

# Mobbing Experiences of Instructors: Causes, Results, and Solution Suggestions\*

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## Abstract

In this study, it was aimed to investigate possible mobbing problems in universities, their causes and results, and to attract attention to precautions that can be taken. Phenomenology as one of the qualitative research methods was used in the study. Sample group of the study was selected through the criteria sampling method and eight instructors with a title of professors, associate and assistant professors and assistants were included. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Study results indicated that instructors were exposed to attacks related to their job performances, communications and relationships with their colleagues, characteristic features and values, threatening and violent behaviors and it was established that various features of the instructors mobbing and being exposed to it and organizational factors led up to the mobbing. It was observed that mobbing affected victims psychologically, physically, and economically and posed problems in terms of job performances and family life. The views on preventing mobbing were examined within the frame of ethics institutions, rectorship election system, authority of rectorship, and training of instructors.

## Key Words

Mobbing, University, Instructor, Preventing Mobbing

The pleasure one gets from his job enables him to be happy in his family life and productive in work life (Örücü, Yumuşak, & Bozkır, 2006, p. 39).

Workplace environment is a social place where organization members influence one another and it is possible to have conflicts in such an environment (Asunakutlu & Safran, 2006; Baltaş, 2006). Mobbing, which is defined as discomforting, galling and adverse behaviours directed systematically at one individual by one or more individuals in the workplace (Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith, & Pereira, 2002, p. 34; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996, p. 20; Leyman, 1990, p. 120; Rayner, 1997, p. 199) is prevalent in health, education and defense oriented organizations (Bartlett, 2009; Fariaa, Franklin, Mixon, & Salterc, 2012; Farrington, 2010; Leyman, 1996; Twale & De Luca, 2008; Westhues, 2004). Research in Turkey revealed that individuals are exposed to mobbing in primary and secondary education institutions (Cemaloğlu & Ertürk, 2007; Gökçe, 2006; Tanhan & Çam, 2011), higher education institutions (Aktop, 2006; Gül, İnce, & Özcan, 2011; Tigrel & Kokalan, 2009; Tüzel, 2009; Yaman, 2007), banking sector (Kök, 2006), health and tourism industry (Picakciefe, Acar, Çolak, & Kılıç, 2012; Şenturan & Mankan, 2009; Tengilimoğlu & Mansur, 2009). In addition to these studies, some

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instances of mobbing and following legal attempts are reflected in the press (Öztürk, 2012; Taşçılar, 2012; Tahincioğlu, 2012).

Universities have a highly complex structure thanks to their internal and external stakeholders, the nature of decision making mechanisms and their being open systems (Birnbaum, 1988; Sporn, 1996) and this complex structure could lead up to mobbing (Farrington, 2010). Research carried out in universities revealed that mobbing could be triggered by individual rivalry, jealousy towards the accomplishments of colleagues, differences of status and roles at the workplace (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994; Thomas, 2005; Vartia, 1996), the need of managers to prove their power over others (Hartig & Frosch, 2006; McKay, Huberman, Fratzl, & Thomas, 2008), and the organization culture that tolerates mobbing (Baillien, Neyens, Witte, & Cuyper, 2009; Vega & Comer 2005). The main sources of conflicts indicated by university staff are the oppressive management (Yaman, 2007), hierarchical segregation (Kesken & İliç, 2008; Özdemir, Yüksel, & Cemaloğlu, 2006), the weakness of democratic management and arbitrary management practices (Dost & Cenkseven, 2007). This leads to mobbing and causes the staff's leaving the university (Arı, 2007; Küçükşüleymanoğlu, 2007).

Individuals who are exposed to mobbing suffer from stress caused by high blood pressure, coronary disorders, depression and obsessive behaviors (Gardner & Johnson, 2001; Moayed, Shell, & Salem, 2007; Tuckey, Dollard, Saebel, & Berry, 2009). For the organization, the main consequences of mobbing are absenteeism and decline in job quality (Thomas, 2005, p. 280). When all these factors are taken into consideration, it can be concluded that mobbing may cause a decline in the quality of the university and harm the notion of academician-ship. Therefore, the factors that cause the universities to be suitable places for mobbing need to be addressed carefully bearing in mind that universities are different from other institutions.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the mobbing experiences among university staff, their possible causes, consequences, and precautions that can be taken.

## Method

### Research Design

In this study, phenomenology, one of the qualitative research methods, was employed. Phenomenology focuses on the phenomenon of which we are aware but not have a full understanding.

### Study Group

In order to collect the qualitative data needed, criterion-sampling was employed to select university staff. In accordance with the nature of the research subject, the selection criteria included having been exposed to mobbing in the past two years and it was on a voluntary basis. The university staff was assigned through pilot interviews and written press. The study group consisted of eight instructors who are professors, associate and assistant professors and assistants from health sciences, social sciences and natural and applied sciences.

### Instrument

A semi-structured interview was employed to collect the data. Similar studies on mobbing that employed interview method were analyzed and *Mobbing Interview Form Among University Staff* was developed after a careful literature review (Ayoko, Callan, & Hartel, 2003; Lewis, 2006; Lewis & Orford, 2005; Yaman, 2007). After a pre-application of the interview form, it was revised according to experts' views and completed.

In order to ensure the external validity of the research, data was defined through direct quotations and it was reported and explained thoroughly in the method part of the paper. In order to ensure internal validity, the raw data and the analyses were examined by the experts and feedback was collected. The external reliability of the research was achieved through describing the method and the processes in a detailed way and the internal reliability was achieved through decoding recorded interviews and presenting them to the interviewees before reporting them. All the data collected were written down and in the analysis, the findings were presented without comment. After the approvals of the interviewees were taken, data were analyzed and aggregated with the findings.

### Process

Each interviewee in the study group was telephoned

in order to assign a date for the interviews for collecting the qualitative data. The participants were informed regarding the confidentiality of their identifying information, institutions and departments. Research data was collected through voice recording devices and note taking. QSR Nvivo 8 qualitative data analysis software was used to analyze the research data. In the analysis section, data was interpreted through themes and sub-themes.

### Results

After the interviews with the participants were completed, it was determined that university staff is exposed to hostile attacks towards their job performances, individual traits and values, their rights to communicate with colleagues as well as threats and violence. The findings stated that the causes for mobbing could be assailant-based, victim-based or organization-based. In addition to that, assailants were identified as having academic and managerial inadequacy as well as a will to abuse their rights while victims were identified as having a desire to fight against injustice.

The findings revealed that the interaction of organizational factors together with assailant and victim treats trigger mobbing. These factors were analyzed under the “*Organizational Factors*” theme and then two sub-themes emerged: “*Practices toward Rectorship Elections*” and “*Rectorship Authority*”. Rectorship elections were causes of polarization of university staff and this polarization could lead to unfair practices with the support of senior management. Unfair practices were analyzed under two sub-themes: “*Unobjective Criteria for Nomination of Academic Staff*” and “*Unobjective Criteria for Nomination of Managerial Staff*”.

The consequences of mobbing were gathered under two main themes which are “*The Consequences on Victims*” and “*The Consequences on Colleagues*”. The psychological effects of mobbing on university staff were identified as stress, pessimism, disaffection and suicidality. These psychological effects of mobbing also cause some stress-based physical problems. Mobbing affects the job performances of academic staff negatively and reduces the desire to attend work. In addition to the psychological and job-related problems, victims also suffer from economic and family issues. Nevertheless, some participants stated that mobbing affected their job performances positively leading to an increase in their ambition. The consequences of mobbing on colleagues were analyzed under two sub-themes:

“*The Consequences Regarding Job and Job Performance*” and “*Psychological Consequences*”.

The themes regarding the prevention of mobbing in universities were identified as follows: “*Training of University Staff*”, “*Changing the Rectorship Election System*”, “*Restricting Rector Authority*” and “*Formation of Ethical Committees*”. The participants stated that creating social awareness among workers and informing them regarding legal sanctions were important steps to take in order to prevent mobbing. Moreover, it was emphasized that workers should be informed about mobbing and that there should be ethical committees to address workers’ complaints and that legal sanctions should be carried out and supervised by these committees. Academic staff stated that in order to prevent mobbing, rectors’ authority should be restricted, nominations of academic and managerial staff should be carried out fairly and rectorship election system should be changed to prevent polarization.

### Discussion

After the interviews with the participants were completed, it was determined that university staff is exposed to hostile attacks towards their job performances, individual traits and values, their rights to communicate with colleagues as well as threats and violence. These findings support the findings of other studies (Mckay et al., 2008; Thomas, 2005; Tigrel & Kokalan, 2009; Twale & De Luca, 2008; Vartia, 1996; Westhues, 2007).

Academic staff relates the causes of mobbing with the assignment of academically incompetent staff who have poor problem-solving skills to academic and managerial positions. Research in Turkey revealed that most of the conflicts in universities were observed between teaching staff and director of studies or faculty management (Çetin & Hacifazlıoğlu, 2004) and that assistants were exposed to mobbing mostly by their professors (Tüzel, 2009). Other studies on mobbing stated that managers had poor problem-solving skills (Namié & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Skogstad, Einarsen, Torshheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007), and that academic staff abused their power to oppress to their lower-level employees (Barsky, 2002; Blando, 2008; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Lewis, 2004; Poilpot-Rocaboy, 2006; Salin, 2003). Unobjective staff policies stemming from the vast power held by the rectors (Ortaş, 2003) resulted in some workers’ using micropolitics to ensure their positions (Ma, Karri, & Chittipeddi, 2004; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), which

had the potential to trigger mobbing by creating an insecure environment (Hartig & Frosch, 2006; Yaman, 2007). Therefore, this research's findings that the assailants foster good relationship with managers and that they support each other are consistent with other studies' findings in the literature.

Unfair managerial practices in Turkey and oppressive management in Turkish universities cause problems among academic staff (Dost & Cenkseven, 2007; Özdemir et al., 2006). In addition to that, findings of previous studies regarding the polarization effect of rectorship elections, unfair practices of rectors stemming from vast privileges, threats, gossip and slander (Altıntaş, 2002; Bozdağ, 2009; Paksoy, 2003) are consistent with this study's findings regarding rectorship elections and privileges.

The participants of the present study mentioned having health problems such as stress, despondency, pessimism, depression and alyosis as well as muscle pains and headaches, stomach problems, anxiety attacks, sleeping disorders and hand tremors. Moreover, they mentioned that they did not wish to attend work and they could not concentrate. Similar studies by Pompili et al. (2008) and Tuckey et al. (2009) also stated that victims suffer from aggression, a decline in self confidence, depression, over-sensibility, fear and loneliness. Similarly, studies by Valdivieso and Padilla (2012), Simpson and Cohen, (2004); Stebbing et al. (2004) stated that victims suffer from various health problems.

A study carried out on the consequences of mobbing (Yaman, 2007) stated that academic staffs perceived mobbing as detrimental towards effective time management. Djurkovic, McCormack, and Casimir (2004) and Druzhilov (2012) on the other hand, found that mobbing was the cause of weak job performance and quitting work. The present study not only supports the literature with its findings about weak job performances but also adds to it with its finding that mobbing could also cause some workers to work more ambitiously.

The findings of the study showed that psychological consequences of mobbing could lead to economic and family problems and cause suicidal ideation among victims. Balducci, Alfano, and Fraccaroli (2009), and Pompili et al. (2008) found that mobbing victims felt hopeless and aggressive, which led them to engage in suicidal behaviour. Namie and Namie (2009) found that victims could reflect their aggression to their families. The findings of present study are also supported by other findings (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik,

2010) which stated that not only the families but also the colleagues of victims felt anxiety and it was detrimental towards academic studies.

Training of workers on the mobbing process and its consequences (Matthiesen, 2006) and legal attempts supported by management could possibly prevent mobbing (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott 2002; Heiskanen, 2007; Saunders & Goodman-DeLahunty, 2007). Also in the present study, academic staff mentioned that in order to prevent mobbing, workers should be informed about the process and they should supervise one another and foster sanctions. With the help of committees with members from law, work ethics, educational management fields, seminars could be carried out in order to create social awareness. In addition to that, non-governmental organizations, universities and local authorities could collaborate and their work could be supported with visual and written press.

It can be concluded that, scientific and managerial evaluations of academic staff should be carried out on an objective basis independent of personal opinions. Besides, accountability of management to both higher and lower units could prevent the possible factors that cause mobbing. In future research on the organizational causes of mobbing, the organizational culture in universities and its relationship between mobbing experiences could be investigated in order to determine the conditions of an ideal culture which prevents mobbing. Only working on the data collected from victims could complicate the process of objectively determining the causes of mobbing. Therefore, in the future research, qualitative studies on the mobbing experiences of academic staff could also be supported with quantitative studies.

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