

# WORKPLACE BULLYING: PREVALENCE AND DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS IN A MULTI-OCCUPATIONAL SAMPLE

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*The aim of this paper is to analyze the prevalence of mobbing in the workplace, as well as its main associated characteristics, in a multi-occupational sample of 2861 workers from diverse employment sectors. For this purpose, a specific mobbing instrument, the “Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised” (NAQ-R) and a questionnaire drawn up ad hoc about relevant socio-demographic and work aspects were employed. The results of this study provide psychometric support for the use of the Spanish version of the NAQ-R as a reliable and valid instrument for assessing different levels of workplace bullying. The results also indicate that 14% of the participants had experienced mobbing behaviors during the previous six months. Likewise, the mobbing characteristics found were, in general, similar to those found in diverse studies, both at national and international levels.*

**Key words:** *mobbing, workplace bullying, violence in the workplace*

*El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la prevalencia del acoso psicológico en el lugar de trabajo y las distintas características asociadas a dicho fenómeno en una muestra multiocupacional compuesta por 2861 trabajadores pertenecientes a distintos sectores de actividad laboral, empleándose para ello un instrumento específico de medida del acoso laboral, el NAQ-R (Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised), y un cuestionario sobre aspectos sociodemográficos y sociolaborales elaborado ad hoc. A tenor de los resultados obtenidos en relación a las propiedades psicométricas del NAQ-R, la versión española permite evaluar, con las suficientes garantías psicométricas, diferentes niveles de acoso laboral. Por otra parte, los resultados obtenidos señalan que el 14% de los participantes han sufrido conductas de acoso laboral durante los últimos seis meses. Asimismo, las demás características del acoso laboral halladas han resultado afines a las de distintos estudios desarrollados tanto a nivel nacional como internacional sobre la materia.*

**Palabras clave:** *mobbing, acoso laboral, violencia en el trabajo.*

No definition of *mobbing* has yet been agreed upon, but it is recognized as a process of systematic and repeated aggression by a person or group towards a coworker, subordinate, or superior (Fidalgo & Piñuel, 2004; Topa, Depolo, & Morales, 2007). It is considered one of the main stressors a worker may face during his or her working life (Moreno-Jiménez & Rodríguez-Muñoz, 2006; Pérez-Bilbao, Nogareda, Martín-Daza, & Sancho, 2001), and has become a customary field of research (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999; Leymann, 1996; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Zapf & Einarsen, 2001).

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The data obtained to date are quite heterogeneous, due to a variety of aspects, including the difficulties involved in the conceptual definition of the mobbing construct, the diverse measurement instruments used, and the fact that study samples are derived from various occupational sectors (Einarsen, 2000; Einarsen et al., 2003; González-Trijueque & Graña, 2007; Topa et al., 2007). Nevertheless, mobbing is considered a clearly multicausal phenomenon (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Garrosa, & Morante, 2005; Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996), capable of producing negative consequences not only for the workers affected (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; González de Rivera & Rodríguez-Abuín, 2006; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002a, 2002b), but also for those in their socio-family context (Pérez-Bilbao, Nogareda, Martín-Daza, & Sancho, 2001), and for work organization itself (Einarsen & Hauge, 2006). Studies carried out to date have attempted to study in depth and identify the diverse variables present in the dynamic of mobbing (e.g.,

antecedents, consequences, moderator variables), though research on the etiology of mobbing has traditionally been divided into three approaches: 1) the personality characteristics of mobber and victim; 2) characteristics inherent to the interpersonal relations within organizations; and 3) the psychosocial risks of the occupational environment (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2005).

In this study we start out from the definition of mobbing provided by Einarsen and Raknes (1997) and included in the NAQ-R, as it is one of the most commonly used definitions in international research. It describes mobbing as "*a situation where, over a period of time, one or more individuals continuously perceive themselves as the recipients of negative acts by one or more individuals, in a situation where the mobbing target finds it difficult to defend him- or herself from such actions. An isolated incident is not mobbing.*" On the basis of this definition, we propose to describe the diverse characteristics of mobbing within the active population of our country, and thus to improve our knowledge of this phenomenon with regard to socio-demographic and work variables and variables of perceived mobbing over the previous six months. Another goal of this study is to adapt the NAQ-R to a Spanish sample, ensuring the basic psychometric guarantees—reliability and validity—of the instrument.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 2861 people participated in the study. They belonged to the active Spanish population of both sexes (55.4% women and 44.6% men), aged between 16 and 67 years, the mean age of the sample being 34.26 years ( $SD = 12.04$ ). Of the total, 97.5% were of Spanish nationality. Regarding participants' civil status, most were unmarried with no partner (49.4%), whilst 8.8% were unmarried with partner, 36% were married, 4.9% were separated/divorced, and 0.9% were widowed. In addition, 74.6% of the participants considered themselves as middle-class, and as regards educational level, 43.1% had a university qualification, 39.7% had completed secondary education (academic or technical) and the remaining 17.2% had primary or incomplete secondary education.

### Procedure

This research on mobbing was carried out during the years 2006 and 2007. In order to obtain the most

representative sample possible of the active population of the diverse urban areas of the Region of Madrid, we selected 250 students interested in obtaining research credits out of a total of 400 from the Department of Clinical Psychology at the Complutense University of Madrid. The selection of the research assistants began with an informative talk about the characteristics of the study to all fourth-year students on the Clinical Psychology course. They were informed that, to be able to participate in the research project, the order of arrival of the requests and the geographical area they came from were important conditions that would be taken into account. We took as reference for the distribution of the assistant researchers the population census of the Region of Madrid from 2006, and considered the following geographical areas to obtain the sample for the study: 1) Madrid capital 60% (150 research assistants), 2) Northern metropolitan area 5% (12 research assistants), 3) Eastern metropolitan area 8% (20 research assistants), 4) Southern metropolitan area 20% (50 research assistants), and 5) Western metropolitan area 7% (18 research assistants). Each research assistant was required to administer 16 protocols to people they knew and to strangers from their area of residence; each protocol took approximately 25 minutes to complete.

All the members of the final sample participated voluntarily and confidentially in this study. The protocols were anonymous and had simple introductory instructions.

Initially, 4000 protocols were handed out, and the response rate was 77.7%, that is, a total of 3111 protocols were returned, of which 250 were rejected because their data were defective, they had been filled out randomly, or they had low response consistency. This latter aspect was detected by means of four items of similar content that had been included *ex profeso* in the battery so that the protocol could be eliminated if any of these items were responded to inversely/contradictorily.

### Instruments

Participants filled out a form drawn up *ad hoc* requesting socio-demographic and socio-employment data and a questionnaire that specifically measured mobbing, the NAQ-R (*Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised*) by Einarsen and Raknes (1997). The NAQ-R divides negative behaviors perceived at the workplace into two subscales, personal harassment and mobbing, according to the original studies (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). It is a 5-point Likert-type scale on which respondents rate the frequency with which they are

subjected to each behavior described. In its original version, this questionnaire had 21 items that came from various bibliographic studies and numerous interviews with victims of mobbing; since then, the NAQ has undergone several modifications, always taking into consideration that the term mobbing should not appear in the text (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). Its essential characteristic is that, after the participants have responded to these items, a definition of mobbing is introduced, leaving them to determine whether or not they consider themselves victims of mobbing according to this definition (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). Diverse studies have revealed the good psychometric properties of the instrument, with internal stability indexes of between .87 and .93 (Cronbach's alpha) and negative correlations with mental/physical health variables ( $r = -.42$ ), workers' general performance ( $r = -.24$ ), degree of job satisfaction (between  $r = -.24$  and  $r = -.44$ ), and degree of psychosocial health and well-being (between  $r = -.31$  and  $r = -.52$ ), as well as positive correlations with intention of quitting one's current job ( $r = .36$ ) and presence of psychosomatic complaints ( $r = .32$ ) (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001).

In this study we used the latest revision in English of the NAQ-R, adding only one item related to sexual harassment. In order to complete the information obtained with this instrument, we developed a series of questions for the participants who considered themselves victims of mobbing, such as the number of mobbers, the mobbers' sex and position in the organizational hierarchy, and how long the victim had experienced this mobbing situation. We used the *back translation* technique to translate the instrument into Spanish. The NAQ-R was translated into Spanish by two experts in this kind of translation and subsequently retranslated into English by two different experts, thus obtaining the final version of the NAQ-R employed in this study.

### Data Analysis

We analyzed the basic psychometric properties of the NAQ-R, calculating the degree of internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficient and the internal validity by means of exploratory factor analysis.

We then carried out a basic description of the study sample based on the selected variables and performed a general analysis of the differences of proportions between the frequency of perceived mobbing with regard to the socio-demographic and socio-employment

variables considered. In order to identify possible significant differences, we analyzed the corresponding percentages and frequencies for the contingency tables and the subsequent application of the Chi-square statistical technique ( $\chi^2$ ). We thereby expected to determine whether there were any indicators—either socio-demographic or socio-employment—related to the existence of mobbing at work, which would thus constitute variables characteristic of mobbing.

## RESULTS

### Basic psychometric properties of the NAQ-R

The factor analysis (principal components method with *varimax* rotation) revealed a three-dimensional structure of the questionnaire. As seen in Table 1, this analysis yielded three factors that explained 54% of the

**Table 1**  
Results of the factor analysis of the NAQ-R  
(rotated components matrix)

	Factor I Psychological harassment	Factor II Mobbing	Factor III Physical harassment
1. Alguien le ha ocultado información que ha afectado a su rendimiento	.540	.417	
2. Ha sido humillado o ridiculizado en relación a su trabajo	.725		
3. Le han ordenado realizar un trabajo que está por debajo de su nivel de competencia		.715	
4. Le han cambiado de realizar tareas de responsabilidad por otras más triviales o desagradables		.689	
5. Se han extendido rumores sobre usted	.671		
6. Ha sido ignorado, excluido o le han dejado de hablar	.775		
7. Le han insultado u ofendido con comentarios sobre usted, sus actitudes o su vida privada	.764		
8. Le han gritado o ha sido o ha sido objeto de enfados espontáneos	.637		
9. Ha sufrido conductas intimidatorias como ser apuntado con el dedo, la invasión de su espacio personal, empujones, que no le dejen pasar, etc.	.561		.459
10. Ha visto detalles o indirectas de otros que le sugieran abandonar su trabajo	.650		
11. Le han recordado continuamente sus errores y fallos	.653		
12. Ha sido ignorado o ha recibido una reacción hostil cuando se ha acercado a alguien	.747		
13. Ha recibido críticas persistentes sobre su trabajo y esfuerzo	.698		
14. Sus opiniones y puntos de vista han sido ignorados	.593	.468	
15. Ha recibido bromas pesadas de gente con la que no se lleva bien	.534		
16. Le han asignado tareas u objetivos inalcanzables		.610	
17. Ha recibido alegaciones en su contra	.679		
18. Ha sido excesivamente supervisado en su trabajo	.382	.569	
19. Ha sido presionado para no reclamar algo a lo que tiene derecho (p. ej., baja temporal por enfermedad, vacaciones, dietas, etc.)		.536	
20. Ha sido objeto de numerosas tomaduras de pelo y sarcasmos	.592		.401
21. Ha sido expuesto a una excesiva carga de trabajo		.645	
22. Ha recibido amenazas de violencia o abusos físicos			.739
23. Se ha sentido acosado sexualmente en su lugar de trabajo		.352	.736
<b>Percentage of variance explained</b>	<b>29.8 %</b>	<b>15.357 %</b>	<b>8.843 %</b>
[Translator's note: The scale items were not translated into English, as this is the Spanish version of an originally English scale].			

total variance. The criteria used to define the definitive factors were, on the one hand, the item had to load higher than .30 on the factor and, on the other hand, as our goal was to identify the diverse subscales of the questionnaire, if an item loaded more than .35 on two factors, we considered that it contributed more to the factor with the highest loading, as long as the difference of item loadings on both factors was higher than .10. If it was not, we proposed the removal of the item.

Once the factor structure underlying the NAQ-R had been tested, we determined the reliability index of the questionnaire and of each one of the factors found, calculating the internal consistency with the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient (see Table 2).

#### ***Descriptive occupational characteristics of the sample***

With regard to work variables, participants reported having worked for an average of 13.25 years ( $SD = 12.05$ ), and that the mean number of years at their current job was 7.95 ( $SD = 9.63$ ) and the duration of their working day was 7.69 hours ( $SD = 1.94$ ). Of the total, 75.6% worked in the private sector and 24.4% in the public sector. It was also interesting to note that 58.5% were at workplaces with fewer than 50 workers, 59.7% had an indefinite contract, 13.4% were affiliated to some kind of union, and 49.3% thought that their current professional activity interfered with their personal life; for 33.8%, their current professional activity was less interesting than when they started out in it, and 50.1% admitted that they considered the possibility of changing jobs. Finally, we should note that 52.9% reported having antecedents of sick leave, 6.9% admitted taking sick leave for psychological reasons, 19.6% reported antecedents of psychotherapeutic/ psychopharmacological treatment, 5.1% were on sick leave at the time we gathered the information, and 7.7% were receiving psychotherapeutic/psychopharmacological treatment.

**Table 2**  
**Reliability of the NAQ-R**

	Cronbach's alpha
<b>Total mobbing</b>	.93
Psychological harassment	.93
Mobbing	.81
Physical harassment	.66

#### ***Prevalence of mobbing in the past six months***

Of the total participants, 86% ( $n = 2462$ ) did not consider themselves to have been the victims of mobbing in the past six months, whereas 8.2% ( $n = 234$ ) reported having suffered psychological harassment at work occasionally (sporadically, monthly) and the remaining 5.8% ( $n = 165$ ) reported a weekly or daily frequency – that is, they described real occupational mobbing situations, if we use the operational frequency and duration criteria of the mobbing concept established at a theoretical level (Martín-Daza & Pérez-Bilbao, 1998).

#### ***Characteristics of the mobbing identified***

In total, 51.1% of those who perceived themselves as being mobbed at the workplace reported a single mobber and 27% two mobbers, while the remaining 21.9% reported themselves as being the victim of more than two mobbers. With regard to the hierarchical relationship with the mobbers, 47.2% reported situations of mobbing committed by a hierarchical superior (*downward vertical mobbing*), 20.9% by workers of the same hierarchical level (*horizontal mobbing*), 23.8% by both superiors and coworkers (*mixed mobbing*), and only 9.1% by a hierarchical subordinate (*upward vertical mobbing*).

Forty-four percent who considered themselves the victim of mobbing during the previous six months reported having been mobbed by men, 32.3% by women, and 23.7% by both sexes. Regarding the duration of the perceived mobbing, 35.7% reported a mobbing situation of more than 18 months' duration, whilst the remaining 64.3% reported that the perceived mobbing situation did not exceed this duration, with a mean duration of 12.66 months ( $SD = 11.6$ ).

#### ***Socio-demographic and socio-employment characteristics***

With regard to frequent mobbing (at least once a week), we found significantly higher percentages in women, in workers aged between 31 and 50 years, in the public sector, in organizations with fewer than 50 workers, in indefinite contract situations, and in union members (see Table 3).

Likewise, the participants who thought that their work interfered with their personal life reported a higher percentage of cases of frequent mobbing in the past six months; this was also the case for participants who displayed less interest in their current professional activity or who admitted considering changing jobs. We

also detected a higher percentage of frequent mobbing in workers with antecedents of sick leave or in a current situation of sick leave, as well as in workers with antecedents of specialized treatment or who were currently receiving specialized treatment (see Table 3).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The adapted version of the NAQ-R has emerged as a useful instrument for the assessment of mobbing behaviors in the workplace. The reliabilities of the instrument and its various subscales are differentially satisfactory. The total mobbing score and the psychological harassment scale presented the highest accuracy, internal consistency or homogeneity of measurement, reaching alpha coefficients of .93. The reliability of the remaining scales can be considered sufficient, though an increased number of items would considerably improve their reliability rates.

Of the total sample, 14% considered themselves to have been the victim of mobbing at work in the past six months, and, more precisely, 5.8% reported experiencing this kind of behavior frequently, while 8.2% said they experienced it occasionally. These numbers are compatible with those obtained in other national and international studies. For example, in our country, the prevalence for the previous six months has ranged between 8% and 16% (González-Trijueque & Graña, 2007; Piñuel, 2001; Piñuel & Oñate, 2002, 2006), a figure that can vary between 1 and 10% if we consider the international level (Einarsen & Hauge, 2006). The International Labour Organization (ILO) established a 5% prevalence of mobbing during the past year in the active Spanish population, which is similar to the 5.8% obtained in the present study, in any event a lower figure than that provided in the latest Cisneros report carried out in our country, which established a prevalence of 9.2% in Spain's active population (Piñuel & Oñate, 2006).

As far as gender is concerned, our results reveal that women are more likely to experience mobbing, a finding that coincides with those from other international (Leymann, 1996; Vartia, 1996) and national studies (Piñuel & Oñate, 2002). With regard to the age of the victims, it is noteworthy that, until recently, the studies carried out in our country had reported those aged under 30 as being most likely to be the victims of mobbing. However, the recent Cisneros VI report was the first to consider people over age 45 as the main occupational age group experiencing mobbing, a finding fully compatible with those obtained in this study.

Another finding of the present study that fully coincides with those of most research carried out up to now is that public administration is a work environment in which the likelihood of mobbing increases. This finding is backed up by the data from the *Third European Survey on Work Conditions*, which reported that public administration is the employment sector with the most cases of *mobbing*, the prevalence of the phenomenon there being situated at 13% (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). This also coincides with the findings of the latest relevant national study, which situates the prevalence of mobbing in public administration at 22.5% (Piñuel & Oñate, 2006), whereas in our study the figure for such prevalence was 9.1%. With regard to the number of employees in the work environments in our sample, we observed that organizations with fewer than 50 workers had the highest percentages of cases of frequent mobbing, a situation that may be facilitated by a lack of health and safety and committees as prescribed by the legislation on risks in the workplace.

	No mobbing (n=2462)	Occasional mobbing (n=234)	Frequent mobbing (n=165)	$\chi^2$
Sex				
Male	87.6	8.1	4.3	9.23**
Female	84.8	8.3	6.9	
Sector				
Private	87.4	7.8	4.8	20.29***
Public	81.2	9.7	9.1	
Number of workers				
Fewer than 50	84.6	9.3	6.1	7.83*
50 or more workers	88	6.6	5.4	
Union affiliation				
Yes	77.3	12.8	9.9	28.99***
No	87.4	7.5	5.1	
Interference of work in personal life				
Yes	80.9	10.7	8.4	18.37***
No	91.1	5.7	3.2	
Less interest in current job				
Yes	76.9	12.2	10.9	12.27***
No	90.7	6.1	3.2	
Switching jobs				
Yes	81.9	10.5	7.6	17.02***
No	90.3	5.8	3.9	
Antecedents of sick leave				
Yes	81.5	10.3	8.2	41.75***
No	91.2	5.8	3	
Current sick leave				
Yes	40	17.9	42.1	13.38***
No	88	7.9	4.1	
Antecedents of treatment				
Yes	73.2	14.3	12.5	3.78*
No	89.2	6.7	4.1	
Current treatment				
Yes	60.2	11.3	28.5	9.21**
No	88.2	7.9	3.9	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

A further interesting aspect observed in this study concerns type of contract. The tendency has been to consider the predictive capacity of the contract for mobbing situations to be based on job insecurity, with those on temporary contracts considered as more likely to experience mobbing (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2005; Piñuel & Oñate, 2002). However, this was not observed in our study, since workers with fixed and indefinite contracts reported perceiving a higher percentage of mobbing situations in the past six months. This makes perfect sense if we consider that, both in the present study and in the Cisneros VI report (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2005; Piñuel & Oñate, 2002), it was shown that it is not younger workers who are most exposed to mobbing, but rather those with greater stability and security of contract, a finding that has also emerged in the work of other authors (Gil-Monte, Carretero, & Luciano, 2006).

It should also be pointed out that being affiliated to a union, having antecedents of sick leave, or having received specialized treatment have emerged in this study as the variables that appear most frequently in mobbing situations. However, according to this study, neither self-perceived job performance nor nationality, subjective social class or educational level are characteristics associated with supposed cases of mobbing. This suggests that, although ethnic- and economic-related discrimination does occur in the work setting, both are separate phenomena from mobbing, and hence require specific study.

As regards the mobbing typology found, it is noteworthy that downward vertical mobbing (*bossing*) accounts for 47.2% of the cases, with situations of horizontal and upward vertical mobbing attaining more moderate levels (20.9% and 9.1%, respectively). This is not surprising given the fact that research carried out in our country has found downward vertical mobbing to be the commonest form of the phenomenon (Piñuel & Oñate, 2002, 2006).

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