

Mobbing in Slovenia: Prevalence, mobbing victim characteristics, and the connection with post-traumatic stress disorder

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Abstract

An increasing number of organizations face the problem of mobbing, which represents a serious, widespread problem with numerous consequences for victims, organizations, and society. We also recognize the connection this phenomenon has with the emergence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD poses one of the most critical consequences for victims of mobbing, who mostly consist of employees at lower organizational levels. Our research focuses on the prevalence of mobbing in Slovenia, its correlation to PTSD, and some differences in the subjective and objective assessments of being exposed to mobbing. We found that the prevalence of mobbing in Slovenia can be compared to some previous assessments as well as data from other countries. Among the study's participants, 24% could be classified as regular victims of mobbing. For the first time, we link mobbing with PTSD using a Slovenian sample. We also recorded some interesting differences between subjective and objective assessments of mobbing, thereby indicating the importance of subjective conceptualizations of mobbing acts, which should be investigated in greater detail in future research.

Keywords: Mobbing, post-traumatic stress disorder, prevalence, subjective and objective assessment, workplace health.

1 Introduction

The modern workplace is changing: The pace of work is accelerating while work efficiency and performance depend on social interaction more than ever. New ways of doing business lead to increased competition and rivalry between coworkers. In addition to difficult interpersonal relationships and increasing

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stress, the phenomenon of mobbing is becoming increasingly noticeable. Mobbing is a sophisticated form of terror in the workplace that can be used to disable a coworker emotionally, mentally, socially, and economically (Bakovnik, 2006).

Several studies have confirmed that mobbing is an issue. Researchers estimate that the prevalence of mobbing ranges anywhere from 1% to 53% among various occupations and countries (Bentley et al., 2012; Cowie et al., 2000; Leymann, 1996; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Vartia, 1996; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). Data for Slovenia also vary. The fourth European Working Condition Survey revealed a 7.4% prevalence (Parent-Thirion, Macias, Hurley, & Vermeylen, 2007) whereas the Slovenian Banking Union' research recorded a 15.1% prevalence (Robnik & Milanovič, 2008). Mobbing most often affects subordinates in organizations (Brinkmann, 1995; Zapf et al., 2003), which includes several other groups that are even more exposed, such as the elderly, people who are often absent, and women (Brečko, 2010). Kostelić-Martić (2007) pointed out that minorities—from religious and ideological minorities to homosexuals—are also victims of mobbing.

Yet we must emphasize that not every insolence or ordinary work requirement should be seen as an act of mobbing. Vie, Glasø, and Einarsen (2010) suggested that the term *mobbing* should be treated within the individual's experience of a certain act that is caused by others. Some people might interpret an action as a harmless joke, while others might see the same action as an act of mobbing. In any case, subjective assessments often differ from the results of objective measurements, although some coherency is also observed (Notelaers, Einarsen, De Witte, & Vermunt, 2006; Zapf et al., 2003).

The consequences of mobbing include a wide range of problems that affect the victims as well as co-workers (Brečko, 2010; Tkalec, 2001; Vartia, 2001), the organization (Brečko, 2006; Di Martino, Vittorio, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003; Tkalec, 2006), and society (Brečko, 2010; Di Martino et al., 2003). Nevertheless, mobbing affects victims the most because it impacts various aspects of their lives: mental and physical functions, interpersonal relationships and interactions, and economic stability. The most severe cases of mobbing lead to the emergence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—a complex, usually chronic, and tiring mental disorder caused by surviving an extremely severe event or trauma (Weathers, Keane, & Foa, 2009). Di Martino et al. (2003) reported that the rate of PTSD in victims of mobbing exceeds those of people who experienced traumatic accidents. Furthermore, Brečko (2006) noted that the level of risk for developing PTSD in victims of mobbing

(25%–50%) resembles the risks in survivors of aircraft accidents (25%), war veterans (25%–50%), and survivors of car accidents (20%).

The fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) provides the most commonly used definition of PTSD, categorizing it as an anxiety disorder. It involves the following diagnostic criteria: (1) reliving symptoms (e.g., remembering the trauma), (2) demonstrating avoidance symptoms (e.g., avoiding thoughts and feelings associated with the traumatic event), and (3) experiencing symptoms of increased arousal (e.g., irritability, lack of concentration). The diagnosis is justified when at least one symptom of reliving, three avoidance symptoms, and two arousal symptoms occur at least one month. The symptoms typically also interfere with the individuals' ability to function in social, professional, or other fields of human activity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

In addition, formal diagnosis requires an experience of a death threat or threats of serious injury to the individual or to others. Mobbing victims usually do not meet this criterion (Rodríguez-Muñoz, Moreno-Jiménez, Sanz Vergel, & Garrosa Hernández, 2010). Many authors have discussed this dilemma (Arias & Pape, 1999; Gold, Marx, Soler-Baillo, & Sloan, 2005; Ravin & Boal, 1989), noting that PTSD can occur in the absence of a traumatic event. For example, Long et al. (2008) showed that an even higher rate of PTSD and severity of symptoms occurred when the criterion of traumatic experience was not present.

Numerous researchers have repeatedly confirmed a positive relationship between mobbing and PTSD. Leymann and Gustafson (1996) identified 59 participants, within a 64-person sample, who demonstrated PTSD symptoms. Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2002) found a positive correlation between mobbing and PTSD ($r = 0.34$), and 76% of the studied 118 mobbing victims displayed severe symptoms of PTSD. Moreover, Nielsen, Matthiesen, and Einarsen (2005) determined that 84% of victims of mobbing had PTSD. The same authors made no observations about gender differences in the prevalence of PTSD among victims of mobbing. In general, however, PTSD is more prevalent among women than men (Breslau, Davis, Andreski, Paterson, & Schultz, 1997; Christiansen & Elklit, 2012; Schüffel, Schade, & Schunk, 2004).

In Slovenia, the limited amount of research that exists in the field of mobbing often focuses on its prevalence and the characteristics of people involved. In the present study, we wanted to reexamine the prevalence of mobbing in Slovenia as well as gender differences, differences between age groups, and organizational levels in terms of exposure

to mobbing. In the second part of the present study, we explored the link between mobbing and PTSD, which has not yet been studied in Slovenia. We also wanted to observe potential differences between subjective and objective measures of mobbing exposure and differences in the incidence of PTSD among male and female victims of mobbing.

2 Method

2.1 Sample

The research sample consisted of 150 participants (females = 81) who had been employed for at least six months. In terms of the organizational structure, the sample includes 62% workers/contractors, 20% employees in lower management, 12% in middle management, and 6% in upper management. Table 1 shows participants' age structure.

2.2 Instruments

We collected data using a structured questionnaire that consisted of three parts:

- (1) A set of demographic questions included questions about gender, age group, and the organizational level at which the participant was employed.
- (2) The Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ; Einarsen, Raknes, Matthiesen, & Hellesøy, 1994) consists of 22 negative behaviors (e.g., "Someone withholding information that affects your performance") that are valued by respondents using a 5-point scale (1 = never; 5 = daily). According to the responses, respondents were classified into three groups: (a) respondents who are not victims of mobbing; (b) respondents who are occasionally victims of mobbing; and (c) respondents who are regular victims of mobbing. For this classification, we used the following key:
 - *Not a victim of mobbing*: respondents who marked all items with 1 (never) and thus had not been victims of negative acts in the preceding six months.
 - *Occasional victim of mobbing*: respondents who had been victims of at least one negative act occasionally or monthly.

- *Regular victim of mobbing*: respondents who had been victims of at least two negative acts weekly or more often.

Subjective assessments of exposure to mobbing were collected with the following question: "Are you a victim of workplace mobbing?" Participants assessed their answer (taking into account the given definition of mobbing) on a scale ranging from 1 (not a victim of mobbing) to 5 (yes, almost daily, I am a victim of mobbing).

The post-traumatic symptom scale–10 items (PTSS-10; Raphael, Lundin, & Wisæth, 1989) was translated and adapted for Slovenian researchers by Jan (2011). It consists of 10 symptoms of PTSD (e.g., "I have trouble sleeping"; "I'm having nightmares"). Respondents assess their frequency on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The respondent's level of PTSD equals the overall score on the scale. In the current study, participants whose total score was 35 points or more were considered victims of PTSD; those whose scores fell between 27 and 35 points were considered potential victims of PTSD (Boer et al., 2007).

Both questionnaires used have been proven to be very reliable. The analysis of internal consistency of the NAQ revealed a Cronbach's α of 0.94 whereas the analysis of PTSS-10 showed a Cronbach's α of 0.93.

3 Results

We analyzed the responses to the NAQ and found that 63% of the participants fall into the category of occasional victims of mobbing, 24% of participants fall into the category of regular victims of mobbing, and only 13 % of respondents reported no exposure to negative acts in their workplace.

The subjective assessment provided a different picture: 59% of the participants believed that they are not victims of mobbing, 36% saw themselves as occasional victims, and 5% considered themselves as regular victims of mobbing.

We present the crosstabs of the NAQ results and the subjective assessment of mobbing exposure in Table 2. We can see that the subjective measure rarely fits (in 37% of respondents) the results of the NAQ. Notably, the subjective rating was typically lower.

Table 1 Participants' Age Structure

| Age (years) | ≤ 25 | 26 ≤ 30 | 31 ≤ 35 | 36 ≤ 40 | 41 ≤ 45 | 46 ≤ 50 | 51 ≤ 55 | ≥ 56 |
|-------------|------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|------|
| Frequency | 12 | 56 | 25 | 14 | 17 | 14 | 9 | 3 |
| % | 8.0 | 37.3 | 16.7 | 9.3 | 11.3 | 9.3 | 6.0 | 2.0 |

The highest scores on the NAQ were achieved by participants from the 36- to 40-year-old group ($M = 44.4$; $SD = 16.75$), participants who work in lower management ($M = 36.8$; $SD = 13.80$), and workers/contractors ($M = 36.5$; $SD = 14.47$). Men's and women's responses on the NAQ showed no statistically significant difference tested with

Mann-Whitney's test ($U = 2758.0$; $p < 0.05$). Individuals from 26- to 30-year-old group (49%) and individuals who work as workers/contractors (68%) represent the majority of regular mobbing victims. We did not, however, record any gender differences in our sample of regular mobbing victims.

Table 2 Crosstabs Analysis of NAQ Results and Subjective Measures of Mobbing Exposure

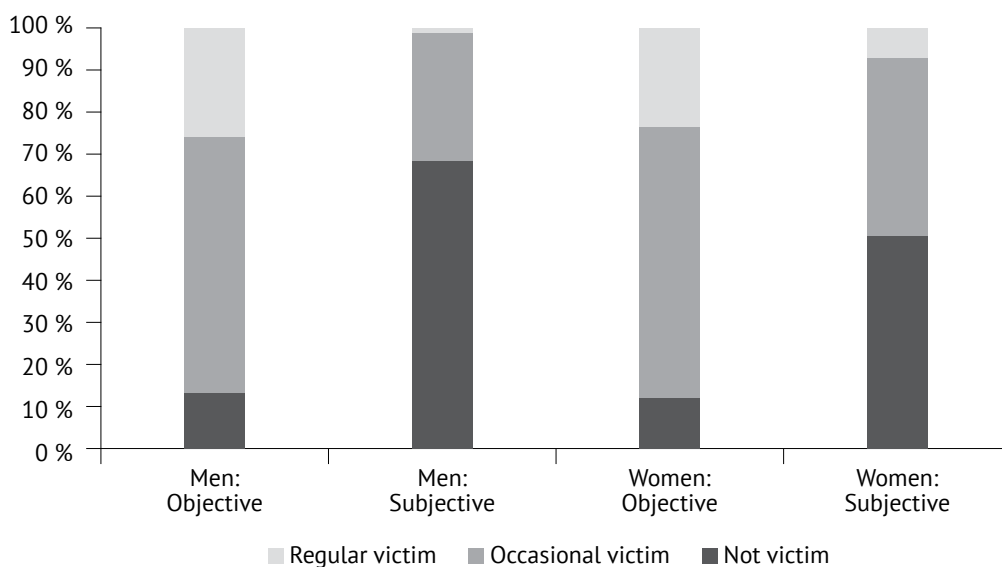
| | | NAQ | | | Total |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|----------------|-------|
| | | Not victim | Occasional victim | Regular victim | |
| Subjective measure | Not victim | 18 | 61 | 9 | 88 |
| | Occasional victim | 1 | 32 | 22 | 55 |
| | Regular victim | 0 | 1 | 6 | 7 |
| | Total | 19 | 94 | 37 | 150 |

Table 3 Average Estimates for the Occurrence of Individual Symptoms in PTSS-10

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>Me</i> |
|--|-------------|-----------|-----------|
| Irritability | 2.81 | 1.51 | 2.5 |
| Jumpiness | 2.73 | 1.55 | 2 |
| Sleep problems | 2.72 | 1.63 | 2 |
| Frequent mood swings | 2.71 | 1.56 | 2 |
| The need to withdraw from others | 2.54 | 1.61 | 2 |
| Depression (I feel dejected/down-trodden) | 2.34 | 1.56 | 2 |
| Muscular tension | 2.15 | 1.56 | 2 |
| A bad conscience, blame myself, have guilty feelings | 2.13 | 1.35 | 2 |
| Nightmares | 1.97 | 1.31 | 1.5 |
| Fear of places and situations that remind me of negative acts in the workplace | 1.77 | 1.32 | 1 |

Note. Estimates were given on a 5-point scale for each item; *M*: mean; *SD*: standard deviation; *Me*: median.

Figure 1: Comparison of subjective ratings of mobbing exposure and results of the NAQ based on participants' gender



The results of the NAQ do not suggest any gender differences in exposure to mobbing. On the contrary, the subjective measures present a slightly different picture. A comparison of the objective and subjective exposure assessments of mobbing by participants' gender are presented in Figure 1. The difference between the ratings was significantly higher in men ($U = 2139.00$; $p < 0.05$).

On the PTSS-10, respondents on average reached 23.9 points ($SD = 11.63$). Table 3 provides the average estimates of the frequency of occurrence for individual symptoms, as assessed by the participants on a 5-point scale.

The groups most exposed to PTSD are workers/contractors ($M = 24.5$; $SD = 12.13$), followed by middle management ($M = 24.1$; $SD = 11.14$), lower management ($M = 23.2$; $SD = 11.15$), and lastly higher management ($M = 19.7$; $SD = 9.81$). Based on age-group classifications, the results show that 36- to 40-year-olds are the most exposed to PTSD ($M = 32.4$; $SD = 11.99$) while 41- to 45-year-olds were the least exposed ($M = 16.9$; $SD = 6.39$). Focusing on gender differences, we see that women, on average ($M = 25.7$; $SD =$

12.15), achieved typically higher scores ($U = 2181.0$; $p < 0.05$) compared to men ($M = 21.7$; $SD = 12.15$).

We also compared the scores on the PTSS-10 between men and women on the level of mobbing exposure measured with the NAQ. The comparison of average scores is illustrated in Figure 2.

Analysis using the Mann-Whitney test for two independent samples showed that statistically significant differences between the sexes was found only in the group of occasional victims of mobbing ($U = 734.00$; $p < 0.01$).

We tested the correlation between the scores on the NAQ, subjective measurement of mobbing exposure, and the test results on the PTSS-10 using the Spearman's rho correlation. We present our findings in Table 4, which shows that all correlations are statistically significant.

We were also interested in whether the level of PTSD differed for people who fall into the selected category of mobbing according to the subjective estimates and the test

Table 4 Results of Spearman's Correlation Test among Scores on the NAQ, the PTSS-10, and Subjective Measure of Mobbing Exposure

| | NAQ | PTSS-10 | Subjective measure |
|-----------------------|--------|---------|--------------------|
| <i>Spearman's rho</i> | 1 | - | - |
| | 0.59** | 1 | - |
| | 0.67** | 0.48** | 1 |

** $p < 0,01$ (one-tailed tests)

Figure 2: Comparison of average PTSS-10 scores between men and women according to the NAQ results of exposure to mobbing

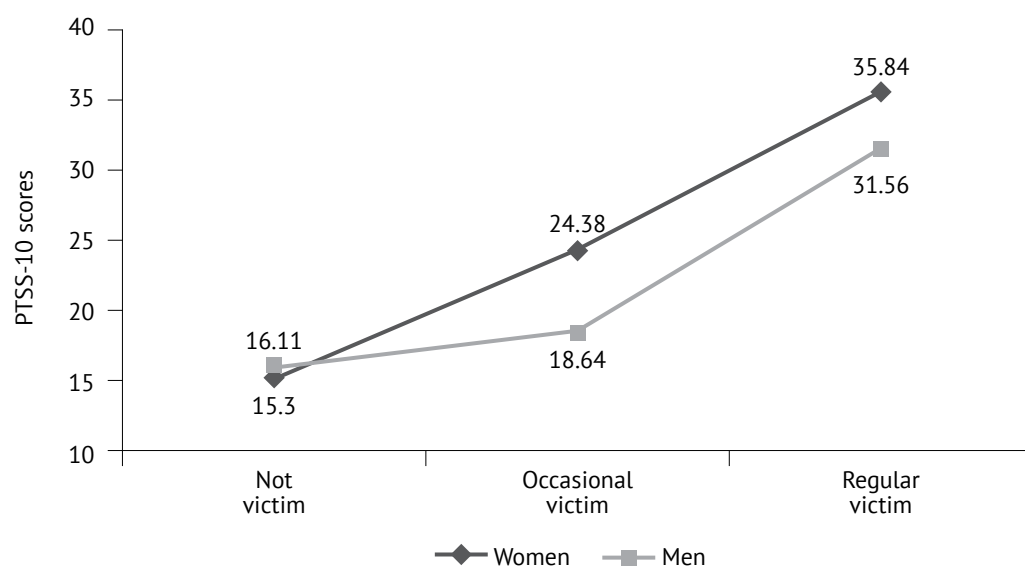
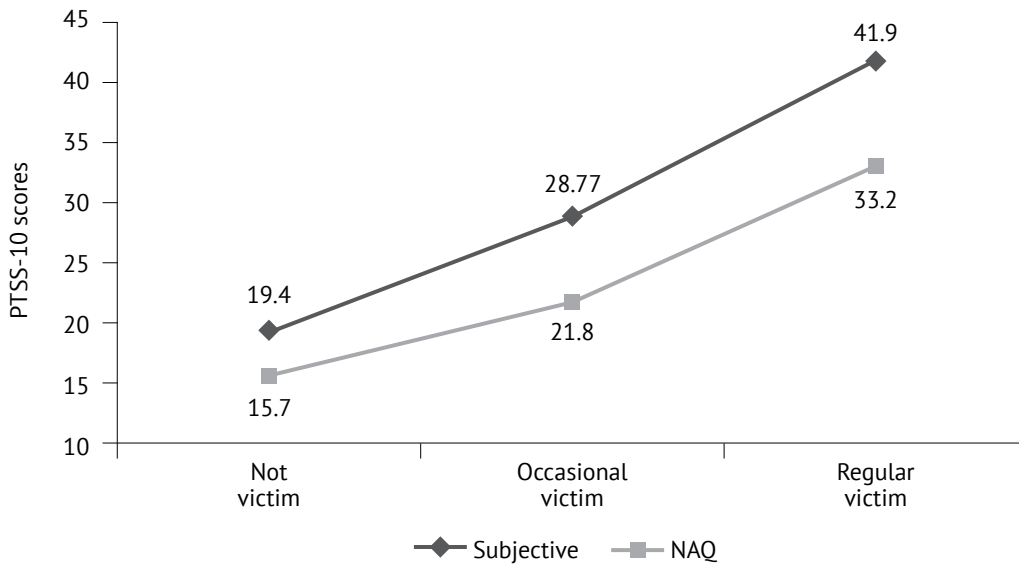


Figure 3: Comparison of assessments on the PTSS-10 based on objective and subjective measures of exposure to mobbing

results of the NAQ. Figure 3 illustrates the test results of the PTSS-10 with respect to these conditions.

Figure 3 clarifies that the participants, who were arranged in their respective groups according to the subjective measure, scored higher on the PTSS-10, compared to those classified based on the NAQ scores.

Discussion

Our findings reaffirm the troublesome prevalence of mobbing among Slovenian employees. The findings also reveal significant differences between the subjective assessments of exposure to mobbing and estimates obtained by an objective method. Furthermore, we confirmed with a Slovenian sample that exposure to mobbing significantly correlates with the emergence of PTSD.

Our findings deviate from previous research in the percentage of mobbed individuals (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007; Robnik & Milanović, 2008). The NAQ test results indicate that 24% of participants are regular victims of mobbing, whereas 68% of participants reported being occasional victims of mobbing. These results fit the data for other countries, which as noted, range from a 1% to a 53% prevalence (Bentley et al., 2012; Cowie et al., 2000; Leymann, 1996; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Vartia, 1996; Zapf et al., 2003). Our results show that victims of mobbing are usually 26 to 30 years old (49%) and at the organizational level of workers/contractors (68%). These findings are consistent with the findings of other studies (Brinkmann, 1995; Zapf, 2000). On the other hand, we did

not find any gender differences in exposure to mobbing, which is contrary to some previous claims (Brečko, 2010), although such results are not unique (Einarsen et al., 1994; Hoel et al., 2001; Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002).

Subjective estimates of mobbing exposure were considerably lower. According to the data, 36% of the present study's participants categorize as occasional victims and 5% fall in the category of regular mobbing victims. Other researchers have reported such differences between subjective and objective assessments of mobbing exposure (Notelaers et al., 2006; Zapf et al., 2003). Differences of this type occurred more often in men, which raises questions about the importance of the subjective conceptualization of acts of mobbing. Escartín, Salin, and Rodríguez-Carballeira (2011) provided some answers that drew attention to higher sensitivity in evaluating mobbing in women. Nevertheless, this remains an under-researched area with considerable potential.

One of the main goals of the present research was to explore the link between exposure to mobbing and PTSD. Our findings show a statistically significant positive correlation between PTSD and the results of the NAQ ($\rho = 0.59$) as well as the results of the subjective assessment ($\rho = 0.48$). Using a Slovenian sample, this connection was confirmed for the first time, although it had already been detected in previous research on foreign samples (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Nielsen et al., 2005). The descriptive analysis of our results also suggests such a connection. We found that workers/contractors are the most at-risk of PTSD and are the most exposed to mobbing (Brinkmann, 1995; Zapf et al., 2003).

Our analysis also shows that women scored significantly higher on the PTSS-10 scale than men in the entire sample.

Such data are consistent with general estimates of the prevalence of PTSD (Breslau et al., 1997; Christiansen & Elklit, 2012; Schuffel et al., 2004). However, among the regular victims of mobbing, no significant gender differences were found in the PTSS-10 scores.

The findings of the present study should be viewed in light of its limitations, which are derived primarily from the characteristics of our sample. The number of study participants deviated across age groups and organizational levels and was relatively low. In addition, we chose to divide the methods into subjective and objective assessments of mobbing exposure. We used a questionnaire, the NAQ, as an objective measure; despite its reasonably good psychometric characteristics, it is still based on self-report. Interestingly, according to this limitation, we would expect more consistent results when comparing the subjective and objective measures, which was not the case. Finally, although we chose the PTSS-10 scale for its promising psychometric characteristics, it is still one of the many instruments used to evaluate PTSD. Finally, we must also note that the PTSS-10 is more of a research tool than it is diagnostic.

Conclusions

Our research deepens the understanding of mobbing in our country. We have confirmed its prevalence and relevance among Slovenian employees and, for the first time, have also confirmed its connection with PTSD in a Slovenian sample. Our findings unravel the seriousness of the problem of mobbing in Slovenia. The problem has been explored to some extent by several prior studies, although we are still waiting for a larger research project in this area. Furthermore, future research should focus on detecting specific features of mobbing conceptualizations by individuals. The present findings show that men identify mobbing to a lesser extent compared to women. Escartín et al. (2011) suggested

that such differences stem from women's higher sensitivity to acts of mobbing, although we assume that other variables could be important as well. Vie et al. (2010), for example, highlighted the importance of personal characteristics; meanwhile, Ireland (2006) studied the effect of organizational context, Lewis (2001) the role of media, and Escartín, Zapf, Arrietta, and Rodríguez-Carballeira (2011) the moderating effect of the national context.

The current situation clarifies that society fails to view mobbing as a wider social phenomenon and treats it with a lack of urgency. Slovenian legislation of this field remains highly problematic. No specific law prevents mobbing, which makes it difficult to prove mobbing legally. However, we have several regulations that indirectly govern procedures in cases of mobbing and sanctioning employers where mobbing actions occur. For example, the Employment Relationship Act (2009), the Civil Servants Act (2012), and the Occupational Health and Safety Act (2011) all address mobbing.

However, there are some solutions for addressing workplace mobbing, which can be adopted by managers, employees, and even the victims. Niedl (1996) suggested that detection of negative acts is possible in an early stage, thereby enhancing the possibility for their prevention. Generally, these solutions focus on eliminating tolerance for bullying and mobbing through surveillance, policy development, training, coaching, mediation, and different reward systems that motivate collaborative behavior at work (Ferris, 2009). The victims are usually encouraged to seek help that integrates the individual, organization, and psychotherapy (Duffy & Sperry, 2012).

Yet mobbing is still not recognized as a social problem, and it is high time for some organized preventive-oriented efforts to fight against it. On the one hand, we must educate and inform; on the other hand, we must introduce more precise legal regulations in this area.

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Mobing v Sloveniji: razširjenost, značilnosti žrtev mobinga in povezava s posttravmatsko stresno motnjo

Izvleček

Organizacije se vse pogosteje soočajo z mobingom. To je resen in predvsem razširjen problem. Že dolgo poznamo tudi njegovo povezavo s posttravmatsko stresno motnjo. Za žrtve mobinga, med katerimi so najpogosteje zaposleni na nižji organizacijski ravni, je ta motnja je ena najresnejših težav. Z raziskavo smo želeli ugotoviti razširjenost mobinga v Sloveniji, raziskati njegovo povezanost s posttravmatsko stresno motnjo ter proučiti razlike med subjektivnimi in objektivnimi ocenami izpostavljenosti mobingu. Naše ugotovitve kažejo, da je prevalenca mobinga v Sloveniji primerljiva s podatki iz prejšnjih merenj pa tudi s podatki za druge države. Med udeleženci raziskave je kar 24 % takih, ki se uvrščajo v skupino rednih žrtev mobinga. Prvič potrjujemo njegovo povezavo s posttravmatsko stresno motnjo na slovenskem vzorcu. Zabeležili smo tudi zanimive razlike med subjektivnimi in objektivnimi ocenami, ki kažejo na pomen subjektivne konceptualizacije dejanj mobinga.

Ključne besede: mobing, posttravmatska stresna motnja, prevalenca, subjektivno in objektivno ocenjevanje, zdravje na delovnem mestu