Distler-Schwartz & Pursell-Elliott, 1999, p.27). Workplace mobbing can be defined as a malicious attempt to force a person out of the workplace through psychological terror, unjustified accusations, humiliation, general harassment and emotional abuse (Davenport et al., 1999; Leymann, 1996; Westhues, 2002). Those targeted include co-workers and managers or supervisors as well as subordinates (Davenport et al., 1999; Einarsen et al., 2003; Lewis, 2001).

### **Phases of mobbing**

There tends to be a pattern in relation to workplace mobbing commencing with a minor conflict that escalates until the target’s ‘expulsion’ from the workplace (Davenport et al., 1999; Leymann, 1996; Resch & Schubinski, 1996). Typically there are five phases, the first being the initial conflict or critical incident stage. The second phase is where psychological abuse is increasingly directed at the target. The third phase occurs when management intervenes, often siding with the perpetrators, and increasing the levels of harm. The fourth phase is recognisable when the target is accused of being ‘difficult’ or ‘mentally ill’ and the final phase is marked by the expulsion of the target from their employment (Davenport et al., 1999, p. 38). The behaviour is frequent and enduring, often occurring over a period of months and years (Einarsen et al., 2003, pp 7-8; Groeblichhoff & Becker, 1996; Leymann, 1996). In some cases, the mobbing continues even after the target's expulsion from the workplace and often causes long lasting psychological harm. Additionally, the harm caused can be described as either first, second, or third degree mobbing, analogous to the degree of harm caused by first, second and third degree ‘burns’ or ‘scars’ (Davenport et al., 1999, p.39).

### **Valuing difference**

The public sector in Australia has one of the highest levels of occupational segregation in OECD countries where women and men tend to work in different occupational sectors (*Equity statistics*, 2004). The majority of women tend to be employed in the lower paid ranks of education, health, and social welfare and are often employed on a casual, temporary or part time basis. In contrast, men are predominantly employed across all levels of the public sector, for example in the police, emergency services, defence, and transport sectors (*Equity statistics*, 2004). To address these apparent inequities the public sector has, over the past

twenty years, introduced equal employment opportunity and diversity management programs, with an emphasis on 'valuing difference' and increasing the diversity of the workplace (Burton & Ryall, 1995). However, a number of studies question the success of these programs in meeting the 'diversity challenge' (Blackburn, Browne, Brooks & Jarman, 2002; Pless & Maak, 2004). Rather than promoting cultural change to accommodate difference, it is argued that 'sameness' is preferred where those employed from diverse groups are required to assimilate or conform to be the status quo (Kamp & Hagedorn-Rasmussen, 2004, p.525).

Furthermore, some studies have identified that those who are different to the dominant group may be at increased risk of becoming targets of workplace mobbing (Bennington & Wein, 2000). In some public sector agencies in Australia, for example, those at the highest risk of being targeted are Indigenous Australians in non-Indigenous agencies, and women in male dominated agencies such as defence, transport, roads, and police services (Hockley, 2002; Murdoch & Taylor, 2002; Smith, 2001). This can be described as a process of exclusion where those who can not conform to the workplace norms are deliberately excluded (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Some researchers in the area of cultural studies, for example Young (1993), claim that the exclusive dominant group can sometimes perceive those who are different to the mainstream as fair targets for aggression and exploitation, aligned to the judgement that they are expendable and less than deserving.

### **Power imbalance**

Workplace abuse has most often been recognised as an abuse of power by managers to bully the staff they supervise. However, the influence of other forms of power, for example access to exclusive powerful networks, is also recognized as influential in creating an imbalance of power (Di-Martino et al., 2003; Einarsen et al., 2003; Hockley, 2002; Leymann, 1996; Rayner, 2002). Consequently, it is argued that any worker at any level can be targeted including managers as well as subordinates, supervisors and co-workers (Davenport et al., 1999; Leymann, 1996; Ramage, 1996).

### **Women at risk**

Women are especially at risk of being targeted particularly by other women (Namie & Namie, 1999). A US survey, based on responses from 1335 individuals who were directly experiencing one-on-one harassment at their workplaces revealed that the highest incidence of abuse was perpetrated by women against other women 84% of the time (Namie & Namie, 1999). Moreover, those women in management and supervisory positions may be particularly susceptible (Chappell & Di-Martino, 1998; Salin, 2002). Some studies have found that the highest level of workplace aggression occurs in female-dominated organizations and that the lowest level occurs where the numbers of men and women are fairly evenly balanced (O'Moore, Lynch, & Nic-Daeid, 2003, p.88). Furthermore, it is claimed that women supervisors and managers keep competent women from being noticed and promoted with 'underhanded' or cover behaviours (Brunner & Costello, 2003). These covert behaviours include spreading rumours and hearsay and making unjustified accusations that discredit the targeted worker's performance and abilities.

### **Perpetrators and targets**

It is sometimes suggested that there are personality traits that typify perpetrators and targets. Some of the literature suggests that some targets tend to be trusting, co-operative, conscientious, high achievers, and often loyal to the organization (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Davenport et al., 1999; Namie & Namie, 2000). This contrasts with the findings from

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other studies that indicate that there may be personality traits that predispose some people to becoming either a target or a perpetrator (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). In these studies, perpetrators are sometimes perceived as authoritarian, manipulative, lacking people skills, insensitive, 'evil', sadists and psychopaths (Davenport et al., 1999, p.59; McCarthy, 2000, p.242; Neuman, 2000) while targets are often perceived as 'weak' and 'helpless victims' (Neuman & Baron, 2004, p. 185). However, others claim that sometimes it is a position that is targeted rather than the individual performing the role and that whoever holds that position will be targeted (Einarsen et al., 2003, Leymann & Gustaffson, 1996).

### **AIMS OF PRESENT STUDY**

The focus of this paper is based on the experiences of a small group of self-identified targets of mobbing. The study aims to contribute to the literature on workplace mobbing from the perspective of targets and to increase awareness of workplace mobbing in public sector agencies across Australia. The study also discusses some possible options for reducing the impact of workplace mobbing and signals future research directions that might contribute to a more informed understanding of the complexities of workplace mobbing. Thus, the study aims to achieve greater in-depth insight into actual mobbing experiences, and to link this understanding with the existent mobbing literature. In addition, the paper aims to add to existing information about mobbing by examining themes arising from the qualitative data in order to provide greater insight into possible directions for future research and intervention in broader public sector systems.

### **METHOD**

#### **Context**

The participants were members of a support group who met regularly over a 12 month period. The group formed from a wider set of respondents who had contacted the researcher in relation to her media reports on mobbing. The researcher set up a website and coordinated email communications among individuals who wished to discuss their mobbing experiences. In essence, the participants shared their insights and coping strategies following their departure from their employment. The researcher contacted group members to ascertain their interest in participating in a study. This resulted in eight women, seven of whom had been employed in the one female dominated state based agency, although not necessarily at the same time, being interviewed.

The data collection method comprised individual interviews with eight public sector employees who perceived that they had been forced to leave their employment and who were members of the aforementioned support group. Confidentiality issues and the research process were explained. The interviews were semi-structured in nature in that the researcher encouraged interviewees to discuss their experiences, while also being guided by aspects of the phenomenon associated with the literature review. Thus, the researcher used reflective questioning to allow the participant to discuss personally relevant experiences further and probing questions to achieve any clarification necessary (Neuman, 2006). The interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and were subsequently transcribed, with the consent of participants. Nvivo text analysis software was used to code interview data to identify emergent themes (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). The software adds validity to the research as it is a rigorous system of sorting and coding. Importantly, the software provides an audit trail for establishing research credibility. The coding of a sample of text from one interview is

identified in Table 1. All aspects of this research process were independently checked by another researcher, experienced in the method and knowledgeable in the content area.

**Table 1: Example of coding**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I felt it most when we were, Julie and I from the [regional offices] had to go to [named city]</li> <li>2. It was as if we were always being questioned about what we did, you always felt very uneasy, I got to the stage where I absolutely hated going .....because it was such an unsupportive and really hostile environment.</li> <li>3. ....you were scared to say too much in case it really wasn't what you were supposed to be doing, you got mixed messages all the time about what you should be doing, and what you were doing ...</li> <li>4. We also knew that there were people, like Wilma, who seemed to be able to say anything she liked about [us] our lack of professionalism as perceived by her, um, the fact that we weren't doing a good job, or we didn't do something,</li> <li>5. and she could make those accusations without ever having to back them up, and they were listened to.....</li> </ol>		
<b>Paragraph</b>	<b>Tree Node</b>	<b>Free Node</b>
Paragraph 1	Workplace Culture	distance
Paragraph 2	Passive Abuse	constant criticism
Paragraph 3	Workplace Culture	roles unclear
Paragraph 4	Passive Abuse	rumours
Paragraph 5	Passive Abuse	false accusations

**Grounded theory and emergent themes**

Following the sorting and coding of data, five key themes, grounded in the voice of the participants and reflecting their experience of workplace mobbing, were identified. The five emergent themes were identified from the categorisation of 800 free nodes as listed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Five emergent themes by number and percentage of free nodes**

Tree Codes or Themes	Percentage of free nodes	Number of free nodes
1. Public sector culture	28%	225
2. Passive/covert abuse	23%	181
3. Mobbing/Expulsion	20%	156
4. Impact on health/coping strategies	16%	129
5. Systems/procedures	13%	109
Total free nodes	100%	800

The five themes are shown diagrammatically in Figure 1. While the impact of mobbing on health and coping strategies (fourth emergent theme) is discussed widely in the literature (see for example, Groeblichhoff & Becker, 1996; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005), there appears to be less information in relation to the other four themes. Additionally, the discussion in this paper is

limited to the themes of public sector culture, passive/covert abuse, and mobbing/expulsion to highlight the first three emergent themes. The theme of systems and procedures, including the sub categories of policies, procedures, and rules, although not explored in this paper, nevertheless provides a basis for ongoing research.

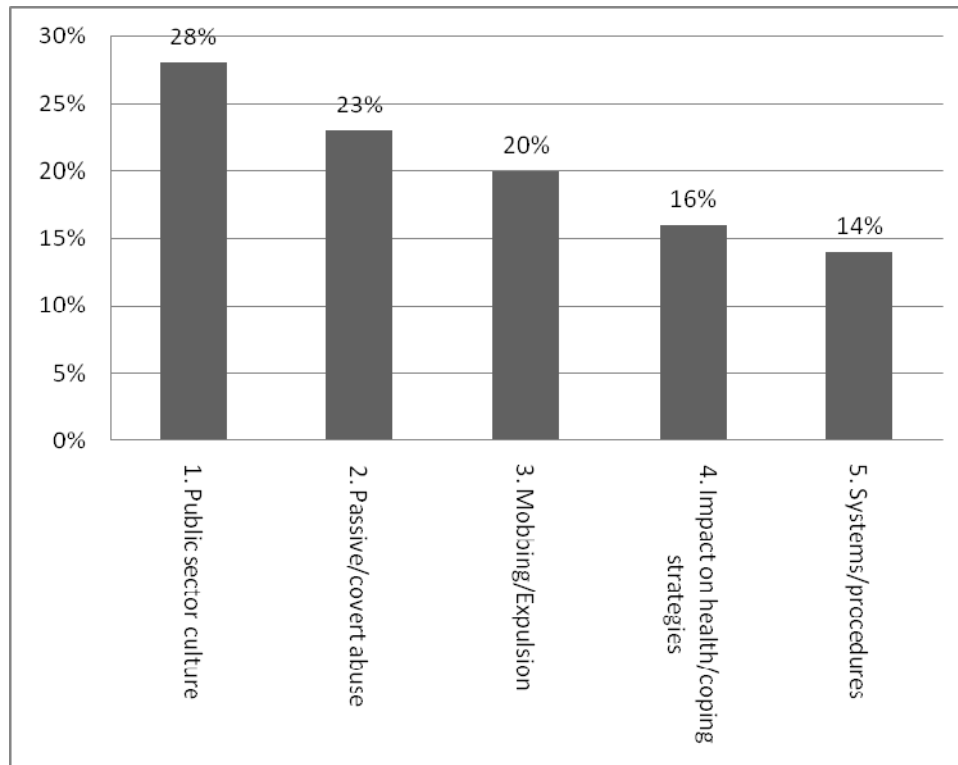


Figure 1: Five emergent themes

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The remainder of this paper discusses the most commonly occurring themes that are linked to the grounded free nodes, or concepts (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), from which the themes emerged. Selected segments of text that best represent each theme, consistent with the notion of theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), are also included to highlight the key issues. Representative quotes from participants are included to illustrate the identified themes. The quoted text in this paper is linked to participants by reference to their interview number, that is, Bronwyn (IN1), Jane (IN2), Jasmine (IN3), Julie (IN4), Mary (IN5), Ronnie (IN6), Shirin (IN7) and Leslie (IN8).

The focus of the discussion is on the theme of public sector culture because this theme emerged with the highest percentage of free nodes (28%).

This is followed with a summary of the next two highest occurring themes comprised of passive/covert abuse, with 23% free nodes, and mobbing/expulsion with 20% free nodes.

### Public sector culture

The highest occurring percentage of free nodes (28%) were categorised in relation to public sector culture, comprised of eight sub categories. These include inadequate staffing levels (27%), cultural differences not valued (22%), ganging up, exclusion and group hostility

(17%), unfounded accusations (14%), management condones and perpetuates the behaviour (9%), flawed appointment processes (8%), politics (2%) and power (2%). These sub categories are each discussed in the following section.

Inadequate staffing levels and high staff turnover. In relation to inadequate staffing levels, the participants reported that the public sector agency in which they were employed was often required to justify the value of the service. This seemingly led to a perception that there was a lack of commitment to the agency and where staff felt the service was not valued. Furthermore, volunteers and students on placement were essential to maintaining a basic level of service. This was particularly the case in regional offices where there was only two paid staff, employed on a casual basis, to provide a 'shop front' style of direct client service.

One participant, Bronwyn, said it was 'pathetic' that the agency, a government department 'has volunteers and students to do their core business' (IN1). Similarly, another participant, Julie, reinforced the claim, saying it was not possible to undertake the duties expected of so few staff, and that 'in the end I got students in. I accepted students on placements ...[to do core work]' (IN4). Another participant, Shirin, in support of the claim about the high level of staff turnover, commented that 'at one point, 95% of the positions were acting, acting for the last two or three years and that's a cause for concern in the context of human resource management' (IN7).

Cultural differences are not valued. In this study, it appeared that those who were different to the dominant group may have been singled out and targeted. For example, the only two women from visibly different ethnic backgrounds (in their department) were forced to exit their employment because of their workplace mobbing experience. Both claimed that their culture was not respected and that their accent and social class were ridiculed. Despite anti discrimination legislation and employment programs to ensure a diverse workplace, both Mary (IN5), an Indigenous woman, and Shirin (IN7), a woman with an accent, perceived they had been targeted because of their communication styles, different cultures, and different life experiences.

Furthermore, each of those interviewed for this study recognised that they either did not share the culture of the dominant group or they were not prepared to join in with what they perceived as destructive and unproductive behaviour. This resulted in a perception of separation. For example, Julie said she felt 'excluded' because she was not 'one of the group' (IN4).

Unfounded accusations. Each of the eight women interviewed claimed that punitive actions were taken against them on the basis of unfounded accusations. They felt that they were dealt with harshly and claimed that management did not abide by the principles of procedural fairness. While some public sector agencies across Australia have developed procedures for dealing with accusations (see for example, Worksafe Victoria, 2003), this study found, consistent with the findings of Dann and Grogan (2002), that practice does not necessarily match public sector policy.

Management condones and perpetuates mobbing. Consistent with the literature, the study found that more senior management appeared to perpetuate mobbing by giving credence to the covert behaviours of the perpetrators, and joined in with them to blame the target as the one 'at fault', thereby increasing the imbalance of power against those targeted (Davenport et.

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al., 1999, p.20; Namie & Namie, 2000). A critical phase in the workplace mobbing process is where management becomes involved, siding with the perpetrators against the target (Davenport et al., 1999; Einarsen et al., 2003). In this study, it was claimed that managers (targets) seemed to be scapegoated and mobbed out of their positions. While their personal management style was sometimes the reason provided by perpetrators for the discrediting of managers, Jasmine, a senior executive in the agency, when asked why she was suddenly removed from her position, suggested rather that:

‘They scapegoated! A scapegoat is often a way of resolving a situation, they take the easy way out which is to get rid of that one person while they retain the ones who are creating the difficulty because it’s easier to eliminate the one...’ (IN3)

Jane, the person on the lowest pay scale of those interviewed and who had been there for five years, when asked why the managers were continually being replaced, said ‘I believe the managers were hated ... if the manager showed, um ... integrity ... they would revolt, pretty much, words I would usually use are they would just go on strike, they would refuse to do their jobs...’ (IN2).

Flawed appointment processes. The participants claimed that it was common practice for their agency to employ casual staff at busy times that would sometimes result in ongoing casual or short term appointments. Some would then be appointed to long term contracts or permanent positions without a merit based selection process. This ad hoc appointment process relied on those who were available at short notice rather than those appointed on merit. This apparently resulted in a situation where some staff who had been appointed through the merit processes were forced out of their employment and replaced with appointees who were part of the existing social or family networks.

When asked to identify how she thought staff were selected for positions, Mary said: ‘I don’t really know but there was never really any exercise to appoint them, they just happened to appear’ (IN5). She went on to say that, ‘people were brought in that seemed to be getting transferred from their groups and there really wasn’t a transparent selection process’ (IN5).

Shirin (IN7) claimed that her ‘expulsion’ from her position was a result of inexperienced colleagues being appointed to more senior positions without meritorious selection processes. In her interview, Shirin admitted that she also had been appointed without a merit process commenting that:

HR is not practiced, nor is there an understanding of what good practice is, even though I came over there with no selection process, I was just tapped on the shoulder.....you would question if it happens like that for every position. (IN7)

Power and position. Four of the eight women reported that they had been either mobbed by the staff they supervised or by those at the same level or both. The perpetrators were said to be insecure and focussed on furthering their career ambitions at any expense. Seven of those interviewed had supervisory or management responsibilities and the positions they held were either permanent or long term contract appointments. However, despite their seemingly secure employment, they claimed that other staff holding part time, casual and short term positions, often targeted them.

In this study, the power imbalance often appears to be not that obtained through formal hierarchical employment relationships, as occurs between a supervisor and a subordinate, but rather seeming to be more informal in nature (Einarsen et al., 2003). For example, although Jasmine was the senior manager, her staff appeared to have more power in terms of manipulating the behaviour of the Executive Officer to their advantage (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) as indicated in the following explanation of the mobbing behaviours directed towards her.

Now, with my coming into the situation, they saw their opportunity to use the Director's naivety in the public service and worked that to advantage. So when I came, it was very easy to focus their attack on me because I was stepping in between them and the Director and bringing a need for accountability, constraining what were by then, their well rehearsed behaviours that were been working effectively for them. (IN3)

Thus, the theme of public sector culture discussed here relates to a number of seemingly entrenched elements that allow for processes that can support mobbing behaviours. Lack of transparency in selection procedures and inadequate attention to appropriate staffing appear to feature in these mobbing experiences, as do power imbalances that can work against particular managers.

The above findings can be related to the existing literature in various ways and in general terms support previous findings. This study adds the perspective of actual self-identified targets of mobbing. Importantly, it supports explanations as to the importance of context in the experience of mobbing (e.g. Hoel & Salin, 2003). The findings here indicate perceptions of contextual factors as a central explanatory device in the personal mobbing experience. While previous research has indicated the importance of factors such as downsizing and de-layering (McCarthy & Mayhew, 2004; Sheehan, 2001), the present study particularly highlights problems associated with inadequate staffing levels. Another contextual feature highlighted here is that of differences not being valued within the organisational cultures described. This links directly to the individual characteristics of national culture and accent and makes a specific contribution to other findings around the risk for "outsiders" (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003).

Notably, attribution theory would suggest that people consider a range of possible causes and combinations thereof in seeking to understand their experiences, and targets, perpetrators and witnesses can have differing interpretations of events (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2007), indicting an important future area of research. However, the present research does resonate with Liefoghe and Davey's (2003) perspective that organisations can have a more active rather than a "back-drop" role in promoting and maintaining negative behaviours against targets. This study also supports previous work that indicates that power can be gained from sources other than formal position and that powerful alliances can be used to bully upwards (Branch et al., 2007).

#### Passive and covert behaviours

The second highest occurring percentage of free nodes (23%) were categorised in relation to passive and covert behaviours comprised of 15 sub categories. All participants, except one, experienced systematic collusion, involving passive and covert behaviours, where their co-workers had 'ganged up' on them. The most frequently occurring behaviours were described

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as rumours and innuendo (14%), hearsay (12%), lack of cooperation (7%), 'martyr syndrome' (7%), scapegoating (7%), manipulation of managers (7%), undermining (7%), threats (7%), and social isolation (7%). While 15 sub categories were identified, the discussion in this paper is limited to the two highest occurring sub categories of rumour and innuendo and hearsay.

**Rumours and innuendo.** In this study, perpetrator behaviours were described by some as a lack of empathy for others, persistent and excessive unjustified criticisms and constant scrutiny, spreading malicious rumours and excluding and socially ostracising others. One of the participants, Shirin, for example, reported that she heard 'endless bitching around' by the perpetrators to discredit 'unsuspecting' targets (IN7). Another participant, Mary, reported that there was 'whispering in the corridors' and that she was deliberately 'left out' of office gatherings and that her colleagues could not 'look her in the eye' (IN5). Another participant, Bronwyn, claimed being 'totally ignored' (IN1), while Julie described her experience as being 'sent to coventry' where you are ignored as if you are 'invisible' (IN4).

**Hearsay.** All eight participants, as previously mentioned, had been subjected to false accusations based on hearsay and made in circumstances where they were unable to defend themselves. For example, Julie, claimed that she was not provided an opportunity to respond to unjust accusations and that management tended to accept hearsay without a 'fair process' (IN4).

In this study, these types of covert behaviours were endured for approximately 12 months before participants were unable to continue working either because they had been told to leave or because they had become ill. While this study does not seek to totally dismiss perpetrator and target personality characteristics as suggested by some other researchers (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), it seems that there are many complexities surrounding the mobbing phenomenon. For instance, participants had been targeted with covert and passive behaviours even though they self-reported as being cooperative, trusting, and enthusiastic staff, and sometimes with publicised achievements. Overall, this theme of passive and covert behaviours indicates that mobbing is complex, far-reaching and often difficult to identify. The study supports the perspective that negative behaviours against targets can be covert and difficult to identify (Branch et al., 2007).

### **Expulsion**

The third highest percentage of free nodes (20%) emerged in relation to expulsion, comprised of 9 sub categories of behaviours that increased the risk of expulsion. While the range of behaviours are identified in Figure 4, the most frequently occurring were described as role not valued (19%), experience not recognised (15%), position power undermined (11%) and encouraged to leave (11%). While nine sub categories of the expulsion theme were identified, the discussion in this paper is limited to the three most commonly occurring sub categories of role not valued, experience not recognised and position power undermined.

**Role not valued.** Public sector departments are often restructured to reflect the policies of an incoming government. This can result in restructuring where positions associated with the policies of the outgoing government are no longer valued. For example, Julie (IN4) was appointed to a position in a regional office by the previous government which was not valued by the incoming government. However, a political decision, resented by staff, was made to keep the regional office opened. Julie said this resentment impacted on her because she

‘wasn’t taken seriously’ and she eventually realised that the disappointment about the ‘political decision’ to keep the office open was directed at her in the form of passive and covert behaviours (IN4).

Experience not recognised. Some of those interviewed claimed that, despite their knowledge and skills, their advice was resented, and their different experiences were not valued. Rather, they explained, these skills appeared to be threatening to other staff, and they believed they were ostracised and discredited as a result. Two participants, Mary and Shirin claimed that they were unjustly accused of incompetence and that their contributions were dismissed as a ‘waste of time’ (IN7). The criticisms, they argued, did not allow for cultural difference, different life experience or culturally appropriate methods of working.

Position power undermined. This study highlighted the power of influential networks rather than power based in formal hierarchical relationships. In this study, it was claimed that the perpetrators were able to successfully manipulate senior management and undermine staff particularly while they were on leave. One participant, for example, reported that she was required to step aside from her position on the basis that ‘staff did not like her’ and that she was ‘incompetent and old fashioned’ in their view (IN3).

While seven of the eight participants experienced expulsion from their employment, as described in Appendix 2, the following comment made by one of the participants, Mary, typifies the crushing emotions experienced by some of the participants during the expulsion phase of mobbing.

It took me to a place where I’d never been before, it made me feel that I was not in control...it was just like you were folded down, and you were nothing. It is as if your mind has been raped, it’s not a rape of your body it’s a rape of your mind, it’s a violation. (IN5)

This theme reflects the possible serious outcomes related to mobbing from participants’ perspectives, with serious emotional and financial consequences related to lack of employment (McCarthy & Mayhew, 2004).

## **CONTRIBUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study highlighted a complex range of factors that contribute to workplace mobbing in the public sector. The research contributes an in-depth understanding to the literature based on the direct experiences of self-identified targets of mobbing, and is among the first studies to provide this level of detail about the phenomenon of mobbing. The research links this in-depth material with the existing literature. As well as personal impacts, the research clearly indicates that there are important organisational culture and employment issues that impact on the experience and perpetuation of mobbing (e.g. lack of due process in appointments).

The following suggestions for addressing workplace mobbing, and drawing upon the literature, were identified in this study. The first step, identified by some of the participants, is to establish a renewed commitment to achieving an inclusive culture where difference is recognized, respected, and valued. The second is to investigate a legislative intervention with a focus on prevention strategies, and identifying remedies for those harmed as a result of mobbing. The third is to generate incentive in the public sector to review existing legislation,

policies and procedures, to address the factors that appear to maintain a culture of workplace mobbing.

### **LIMITATIONS OF STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

While this study is among the first to identify workplace mobbing in the Australian context, further investigation is warranted due to the small sample size of the study. It is not suggested that the findings of this study can be generalised across the public sector. However, the study identifies workplace mobbing as a distinct form of harmful workplace behaviour and signals some future research directions. Legislative interventions can also be further explored in the context of ensuring prevention and providing redress for those targeted.

The study indicates that future research would also benefit from a gender analysis to explore any link between female gender and workplace mobbing. While this approach might be legitimately criticised as perpetuating gender stereotypes, this study suggests that this might be necessary if the problem is to be recognised and effectively addressed. Additionally, the contribution to mobbing stemming from systems, procedures, and rules, is another area for future research identified in this study.

#### **Identify, recognize and value difference**

It appears that a paradigm shift in public sector culture, underpinned by moral values including tolerance, integrity, respect, fairness, and equity, may be required to reduce workplace mobbing behaviour. The findings also suggest that acknowledgement, recognition, and respect for difference would also partly contribute to addressing the problem of workplace mobbing. While these concepts are not new, this study highlights a need for increased awareness of the 'valuing difference' agenda, as its practical implications may not have filtered through to all ranks of the public sector.

#### **Legislative intervention**

While legislation does not exist in Australia, there are a number of European and Scandinavian countries that have introduced regulatory responses to deal with mobbing and other forms of covert behaviour including psychological aggression (Di-Martino et al., 2003, pp. 47-56). While it is not suggested that legislation is a panacea for the prevention of workplace mobbing, this study indicates that a legislative approach may be required to provide redress to those damaged and to prevent the counterproductive behaviours occurring in the first instance (Bukspan, 2002). One option is to broaden the legal definition of discrimination and harassment under existing anti-discrimination legislation so that commissions can take up complaints. This option has already received some consideration by the Tasmanian Anti Discrimination Commission, where the Commissioner recommended that legislation be amended to incorporate 'workplace bullying' as a generic term (McCarthy, 2003, p.235).

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper discussed 'workplace mobbing' from the perspective of eight women who had been forced to exit their employment in the public sector. The culture they described was one that encouraged and condoned mobbing behaviours of spreading rumours, gossip, innuendo and hearsay. The adverse consequences for seven of the eight women were particularly significant because of their loss of employment and long term psychological damage that was attributed to their mobbing experience.

The mobbing behaviour identified in this agency appeared to be a symptom of a destructive and toxic workplace culture rather than individual perpetrator or target personality characteristics. In this agency, the culture appeared to be one that did not value the contribution of those who were in some way different to the mainstream. Rather, workplace mobbing was found to be a symptom of a dysfunctional workplace and sometimes the result of the dominant group's 'outing' of those who were different or not accepted (McCarthy, 2003, p.241; Neumann, 2000). Furthermore, workplace mobbing was partially attributed to 'fault finding', blame and scapegoating. Finally, the study concludes that the concept of workplace mobbing needs to be named and recognised in the Australian context in an effort to reduce the damage caused to those targeted.

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