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Bullying or Mobbing: Is it Happening in Your Academic Library?

Susan Hubbs Motin

The behaviors of bullying and mobbing have only begun to rise in the public's awareness or towards the legal standing of harassment. But, like harassment, bullying and mobbing can lead to the same results for employees: a loss of dignity, self-confidence and productivity, as well as an excessive amount of non-work related stress and other related health issues. Unfortunately, librarians, media specialists and other who work in libraries and information centers can also experience bullying and mobbing. It is important for people who work in libraries and information centers to understand bullying and mobbing, and toward that end this article provides definitions and a brief history of bullying and mobbing, presents scientific statistics, describes the characteristics of the various types of bullies, exposes who bullies tend to target and explores what is happening in the legal arena.

One does not normally equate bullying and mobbing with libraries. There is a presumption that libraries exist on a higher plain; that they are places of refuge, bastions of freedom and evidence of civilization at its best. Although this may generally be true, however, any time you have complex personalities interacting there is potential for conflict. Individuals can either fulfill the goals and aspirations of what an

excellent service-oriented library can be, or they can create a culture of anxiety, stress, and distrust which hampers providing the best possible service to patrons and inhibits the free flow of ideas and creativity. Until Thomas Hecker's article on workplace mobbing in libraries, which appeared in the 2007 issue of *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*,¹ there was no discussion of bullying or mobbing in libraries.

Unfortunately, bullying and mobbing can begin at a very early stage in life. This has tragically played out in a number of school shootings across our nation in recent years. It was also highlighted in a very personal way when my eight year old daughter was being bullied and wrote the following Haiku to help her articulate her feelings about bullies.

The bullies that bug
Are the worst kind of them all
They think it's a ball²

While there is a significant amount of research and literature on bullying by children and adolescents, only recently has there been an acknowledgement that bullying can continue later in life or that it can even begin in adulthood, when brought into the workplace,

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its effects can be devastating to individuals and can cause institutional chaos and instability. Bullying or mobbing has been an accepted behavior in the history of our workplaces. Individuals who are bullied or mobbed are told by colleagues that they need to “toughen up,” “stop being so sensitive” and “just roll with the punches.” However, individuals and some enlightened organizations are realizing that just as discrimination is damaging to an institution, so too is ignoring and permitting bullying and mobbing in the workplace. During my twenty-five years as a librarian, I have experienced being bullied and/or mobbed by both supervisors and colleagues. I have also witnessed others being bullied or mobbed and listened with empathy to many emotionally distraught and stressed librarians that have shared with me their painful experiences and sought me out for my advice and affirmation that they were indeed being bullied or mobbed. I have always wanted to share with them some substantive information that would allow them to realize that they are not alone and that bullying or mobbing does not end after high school.

Dr. Ruth Namie and Dr. Gary Namie, in their book *The Bully at Work What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity On the Job*,³ use the term Targets to mean those who are or have been bullied. They successfully make the case that people who are bullied are not victims but have been targeted by the bully/bullies. They also do not capitalize bully unless it begins the sentence. I agree with the use of this terminology and punctuation and will employ it throughout this paper.

Definitions

Bullying at work is the **repeated** mistreatment of a Target by one or more bullies. It is malicious verbal harassment (including snide or sarcastic remarks) and can also include such non-verbal behavior as dismissive body language including eye rolling, turning of the back and making dismissive sounds. People who also address you in a condescending or hostile tone are bullying. Bullying also includes intentional work interference such as sabotage. Mobbing is a specific type of bullying where a majority of people in the workplace emotionally abuse and bully an individual. It can be likened to creating a scapegoat or the pecking to death of one chicken (perceived as weaker) by the rest of the chickens.⁴ Bullying or mobbing is about control. The bully wants to be in control of its Target(s).

Once you realize that this behavior is happening to you in a repetitive manner, it is extremely important that you do the following things. First, you need to truly know and believe that you as the Target have not brought this on yourself and did not do anything to deserve this treatment. Second, you need to begin to keep detailed notes of when bullying or mobbing has occurred, who was there to witness this and what was said or done. If there are witnesses, you need to ask them if they will write down date/time/place and what they recall was said and done. However, you should realize that research has shown that most people who witness bullying or mobbing may at first be willing to write something up but, as time goes on and the possibility that they might be drawn in or bring the wrath of the bully down upon them, they may retreat or consciously avoid you. Third, let your family and close friends know what is happening to you. They will be the people you can count on to listen and be supportive. As a cautionary note, you should be prepared to have your friends and family ask you as what you could have done or why you are the Target. Research has shown this is a normal reaction and you will need to educate your family and friends about what is bullying or mobbing and that a Target is not responsible for what is happening to them. The best analogy in the research is likening bullying or mobbing to a person who has been raped. For many years, rape victims would be accused of dressing provocatively, inappropriately flirting and thereby “bringing it on themselves.” It has been only fairly recently acknowledged by the courts and society that a person who has been raped does not bring on this violent act but that it is perpetrated on them. Bullying or mobbing is the same thing; it has been perpetrated on a blameless Target.⁵

History

The study of workplace bullying or mobbing goes back to 1982 when Dr. Heinz Leymann, Ph.D., M.D., a German industrial psychologist and medical doctor began researching and publishing his findings on a phenomenon he named using the English word “mobbing.” It became a well known concept in Europe but was virtually unknown in the United States until 1998, with the publication of the book *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace*⁶ and in 2000, *The Bully at Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim your Dignity on the Job*.

Beginning in the 1980s, Dr. Leymann created the world's first clinic to treat people who were emotionally abused. He defined workplace bullying/mobbing as:

Psychological terror or mobbing in working life [involving] hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic manner by one or more individuals, mainly toward one individual, who, due to mobbing, is pushed into a helpless and defenseless position and held there by means of continuing mobbing activities. These actions occur on a very frequent basis (statistical definition: at least once a week) and over a long period of time (statistical definition: at least six months' duration). Because of high frequency and long duration of hostile behavior, this maltreatment results in considerable mental, psychosomatic, social misery.⁷

Dr. Leymann focused his research on how to treat people who had been bullied. He discovered people that had been bullied suffered a more intense and long term level of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than other people who had experienced some traumatic event which had led them to have PTSD. Dr. Leymann was concerned about the health consequences from such prolonged exposure to bullying/mobbing stress. Continued research has proved that Dr. Leymann was correct in his concern. The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute (now known as The Workplace Bullying Institute) (WBI) performed a survey in 2003 relating to health. Here is their finding:

Overall Ranking of the Prevalence of Symptoms, most to least frequent

1. Anxiety, stress, excessive worry (76%)
2. Loss of concentration (71%)
3. Disrupted sleep (71%)
4. Feeling edgy, irritable, easily startled and constantly on guard (paranoia) (60%)
5. Stress headaches (55%)
6. Obsession over details at work (52%)
7. Recurrent memories, nightmares and flashbacks (49%)
8. Racing heart rate (48%)
9. Needing to avoid feelings, thoughts, and situations that remind you of trauma or a general emotional "flatness" (47%)

10. Body aches—muscles or joints (45%)
11. Exhaustion, leading to an inability to function (41%)
12. Compulsive behaviors (40%)
13. Diagnosed depression (39%)
14. Shame or embarrassment that led to dramatic changes in lifestyle (38%)
15. Significant weight change (loss or gain) (35%)
16. Chronic fatigue syndrome (35%)
17. Panic attacks (32%)
18. TMJ (jaw tightening/teeth grinding) (29%)
19. Skin changes, e.g., shingles, rashes, acne (28%)
20. Use of substances to cope: tobacco, alcohol, drugs, food (28%)
21. Asthma or allergies (27%)
22. Thinking about being violent towards others (25%)
23. Suicidal thoughts (25%)
24. Migraines (23%)
25. Irritable bowel syndrome (colitis) (23%)
26. Chest pains (23%)
27. Hair loss (21%)
28. Fibromyalgia—inflamed joints and connective tissue (19%)
29. High blood pressure/hypertension (18%)
30. Ulcers (11%)
31. Angina (11%)
32. Heart arrhythmia (5%)
33. Heart attack(s) (3%)⁸

Dr. Leymann died of cancer in the spring 1999. His clinic has closed, but his colleagues continue to maintain and update his website. Dr. Leymann's ground breaking research is the basis of all the research literature on bullying or mobbing.

Statistics

How prevalent is bullying or mobbing in the United States today? According to the survey done by the Workplace Bullying Institute and Zogby International in September 2007, with 7,740 respondents (a scientifically representative sample of adult Americans) on the topic:

- 37% of workers have been bullied
- Most bullies are bosses (72%)
- Most Targets (57%) are women
- Bullying is 4 times more prevalent than illegal harassment

- 62% of employers ignore the problem
- 45% of Targets suffer stress-related health problems
- 40% of bullied individuals never tell their employers
- Only 3% of bullied people file lawsuits⁹

With 37 percent of workers having been bullied, this works out to be an estimated 54 million Americans. Other studies have shown that 1 out of 6 American workers are being bullied. The most common type of bullying is women on women.

The Different Types of Bullies

How does one become a bully? According to Dr. Gary and Ruth Namie, bullies have become bullies through “personality development, by reading cues in competitive, political workplace and by accident.” The Namies categorize bullies into Chronic Bullies, Opportunist Bullies, Accidental Bullies, Substance Abusing Bullies, Constant Critic (extremely negative, nitpicker, perfectionist whiner, complainer, fault finder, liar), Two-Headed Snake (passive-aggressive indirect, dishonest style of dealing with people and issues), Gatekeeper and Screaming Mimi. They do an excellent job of describing the characteristics of each type and give “Handling Tips” for each type, but theirs is a more layman’s way of describing these bullies. I have found that Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot in *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace* give a more psychological categorization of bullies. They categorize them to include the evil, divine right, threatened egotism/inflated self-appraisal, and the narcissistic personalities.

The first type of bully they categorize is the evil personality. In his book *People of the Lie*,¹⁰ Peck concludes that evil “is that force, residing either inside or outside of human beings, that seeks to kill life or liveliness.” This concept of evil in a person is the only way some Holocaust scholars have come to conclude that Hitler and his henchmen could have planned the Holocaust and brought it to its horrible fruition. This type of bully is especially scary.

A second type of bully is the boss who believes that it is her divine right to exercise her power as she chooses, with no restraint and that whatever she does is for the good of the institution. She believes that as the boss she is bullying the Target for the good of the institution. In reality, these bosses are the people who are power hungry. They do not have leadership quali-

ties or skills and they use their power to compensate for their shortcomings.

Another personality is the threatened egotism/inflated self-appraisal. This has been described as a person who has had her own ego threatened because of her own overly inflated self-appraisal or from overly inflated outside appraisal. This person will feel very threatened by being the new boss, especially after following a highly regarded and effective leader. This person is also threatened by more experienced staff. This is the type of personality that administrators will often hire to do the “cleaning up” of what the administration believes to be the problem department/area.

The final personality for a bully is the narcissistic personality. The best explanation comes from Wyatt and Hare’s book *Work Abuse* where they use the following American Psychiatric Association’s diagnostic manual’s definition:

Clinically speaking, any socially dysfunctional person who feels entitled to use power to control others he is afraid of, who lives in pretentious fantasy rather than reality, and who consistently views himself as superior to his fellow human beings and craves being told so, has a mental disorder called narcissistic personality disorder.¹¹

Organizations can also allow bullying or mobbing to flourish through their organizational culture or structure through bad management that has

Excessive bottom-line orientation at the expense of human resources, highly hierarchical structures, no open door policy, poor communication channels, poor conflict-solving abilities and no or ineffective conflict management or grievance procedures in place, weak leadership, pervasive scapegoat mentality, little or no teamwork, and no or ineffective diversity education.¹²

Also, according to Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, other organizational cultures or structures that will allow for these types of behaviors are a stress-intensive workplace, monotony, disbelief or denial by managers, unethical activities, flat organizations and downsizing, restructuring or mergers.

Who are the People Most Likely to be Targeted and Why?

As mentioned above, the research has shown that most of the people being bullied or mobbed are women. In over half of the bullying that occurs, it is one woman bullying another woman. If one has been bullied or mobbed, there may be some redemption in the research by the WBI that shows Targets are independent, skilled and bright people. They also are cooperative and nice people. Finally, Targets are ethical, just, and fair people. Interestingly, the WBI research has also shown that 63 percent of Targets had some college or college degree and that 21 percent held a graduate or professional degree. They cite four major reasons why people become Targets. First, the

Targets refusal to be subservient, to not go along with being controlled (reported by 58 percent of respondents); Bully envied the Target's superior competence (reported by 56 percent of respondents); Bully envied Target's social skills, being liked, positive attitude (reported by 49 percent of respondents) and finally, ethical whistleblower-type behavior (reported by 46 percent of respondents).¹³

Bullies have no shame and, if allowed to continue their odious behaviors, they will do so with impunity. Bullies are also lazy and will stop if Targets learn and employ strategies which have proven to be effective.

How to Deal with Bullying/Mobbing in your Workplace—Strategies and Options

So what do you do when you realize that you are being bullied or mobbed? First, you should not try to deny it to yourself. Keeping a stiff upper lip or withholding it from family and friends can only cause you more health and emotional problems by not allowing you to release your stress and anger. Remember, it has been shown intense bullying or mobbing can actually have such a devastating effect on a person that it becomes Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD).

Second, you need to seek out a qualified health professional. Dr. Ruth Namie and Dr. Gary Namie, suggest that you will need to screen counselors to learn if they know and understand about bullying at work, so that the counselor will not try to blame you for what is happening to you. Since clinical depression, is so prevalent among Targets, a qualified coun-

selor can use various recognized treatments, including talk therapy or behavior modification techniques. They may also refer you to a medical doctor for anti-depressive drug therapy, since the threat of suicide is very real.

Also, as noted above, when dealing with bullying or mobbing, take notes on all incidents but do not share them with anyone at work until you are prepared to be attacked by the bully and her bully backers. Do not share information with the human relations department. Remember, they work for the institution and the bully will probably know about your bullying/mobbing complaint before you get back to your office. If you have a union, you also need to be cautious. Some unions have backed employees who have brought complaints about bullying or mobbing while others have been dismissive of the employee, given them bad advice, or have sided with the institution against the individual when the union felt it was to its advantage. Individuals need to know or spend some time learning about their organization's culture and who they will be able to trust and ask for visible support in their struggle against the bully or bullies.

One option for dealing with bully or mobbing comes from the nursing profession. Like the nursing profession, the library profession is predominately made up of women. We could learn from our nursing colleagues by employing a system nurse's call, Code Pink. In this system, if a nurse is bullied by a doctor, the nurses' rally around the Target and the group informs their supervisor(s) that they will no longer work with the bully until there has been a formal apology and that all bullying will stop, and that there can be no retaliation. Another option that may be open to a Target is to go two steps above the bully's boss. If the bully is the Target's boss, there is a real chance they may be "bullying down" from their boss. By being removed two steps away, there is a chance the Target might be heard and some bullies revealed. If an individual is granted a meeting, one should be prepared with a list of times, dates, places and any witness statements. It is important to remember to remain calm and factual. Sometimes the ultimate supervisor, in this case the president of a university can take steps to change the culture. This was recently reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*^{14,15} when the new president Richard Davenport, of Minnesota State University, Mankato arrived on campus and began hearing from people on campus that there were a number of bullies on the

campus. President Davenport decided to investigate. He hired consultants who surveyed the campus community and reported back that one-third of those who were surveyed said they were bullied or mobbed in the past year.

Finally, an individual will need to decide to if she wants to leave or if she should stay and fight. If an individual chooses to leave, there also are some considerations. An individual can choose to do a quiet exit, arrange for positive references, and if there is no concern of continued bullying in the form of retribution, walk away and work on healing after this traumatic experience. However, if an individual is concerned about retribution after she has left the institution; there are several options a Target can employ. Let your supervisor and other higher ranking administrators know in writing that should they as individuals or as representatives of the organization release to future employers or others any information about the mistreatment they will be held liable. Having an attorney draft and deliver this letter could be well worth the cost. Also, let them know that you are aware of the law regarding defamation of character. One service available is Documented Reference Check (DRC) [(800) 742-3316] <http://www.badreferences.com/>. For a small fee, they will contact an employer and ask for a reference about an individual. DRC will send the individual the report that was given to them.

After reading a great deal of research and having firsthand accounts on bullying and mobbing, I have several final pieces of advice to share. First, for people who are starting a new job, let it be known that there is nothing to hold you to this job, if this job does not work out, you are fully prepared and able to leave and find another position. I also would advise individuals not to share very much of their personal life with any one at their new position. If you choose to fight in terms of a legal battle, you need to know that, in the United States, it currently is an uphill and difficult battle.

The Law(s) Regarding Bullying/Mobbing

According to Dr Heinz Leymann, "In the societies of the highly industrialized western world, the workplace is the only remaining battlefield where people can 'kill' each other without running the risk of being taken to court."¹⁶ In term of bullying or mobbing, several European countries have led the way in terms of establishing laws to stop bullying or mobbing in

the workplace. Due to Dr. Leymann's work in mobbing, the Scandinavian countries have led the way. In March of 1994, Sweden enacted an ordinance against victimization at work defined as, "recurrent reprehensible or distinctly negative actions which are directed against individual employees in an offensive manner and can result in those employees being placed outside the workplace community." In Great Britain, the laws are being formulated around Health and Safety or Employment Law codes. Additionally, France, Germany, Italy, South Africa and Australia all have or are working on governmental policies or laws against bullying or mobbing. Of the industrialized nations, Canada and the United States are the nations lagging behind in this area.

In the United States, workplace bullying or mobbing is extremely difficult to try to prosecute because currently, bullying or mobbing does not fall under any federal or state laws. It cannot be prosecuted through normal harassment or discrimination laws. In these types of harassment or discrimination, having a protected class status is the important factor. Some attorneys have attempted to prosecute under Title VII using the hostile environment argument or by using tort law which includes various theories of intentional infliction of emotional distress, defamation-libel/slander, and breach of contract, public policy, wrongful discharge, and workers' compensation. All of these have met with little or no success.¹⁷ 2009 may be the year where workplace bullying and mobbing is finally addressed by thirteen states. 116 legislative sponsors are working to get a bill through these states that can be used as a model for other state legislative bodies. The WBI has been and continues to be heavily involved in working with these legislative sponsors and continually updates their website with new developments as they occur. Attorneys are also becoming involved in writing articles about bullying and mobbing and challenging other attorneys to create laws in their states that will combat this behavior.¹⁸ As individuals who may be Targets, it is important to find out what is happening in your state.

As librarians we are often asked for reading recommendations, I would highly recommend the following resources for people who are Targets or for employers who wish to learn more about bullying or mobbing and how they can create a healthy workplace to not allow or to stop these behaviors at their institutions. An essential book to read is *The Bully at*

Work What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity On the Job, by Dr. Gary and Ruth Namie. Their website for the Workplace Bullying Institute is important for keeping up with this topic <http://www.bullyinginstitute.org/>. Their corresponding website for employers is designed for institutions who want to create policies for their institutions <http://www.workdoctor.com/>.¹⁹ For more information on mobbing, *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace* by Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot is excellent. Other important scholars in this area are Andrea Adams and Neil Crawford who wrote the first book on the subject in the United Kingdom, *Bullying at Work: How to Confront and Overcome It*. Other authors from the United States include Loreleigh Keashly, Kenneth Westhues, Ph.D. and David Yamada, J.D... Also, technology has added some more interesting resources for the academic community. First, the blog *Bullying of Academics in Higher Education*²⁰ and the blog's accompanying Facebook²¹ account. In the past three years, there has been a plethora of books published and numerous websites created. A number of these are just a rehashing of the work that was done by Dr. Leymann and the other early bullying and mobbing scholars and they do not add significantly to the scholarly literature.

Every person in the workplace has the right to be treated with respect and should not be bullied or mobbed. It is my great hope that the information contained in these pages will be of assistance to librarians and information professionals that will allow them to survive and thrive while having to cope with the bullies in their lives. To bullies everywhere, I would add the warning, we know you are out there and *we are not going to take it anymore!*

Notes

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