Workplace Bullying and Mobbing: Definitions, Terms, and When They Matter

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Since the late 1980s, when the terms workplace mobbing and workplace bullying began to appear in the research and professional literature, scholars and practitioners in fields as diverse as psychology, organizational behavior, and law have attempted to define these terms or have suggested other labels for naming the underlying behaviors. Three decades later, the concepts of workplace bullying and mobbing are fully entering the mainstream vocabularies of employee relations and interpersonal mistreatment.

The process of labeling and defining human interactions can be a tricky and sometimes touchy business, as many researchers and theorists have come to realize. In what is now a multidisciplinary field of study, with multiple disciplinary lexicons simultaneously in use, labeling and defining workplace bullying and mobbing remains a sometimes fraught activity. Nonetheless, what is common to these efforts to label and define these behaviors is the shared interest in understanding the underlying social and neurobiological processes involved; the damaging effects on targets and an increasingly wide range of other stakeholders; and the development of effective means to both prevent workplace bullying and mobbing and offer treatments, interventions, and legal relief to those affected.

Naming something is a powerful epistemological act with real-world significance. Drawing a distinction by naming and defining something brings that something from the background into the foreground, thereby enabling it to be studied and investigated. Keeney (1983) stated that “drawing any distinction necessarily leaves us with an altered, expanded universe for further investigation” (p. 23). It would be a safe bet to say that there are very few professionals, especially practitioners, working in the area of workplace bullying
and mobbing who have not heard clients express huge relief upon learning
that the abuse they have been experiencing at work has a name and is studied
in the professional literature. The naming of their experiences of bullying and
mobbing provides validation, opportunities for understanding, and avenues
for healing. John Dewey (1910/2007), the American philosopher, psycholo-
gist, and educational reformer, also paid attention to the importance of nam-
ing. He said,

Every one has experienced how learning an appropriate name for what
was dim and vague cleared up and crystallized the whole matter. Some
meaning seems distinct almost within reach, but is elusive; it refuses
to condense into definite form; the attaching of a word somehow (just
how, it is almost impossible to say) puts limits around the meaning,
draws it out from the void, makes it stand out as an entity on its own
account. (p. 173)

Thus, we begin these volumes with what may appear to be an obligatory
chapter on terms and definitions. However, we do so with aspirations that go
beyond checking a box. In addition to providing and explaining basic terms
and definitions, we will highlight when, why, and how they matter, while
acknowledging that people will have their own opinions as to which ones
best capture the underlying behaviors. As we see it, these behaviors are so
damaging and destructive to individuals and organizations that we should
not get too caught up in debates over who is “right” on the question of pre-
ferred terminology. Rather, we embrace and call for a “big tent” approach that
focuses on understanding, preventing, and responding to these behaviors on
individual, organizational, and public policy levels.

Accordingly, this chapter will identify and discuss varying terms and defi-
nitions related to our focus on workplace bullying and mobbing. We begin
by focusing on a representative sampling of definitions used for our primary
terms of workplace bullying and workplace mobbing, followed by a look at
other terms that have been invoked to cover the same or similar behaviors.
We then discuss the key elements of the definitions, followed by a brief con-
sideration of the most common bullying and mobbing behaviors. Finally, we
offer an examination of the implications of these terms and definitions for
important stakeholder interests. Before proceeding, we wish to acknowledge
that no core definition can possibly cover all the relevant dynamics of bul-
yling and mobbing at work. In parsing and distinguishing them, we are not
finding fault with what is or is not contained in a given definition. In many
cases, a factor that one author includes in a basic definition may be covered
by another author elsewhere in a commentary.
DEFINING WORKPLACE BULLYING

Three representative definitions of workplace bullying are provided here. They include definitions from Andrea Adams, the British journalist who first popularized the term *workplace bullying* in the 1980s and early 1990s; Gary and Ruth Namie, the cofounders of the American-based Workplace Bullying Institute, who were most responsible for bringing the term *workplace bullying* to the United States; and leading European researchers Stale Einarsen, Helge Hoel, Dieter Zapf, and Cary Cooper.

**Andrea Adams**

The late Andrea Adams used a series of BBC radio documentaries to bring the topic to a more public audience. In 1992, she authored what may have been the first book to use “bullying” at work as its operative term (Adams, 1992). She observed that even though workplace bullying is “like a malignant cancer” and that “the majority of the adult population spends more waking hours at work than anywhere else,” the manifestations of this form of abuse “are widely dismissed” (Adams, 1992, p. 9). In a 1994 speech to the trade union Manufacturing, Science and Finance, she defined bullying this way:

> Workplace bullying constitutes offensive behaviour through vindictive, cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine an individual or groups of employees. And these persistently negative attacks on their personal and professional performance are typically unpredictable, irrational and often unfair. This abuse of power or position can cause such chronic stress and anxiety that the employees gradually lose belief in themselves, suffering physical ill-health and mental distress as a result. (Ellis, 2011, p. 2)

Adams was a journalist, not a researcher or theorist. However, her early explanation of workplace bullying captured many of the elements found in more academic definitions. Furthermore, by emphasizing a public audience rather than an academic one for her work, she helped to lay the groundwork for mainstreaming workplace bullying as an employee relations concern.

**Gary Namie and Ruth Namie**

In 1997, Gary and Ruth Namie, both holders of PhDs in psychology, founded the Campaign Against Workplace Bullying, the first major initiative designed to import the term *workplace bullying* into the vocabulary of American employee relations and mental health treatment. This effort would
evolve into the creation of the Workplace Bullying Institute and the publication of several books (Namie & Namie, 1999, 2009, 2011).

The Namies define workplace bullying as the “repeated, health-harming mistreatment of a person by one or more workers that takes the form of verbal abuse; conduct or behaviors that are threatening, intimidating, or humiliating; sabotage that prevents work from getting done; or some combination of the three” (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 1). They go on to characterize workplace bullying as a form of “psychological violence” that mixes “verbal and strategic assaults to prevent the Target from performing work well,” thus undermining “an employer’s legitimate business interests” (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 1). They add that bullying includes an aggressor’s “personal agenda of controlling another human being,” typically via “a combination of deliberate humiliation and the withholding of resources” required to perform a job (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 1).

Working in conjunction with Zogby Analytics pollsters, the Workplace Bullying Institute has conducted periodic national scientific surveys on workplace bullying using various measures that build off this basic definition. Further discussion of those surveys may be found in chapter 2, which examines the prevalence of workplace bullying and mobbing behaviors.

**Stale Einarsen, Helge Hoel, Dieter Zapf, and Cary Cooper**

Leading European researchers and theorists Stale Einarsen, Helge Hoel, Dieter Zapf, and Cary Cooper have been examining bullying, mobbing, and related behaviors at work going back to the 1990s. While acknowledging the complexities and “many shapes and shades” of this topic (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, p. 4), they define workplace bullying this way: “At a basic level it is about the systematic mistreatment of a subordinate, a colleague, or a superior, which, if continued and long-lasting, may cause severe social, psychological, and psychosomatic problems in the target” (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 4). They further expound on this definition: “Bullying at work is about repeated actions and practises that are directed against one or more workers; that are unwanted by the victim; that may be carried out deliberately or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offence, and distress; and that may interfere with work performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment” (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 9).

**DEFINING WORKPLACE MOBBING**

Now we offer three representative definitions of *workplace mobbing*. They include definitions from Heinz Leymann, the first to adopt and develop the term *mobbing* in a workplace context; Noa Davenport, Ruth Distler Schwartz, and Gail Elliott, whose 1999 book helped to introduce workplace mobbing
to American audiences; and Maureen Duffy and Len Sperry, coauthors of two leading books on workplace mobbing behaviors.

**Heinz Leymann**

During the 1980s, the late Swedish psychologist Heinz Leymann adopted the term *mobbing* to describe the kinds of abusive, hostile behaviors that were being directed at employees by their coworkers. This pioneering expert on mobbing behaviors built on the work of ethologist Konrad Lorenz, who studied the behaviors of birds and other animals when they ganged up to drive a target animal out of their territory. Here is his “operational definition” of workplace mobbing (Leymann, 1990):

Psychical terror or mobbing in working life means hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual. . . . These actions take place often (almost every day) and over a long period (at least for six months) and, because of this frequency and duration, result in considerable psychic, psychosomatic and social misery. (p. 120)

Leymann (1990, 1996) fleshed out the above definition through his development of a multiphase model of workplace mobbing: namely, Phase 1: the precipitating conflict; Phase 2: the escalation of abusive behaviors against a target; Phase 3: the involvement of management or administration into the conflict; Phase 4: the acceleration of negative acts and labeling of the target; and Phase 5: the elimination of the target from the workplace or unit within it.

Kenneth Westhues, the Canadian sociologist, built on the work of Heinz Leymann and investigated multiple cases of workplace mobbing, in particular among academics in higher education. In a highly regarded series of books on workplace mobbing, Westhues (1998, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c) extended and applied Leymann’s definition and understanding of workplace mobbing to his analysis of multiple actual cases.

**Noa Davenport, Ruth Schwartz, and Gail Elliott**


The mobbing syndrome is a malicious attempt to force a person out of the workplace through unjustified accusations, humiliation, general harassment, emotional abuse, and/or terror.
It is a “ganging up” by the leader(s)—organization, superior, co-
worker, or subordinate—who rallies others into systematic and frequent
“mob-like” behavior.

. . . The result is always injury—physical or mental distress or ill-
ness and social misery and, most often, expulsion from the workplace.
(Davenport et al., 1999, p. 40)

In America, *bullying* gained a stronger foothold than *mobbing* as a preferred
term for employee relations stakeholders and the general public during the
first decade of the century. However, the work of these authors would help to
keep mobbing in the U.S. work abuse vocabulary as well.

**Maureen Duffy and Len Sperry**

Maureen Duffy and Len Sperry (2012) define workplace mobbing this way:

Workplace mobbing is nonsexual harassment of a coworker by a group
of members of an organization for the purpose of removing the targeted
individual(s) from the organization or at least a particular unit of the
organization. Mobbing involves individual, group, and organizational
dynamics. It predictably results in the humiliation, devaluation, dis-
crediting, and degradation; loss of professional reputation; and, often,
removal of the victim from the organization through termination,
extended medical leave, or quitting. The results of this typically pro-
tracted traumatizing experience are significant financial, career, health,
and psychosocial losses or other negative consequences. (p. 52)

Duffy and Sperry's (2012, 2014) definition of workplace mobbing is based
on a systemic, integrative approach to understanding workplace abuse and
includes the interaction of the individual with the group and with the larger
organization—all elements that they see as crucial in the development of
workplace mobbing and, hence, as necessary for inclusion in a comprehen-
sive definition. Like other definitions, Duffy and Sperry's includes the fact
that workplace mobbing is physically and psychologically health harming.
Unlike other definitions, they include the reputational damage and other
psychosocial losses that follow workplace mobbing.

In expanding on the inclusion in their definition of the fact that workplace
mobbing is a typically traumatizing experience, Duffy and Sperry (2014) state
that “it leaves the victim reeling, not knowing what has happened, why it hap-
pened, and, most important, what will happen in the future. Being mobbed
can take away a victim’s sense of safety and security in the world” (p. 1).
BULLYING VS. MOBBING

Researchers and commentators about bullying and mobbing behaviors at work have expressed different views about the relationship between the two terms. At times, these discussions have yielded (usually respectful) differences of opinion.

Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2011) recommend avoiding “the trap, often observed in social sciences, where new issues are coming into focus and a plethora of competing terms and concepts are introduced” (pp. 4–5), while gently chiding the United States for falling into it. They further suggest that “in practice, only minor differences exist between the concepts of bullying, harassment, and mobbing” (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 5). Accordingly, they endorse a more or less interchangeable use of the terms in referring to “the systematic exhibition of aggressive behavior at work directed towards a subordinate, a coworker, or even a superior, as well as the perception of being systematically exposed to such mistreatment while at work” (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 5).

Duffy and Sperry (2012, 2014) make the case for not conflating mobbing with bullying. They see the primary conditions differentiating mobbing from bullying in the workplace as (1) ganging up or group aggression that is always characteristic of mobbing and (2) organizational participation in mobbing through acts of commission or omission or both against the target. In Leymann’s (1990, 1996) multiphase model, organizational involvement in mobbing is specified in Phase 3, and Duffy and Sperry see organizational culture, climate, and leadership as a central feature of this destructive social process. On the other hand, bullying can involve one-on-one aggression and not include the process of ganging up by multiple actors. Additionally, definitions of bullying are silent on the issue of organizational involvement—a basic element of both Leymann’s (1990, 1996) and Duffy and Sperry’s (2012, 2014) definitions.

Martin and Peña Saint Martin (2012) prefer the use of the term mobbing over bullying to avoid conceptual confusion between mobbing and bullying. They suggest that the concept of bullying is most clearly associated for many, especially for those in Latin America and other Spanish-speaking countries, with aggression among schoolchildren. Because of differences in languages and in cultural understandings, it has so far not been possible to arrive at a global consensus of what the best term to describe workplace aggression is. Like Duffy and Sperry (2012, 2014) they also point out that the term mobbing always refers to group or collective aggression and is, therefore, more theoretically precise.

For Duffy and Sperry (2014), not conflating bullying and mobbing is particularly important when thinking about interventions to reduce and prevent workplace mobbing. They state, “Understanding the difference between
Workplace bullying and workplace mobbing is important because you can’t solve workplace mobbing by only addressing the bullying behaviors of individuals. Since organizations are the incubators of workplace mobbing, solving the problem of mobbing requires awareness and change at the organizational level as well as at the individual level” (Duffy & Sperry, 2014, p. 17). For Duffy and Sperry, the value of theoretical precision and sensitivity makes the case for distinguishing between mobbing and bullying and not conflating the differences between them.

**OTHER TERMS RELATED TO BULLYING AND MOBBING AT WORK**

Many other terms have been used to describe behaviors typically associated with, or related to, bullying and mobbing. Perhaps the earliest American treatment of this general subject is Carroll M. Brodsky’s *The Harassed Worker* (1976), describing workers who had been subjected to mental cruelty on the job that escaped safety protections designed to prevent physical workplace hazards. Other labels have included abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000); lateral violence, horizontal violence, and oppressed group behavior (Roberts, 1984; Vessey, Demarco, Gaffney, & Budin, 2009); emotional abuse (Keashly, 1997); indirect, relational, and social aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005); disruptive behaviors (The Joint Commission, 2008); chronic work trauma (Stennett-Brewer, 1997); relational aggression (Dellasega, 2009); and incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2009). Below is a closer look at several terms that have been offered during the past two decades.

**Work Abuse**

On the eve of workplace bullying and mobbing entering the lexicon of American employee relations, therapists Judith Wyatt and Chauncey Hare invoked the term *work abuse* to largely describe the same cluster of behaviors (Wyatt & Hare, 1997). In their 1997 book, they define work abuse as the “demeaning or brutalizing of a person through patterned ways of interacting at work that are mostly denied” (Wyatt & Hare, 1997, p. 373). These behaviors generally fall into four categories: “Ongoing (Neglectful) Abuse,” “Chronic Scapegoating,” “Acute Scapegoating,” and “Denial of Due Process” (Wyatt & Hare, 1997, p. 8).

Wyatt and Hare (1997) are especially critical of any tendency to conflate work stress and work abuse. Work stress is often a euphemism for work abuse and is invoked when people who are “routinely misused within a work system” blame the effects on themselves (Wyatt & Hare, 1997, p. 373). The
term _work stress_, they believe, “carries society’s false implication of self-blame for one’s abusive situation” (Wyatt & Hare, 1997, p. 373).

**Emotional Abuse**

In an early comprehensive literature review and commentary, Loraleigh Keashly (1997) uses the term _emotional abuse_ to capture varieties of verbal and nonverbal workplace aggression. She derived from the research seven common dimensions to form an overall definition of emotional abuse at work:

- “‘Behavior’ can include verbal and nonverbal/physical modes of expression”;
- “Constitutes a pattern (vs. a single event)”;
- “Includes behavior that is unwelcomed, unwanted, or unsolicited by the target”;
- “Involves a violation of a standard of conduct towards or treatment of others or of a person’s rights”;  
- “Results in harm to the target”;  
- “There is intent or controllability of the action”; and  
- “Involves power differences” (Keashly, 1997, pp. 94–96).

**Abusive Work Environment**

The Healthy Workplace Bill (HWB), authored by David Yamada, serves as the template workplace antibullying legislation for law reform efforts in the United States (Yamada, 2013). The HWB does not use the terms _bullying_ or _mobbing_ in its key operational and definitional language. Rather, use of the term _abusive work environment_ as a proxy for workplace bullying reflects the author’s decision to make the proposed bill language more legally congruent with protections against harassment based on protected class status, such as sexual harassment.

The Healthy Workplace Bill defines its primary cause of action as follows: “It shall be an unlawful employment practice under this Chapter to subject an employee to an abusive work environment as defined by this Chapter” (Yamada, 2013, p. 352). Within the bill language, the critical definition is “abusive work environment,” which “exists when an employer or one or more of its employees, acting with intent to cause pain or distress to an employee, subjects that employee to abusive conduct that causes physical harm, psychological harm, or both” (Yamada, 2013, p. 351). As explained in chapter 18, “abusive conduct” is further defined in ways that capture bullying and mobbing behaviors (Yamada, 2013, p. 351).
Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision is a term used to describe a type of workplace abuse that occurs between a supervisor and subordinate, in which the abuse is top-down and carried out within the context of a relationship in which there are clear power differentials. The characteristic behaviors are excessive criticism, fault-finding, nitpicking, micromanagement, and excessive supervision or scrutiny. Ben Tepper (2000) defines abusive supervision as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (p. 178). Tepper’s (2000) definition is based on the subjective assessment of the subordinate under supervision. However, the concept of abusive supervision has evolved to the point that certain supervisory behaviors (i.e., excessive criticism, faultfinding, etc.) are now generally regarded as intrinsically hostile or abusive, irrespective of whether the subordinate views them that way or not.

Workplace Violence and Psychological Violence

American conceptualizations of workplace violence commonly emphasize physical aggression, physical harm, and criminal behavior. For example, here is one of the early contemporary framings of the topic, courtesy of workplace violence expert Raymond Flannery:

Offices, courts, schools, and healthcare settings are no longer safe havens from crime. The four major societal crimes of homicide, assault, rape, and robbery have now become frequent visitors to the workplace. . . . While we shall look more closely at the specific nature of these crimes, . . . the general national statistics suggest that violence in society and in the workplace has become a major public health problem for our country. (Flannery, 1995, p. 5)

Some definitions leave room for purely verbal and nonverbal, nonphysical behavior, while continuing to focus on physically violent behavior that overlaps with criminal activity. For example, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (2002) uses this definition: “Workplace violence is violence or the threat of violence against workers. It can occur at or outside the workplace and can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and homicide, one of the leading causes of job-related deaths” (p. 1). Also, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (2006), the workplace-safety research arm of the federal government, has a classification system that labels “worker-on-worker” violence as Type III Violence, which may include “verbal violence (e.g., threats, verbal abuse, hostility, harassment) and other forms, such as stalking” (p. 4).
The Namies, among others in the United States, have attempted to bridge the gap by using the term *psychological violence* to describe bullying (Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 1). They appear to be on strong international ground, with both the International Labour Organization (Chappell & DiMartino, 2006) and the World Health Organization (Cassitto, Fattorini, Gilioli, & Rengo, 2003) also referring to bullying and mobbing behaviors as psychological violence and including them under the workplace violence rubric. While this may be an accurate characterization of forms of severe nonphysical aggression, the term is not widely used in the American employment context.

**Workplace Incivility**

*Workplace incivility* has been defined as “the exchange of seemingly inconsequential inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct” (Pearson & Porath, 2009, p. 12). Incivility researchers Christine Pearson and Christine Porath give as examples “interrupting a conversation,” “talking loudly in common areas,” “arriving late,” “not introducing a newcomer,” “failing to return a phone call,” and “showing little interest in another individual’s opinion” (Pearson & Porath, 2009, p. 12).

At times, incivility has been conflated with bullying and mobbing, and sometimes it has been used interchangeably, especially in the popular media. Furthermore, incivility research is sometimes used to buttress analyses of more severe forms of workplace mistreatment. In logical terms, it could be argued that while not every act of incivility rises to the level of bullying or mobbing, many bullying or mobbing behaviors would surely qualify as acts of incivility. Increasingly, however, researchers are distinguishing between incivility on one hand and bullying and mobbing on the other.

**Harassment and Hostile Work Environment**

*Hostile work environment* is a legal term used to describe a common form of harassment grounded in protected class status, such as sex or race. Most of the leading case law has developed in the context of sexual harassment (Yamada, 2000). Chapter 18 sets out the U.S. Supreme Court’s standard for defining what constitutes a hostile work environment under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

At times, those who are not versed in employment discrimination law will invoke this term to describe workplace bullying, aggression, and incivility. This is understandable, for combinations of these behaviors can surely make for hostile work environments. However, this may also create the misleading impression that all bullying-type behaviors are prohibited under employment discrimination laws, which is not the case. Unless it can be shown that
harassing behaviors are motivated by the target’s protected class status, they do not fall within the prohibitions of the Civil Rights Act and similar protective statutes (Yamada, 2000).

**COMMON WORKPLACE BULLYING AND MOBBING BEHAVIORS**

As a whole, workplace bullying and mobbing situations cover a gamut of overt and covert behaviors directed at targets. However, none of the core definitions examined here lists the more common bullying and mobbing behaviors. Although these behaviors may be self-evident to many who are consulting these volumes, it may be useful for those who are newer to the general subject matter to see a catalogue of some of the more common forms of workplace abuse. This also helps to put the definitions in context and build a foundation for the remaining chapters.

**Workplace Bullying Institute U.S. Survey**

The Workplace Bullying Institute’s 2007 U.S. scientific survey of workplace bullying provides a useful snapshot of common abusive behaviors at work (WBI, 2007). Under WBI’s guidance, the polling firm Zogby International conducted some 7,700 online interviews of a survey group representative of the U.S. population. Among those who indicated they had been subjected to forms of workplace bullying:

- 53 percent reported verbal abuse including “shouting, swearing, name calling, malicious sarcasm, threats to safety, etc.”;
- 53 percent reported behaviors and actions, private or public, including “threatening, intimidating, humiliating, hostile, offensive, inappropriately cruel conduct, etc.”;
- 47 percent reported abuse of authority, including “undeserved evaluations, denial of advancement, stealing credit, tarnished reputation, arbitrary instructions, unsafe assignments, etc.”;
- 45 percent reported “interference with work performance,” including “sabotage, undermining, ensuring failure, etc.”; and,
- 30 percent reported “destruction of workplace relationships” . . . “among co-workers, bosses, or customers.” (WBI, 2007, p. 12)

Other frequent bullying behaviors reported by survey participants included sexual harassment, defamation and misrepresentation, physical assault, pay and benefit reductions, and terminations without cause (WBI, 2007).
Leymann’s Critical Incident Model

Heinz Leymann identified frequent workplace mobbing behaviors as part of a four-phase critical-incident model leading from mobbing to expulsion (Leymann, 1990). Phase 1 is the critical incident itself, usually an unresolved work conflict that leads supervisors and/or coworkers to resent or dislike the victim. Phase 2 is the actual mobbing or stigmatizing of the victim, which includes a range of negative acts against the victim, including removal from the workplace. Specific behaviors may include:

- Injuring the victim’s personal reputation, including “rumor mongering, slander, holding up to ridicule”;
- Directing or limiting communications, such as undermining the victim’s ability to communicate, giving the silent treatment, or “continual loud-voiced criticism and meaningful [hostile] glances”;
- Physical and social isolation of the victim;
- Undermining the victim’s ability to work, including withholding work assignments or giving the victim “humiliating or meaningless work tasks”; and,
- Directing “violence and threats of violence” at the victim. (Leymann, 1990, p. 121)

Phase 3 of the process involves more formal management involvement that “turns the person into a marked individual” through negative formal evaluations of job performance and negative assessments of suitability for continued employment. Finally, phase 4 culminates in the expulsion of the victim from the organization.

Individual Situations May Vary

Individual aggressors may have their favored tactics and strategies, and patterns of abusive behaviors may emerge in certain types of work settings. Many of the negative acts and patterns of negative acts in bullying and mobbing are sadly predictable. However, it would be risky to presume that there are uniform sets of bullying and mobbing behaviors for given situations. Indeed, while some occurrences of work abuse are ordinary and foreseeable in terms of the behaviors described above, we are continually amazed and appalled at the inventive combinations of mistreatment that can be directed at targets.

Accordingly, specific instances of mobbing and bullying typically involve varying combinations of these hostile behaviors and negative acts. Based on our familiarity with hundreds of bullying and mobbing situations, a multitude of contextual factors shapes the choices of abusive behaviors enacted by
aggressors. These include, among other things, power relationships grounded in organizational hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics, legal relationships, the number and nature of key actors, institutional resources available to aggressors, and motivations driving the mistreatment. Furthermore, in given situations the types of bullying and mobbing behaviors may change over time, depending upon the status of those targeted and the roles of those enlisted to participate in the abuse.

**KEY ELEMENTS OF DEFINITIONS**

Obviously, the foregoing definitions of bullying, mobbing, and related terms vary in some ways. Taken as a whole, however, they lead us to a largely shared cluster of key elements.

**Negative Acts**

All of the core definitions of bullying and mobbing include negative acts. For example, Adams refers to “vindictive, cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine” targets (Ellis, 2011, p. 2). Namie and Namie (2009) cite “verbal abuse; conduct or behaviors that are threatening, intimidating, or humiliating; sabotage that prevents works from getting done; or some combination of the three” (p. 1). And Duffy and Sperry (2012) describe “devaluation, discrediting, and degradation; loss of professional reputation; and, often, removal of the victim from the organization” (p. 52). Lists of specific negative behaviors, however, are usually reserved for subsequent commentary following the definitions.

Many commentators would readily acknowledge that bullying and mobbing are dignity-denying forms of mistreatment. However, only Keashly’s (1997) definition expressly describes the harm in terms of societal norms and rights, noting that workplace emotional abuse “involves a violation of a standard of conduct towards or treatment of others or of a person’s rights” (p. 95).

**Intention**

Most definitions and explanations of workplace bullying and mobbing, as well as definitions of related terms, include an element of intent by an aggressor, either explicitly or implicitly. For example, in defining workplace bullying, Namie and Namie (2009) refer to an aggressor’s “personal agenda of controlling another human being” (p. 1). Duffy and Sperry (2014), in describing workplace mobbing, refer to how “individuals, groups, or organizations target a person for ridicule, humiliation, and removal from the workplace” (p. 1). Yamada’s (2013) legal conceptualization of an abusive work
environment includes “intent to cause pain or distress to an employee” (p. 351). By contrast, Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper state that bullying “may be carried out deliberately or unconsciously” (2011, p. 9).

A 2009 survey of human resources practitioners by Teresa Daniel and Gary Metcalf (2016) exploring distinctions between perceived workplace bullies and tough bosses suggested that intent matters. Interviews of survey respondents indicated that the presence of malice created a dividing line between bullying and tough management: “Participants were able to articulate clear distinctions between a bully and a tough boss. The ‘so what’ of this study was our finding that it is the presence or absence of malice that determines whether a conflict at work is actually workplace bullying, with malice defined as "the desire to cause pain, injury, or distress to another" (Daniel & Metcalf, 2016, p. 31).

**Frequency and Duration**

Under Leymann’s definition (1990, p. 120), “these actions take place often (almost every day) and over a long period (at least for six months).” Other core definitions are less specific, with the Namies (2009, p. 1) referring to “repeated” behaviors and Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2011, p. 9) referring to “repeated actions and practises.” Furthermore, as noted by Keashly (1997), the behaviors present a pattern as opposed to being a single event. In general, we may presume that the greater the frequency and duration of the mistreatment, the more likely it is to be considered a form of bullying or mobbing. Specifications of frequency and duration are also likely to appear in survey instruments measuring prevalence rates.

**Negative Impacts**

Virtually every definition of bullying, mobbing, or similar terms includes negative health impacts on targets. Namie and Namie (2009) refer to “health-harming” effects (p. 1), while Einarsen and colleagues (2011) describe “severe social, psychological, and psychosomatic problems” (p. 4). Duffy and Sperry (2014) include “deteriorating physical and mental health” (p. 1), and add to that the disorientation experienced by targets who are left “reeling, not knowing what has happened, why it happened, and . . . what will happen in the future” (p. 1). In the legal context, Yamada’s conceptualization of an “abusive work environment” requires “physical harm, psychological harm, or both” to state a valid cause of action (2013, p. 351).

The core definitions tend not to delve into forms of collateral damage facing targets, including psychosocial impacts such as vocational and professional identities, future employability and career prospects, and impairment of
family and personal relationships. They also tend to omit the significant costs of these behaviors to employers and organizations. However, the cited commentators and researchers discuss these factors at length in their major works.

**Number and Roles of Actors**

Most of the core definitions anticipate a single target. However, Adams refers to attempts to undermine an “individual or groups of employees” (Ellis, 2011, p. 2), and Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2011) refer to behaviors “that are directed against one or more workers” (p. 9). This raises the question of whether negative acts directed at a larger number of workers somehow lose “eligibility” to be deemed bullying or mobbing, perhaps at some stage falling into the category of very bad management rather than targeted aggression.

In terms of aggressors, both the bullying and mobbing definitions generally anticipate the possibility of more than one actor participating in the abusive behaviors. Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott (1999) invoke the more emotionally laden “ganging up” (p. 40) in their definition of mobbing.

**FRAMING CONCEPTS FOR TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Organizational Culture and Responsibility**

The basic definitions provided here focus on central actors, intentions, behaviors, and impacts. Most of the core definitions do not branch into the roles of organizational cultures in discouraging or enabling the underlying behaviors, nor do they address questions of institutional responsibility when such behaviors occur. Duffy and Sperry (2012) are unique in this respect in that they include “mobbing involves individual, group, and organizational dynamics” (p. 52) in their definition. Nonetheless, learned researchers and commentators readily acknowledge the organizational implications of bullying and mobbing, including the central role of top leadership in establishing workplace cultures. These behaviors are especially prevalent in organizations with more pronounced hierarchical structures (Grubb, Roberts, Swanson, Burnfield, & Childress, 2005).

**Power Imbalances and Differentials**

Of the core definitions shared here, Keashly (1997) expressly mentions power differentials between aggressors and targets; Adams refers to the “abuse of power or position” (Ellis, 2011, p. 2); and Leymann includes the inevitable role of management or administration (1990, 1996). Surveys covering workplace bullying in America consistently show supervisors and bosses as the
most likely aggressors by a significant margin over peers and coworkers, with subordinates coming a distant last (Namie & Namie, 2009). More fundamentally, bullying and mobbing behaviors are, by their very nature, exercises of power over another because of organizational rank and culture, individual personalities, demographics, and perceived target vulnerabilities.

**IMPLICATIONS OF TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

The public at large, academic researchers, labor and employee relations practitioners, legal and dispute resolution institutions, and mental health providers are among the stakeholders whose interests are implicated by how we label and define workplace bullying, mobbing, and related behaviors.

**Public Education, Dialogue, and Understanding**

The benefits of naming, labeling, and defining behaviors can be considerable. Both authors can attest to having people targeted by workplace bullying and mobbing reporting that they had no idea what they were enduring until they discovered articles, Web sites, and blogs using these terms and explaining the underlying behaviors and their impacts. The terms and definitions resonated with these individuals and often captured their experiences.

Whether dealing with individuals, organizations, or society as a whole, the naming of recurring behaviors in our lives may help us to develop a contextual understanding of our experiences. Consider, for example, how the term *sexual harassment* has changed our understanding of employment relations, discrimination, and gender. Until the underlying behaviors were named, women so targeted had no easy way to refer to them. Today, however, the term *sexual harassment* is well understood and has significant personal, societal, and legal meanings.

Of course, there are risks that come with using such familiar words as *bullying* and *mobbing*. Both terms carry differing cultural connotations that may add emotional components to the definitions offered above and elsewhere. For example, over the years, the authors have fielded claims that bullying is too soft a label to adequately capture the damage wrought by the underlying behaviors, while encountering others who believe the term is too heavy-handed. To further illustrate, mobbing may conjure up images of angry assemblies of people carrying pitchforks, whereas workplace mobbing may actually be much more strategic and multidirectional in nature.

Furthermore, adapting these terms to label workplace aggressors involves potential stigmatization. Most would not want to be branded a bully or a mobber, and some may face retaliation, retribution, or ostracism after being publicly tagged as such.
Research

In designing and conducting research studies about workplace bullying and mobbing, definitions may play a significant role. For example, definitions will help to inform lists of behaviors or scales used by researchers in prevalence surveys. Furthermore, definitions may shape questions posed to survey respondents or interviewees in qualitative studies. Further evidence of this will be found in chapter 2 (prevalence of bullying and mobbing).

The use of labels or terms in survey research may be more problematic. As discussed above, bullying and mobbing may carry strong connotations. Invoking terms (e.g., “Have you ever been bullied at work?”) rather than behaviors may project meanings to respondents or invite them to make up their own, thus subjectively influencing their answers to survey questions.

Mental Health Care

If a client or patient approaches a mental health care provider with a personal account about, say, domestic abuse or sexual harassment, then using the label will likely provide a common base of understanding for both parties that can inform further discussion and eventual therapeutic and treatment options. It can potentially be so with workplace bullying and mobbing.

However, for two reasons, we are not quite there yet. First, unlike sexual harassment, the terms are not sufficiently well-known that workers will necessarily invoke them when confronted by the behaviors. Second, the mental health community is not adequately informed on this overall topic, resulting in too many situations being dismissed or misunderstood as ordinary conflicts and stressors of a job (see chapters 13 and 14 for a fuller discussion). However, levels of understanding are widening and deepening, and it is eminently foreseeable that targets of bullying and mobbing will get more hospitable and understanding receptions from mental health providers in the years to come.

Labor and Employee Relations

Terms and definitions matter greatly for ground-level applications in labor and employee relations. As explained in chapter 18, collective bargaining agreements and, in many jurisdictions, employee handbooks have contractual force. If provisions covering bullying and mobbing behaviors are included in such documents, then nearly every key word or phrase carries potential legal significance for employees and employers. If an employment policy refers to generic bullying or mobbing but does not define the term in terms of conduct or behavior, then in the event of litigation, it may be left to a legal tribunal to adopt a definition.
**Law and Public Policy**

Specific words and phrases matter greatly in law and public policy, including those covering bullying and mobbing behaviors. Courts and administrative tribunals will look first to specific terms and definitions in legislation and regulations to clarify the scope of coverage of legal protections and obligations. In the case of laws that explicitly cover bullying and mobbing behaviors, definitions contained within will be controlling.

**Conflict Resolution**

Labels, definitions, and accompanying legal norms may significantly influence the roles of conflict resolution mechanisms, including alternative dispute resolution modalities. If bullying and mobbing are acknowledged as forms of interpersonal mistreatment or abuse, then conflict resolution systems are more likely to recognize the possibilities of wrongful behavior and exploitation of power differentials. If these behaviors are classified as forms of interpersonal conflict, then parties are more likely to be treated as equals who cannot resolve their differences privately.

**MAKING ROOM FOR A BIG TENT**

In this chapter, we set out a basic landscape of terms and definitions that will inform and help to frame subsequent chapters in these two volumes. We hope that we have done so in a way that creates room for different preferences and opinions on terminology related to these destructive workplace behaviors.

**REFERENCES**


