

***Re-establishing the power to act: a group approach for victims of
working bullying***

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Abstract

Using psychodrama as a framework for reference, this paper aims to present tools for re-establishing the power to act of people who are bullied at their workplace. This proposal is based on a pilot project carried out in a group setting for people bullied at work, with the support of the Psychology Department of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC). This approach was part of an extension project described as “Combat and prevention of working bullying in order to promote occupational health”.

Keywords: working bullying; psychodrama; occupational health.

INTRODUCTION

Work is characterized by being multifaceted, since it may be related to both positive aspects, such as pleasure, achievement, challenge, satisfaction in the exercise of activities, and instrumental, as a way to guarantee only subsistence; it may also present negative characteristics when work is understood as curse, punishment, submission, stigma, coercion, effort and penalty (RIBAS, 2003). Violence in organizations often contributes to a person’s negative conception of work and it may be expressed in a more or less explicit way, however, not less perverse, as in the case of working bullying.

The phenomenon known today as working bullying has been present in society

since the emergence of the first work relationships. The subject, however, only came to be studied and considered relevant in the relationship between mental health and work from the 1980s (SOBOLL, 2008). The greater visibility of the subject, observed worldwide, is justified insofar as changes in the production and management system have favored violence practices. Among these changes are, e.g., increase in productivity, individualism, power struggle, comparative display of results, as Soboll (2008) warns.

Heinz Leymann is considered the pioneer in studies of working bullying. He has started investigating the suffering at work in the early 1980s and obtained troubling results, which made him broaden his research. The objective of his studies was to alert employees, trade unionists, administrators, occupational physicians and jurists to the seriousness of the situation, sensitizing and stimulating them to combat and prevent this kind of violence at work (FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008).

The researches carried out by Leymann and his team had the intention to apprehend the problem and to determine univocal terms for the objects of study and for the behaviors of the researched ones, intending to differentiate apparently similar situations. He has created the term *psychoterror*. "It was clear that naming the phenomenon was the first step for its knowledge and intervention, because names create a relationship between the person and the others, and between people and things" (FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008, p. 21).

Another author who stands out in the precursory studies related to working bullying is Marie France Hirigoyen: French, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and family psychotherapist. She used the term *working bullying* for the first time to reveal perverse violence in families' everyday life and at work (FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008). The author was the one who popularized the term *working bullying* in her best-selling book "*Le harcèlement moral: la violence perverse au quotidien*", addressing mainly individual working bullying, a perversion of the ego in the strictly psychopathological aspects. In her second book "*Malaise dans le travail, harcèlement moral: démêler le vrai du faux*", Hirigoyen relativizes the idiosyncratic variable (HELOANI, 2004).

In Brazil, studies on working bullying are much more recent than in other countries. The first academic article on this topic in organizations was written by Maria Ester Freitas, "*Assédio moral e assédio sexual: faces do poder perverso nas organizações*" in 2001, in which she appropriates the concepts of Hirigoyen and reckons that working bullying in organizations is born from the meeting of envy of power and perversity. This violence spreads because the victims do not formalize the complaint, perceiving the situation in a superficial way and letting jokes and insinuations pass. Subsequently, the attacks increase, the victim is usually cornered, put in an inferior state and undergoes hostile and degrading maneuvers over time. If the aggressions persist, a drop in the self-esteem of the victim occurs, who feels humiliated, used and stained. The author reckons that to constitute the destructive phenomenon it is necessary to repeat the vexatious situations and the indisputable humiliations.

In her most recent papers, Freitas (2005, 2006, 2007 *apud* FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008) questions the contemporary management model and points out the organizational responsibilities with regard to building a healthier work environment, besides evaluating the levels of damage caused by working bullying. For the author, more than a mere practice in the sphere of individual relationships, "it is an action that also penalizes organizations and societies and should be the object of a broader and blunter action than the one that limits this unhappiness to behavioral disorders of perverse individuals" (FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008, p. 31).

Working bullying is also an organizational problem, since it is manifested in the

context of work activities, making the organization co-responsible for its practice or for accepting these behaviors and actions (FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008). Silva and Tolfo (2011) point out that some situations within organizations have contributed to be characterized as working bullying: an extremely competitive environment guided by pressures oriented to achieve goals coupled with voracious struggles to occupy positions seen as attractive in the organizational structure.

Due to the seriousness of the phenomenon in organizations and of its overwhelming consequences for those involved in the process, an extension project titled "Combat and Prevention of Working Bullying in order to promote occupational health" was proposed in 2011, linked to the Psychology Department of the Federal University of Santa Catarina and financed by the Ministry of Education.

Several activities were developed during 2011 to achieve the objectives of the project: 1. Preparation of a booklet on working bullying in partnership with SRTE - Regional Superintendency of Labor and Employment of Santa Catarina; 2. Conduction of the Second Seminar on Prevention of Working Bullying of Santa Catarina (in partnership with several institutions from Santa Catarina and the Occupational Health and Safety State Forum); and 3. Group assistance for people who are bullied at work, using Psychodrama as a theoretical/practical reference.

Founded by Jacob Levy Moreno, Psychodrama offers an important theoretical and methodological framework to subsidize and/or expand actions with groups. Martins (2005) emphasizes that Moreno is recognized throughout the world as the father of Psychodrama, although it is worth mentioning that he has developed a theoretical system that transcends this theory. This psychiatrist has created Sociometry, which means science of social laws. Moreno (1951 *apud* NAFFAH NETO, 1997) argues that sociometry aims to explore the laws of social development and of social relations. Moreover, he stresses that it is in the sociometric system that the metaphorical we, i.e., community, co-participation, state, church and many other organizations, have their place.

[...] sociometry has emerged as something more than a sociological theory, since it was proposed as a revision of old theories and it aimed to convey its complex theoretical elaborations to the level of reality lived in the everyday life, pursuing in the present and through direct investigations the structural complex of exchanges and of human interactions, as it was performed, crystallized or transformed in the concrete reality and how it was lived and produced by each human subject. (NAFFAH NETO, 1997, p.128).

Martins (2005) points out that Moreno proposed treating society as a whole with a project called sociatry "of which psychodrama is a part, with the purpose of smoothing the difficulties among men, improving their ability to relate and seeking harmony of groups of coexistence, in a universal amplitude" (ALMEIDA, 1998, p.11).

Because of the breadth of this approach called Psychodrama and based on the understanding of the multitude of possibilities that it brings to the rescue of dignity of human beings, we have decided to use it in this study of group assistance for people bullied at work.

WORKING BULLYING

Working bullying consists of "any abusive conduct (gesture, word, behavior, attitude) that attacks, by its repetition or systematization, dignity or the physical or psychological integrity of a person, threatening his or her job or degrading the work environment" (HIRIGOYEN, 2005, p.17). Thus, it is essential that the acts of violence are repeated to characterize working bullying; however, "to be usual it does not have to happen every day, nor every two or five days; what matters is the regularity and systematic repetition of the conduct, able of degrading the work environment and of causing harm to the victim" (ALKIMIN, 2011, p. 52).

Heloani (2004) reckons that working bullying consists of the constant disqualification of the victim, followed by his or her consequent weakening, in order to make the person neutral in relation to power and from there it derives its characterization as a phenomenon arising from the disciplinary process. The author clarifies that bullying usually begins with little intensity, as something harmless because people tend to excuse aggressions, understanding them as jokes; later, they are multiplied with more intensity and the victim is the target of more humiliations and of jokes in bad taste.

Margarida Barreto, a Brazilian author who stands out in the fight for criminalization and in the combat against working bullying, reckons that this violence occurs when the employee is exposed to vexatious, embarrassing and humiliating situations at work, in a repetitive and prolonged way throughout working time (FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008). Working bullying is characterized as an inhuman, violent and unethical attitude in work relationships, which affects the dignity and identity and violates the fundamental rights of individuals (BARRETO, 2006).

According to Barreto (2006), working bullying is an indicator of the existence of instituted and institutionalized violence and of the imposition of organizational logic. The author recalls that there are two fundamental factors that cause the practice of this violence with victims of bullying: the way work is organized and the organizational culture that trivializes violence on behalf of productivity.

Working bullying practices may take place in different ways: vertical downward, from the boss to his or her subordinates; vertical upward, from the subordinate(s) to his or her superior(s); horizontal, among co-workers; and mixed. In quantitative terms, the vertical downward bullying predominates, corroborating one of the fundamental characteristics of bullying: the abuse of power (FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008).

Hirigoyen (2005) has grouped in four categories the hostile situations that characterize the method of bullying: deliberate deterioration of working conditions; isolation and refusal of communication; attack on dignity and verbal, physical or sexual violence. It should be noted that these categories were grouped starting with the most difficult one to highlight until the most obvious one.

The occurrence of working bullying may be individual or characterize a collective working bullying, as Silva and Tolfo (2011) explain. In the first case, it is characterized as the refusal of direct communication, disqualification of the victim, isolation, imposition of useless tasks to the victim and error induction, and sexual bullying may occur in addition to the practices of working bullying. In the case of collective working bullying, threats of demission may occur; besides group comparison, demands that go beyond the possibilities of the group and requirement of overtime work to the point of compromising personal relationships of employees, among others (DARCANCHY, 2005).

The consequences of working bullying affect the bullied employee, the organization and society. Exposure to violence generates a process of progressive degradation of the individual's physical and mental health, which may start with tension,

anxiety and progress to depressive conditions, which may culminate in suicide.

Within the organization scope, working bullying affects productivity through two main phenomena: presenteeism and absenteeism. The first one corresponds to an employee's poor performance in the work environment, who works even without health conditions to perform well, while the second one involves the absence or delay of employees due to medical treatment or other personal factors (FERREIRA, 2010). In addition, working bullying may increase staff turnover, errors, accidents and payment of indemnities, among others. For society, the consequences involve raising costs with rehabilitation and health care for victims of working bullying, as well as expenses with social benefits, such as early retirement and unemployment insurance (ALKIMIN, 2011).

Heloani (2004) suggests that organizations adopt a code of ethics and provide the means for the attacked person to make the complaint, although such steps that ease the problem are not enough. For the author, the conditions and the philosophy that determine hypercompetition are the ones that must change: "only an effective process of humanization of work may cause the 'symptoms' of this disease to recede" (HELOANI, 2004, p.7). Hence, the author recommends that in organizations there is a space for members to expose their problems, anxieties and expectations, the so-called public space or space for discussion, and also that organizations give way to communicative action that has fair arguments as reference. Even from his slightly utopian look, Heloani (2004) reckons that these actions may help people realize that their problem is not individual, that they do not lack competence, because it is a phenomenon that encompasses complex social interactions, reasons why the victims should not feel guilty. By organizing the collective and opening channels for dialogue, society would be more democratic and less prone to violence, which would help to gradually minimize the problem of working bullying.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF PSYCHODRAMA TO RE-ESTABLISH THE POWER TO ACT OF PEOPLE BULLIED AT WORK

The theoretical system developed by Jacob Levy Moreno is of wide scope and it involves a deep concern with the harmonious coexistence of people in groups in the most diverse contexts (MARTINS, 2005). It should be recalled that Moreno was widely recognized for his pioneering works aimed at this appreciation of groups.

Gonzales (1997) states that he is considered the father or founder of psychology of groups, since he was the first author to fundamentally and extensively deal with human groups as the object of his work. His contribution to psychology of groups involves three major aspects of any systematic study: the theoretical field, the methodological field and the applied field (MARTINS, 2005).

Group work was considered very rich to work on the issue of working bullying, and Psychodrama made possible the creation of a welcoming and propitious environment to trust and to respect the pain experienced by people. The psychodramatic games used have allowed, as pointed out by Monteiro (1998), to work internal contents of the participants aiming at a transformation in their inner universe, seeking more freedom to express their spontaneity and creativity.

Moreno believed that the game would facilitate the work with the groups, for through it the participants experience the ludic, thus abandoning an intellectual pattern of responses to certain stimuli. With the game, participants leave a tense field to enter a relaxed field that propitiates greater participation and involvement (MARTINS, 2005).

In order to structure the work carried out with people bullied at work, the steps,

contexts and instruments involving the psychodrama session were respected. The activities were always planned on the week before the meeting of the group based on the demand expressed by the participants.

A Psychodrama session is composed of three contexts, five instruments and three phases. The contexts are the social, the group and the dramatic. The instruments are the scenario, the protagonist, the director, the auxiliary ego and the audience or public. The phases are known as warm-up, action and sharing (MARTINS, 2005, p.97).

We have decided to describe in this section the presentation of how the pilot project was structured and the holding of a more comprehensive discussion about the results in order to re-establish people's power to act, as well as to seek dialogue with the literature on working bullying. Therefore, due to the chosen focus, the details of the holding of each group meeting, of the dramatic games and of the techniques used were not discussed.

The psychological group setting for bullied employees, as already mentioned, is part of a set of initiatives associated with the Extension Project "Combat and prevention of working bullying in order to promote occupational health". The main target audience were the faculty and the technical-administrative servers of UFSC. Nevertheless, a person not linked to the university has spontaneously sought support and was integrated into the group.

The first step to carry out the pilot project was the formation of a weekly study group to review the literature on working bullying and on Psychodrama. Some of the explored contents were: sociometry: its ramification and its methods; role theory from a Morenian perspective; cluster theory; Morenian concepts: spontaneity, creativity and tele, *status nascendi*, locus and matrix; psychodrama session and psychodramatic games. The studied subjects were listed to contribute to the qualification of the facilitators, interns enrolled in the last year of the Psychology course. Some authors researched in this phase were: Almeida (1998); Amato (2002); Bustos (1980, 1990); Datner (2006); Drumond and Souza (2008); Moreno (1974, 1992, 1997); Monteiro (1998); Naffah Neto (1997) and Yozo (1996), among others.

The study group was maintained until the end of the group meetings, for it has served as a space for the planning of activities, reflection on the process, and supervision by the project coordinators. The participants of the study group were: a professor, coordinator of the extension project; a psychodramatist and professor who is a postdoctoral student at the Graduate Psychology Program (PPGP); a master's student (currently a PhD student) at PPGP, with a degree in coordination of groups in the psychodramatic approach, a CAPES-REUNI scholarship student; and two interns from the undergraduate Psychology program at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, ProExt scholarship students, who have attended the optional course of Psychodrama in that semester.

In order to operationalize the group setting, the next step was to disseminate the proposal through e-mails to faculty members and technical-administrative servers. Two individual interviews were then conducted with the ones interested in the research to address possible concerns about working bullying and to sensitize them to participate in the group. The individual interviews were carried out with 7 (seven) people, being 5 (five) women and 2 (two) men; at the same time, the group activities that have started with 5 (five) participants were planned. The group assistance has occurred biweekly from October to December 2011, with 6 meetings of 2 hours duration each.

Working bullying usually begins with a game of almost imperceptible attacks and of misunderstandings that make it difficult for the victim to be aware of the violence to which he or she is being subjected, thus creating disturbance and doubts about one's sanity and difficulty of discerning the reality of the facts (HIRIGOYEN, 2008). This situation of unreality and doubt regarding bullying has been reported by all members of the group since the first meeting. One participant has talked about being considered crazy by colleagues and family members when reporting on what was happening in her workplace. Given the attitude of her colleagues and family, this participant came to question her own sanity, which is consistent with what Hirigoyen (2008, p. 175) states about the consequences of bullying: "The victims feel alone [...], they doubt their own perceptions, not certain if they are exaggerating or not".

Regarding gender difference, more than one male person was interviewed to participate, however, in the final formation the group consisted only of women. This data corroborates the study carried out by Hirigoyen (2005), showing that 70% of the bullied people are women. One of the members of the group was bullied by her male colleague and forms of bullying included sexual discrimination, isolation, verbal violence and deliberate deterioration of working conditions, confirming the forms of manifestation of working bullying also discussed by the abovementioned author.

Differently from what is generally thought, the victim tends to be quite competent and responsible in his or her work. Hence, jealousy may be the trigger for the hostile behavior of the aggressor (HIRIGOYEN, 2008) or the refusal of differences that are irreconcilable. This fact coincides with the reality of the group, since its members had a high education level and showed interest and appreciation for their work activities and a high degree of demand about themselves, besides observing that the aggressor always disagreed with something they did.

Another issue experienced and reported by the participants of the group refers to the strong feeling of guilt and responsibility for the aggressions suffered. According to Hirigoyen (2008), exculpation constitutes an important part of the healing process because it allows the reappropriation of one's own suffering. One of the ways to deal with this aspect in the group meetings was to reflect on the context in which working bullying occurs and the social issues that have led to this form of violence.

A positive aspect of the group that was pointed out by the participants in the last meeting was the possibility of minimizing the negative repercussion of working bullying in other areas of life, such as in family relationships. As Guedes (2008) mentions, the damage in the emotional sphere targets the family and social lives of the victim, who finds him or herself in an existential, economic and relationship crisis. "The victim of bullying may become bitter, whining and unpleasant" (GUEDES, 2008, p.108).

During the meetings, a participant was able to instrumentalize and activate internal resources to seek support and request the transfer of the sector where she used to work and was bullied. Her initiative was successful and it may be attributed to the encouragement elicited by the support of the group and to the increased capacity to create possible alternatives to solve her problem.

Another member, by means of the progress achieved by attending the group, was able to reduce, with her psychiatrist, the use of sleeping pills and antidepressants. She was also strengthened to the point of reconsidering her return to work as a schoolteacher, a practice from which she was on leave, ill, for 4 years, due to bullying. Her improvement in posture and in attitude toward the group was also remarkable, she managed to get better dressed, showing self-esteem recovery, and talking with the group with visual contact, something that she had avoided before, demonstrating more confidence.

As main results of the group we may cite: the promotion of strategies for reflection

and for coping with suffering; clarification on working bullying and on the world of work today; and the configuration of a context of mutual support among the participants, mediated by the coordinators.

It is important to highlight that after 5 (five) months of ending the group assistance, the project team has contacted the participants via e-mail requesting feedback on their current experience, both personally and professionally. The answers were sent by all of them and they have confirmed that the group was fundamental to the understanding of the situations experienced, to eliminate the guilt and to strengthen the decisions, seeking emotional balance even in the face of some difficulties that linger. One of the answers was selected to compose this section by expressing the feeling of all of them:

Hello,

At first, I have noticed that it was not a situation created by me, or that it was my fault. However, I had the misfortune to be placed in a sector where bullying was common practice. With the help of the group, I saw that many people went through this type of situation, in the most varied ways, and the exchange of experiences was an indispensable requirement for me to seek the solution of that situation, that is, to leave that place. I have started to look at the situation in a less painful way, because the understanding that it was not generated by me was something that relieved me greatly, and made me not give so much importance to the situation. The dedication of the students, of the Coordinator and of the colleagues was essential to fight for change. Anyway, I have managed to leave that place, and today I am very happy and fulfilled in the sector that I am working at. Indeed, I have realized I did not have the ability and/or capacity to deal with it alone. Thank you (Participant 1)

Finally, it is worth mentioning a thought by Moreno that expresses the commitment of each professional with social changes, regardless of the area in which they work. According to Moreno (1992): we are all united by responsibility. There is no partial responsibility, no limits to exercise it. It makes us creators of the Universe.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Respect and appreciation must guide relations among people regardless of their socio-political and economic conditions; however, this is an ever-increasing challenge in contemporary society. This challenge occurs, according to Heloani (2003), because the barbarity of capital today establishes the inhumanity of human relations.

Working bullying is a phenomenon present in this new context we live in: the banalization of social injustice, the precariousness of working conditions, fastidious and painful tasks, unemployment and abysmal inequalities, among many other degrading situations for the human being.

To reduce the occurrence of working bullying, Silva and Tolfo (2011) suggest building a culture that does not tolerate this type of violence. Therefore, the solution would be to build corporate cultures that manifest themselves through quality-of-life actions that help awaken and maintain feelings of happiness in the workplace.

It is important for the victim to acknowledge that he or she has gone or goes through situations of violence and to manifest him or herself through discourse to face

aggression and regain confidence, self-concept and self-esteem. According to Hirigoyen (2008, p. 204), "expressing perverse manipulation does not lead a person to keep brooding things, on the contrary, it allows one to escape denial and guilt". Listening to how the victim feels about bullying means an important possibility to generate health for employees who have suffered predominantly psychological violence.

Professionals working in the area of occupational health must commit themselves to contribute to reverse the unjust and inhuman predatory dimensions in which many people live within organizations. It is necessary to create a space of trust, so that victims of abusive behavior may express their feelings and their experiences without the fear of reprisals or disqualifications (FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008).

It was possible to perceive that the developed activities, both the individual interviews and the group setting, have helped people to understand various aspects, such as what is working bullying, the characteristics of the world of work today, the professional role as another within the repertoire of roles that they play in life, among other explanations that have contributed to improve self-concept and self-esteem. Another relevant fact was the search for alternatives of each participant aiming at the change of the situation in which they were living, strengthening themselves in the group to make decisions more appropriate to their circumstances. In addition, throughout the meetings, all participants have perceived positive changes regarding the vision of work and its meaning, giving new meanings to work.

Having in mind all that was previously exposed, it is possible to conclude that there is a unique contribution of Psychodrama to work with people bullied at work, since it seeks to bring more humanity to relationships and it prioritizes healthier bonds, as well as rescuing spontaneity and creativity, that in this case were taken from people through humiliations and disqualifications suffered in the workplace. The use of Psychodrama has provided an environment that welcomed weaknesses and vulnerabilities of each participant, making the group feel accepted and seen beyond their symptoms.

We hope that professionals from the most diverse areas may sustain their practices theoretically with Psychodrama in works with groups of this nature, since the theoretical framework offered by this approach may sustain an action that seeks to restore people's power to act, giving them their health and dignity back.

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