WORKPLACE BULLYING? MOBBING? HARASSMENT? DISTRACTION BY A THOUSAND DEFINITIONS

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The growing body of research on what is variously termed *workplace bullying*, *mobbing*, *psychological abuse*, and/or *harassment* reflects a growing problem of conflicting terms and definitions. This definition proliferation impedes our ability to conceptualize the phenomenon of workplace aggression in clear and consistent terms, and complicates effective collaboration among researchers and practitioners. The absence of a shared descriptive language for the phenomenon is doubly perplexing for employers, legislators, and other members of society who seek to address this source of psychological pain in the workplace. This article calls for the development of a standard nomenclature to facilitate research and support the development of best practices and proposes a descriptive nomenclature of workplace psychological harassment.

Keywords: bullying, mobbing, workplace psychological harassment, nomenclature

In reading the articles in this issue (Sperry, 2009c), I was reminded of the Buddhist tale of six blind monks who sought to learn what an elephant was through direct examination. One blind monk touched the tail, and described the elephant as a brush; another touched the leg, and declared the elephant a pillar; the third, grasping the elephant's trunk, described a snake, while the others each proffered their very different descriptions of the elephant. As the story goes, an argument ensued, and they began shouting "Yes it is!" "No, it is not!" "An elephant is not that!" "Yes, it is!" until they came to blows over the matter. Buddha then uttered the following:

> O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim
> For preacher and monk the honored name!
> For, quarreling, each to his view they cling.
> Such folk see only one side of a thing. (Udana 68–69, 1995 Version)

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Over the past 3 decades, advances have been made in our understanding of—what shall I call it? Workplace bullying? Mobbing? Harassment? Abuse? For now, I will refer to it as *the phenomenon*. I worry, however, that as concerned scholars and practitioners (and hybrids thereof) examine this workplace elephant, we too may undertake our examinations with limited perspectives, unaware or unwilling to consider other views that could help us better understand and address this phenomenon involving psychological pain in the workplace.

If we are to translate our findings from research and practice into effective prevention and intervention strategies, we must take care to collaborate. Only through sharing our various views and doing our best to consider others' perspectives do we hold any hope of comprehending the full nature of the phenomenon. To expedite such collaboration, I believe the time has come to begin formulation of a standard nomenclature to facilitate research and development of best practices for intervention and prevention. Before proceeding, I must confess that I too cling to views based on my research of the phenomenon (Crawshaw, 2005, 2007) from the perspectives of targets and perpetrators.

The overview (Sperry, 2009a) of this special issue (Sperry, 2009c) notes that bullying and mobbing are used both differentially and synonymously, and that attempts made by article authors to provide descriptions, definitions, or models may seem tedious or confusing. Fox and Stallworth (2009) additionally describe the proliferation of definitions and delineations as a "major barrier" (p. XX), calling for common definitions. If the proliferation of terms strikes researchers and practitioners as tedious and confusing, it would seem that this absence of a shared descriptive language is doubly exhausting and perplexing for employers, legislators, and other members of society who seek to learn, and whom we strive to help. How can we ask them to conceptualize the phenomenon in clear and consistent terms when we have yet to do so? Consider the variety of terms used to describe the phenomenon in this special issue (presented in alphabetical order):

> *abuse*, *abusiveness*, *aggression*, *bullying*, *bullying/mobbing*, *counterproductive workplace behavior*, *emotional abuse*, *emotional harassment*, *employee emotional abuse*, *generalized workplace abuse*, *harassment*, *hostile workplace behavior*, *maltreatment*, *mistreatment*, *mobbing*, *nonphysical aggression*, *nonsexual harassment*, *non–status-based harassment*, *psychological abuse*, *psychological aggression*, *psychological harassment*, *psychological terror*, *scapegoating*, *status-blind bullying*, *status-conscious bullying*, *unlawful bullying*, *vexatious behavior*, *workplace abuse*, *workplace aggression*, *workplace harassment*, *workplace hostility*, *workplace incivility*, *workplace psychological violence*.

Compounding the confusion generated by ever-proliferating terms are never-ending debates over definitions. In this special issue, *bullying* is variously defined as the act of a single perpetrator (Sperry, 2009b), the acts of both single and multiple perpetrators (Namie & Namie, 2009), and as negative behavior from superiors (Ferris, 2009). These current debates over terms and definitions, prefaced by the inevitable historical review of earlier terms and definitions, combined with the introduction of new terms and definitions, threaten to achieve elephantine proportions, impeding our ability to talk about, much less solve, this destructive workplace phenomenon.

A Proposed Nomenclature

So which is the elephant? Which describes the phenomenon, or could it be all of these things? I propose that we move to end the seemingly endless arguing by formulating a

nomenclature, generally defined as a standardized system of names or terms in a science or discipline, as illustrated in Table 1. Higher-level categories are more inclusive and broadly defined, while lower-level categories are more restricted, with categories descending from the general to the specific.

In this classification, the phenomenon is termed *workplace psychological harassment* (commonly called *workplace bullying*), a subcategory of *workplace abuse*. Involved entities are termed *targets* (preferred over *victims*) and *perpetrators* (vs. *bullies*, a term that implies intent).

Definition Versus Description

Let us continue with an imagined scenario in which a Global Nomenclature Congress agrees on the above classification and terminology. How, then, do we describe the various subphenomena of what we call workplace psychological harassment (commonly termed *workplace bullying*)? How do we address numbers and types of perpetrators and targets (including power differentials), severity, frequency, intentionality, and specific manifestations of workplace psychological harassment? We do this by describing the subphenomena rather than insisting that variations of subphenomena define higher categories. I ask that we resist the temptation to contribute to definition proliferation, and instead choose to describe, rather than assign definitions to, subphenomena. Table 2 compares the two approaches for clarity and precision. In a descriptive nomenclature, workplace psychological harassment can involve one or more perpetrators and targets at various levels of the organization, occur at various degrees of severity and frequency, be intentional or unintentional, and manifest in a wide variety of unacceptable behaviors in response to various precipitants.

Let us take the case of a manufacturing safety director who loses emotional control and publicly berates and humiliates any employee who fails to immediately and strictly comply with safety directives. When confronted on his behavior, the perpetrator protests that he does not intend to harm others, but only wishes to protect them from harm. He adds that his management techniques were developed and condoned during his military career, and appears hurt and confused that he is now being disciplined "for trying to do my job

Table 1

Proposed Nomenclature for Workplace Psychological Harassment

Level	Terminology and parameters
General category	*Workplace abuse*
	● Encompasses all forms of workplace abuse, including but not limited to discrimination, sexual harassment, workplace violence, unsafe working conditions, and so forth
	● Coincides with other categories of abuse that are described either by target or locale, for example, child abuse, domestic abuse
Specific category and scientific name	*Workplace psychological harassment*
	● Identifies common denominator of all current descriptions that differentiate this subcategory from the general category
Common name	*Workplace bullying*
	● Acknowledges descriptive term in common usage
Involved entities	*Target(s):* Superior, peer, subordinate, employer, customer, vendor, others
	Perpetrator(s): Superior, peer, subordinate, employer, customer, vendor, others

Table 2

Definitions Versus Descriptions of Workplace Psychological Harassment

Current conflicting definitions	Descriptive nomenclature
Bullying = Individual to individual	Workplace psychological harassment subtypes:
Bullying = Group/organization to individual	● Individual to individual or group
Bullying = Group/organization to group	● Group to individual or group
Bullying = Superior to subordinate(s)	● Organization to individual or group
Mobbing = Group/organization to individual	
Mobbing = Group/organization to group	
Mobbing = Peer to peer(s)	

well and keep people safe." Using the nomenclature proposed in Tables 1 and 2, this phenomenon can be described as *workplace psychological harassment*, *individual to group* (*including superiors*, *peers*, *and subordinates*), manifested in verbal abuse. Incidents have averaged once a month since the employee was hired 2 years ago, apparently precipitated by noncompliance with the perpetrator's expectations, and appear absent of intent to inflict psychological harm.

Consider a second case, in which members of an academic department exclude a fellow faculty member of 8 months from important meetings, and belittle this individual's contributions to discussions. When the target brings her concerns to the chair of the department, she is told that if she cannot "function at the level of the department," she should look elsewhere for employment. When she asks for a statement of specific concerns regarding her performance, the chair responds that she should be able to identify her shortcomings without being told. Using the proposed nomenclature, this case can be characterized as *workplace psychological harassment*, *group (including superior and peers) to individual*, manifested in continual minimization and isolation. Incidents have occurred over the prior 3 months, precipitated by the target's presence, with the apparent intent to inflict professional harm.

With this approach, the nomenclature of this workplace phenomenon includes a wide array of subphenomena. Until empirical research indicates otherwise, these variable factors should not be ruled out of the higher level category definition of workplace psychological harassment. In other words, unless and until we determine through empirical research that all perpetrators act with intent, we should allow for the subcategory of unintentional harassment.

One suspects that the current debate over definitions and terminology derives from efforts to fit a very complex phenomenon into more restrictive policy or legislative definitions. Leymann's (1990) definition of bullying, as repeated acts over a minimum period of 6 months, seems absurd when considered in the context of other forms of abuse. Must a child be beaten more than once over a minimum period of 6 months to be considered a victim of child abuse? The simple answer is no: Single and multiple incidents alike constitute abuse. However, Leymann's definition of bullying seems reasonable if we are attempting to circumscribe those bullying subphenomena pertinent to policymaking and litigation. If our goal is to have employers and legislators enact effective responses to workplace psychological harassment, we must first fulfill our duty to provide a precise nomenclature and engage in comprehensive empirical research of this complex phenomenon. Determining a common language to better understand our elephant will be no easy task, requiring each of us to resist the impulse to psychologically harass our colleagues

into adopting our preferences. I'm right, aren't I? Of course I am! And I'll do my best to restrain myself from calling anyone who disagrees with me a complete idiot.

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