



Bullying: concept analysis from Rodgers' evolutionary perspective*

Assédio moral: análise de conceito na perspectiva evolucionista de Rodgers

Acoso moral: análisis de concepto en la perspectiva evolucionista de Rodgers

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to analyze the concept of bullying from Rodgers' evolutionary perspective, as expressed in the health, legal sciences, social and humanities literature. This was document research, which had for sources of data the articles available in the Periodical Portal / CAPES and Buscalegis from 1954 to 2010. The sample consisted of 46 items. For data analysis, we used the steps proposed by Rodgers in her model of conceptual analysis. In relation to the surrogate/related terms, we discovered *psycoterror* and *mobbing*. As for attributes, the most frequently understood were psychological violence and the social exclusion of the worker. The most relevant antecedents were the oppressive conditions of work. Regarding consequences, the highlights were psychosomatic, business and social problems. In this sense, the concept of bullying constitutes psychological violence with the intent to humiliate and socially exclude the victim, provoking psychosomatic disorders, impairing society and the workplace institution.

Keywords: Violence; Behavior; Bullying; Occupational health

RESUMO

O estudo teve como objetivo analisar o conceito de assédio moral, na perspectiva evolucionista de Rodgers, conforme expresso na literatura da saúde, ciências jurídicas, sociais e humanas. Trata-se de uma pesquisa documental, que teve como fontes de dados artigos disponibilizados no Portal de Periódicos/CAPES e na Buscalegis de 1954 a 2010. A amostra constituiu-se de 46 artigos. Para a análise dos dados, foram utilizados os passos propostos por Rodgers em seu modelo de análise conceitual. Em relação aos termos substitutivos, destacaram-se *psicoterror* e *mobbing*. Quanto aos atributos, os mais frequentes compreenderam a violência psicológica e a exclusão social do trabalhador. Os antecedentes mais relevantes foram as condições opressivas de trabalho. No tocante às consequências, destacaram-se os problemas psicossomáticos, empresariais e sociais. Nesse sentido, o conceito assédio moral constitui-se em violência psicológica com a intenção de humilhar e excluir socialmente a vítima, provocando distúrbios psicossomáticos, prejuízos à sociedade e à instituição de trabalho.

Descritores: Violência; Comportamento; Bullying; Saúde do trabalhador

RESUMEN

El estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar el concepto de acoso moral, en la perspectiva evolucionista de Rodgers, conforme referido en la literatura de la salud, ciencias jurídicas, sociales y humanas. Se trata de una investigación documental, que tuvo como fuentes de datos artículos disponibles en el Portal de Periódicos/CAPES y en la Buscalegis de 1954 a 2010. La muestra se constituyó de 46 artículos. Para el análisis de los datos, se utilizaron los pasos propuestos por Rodgers en su modelo de análisis conceptual. En relación a los términos sustitutivos, se destacaron *psicoterror* y *mobbing*. En cuanto a los atributos, los más frecuentes comprendieron la violencia psicológica y la exclusión social del trabajador. Los antecedentes más relevantes fueron las condiciones de opresión en el trabajo. En lo que respecta a las consecuencias, se destacaron los problemas psicossomáticos, empresariales y sociales. En este sentido, el concepto acoso moral se constituye en violencia psicológica con la intención de humillar y excluir socialmente a la víctima, provocando disturbios psicossomáticos, perjuicios a la sociedad y a la institución de trabajo.

Descriptores: Violencia; Conducta; Intimidación; Salud laboral

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INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, factors such as capitalism and globalization have contributed to increasing violence in the work environment, because of the precariousness of employment, flexibilization of work relationships, accelerated rhythm of the economy, interest in cost reduction, growth of unemployment, outsourcing, growth of the informal sector, trend towards fixed-term or “contingent” employment, and unrestrained competition among workers⁽¹⁾. These are factors that have a direct repercussion on workers’ health at **individual** and **collective** levels⁽²⁾. The presence of this reality in the work environment favors the occurrence of moral harassment.

Depending on the country, different expressions are used to express moral harassment, such as: *harcèlement moral* (moral harassment), in France; *bullying*, in England; *mobbing*, in the United States of America and in Sweden; *murabachibu, ijime* (social ostracism), in Japan; *psicoterror laboral, acoso moral* (work psychoterror, moral harassment), in Spain⁽³⁾. In Brazil, the recognized term is moral harassment, although not legitimate, as there are controversies about the use of the word “harassment”. To some authors⁽⁴⁾, the correct designation would be “persecution” or “molestation” or even “intimidation”. Nevertheless, other studious individuals^(5,6) use the more general term, violence or even psycho-terrorism at work.

Corroborating the thoughts of other researchers⁽⁷⁾ with respect to the subject being highlighted, the term moral harassment is emphasized as the one that best expresses the phenomenon, since harassment signifies surrounding a certain territorial space in order to exert dominance, the defining characteristic of the phenomenon being analyzed. Another characteristic of moral harassment is abusive conduct, which may be manifested above all by behaviors, words, acts, gestures, writings that may damage the personality, dignity, or physical or psychic integrity of persons, place their jobs in jeopardy, or degrade the work environment⁽⁸⁾. In this context, the aggressor’s goal is to professionally disqualify and demoralize and emotionally and morally destabilize the harassed person(s), making the work environment unpleasant, unbearable and hostile⁽⁸⁾.

One perceives that there has been discussion with respect to moral harassment in various countries, as well as in diverse areas of knowledge such as Law, Psychology, Medicine, Administration, Sociology, Nursing and others. This is an interdisciplinary subject and it deserves study, which demonstrates the concern of researchers in these area of knowledge about this phenomenon that is so peculiar and psychologically de-structuring. In spite of this, researches have also demonstrated the need to refine and explain this phenomenon in order to have a better understanding of its specificities in the work world, as well as its characteristics and consequences for the health of victims of this type of violence.

From this perspective, in order to understand moral harassment, a meticulous analysis of its concept is necessary, which would favor uniformization of its use by and meaning to researchers in the various areas of knowledge, in order to define it more precisely. In view of the foregoing discourse, the aim of this study was to analyze the concept of moral harassment from Rodgers’ evolutionary perspective, as it is expressed in the literature in the areas of health, legal, social and human sciences.

METHODS

Analysis of the concept was performed by means of the evolutionary model proposed by Rodgers⁽⁹⁾, who understands the development of the concept as a cycle that continues by means of time and within a particular context. In this model, three important aspects are distinguished in the development of the concept: its “meaning”, its “use” and its “application”. “Use” of the concept expresses the manner in which it is applied in appropriate situations, expressing “essential attributes”. “Application” reveals itself when a concept is associated with “use” in particular; it reflects the effectuated and identified concept in the context in which it is continually refined, incorporating other meanings.

Among the steps that comprise this model, the following were used: Identify the concept of interest, including the substitute terms, in this case, moral harassment; identify a field for the data survey (national and international publications about moral harassment, in the field of health, legal, social and human sciences, in the period from 1954 to 2010, accessed through the Portal of Periodicals the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Level Personnel (Capes) and Buscalegis; collect the data and identify the attributes of the concept and its contextual basis – sociocultural variations, antecedents and consequences.

To locate the literature, the following key words were used (in an individual and/or integrated manner): *assédio moral OR harassment OR bullying OR mobbing OR acoso moral OR psicoterrorismo*. This search enabled 764 articles to be identified, of which 46 (27 national and 19 international) formed part of the sample. The sample selection criteria were as follows: Articles in the Portuguese, English or Spanish language, made available in full in the databases selected for the study, which showed evidence in the title or in its other structures, of aspects relative to the concept of interest.

After the stage of selecting the material that served as the basis for analysis of the concept, the material was carefully and objectively read, and during reading, fragments of text were highlighted, which referred to attributes, antecedent events or consequences of the concept of moral harassment. After this procedure, all the topics of the articles detected during reading were digitized, and next, by means of an inductive process,

the possible attributes, antecedents and consequences of the concept were listed, as well as the number of authors who approached these elements. Attributes, antecedents and consequences of the phenomenon referred to were considered those identified with greater frequency in the investigated literature.

RESULTS

With regard to the use of the concept, the analysis undertaken allowed one to identify that the concept of moral harassment is widely used in diverse areas of knowledge, especially in human, legal and health sciences. Within the scope of health, the disciplines Medicine and Nursing were outstanding. Within the scope of human and legal sciences, the disciplines that most frequently dealt with this phenomenon were Law and Psychology, whose analytical guidelines were the conceptual and legal aspects and implications for the worker's health.

Considering the essential elements of the concept, analysis of the literature enabled identification of substitute terms, attributes, antecedents and consequences, as shown in the data in Table 1.

Table 1. Essential elements of the moral harassment concept pointed out in the researched literature, João Pessoa/PB, 2011

Essential elements	No.	%
Substitute Terms		
<i>Psicoterror</i>	17	36.9
<i>Mobbing</i>	16	34.7
<i>Bullying</i>	10	21.7
<i>Harçèlement moral</i>	6	13.0
<i>Acoso moral</i>	6	13.0
<i>Harassment</i>	6	13.0
Assédio psicológico	6	13.0
<i>Ijime</i>	4	8.6
Attributes		
Psychological violence	34	73.9
Social exclusion of the worker	21	45.6
Humiliation	20	43.4
Repetitive and prolonged nature	19	41.3
Abusive conduct	17	36.9
Antecedents		
Oppressive working conditions	23	50.0
Political, economic and social plans	19	41.3
Organizational dysfunctions	16	34.7
Interpersonal conflicts	9	19.5
Consequences		
Psychosomatic disorders in the victim	35	76.0
Company problems	16	34.7
Social problems	14	30.4

n= 46

DISCUSSION

Substitute Terms

Based on the empirical material researched, the most diverse expressions were found to denominate moral harassment. Table 1 reveals that the substitute term (expression used to refer to the concept) most cited in the researched literature was *psicoterror* (*psychoterror*), followed by *mobbing* and *bullying*. In the studied literature it was also found that there is no consensus with regard to the denominations of the concept, which acquired evolutionary specificities and implications with the passing years.

In the 1970s, the term *mobbing* was used by the Swedish doctor Heinemann, to describe a highly destructive behavior of small groups of children, directed against a single child. Up until then, *mobbing* was the term used in studies with seagulls and geese. In this context, the *mobbing* behavior would define a collective attack directed towards a target considered dangerous, which involves various individuals of the same species or of different species, with a view to confusing the intruders with threats at a distance and successive attacks, and physical contact could occasionally occur⁽⁸⁾.

In 1980, the German researcher Leymann, popularized the concept of *mobbing*, and in the next decade he conducted a study on human conduct in labor organizations and defined *mobbing* as the phenomenon in which one or a group of persons exercises extreme psychological violence in a systematic and repeated manner, against another in the work place, with the purpose of destroying the labor environment, and succeeding in making the victim abandon his/her job⁽⁸⁾. As from 1993, the term spread with the publication of the book *Mobbing: Persecution at work*⁽¹⁰⁾.

In 1996, Leymann conducted a new study by means of a survey made in various groups of professionals, which qualified the process found as psychoterror and introduced the concept of *mobbing* to describe forms of harassment that occurred within work organizations⁽¹⁰⁾.

In September 1998, the term moral harassment appeared when the French victimologist, Hirigoyen, published a book in France, with the title *Moral Harassment: The perverse violence in everyday life*, producing reflections on this phenomenon in the work environment⁽¹¹⁾. From then on, various expressions have been used in different countries to designate the concept. It is worth pointing out that in Spain it is known as "*acoso moral*"; in the United States of America, as "*mobbing*" or "*harassment*"; in Japan, "*ijime*"; in France, "*harçèlement moral*", and in England⁽⁶⁾, as "bullying".

In Brazil, the accepted term is "assédio moral"⁽¹²⁾, which gained intensity by means of a research conducted by Barreto, in 2000. But there are some authors who use the terms "psychoterror or psychological violence"⁽⁶⁾.

One perceives that these different denominations are attempts to define and describe moral harassment as a universal phenomenon, however, these attempts have up to now, represented disagreement in the approach to the concept, which is unfavorable to elaborating a consensual definition. Therefore, the subject needs the interchange of knowledge, theories and studies that uniformize its meaning, especially in the field of work.

Attributes

To characterize moral harassment, the researched literature mentions five essential attributes that express the nature of the concept, namely: Psychological violence; social exclusion of the worker; humiliation, repetitive and prolonged nature and abusive conduct^(6,11).

The publications pointed out that the characteristic most strongly present in the concept of moral harassment is psychological violence^(6,7,11-12), cited by 34 articles. This concerns a deliberate, moral not physical offense, in which the aggressors, in a verbal, subtle, dissimulated and intentional manner, carry out discriminative actions, threats, public cooptation and coactions to achieve the objective of isolating or assailing the victim^(6-8,11,13). These attitudes are established on the basis of inhuman and authoritarian hierarchical relationships, in which the victim is hostilized in front of others⁽¹⁴⁾.

Therefore, the anti-ethical behavior of the harasser occurs by means of conducts, such as depreciative comments, persistent criticisms, shouting, demands of impossible tasks, excessive monitoring of the victim, malicious rumors and threats, in the sense of devaluating and isolating the worker in order to degrade the work environment^(6,10-12). Thus, the emotionally destabilized worker decides to ask to be dismissed from the job⁽⁷⁾.

The purpose of harassment is to exclude someone undesirable from the work scenario. In this context the aggressor (in general, a person imbued with authority) begins to persecute the worker, particularly when he/she represents something different from the group, the one who has some confidence, social class or even sexual orientation differing from the others. Excessively competent persons who occupy various positions in the company, in the majority of cases become the target of persecution by moral harassment⁽¹³⁾.

The characteristics that differentiate moral harassment from other normal day-to-day conflicts in work relationships are its intentionality and the repetitive and prolonged nature^(4,6,10-11,13-16), conditions most strongly related to the victim's emotional imbalance. It is necessary to make it clear that the threat to the dignity or psychic integrity due to hostile activities of one or various persons, is only characterized as moral harassment if it occurs regularly and in a minimum period of 6 months, and a mean frequency of two times in a week⁽⁸⁾.

Therefore, situations of stress, humiliation, conflicts and habitual attributes, tensions and isolated incidents that occur punctually and in a nonsystematic manner among participants of modern work organizations must not be considered moral harassment⁽⁸⁾.

Contextual Basis – antecedents and consequences

Where the antecedents of moral harassment, presented in Table 1 are concerned, one observes that among the antecedents most cited in the researched literature, oppressive working conditions are outstanding^(6,12,17-19), which configure as pressure to obtain pre-established results, fixed work rhythms, night work, solitary work, and the type that has rigid hierarchical relationships, in which fear and authoritarianism reign supreme. Moreover, they verified organizational dysfunctions^(4,13,16-19), characterized by work environments in which there are no precise internal rules, lack of coherent policies, with poor communication and scarcity of material and human resources.

According to some authors^(13,17), executives with psychological disturbances, who have illusions of grandeur, power and superiority, as well as envious and chronically stressed individuals are predisposed to developing negative feelings, with the purpose of attacking and destroying their fellow humans purely for pleasure. However, the study entitled moral harassment⁽¹³⁾ states that the majority of those responsible for practicing this type of violence are persons considered normal, who only follow the above-mentioned behavior in their work group.

In addition, there are factors related to the modern world which have made the work environment favorable to moral harassment^(4,6,10,12,13), such as for example, the political, economic and social models, marked by capitalism, neoliberalism and globalization that favor the proliferation of privatization of services, deterioration of interpersonal relationships, the weakness of employment ties and devaluation of the worker, making the work market extremely dynamic and competitive.

The interpersonal conflicts present in discrimination against sex, racial prejudice, xenophobia, physical and mental incapacity, political or religious reasons, migration, intolerance of sexual option, or the simple fact that the victim is different or behaves differently from the other members of the work institution are also pointed out as aspects that favor the appearance of moral harassment⁽¹³⁾.

There is a consensus in the literature investigated that there are consequences of moral harassment for the health of workers, institutions and society. After careful analysis of the empirical material of this study, the consequences were divided into three categories: Psychosomatic disturbances, company problems and social problems.

The category denominated psychosomatic disturbances refers to the damage caused to mental and physical health of the victims of the phenomenon. Among them,

the following are outstanding: depression, stress, low self-esteem, burnout syndrome, insomnia, fatigue, gastric problems, especially, gastritis and ulcers, cardiovascular disturbances, such as tachycardia and arterial hypertension, pain, and in extreme cases, suicide^(4,6,10,19).

It should be noted that the disturbances caused by moral harassment frequently leave the worker incapable of performing his/her activities and diminish his/her performance at work, increasing absenteeism, and consequently causing a drop in the company's productivity and profits. As a result the employee is dismissed, and this increases costs through payment of indemnification or percentage of deposits on the Employees Dismissal Fund, 13th salary and vacation pay⁽¹⁹⁾.

Therefore, moral harassment is considered a multidimensional psychosocial syndrome, as it present various physical and psychic symptoms that affect the individual, the work group and the organization, and produces dysfunction at an individual and collective level, affecting all the hierarchical levels with negative repercussions on the company's image⁽⁸⁾. In the same way, society feels the negative consequences arising from the practice of moral

harassment, since it increases unemployment, criminality, burdens public spending on the employees' medical aid and early retirement⁽¹⁹⁾.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the moral harassment concept, based on Rodgers' model, made its meaning, attributes, antecedents and consequences more understandable. In addition it enabled elaboration of the following definition for the phenomenon: *Subtle, dissimulated, intentional psychological violence, of a repetitive and prolonged nature, with the intention of humiliating and socially excluding a person from the context of work activity, causing him/her psychosocial stress and harm to the society and organization.* It is expected that this definition may favor an approach to the phenomenon in the different areas of knowledge.

The importance should be emphasized of analyzing this concept using Rodgers' evolutionary model, which allowed one to verify its historical evolution over the course of time, considering the dynamism and variations of the concept in various socio-cultural scenarios.

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