

# Influence of Some Psychosocial Factors on Mobbing and its Consequences Among Employees Working with People with Intellectual Disabilities

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**Background** The problem of mobbing has attracted a great deal of attention over the past few years. This concern has increased the study of the phenomena, which has resulted in many scientific publications. Mobbing has been characterized as an emerging risk at work. The aim of this study was to analyse the influence of some psychosocial factors at work – role clarity, interpersonal conflicts and social support – on mobbing and its consequences – that is, inclination towards absenteeism and psychosomatic disorders.

**Materials and methods** The sample included 422 employees working with people with intellectual disabilities.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses.

**Results** The Hypothesized model showed an adequate fit to data, and all hypothesized relationships were significant.

**Conclusions** The results of this study provide support for the mediator role of mobbing in the relationship between high role ambiguity, low social support and high interpersonal conflicts and psychosomatic disorders and inclination towards absenteeism.

**Keywords:** inclination towards absenteeism, mobbing, psychosocial risk factors, psychosomatic disorders

## Introduction

Mobbing has been defined as interpersonal workplace aggression and efforts by individuals to harm others with whom they work (Neuman & Baron 2005). In addition, this form of aggression is not necessarily related to discriminatory behaviours based on gender, race or social group. In the case of aggression, some authors, such as Einarsen *et al.* (2003), have emphasized the question of whether or not there is an intention to do harm.

Authors have often employed different terms to name the same phenomenon: mobbing, bullying and harassment. According to Einarsen (2000), the expressions bullying and harassment can be used synonymously with the Scandinavian concept of mobbing. Furthermore, Einarsen *et al.* (2003) concluded that mobbing and bullying are used interchangeably to refer to the same phenomenon. Sperry (2009) states that the terms bullying and

mobbing are used more or less synonymously, whereas preferences vary geographically.

In environments with poorly organizing of work processes, conditions germinate that can lead to critical situations for the worker, like mobbing (Hauge *et al.* 2009). Examples of the so-called healthy organizations from the theoretical field have not yet been translated into proper practice, and mobbing situations have been increasing in the last few years (Mayhew *et al.* 2004), with a prevalence of between 2 and 15% being found in several studies (Høgh & Dofradottir 2001; Niedhammer *et al.* 2006; González-Trijueque & Graña 2009; Escartín *et al.* 2011).

However, in Spain, the High Court decision of 19 November 2007 determines 'the existence of moral harassment, not necessarily involving violence or explicit coercion, but displayed through acts of a clear, decisive and gratuitous nature that go beyond any

organizing or corrective authority corresponding to the role of employer, and that can produce anxious or depressive symptoms and low self-esteem in the average person.'

In this context, as Hershcovis & Barling (2010) point out, it should not be forgotten that the victim's subjective perception will determine whether the behaviour is considered discriminatory or not, and how it differs from sexual harassment behaviour.

Therefore, the definition of mobbing contains two fundamental elements: one, the interpersonal context in which it occurs; and, two, its consideration as an aggressive behaviour in that interpersonal space.

Mobbing began to attract the interest of European researchers in the 1990s (Einarsen *et al.* 1994; Einarsen 2000; Leymann 1990, 1996; Rayner 1997). Studies focused on its consequences for workers' health and satisfaction (Einarsen & Mikkelsen 2003) and its relationship with variables like commitment, job satisfaction and absenteeism (Hoel & Salin 2003; Djurkovic *et al.* 2004). Whereas the European tradition emphasizes the study of the characteristics of conflict (Zapf & Einarsen 2005) and the work environment (Einarsen *et al.* 1994; Hoel & Salin 2003), research in the United States focuses on the description of mobbing as a form of aggression in the workplace (Neuman & Baron 2003), understood as discriminatory conduct (Cortina 2008).

Following the ideas of researchers like Neuman & Baron (2003), we understand that mobbing is an attack at the interpersonal level of organizational relations that reaches deep within each individual. It involves undervaluing the human condition, and it is characterized by its offensiveness and ability to violate rights and fundamental freedoms in the workplace, as the Spanish Constitutional Court acknowledged in Decision number 186/2000.

Several definitions indicate that the emotional aspects make up one of the most representative features of mobbing (Keashly 2001; Mikkelsen & Einarsen 2002; Lutgen-Sandvik 2003). Along with the emotional aspects, it is important to consider the cognitive aspects, as victims of aggression tend to make more internal attributions (Hershcovis & Barling 2010). These cognitive processes determine both the visible behaviours of the people affected and their coping strategies, influencing the appearance of guilt, chronic victimization and health problems.

Among the antecedents of mobbing, there are some job characteristics that, as they deteriorate and become psychosocial risks, facilitate its emergence. This is the case of role ambiguity or low role clarity. Role ambiguity refers to the lack of clarity in the requirements asked

of the worker in the workplace. Baillien & De Witte (2009) point out in their study that role ambiguity can promote mobbing. Spector & Fox (2005) identified role ambiguity as a very important factor that triggers the exercise of aggressive behaviours towards other individuals in the organization. Notelaers *et al.* (2010) carried out a study in Belgium whose aim was to analyse job characteristics as antecedents of mobbing. They concluded that role ambiguity plays a slightly more important role than other factors in explaining mobbing. Moreover, other studies have found significant positive relationships between this variable and mobbing (Bowling & Beehr 2006; Baillien & De Witte 2009; Hauge *et al.* 2010).

Another variable studied in the mobbing development process is interpersonal conflicts (Baillien & De Witte 2009). Tuckey *et al.* (2009) indicate that highly hierarchical organizations may use mobbing as a strategy to maintain power within the organizational culture. These organizations are characterized by promoting large differences in power and status among their members and working with highly authoritarian management styles (Mikkelsen & Einarsen 2001), thus being more likely to facilitate the emergence of mobbing situations (Hodson *et al.* 2006). In the same vein, other empirical studies have shown a relationship between interpersonal conflict and mobbing. From the victim's perspective, unresolved conflicts have been mentioned as one of the main causes of negative events that incorporate mobbing (Zapf 1999).

Einarsen & Hauge (2006) indicated that social support from colleagues and supervisors, as well as family support, may act as a protector against the appearance of mobbing by establishing more effective coping strategies. Bowling & Beehr (2006) emphasize the importance of social support as an antithesis to mobbing, because its presence would reduce the likelihood of mobbing. Some studies have obtained empirical evidence for this statement (Hansen *et al.* 2006; Baillien & De Witte 2009; Tuckey *et al.* 2009).

Role ambiguity (Hatton *et al.* 1999; Gray-Stanley *et al.* 2010), interpersonal conflicts (Jahoda & Wanless 2005) and social support (Flores *et al.* 2011; Mutkins *et al.* 2011) have been identified as relevant stressors in employees working with people with intellectual disabilities. Gil-Monte *et al.* (2006) found a prevalence of mobbing of 18.97% among 696 Spanish employees working with people with intellectual disabilities. Moreover, mobbing has been identified as a prominent phenomenon in occupational groups with working conditions similar to those of these workers, such as nurses (Sá &

Fleming 2008; Yildirim 2009) and teachers (Fox & Stallworth 2010). These examples support the relevance of the present study of employees working with people with intellectual disabilities.

Among the negative effects of mobbing, health problems and increasing absenteeism have been mentioned. The effects of mobbing on health have been detected in several studies, and significant positive associations have been obtained between mobbing levels and psychosomatic symptoms assessed with the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) (Sá & Fleming 2008; Einarsen *et al.* 2009; Rodríguez-Muñoz *et al.* 2009). Other studies have linked mobbing to physical problems such as insomnia, chronic fatigue, etc. (Niedhammer *et al.* 2009). In a recent study, Morán *et al.* (2009) found positive relationships between mobbing and health problems like somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia or depression. These results are similar to those from other studies carried out in Spain in the past (García-Izquierdo *et al.* 2006; Moreno-Jiménez *et al.* 2006; Rodríguez-Muñoz *et al.* 2009).

Einarsen *et al.* (2009) pointed out a positive relationship between mobbing and health problems, reduced work performance, absenteeism and increased intention to leave. Hauge *et al.* (2010), in a study carried out in Norway with more than 2000 workers, found a significant positive relationship between mobbing and absenteeism, although this result only explains 5% of the variance in the study.

Furthermore, some authors have studied the role of mobbing actions in the relationship between some psychosocial stressors and their consequences. Mobbing actions have been found to play a mediator role between: (i) job demands and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (Balducci *et al.* 2011), (ii) job strain and symptoms of depression and sleep disturbances (Takaki *et al.* 2010), (iii) organizational climate and psychological health (Giorgi 2009) and (iv) social support and physical symptoms (van Dick & Wagner 2001).

The aim of this study was to analyse the influence of role clarity, interpersonal conflicts and social support on mobbing and its consequences – that is, inclination towards absenteeism and psychosomatic disorders –, and the mediator role of mobbing actions in the relationships between these psychosocial factors and the consequences of mobbing, in a sample of employees working with people with intellectual disabilities.

**Hypothesis 1.** A significant positive relationship is expected between role ambiguity and mobbing (signifi-

cant negative relationship between role clarity and mobbing).

**Hypothesis 2.** A significant positive relationship is expected between interpersonal conflicts and mobbing.

**Hypothesis 3.** A significant negative relationship is expected between social support at work and mobbing.

**Hypothesis 4.** A significant positive relationship is expected between mobbing and psychosomatic disorders.

**Hypothesis 5.** A significant positive relationship is expected between mobbing and inclination towards absenteeism.

The hypotheses were integrated into a path model in which psychosocial risks were linked to mobbing and its consequences.

**Hypothesis 6.** Mobbing actions would mediate the relationships between psychosocial factors, and psychosomatic disorders and inclination towards absenteeism (Figure 1).

## Methods

### Participants

The sample consisted of 422 Spanish employees working with people with intellectual disabilities at 61 companies in the Valencian Community (Spain). With regard to gender, 88 (21.2%) participants were men, and 328 (78.8%) were women. Six participants did not answer this question. The mean age was 39.29 years (maximum = 70, minimum = 22). With regard to occupation, the highest percentage of participants worked as educators (29.85%) and personal care assistants (23.7%). The remaining par-

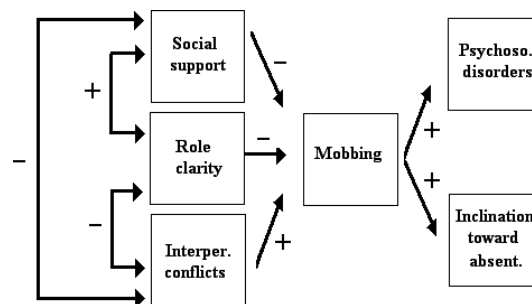


Figure 1 Hypothesized model.

ticipants worked as social workers, psychologists, health professionals, administrative staff, etc. In addition, 76% of participants were tenured staff, and 24% were temporary. The mean number of years at work was 12.04 (SD = 7.81; range: 0–43 years). Response rate was 61.82%.

### Instruments

Role clarity was measured by the UNIPSIICO subscale (five items,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ) (adapted from Rizzo *et al.* 1970). Items refer to the degree of clarity that employees have about their jobs (e.g. I know what my responsibilities are). Social support was measured by the UNIPSIICO subscale (eight items,  $\alpha = 0.81$ ) (adapted from Caplan *et al.* 1975). Items refer to social support from supervisor, colleagues, centre administrators and users (e.g. *Do you feel appreciated by colleagues in the workplace?*). Interpersonal conflicts were measured by the UNIPSIICO subscale (six items,  $\alpha = .76$ ). Items refer to interpersonal conflicts that employees have in their workplace with the management of the organization, their supervisor, colleagues, other employees and organization users (e.g. *How often do you have conflicts with your colleagues?*). Participants answered the items on all subscales on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from 'Never' (0) to 'Very frequently: Every day' (4).

Mobbing was evaluated by the Mobbing-UNIPSIICO scale (Gil-Monte *et al.* 2006) ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). This scale contains 20 items adapted from the *Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorization* (Leymann 1990) and the Negative Acts Questionnaire (Einarsen & Hoel 2001), taking into consideration mobbing actions that are more frequent in Spain (Piñuel & Oñate 2002). Items deal with effects on the victim's opportunities to communicate adequately and maintain social contacts (e.g. management gives you no chance to communicate, you are silenced, you receive verbal threats, verbal activities to reject you, etc.), effects on the victim's possibilities of maintaining his or her personal reputation (e.g. others ridicule you), effects on the victim's occupational situation (e.g. you are not given any work assignments at all; you are given meaningless work assignments) and effects on the victim's health (e.g. 'sexual harassment'). Previous studies have concluded that this scale has acceptable psychometric properties, and all items load on one factor labelled 'Mobbing' (Gil-Monte *et al.* 2006). These items are evaluated on a scale with five options (0 'Never' to 4 'Every day'). There is one additional item where the participant indicates the duration of the actions (1 = less than 6 months to 7 = 10 months or more) ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

Psychosomatic disorders were measured by the UNIPSIICO subscale (nine items,  $\alpha = 0.85$ ) (adapted from Caplan *et al.* 1975). Items include different work-related psychosomatic disorders (e.g. headaches, musculoskeletal pain, sleep quality, anxiety, illness) (e.g. *Do you have a headache?*). Participants answered the items on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from 'Never' (0) to 'Very frequently: Every day' (4). Inclination towards absenteeism was rated using the UNIPSIICO subscale (four items,  $\alpha = 0.78$ ) (adapted from Geurts *et al.* 1994). Items refer to motivation for the employee to go to work (personal circumstances; not feeling too well; just wanting to stay at home; being fed up with work). Participants answered the items on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from 'Never' (0) to 'Always' (4).

### Procedure

The companies were selected in a non-random manner, taking into consideration the population of companies that provide care and attention to people with intellectual disabilities (stimulation centres, occupational centres, day centres and residential centres) in the Valencian Community (Spain). The researchers contacted the managers of all the selected centres to ask for permission to administer a questionnaire. Next, all of the workers at the selected centres were asked to fill out the inventory. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was guaranteed. The questionnaire was handed out together with a response envelope in which to return the questionnaire to the researchers. In some centres, the response envelopes were collected by the researchers.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses. The model was examined using AMOS 7. The maximum likelihood estimation method was employed. The goodness of fit of the estimated model was evaluated using the Chi-squared test, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Normed Fit Index (NFI) were also used (Bentler & Bonett 1980). As a rule of thumb, RMSEA values <0.08 indicate an adequate fit (MacCallum *et al.* 1996), GFI values >0.95 indicate a good fit (Schumacker & Lomax 2004), and NFI and CFI values larger than 0.95 indicate a good fit (Hu & Bentler 1999).

### Results

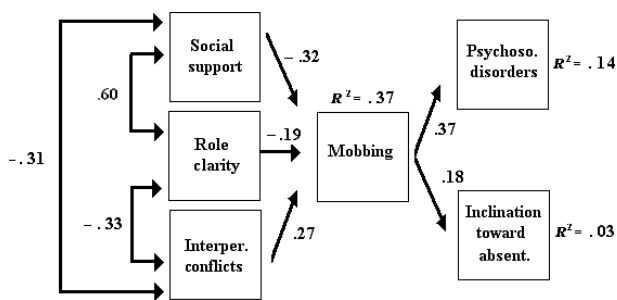
Descriptive statistics for the items are shown in Table 1. The internal consistency for all scales yielded values

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha and correlations between the study variables

	Mean	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Role clarity	2.93	0.86	0–4	(0.79)					
2. Interpersonal conflicts	0.89	0.51	0–4	–0.33*	(0.76)				
3. Social support	2.68	0.77	0–4	0.60*	–0.31*	(0.81)			
4. Mobbing	0.33	0.39	0–4	–0.47*	0.43*	–0.51*	(0.92)		
5. Psychosomatic disorders	1.08	0.68	0–4	–0.29*	0.29*	–0.29*	0.37*	(0.85)	
6. Inclination absenteeism	3.12	0.83	0–4	–0.18*	0.13*	–0.15*	0.18*	0.15*	(0.78)

The Cronbach's alpha values are in the diagonal of the correlation matrix.

\* $P < 0.001$ .

**Figure 2** Estimated Hypothesized model.

higher than 0.70, indicating appropriate internal values consistency (Table 1).

The Hypothesized model obtained an adequate data fit for the sample:  $\chi^2$  (d.f. = 7) = 27.073 ( $P = 0.000$ ), RMSEA = 0.083, GFI = 0.978, NFI = 0.950, CFI = 0.962. All of the relationships between the study variables were statistically significant. More specifically, the relationships between role clarity ( $r = -0.19$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), interpersonal conflict ( $r = 0.27$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), social support at work ( $r = -0.32$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and mobbing were significant and in the expected direction. In the same way, mobbing correlated significantly and in the expected direction with psychosomatic disorders ( $r = 0.37$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and inclination towards absenteeism ( $r = -0.18$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ). These results confirmed the hypotheses formulated.

Psychosocial factors accounted for 37% of the variance in this study. In turn, the overall model explained 13.8% of psychosomatic disorders and 3% of inclination towards absenteeism (Figure 2).

## Discussion

The main purpose of the current study was to test a comprehensive model of mobbing. The aim was to ana-

lyse the influence of role clarity, interpersonal conflicts and social support on mobbing and its consequences – that is, inclination towards absenteeism and psychosomatic disorders –, and the mediator role of mobbing actions in the relationship between these psychosocial factors and the consequences of mobbing in a sample of employees working with people with intellectual disabilities.

All six hypotheses have been confirmed. Thus, Hypothesis 1 established a negative and significant relationship between role clarity and mobbing. The results coincide with those obtained in past studies, where positive and significant relationships were found between role ambiguity and mobbing (Baillien & De Witte 2009; Hauge *et al.* 2010). In their study, Baillien & De Witte (2009) state that role ambiguity can encourage mobbing. Thus, in the present study, role clarity plays an important role in preventing the development of mobbing. Hypothesis 2 suggested that a positive and significant relationship would be found between interpersonal conflicts and mobbing. Baillien & De Witte (2009) obtained similar results to those found in this study. In a study in which a four-stage model was formulated after performing 800 case studies, Leymann (1996) proposed that mobbing might be a consequence of interpersonal conflicts.

Taking Hypothesis 3 into consideration, we expected to find a negative and significant relationship between social support and mobbing. After a literature review, we expected social support to play an important role in the prevention of the mobbing development process. As Bowling & Beehr (2006) state, the presence of social support might, hypothetically, eliminate the chance of mobbing. Inversely, Zapf (1999) argues that mobbing might negatively affect social climate and bring about a decrease in social support. Given that hypothesis 3 was confirmed, our results support these authors by showing

that social support is an important tool to protect employees against mobbing.

According to Hypothesis 4, we expected to find a positive and significant relationship between psychosomatic disorders and mobbing. After a literature review, we can conclude that mobbing has serious consequences for employee health. Psychosomatic problems measured with the GHQ, and their connection with mobbing, have been shown in different studies (Sá & Fleming 2008; Einarsen *et al.* 2009; Rodríguez-Muñoz *et al.* 2009). The results obtained in this study confirm this hypothesis and concur with these mentioned studies.

Hypothesis 5 expected to find a positive and significant relationship between inclination towards absenteeism and mobbing. This hypothesis was confirmed, and the results agree with those obtained in the past studies where mobbing is a predictor of absenteeism (Einarsen *et al.* 2009). Similarly, in the present study, the variance explained in the model by the tendency towards absenteeism variable is low, as it is in the aforementioned studies (Hauge *et al.* 2010).

Finally, all previous hypotheses were included in a structural equation model whose purpose was to explain the mobbing development process in a sample of employees working with people with intellectual disabilities. All adjustment indexes in the model were appropriate. The Hypothesized model obtained an adequate data fit for the sample. Thus, we can conclude that the model suggested in the present study is valid to explain the mobbing development process. According to the Hypothesized model, mobbing plays a mediator role between the assessed psychosocial factors/risks and their consequences, that is, psychosomatic disorders and inclination towards absenteeism (Hypothesis 6).

Within the study limitations, its cross-sectional nature should be noted. Because it is not a longitudinal study, causal conclusions should not be derived from it. Another limitation of the present study is that the sample was not balanced in terms of gender (21.2% of the sample were men). However, this ratio has been obtained in some studies with employees working with people with intellectual disabilities conducted outside of Spain (Hatton *et al.* 1999; Innstrand *et al.* 2004; Thomas & Rose 2010). On the other hand, it should also be noted that answers to the questionnaire were subjective and, therefore, may be biased. Another limitation of the study is that the score on the mobbing variable was calculated as a mean of all the scores on the scale, and it included all the individuals in the sample, both those who met the mobbing criteria and those who did not.

Regarding the practical contributions, the relevance of this study is that it provides evidence showing that role ambiguity, low social support and interpersonal conflicts are significant predictors of mobbing actions and their consequences in employees working with people with intellectual disabilities. As practical suggestions based on the study, we can conclude that since role ambiguity and conflict trigger mobbing, solutions for their prevention should be found, such as making staff roles clear (Hatton *et al.* 2001), and using techniques like the role negotiation to improve employee resources to prevent mobbing actions (Licata & Popovich 1987). Regarding interpersonal conflicts, the supervisor, job committee representatives or the trade union should avoid the escalation of the conflict (Salin 2009). Previous studies have shown that a change in workgroup or department seems to be a reasonable solution (Zapf & Gross 2001). In addition, social support should be fostered (Duffy 2009) because, as the present study shows, it has the ability to prevent the development of mobbing and its consequences. Managers might consider how well resources are managed and offer employee assistance programs (Richardson & Rothstein 2008) to improve interpersonal relationships and social support at work.

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