Psychological/Moral Workplace Harassment: Development of an Inventory in Argentina

Eduardo Mario Bustos Villar, Marcelo Carlos Caputo, Silvia Elizabeth Aranda Coria and Nadia Messoulam

Introduction

Psychological/moral harassment is one of the most concerning workplace issues for employees and has many negative consequences for employee health. When these issues are not specifically identified as psychological/moral workplace harassment, they are typically addressed in ineffectual and non-specific ways. Piñuel[1] points out:

> The strategies used to treat a victim of psychological harassment are varied, and in the majority of cases they are combined to create an integrated treatment approach.

The need for integrated approaches suggests the intrinsic complexity in the phenomenon at hand.

An adequate assessment of psychological/moral workplace harassment presents a number of difficulties. The victim often knows nothing about the subject; this renders him or her defenseless when attacked. As a consequence harassment is not reported.

While there are no current statistics in Argentina, it is estimated that there is a high incidence of psychological/moral workplace harassment with resulting absenteeism and a range of psychosocial problems. Scientific evaluation of psychological/moral workplace harassment is lacking in our country, and to date, there are no reliable and validated instruments that can be used to adequately assess this phenomenon within our socio-cultural context.

Objective

To describe the development of an instrument for the evaluation of psychological/moral workplace harassment within the Argentinian socio-cultural context.

Methods

This paper presents the various stages in the creation of the Self-Administered Inventory of Workplace Harassment (*Inventario de Hostigamiento Laboral Autoadminstrable*, IHL). The approach followed the technique described by Tornimbeni.[2]

Conceptual Approach

A literature review and interviews with key informants were carried out with the purpose of mapping the field under evaluation. The goal of this step was to reach a definition of the phenomenon and a description of the operational indicators.

Literature Review

The literature review identified several instruments developed for other contexts.

Leymann in Sweden developed the Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorization (LIPT).[3-5] Leymann defines mobbing – or psychological terrorization in the workplace – as consisting of uneth-

Eduardo Mario Bustos Villar, Doctor of Community Medicine, Secretary of Health Determinants and Hygiene Health Relations, Vice Minister of the National Ministry of Health, Argentina.

Marcelo Carlos Caputo, BA (Psychology), Coordinator of the National Health and Human Rights Program, Secretariat of Health Determinants and Hygiene Health Relations, National Ministry of Health, Argentina.
E-mail: mccaputo@msal.gov.ar or marcelocaputo@gmail.com

Silvia Elizabeth Aranda Coria, BA (Psychology), Member of the National Health and Human Rights Program, Secretariat of Health Determinants and Health Hygiene Relations, National Ministry of Health, Argentina.

Nadia Messoulam, BA (Psychology), Member of the National Health and Human Rights program, Ministry of Health Determinants and Hygiene Relations, National Ministry of Health, Argentina.

ical, hostile communication systematically directed by an individual or group towards a victim who is dragged into a position of defenselessness and vulnerability and actively maintained in that position. The LIPT measures 45 behaviors that the individual must recall as having suffered or not.

González de Rivera and Rodríguez-Abuin[6] adapted the LIPT survey for use in Spain. They added 15 behaviors and evaluated the frequency and intensity of the behaviors perceived by the interviewee.

Also in Spain, Piñuel y Zabala developed the CISNEROS®: *Cuestionario Individual sobre Psico-terror, Negación, Estigmatización, y Rechazo en Organizaciones Sociales* (Individual Questionnaire on Psycho-terror, Denial, Stigmatization, and Isolation in Social Organizations). CISNEROS® measures the degree of psychological harassment suffered, as well as its psychosocial and work-related consequences.[1,7]

The Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) was developed by Einarsen and Raknes.[8] It divides perceived negative workplace behaviors into two categories: personal harassment and work-related harassment.

Exploration of the construct with key informants

The instruments identified in the literature review had all been influential in the development of the field. We used them to develop an *ad hoc*, structured interview to gather information about the construct. The interview consisted of six open-ended questions: definition of psychological/moral workplace harassment, principal indicators, specificity of existing measures, detection, potential prevention methods, and degree of knowledge about the problem within our context.

Four professionals were interviewed: a psychiatrist specializing in post-traumatic stress disorder, a workplace psychologist from the *Superintendencia de Riesgo del Trabajo* (Department of Occupational Risk), a sociologist specializing in violence and working in public administration, and an attorney specializing in administrative investigations related to violence.

The interviewees all described the phenomenon as a situation of interpersonal abuse in the workplace. As a general rule, one person or group is intentionally singled out as the target of group hostility; there are usually several reasons a particular victim is picked. The interviewees describe this as a systematic behavior intended to undermine a person

or group with the goal of excluding them from the workplace, breaking them down emotionally, physically and verbally. It is not simply the subjective perception of negativity, but rather the subtle, objective, and observable actions that produce negative and serious effects when sustained over time. In general, they described effects that are manifested in workplace performance as well as in interpersonal relations and in physical and mental health.

Interviewees emphasized that people often delay reporting when they are targets of this kind of violence. They interpret these attacks as just part of the way the workplace operates. Consequently, people normalize violence and either do not register it or – out of fear of losing their job – prefer not to complain. It is also very difficult to secure professional or legal assistance. Interviewees emphasized that those affected by workplace harassment enter into a state of perplexity when the rules of the game have suddenly changed. Their coworkers often show little solidarity. Since they cannot find reasonable explanations for what is happening to them, they tend to blame themselves.

The interviewees agreed that the subject of harassment had been poorly studied within our context. There are no reliable methods for evaluation, nor specific legislation, nor health professionals trained to prevent and treat the effects described.

Interviews with victims of harassment

Three workers who had been stably employed for at least six months and were victims of workplace harassment were also interviewed. Information was gathered using 10 open-ended questions primarily assessing the characteristics of the harassers, harassing situations, support received and consequences perceived.

The workers realized only long afterwards that they had been victims of violence. They recognized that they were being treated poorly, but they did not fully realize what was happening to them until it became unbearable to be in the same space as the abuser. Among the actions they reported were: constant negative evaluation, change in their jobs, restriction of job functions, and being asked not to come in anymore. They described psychological, physical, and moral consequences of harassment, even being forced to leave their workplace without any wrongdoing on their part. Similarly to the key informants, workers stated that they felt uneasy long after the abuse, not knowing what caused the situation. They felt that everything had been unfair, un-

necessary, and that those who had abused them acted as if nothing at all had happened.

Development of specific indicators

Based on the literature review and interviews, we developed a definition of the construct and defined four strategies of psychosocial/moral workplace harassment. These were: communication, work, private life, and facilitating environment. Selected indicators were distinct from those used to measure sexual harassment and workplace stress. Items were designed to reflect a variety of situations to which workers could be exposed to and to avoid ambiguity and unnecessary statements.

By harassment, we do not mean behaviors of a sexual nature. In contrast to stress, in which the individual tends to recover gradually if the stressors are removed, those who have suffered workplace harassment (especially for a prolonged period of time) show effects on their self-esteem and identity long after they leave the abusive situation.[9,10]

Situations described by the victims were taken into account. Some mentioned by participants were:

They changed the location of my office, without allowing me to use anything, they even moved me to another building where I was alone.

They didn't give me the information I needed to do my job.

They gave me tasks of little importance, which did not require me to be there, so that I wouldn't show up.

A scale was developed in order to assess the frequency (every day, a few times per week, a few times per month, a few times per year, never) and a severity of perceived suffering (high, medium, low). A Lickert scale was chosen due to its reliability.

Revision by expert panel and editing of items

Ten psychologists specializing in psychological evaluation took part in the expert panel. They were sent the definition of the construct, a description of the four strategies and the full inventory of 98 items. Every member had to assess the appropriateness of each item, indicating if each item could be operationally represented; the scale used was "very appropriate," "appropriate," and "inappropriate." Experts were asked to evaluate items for their semantic clarity, grammatical correctness, and congruence with the strategy being evaluated. They were also asked to make observations, recommendations, and suggestions on areas to be modified.

The evaluations were independent; no member of the panel knew the opinions of other members.

The list of items was edited based on quantitative criteria to determine which items would be modified and which would be eliminated. Those items that were assessed as appropriate by all the judges were included. Items assessed as adequate or inadequate by half of the judges were either partially modified or regrouped into another scale. Those items that were deemed inadequate by at least half of the judges were eliminated. A final inventory of 72 items was obtained.

The draft inventory

We developed the Self-Administered Inventory of Workplace Harassment (*Inventario de Hostigamiento Laboral Autoadminstrable*, IHL)[11] in order to discern whether the subject being evaluated is a target of psychological/moral workplace harassment, the strategies are used in their situation, and the effects of this harassment on the individual. The IHL also collects information on the frequency, timing, origin, and expected result of harassment. Subjects are asked to describe their harassers.

The Inventory is divided into two parts. Part A allows for the diagnosis of workplace harassment as we have defined it. The subject is asked to report on the frequency with which 72 situations have happened to him or her using a Lickert scale with five options varying from "every day" to "never." The items present different situations of workplace harassment and are framed by the four strategies we used: communication, work, private life, and facilitating environment. For each situation, the subject reports the degree of distress that it provokes as high, medium or low.

Part B of the Inventory allows the subject to describe the harasser and provides qualitative information. It is only to be completed if the subject considers him- or herself as having experienced workplace harassment.

Pilot testing

The Inventory was pilot-tested in a sample of 30 subjects. All worked in public service and had been in their positions for at least six months.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed in accordance with national and international guidelines.[12-14]

Thirteen of the subjects (44%) were male. Ages ranged from 23 to 62 with a median of 46.6,

SD=9.7). Ten percent had completed primary school only; 33% had a high school degree and 57% had studied at the university level.

Analysis of item discrimination

The data from the pilot survey was analyzed using SPSS, version 11.0. In order to determine the reliability of the items in the inventory, a correlation analysis of items and corrected totals was performed using Cronbach's alpha. In the analysis, strict elimination criteria were used; we accepted only items that had a correlation of over 0.40 between the item and corrected totals. Nine items were discarded and an alpha of 0.98 was reached.

Results

A valid and reliable instrument for the evaluation of psychological/moral workplace harassment was developed taking into account the specificities of our social/cultural context.

We defined psychological/moral workplace harassment as:

> ... *actions of psychological violence of a repeated (at least once per week) and prolonged (lasting longer than 6 months) nature. It is carried out by one or more persons against another. The objective is to cause harm, inconvenience, or removal of the victim from the workplace.*[11]

Currently existing instruments – developed and adapted in other cultural contexts[2,6,7] – consider that the harasser exerts power through hostile behaviors of different types, primarily related to communication, work-related tasks, and the personal life of the chosen victim. Based on our literature review,[15-17] as well as contributions from specialists and worker/victims, we decided to include a fourth strategy in our survey: the role of environment as facilitator. These four strategies[18,19] allow us to precisely describe the risk factors[20,21] in the workplace:

Communication: Harassment involves intentionally impeding communication between employees. This makes good interpersonal relations between employees impossible, and slows the resolution of conflicts. The objective is to isolate the person being harassed and limit their social contact.

Work: Harassment involves contextual barriers that impede the victim from using resources for the purpose of carrying out work. One example is providing the employee with incorrect, partial, or confusing information that limits the effectiveness of their work. The objective is to create barriers to the availability of resources and tools needed for the job, and to make it more difficult to carry our work responsibilities out properly.

Private life: Harassment involves discriminating against behavior and traits in order to damage the reputation and dignity of the affected person. The objective is to batter, destroy, or spiritually demolish a person so that they cannot perform their job effectively.

Facilitating environment: Characteristics of the workplace promote the emergence of harassing behavior. These characteristics include the formation of alliances that facilitate situations of harassment.

The final inventory

The final version of the inventory contains 72 items. Part A (63 items) evaluates situations of harassment according to the four strategies: communication, work, private life, facilitating environment. Part B (10 questions) captures specific qualitative data and a description of the harasser.

As for the internal validity, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.98 was obtained, for the strategy of communication 0.98, for work 0.93, for private life 0.92, and for facilitating environment 0.93.[22]

[Note: This instrument is currently embargoed. It is indexed as unpublished work/Scientific Document, File No. 4932952, Form No. 210449. Bustos Villar, Caputo, Aranda Coria (07/06/2011).]

Conclusions

This study describes the process of developing a tool for the evaluation of psychological/moral workplace harassment in the contemporary Argentinean socio-cultural context.

A first version of the Inventory of Workplace Harassment (*Inventario de Hostigamiento Laboral*) was developed using the contributions of experts and victims that were interviewed. Modifications were made with the guidance of a panel of expert judges. The reliability coefficients were presented after using the instrument on a sample of subjects.

The psychometric characteristics reflect excellent internal validity, and as such, the Inventory can be used with confidence. The results also indicate that the majority of items have high discriminatory capacity and result in adequate homogeneity.

Including the contributions of specialist informants in areas of workplace violence allowed the measurement of how workplace harassment occurs in the local (Argentinean) context. This makes the Inventory a valuable scientific contribution to the field of psychological assessment.

In the next stage we will proceed to use the final inventory, in conjunction with other techniques, in a larger and more heterogeneous sample. This will allow the validation of the Inventory and the development of scales adjusted to the local population.

It is of utmost importance to have in-depth knowledge of the psychosocial risk factors associated with psychological/moral workplace harassment. This can inform strategies to optimize the quality of life for workers. This instrument – created with an ecoevaluative approach – contributes to the development of reliable diagnostic tools. As it is still in the process of validation, it is not currently annexed although it will soon be in use within Argentina.

Acknowledgements

References

1. Fidalgo, A.M. & Piñuel, I. (2004). La escala Cisneros como herramienta de valoración del mobbing. *Psicothema*. 16(4):615-624.
2. Tornimbeni, S., Pérez, E., Olaz, F. & Fernández, A. (2004). *Introducción a los Tests Psicológicos.* 3rd edition. Córdoba, Argentina: Brujas.
3. Leymann, H. & Tallgren, U. (1989). *Undersökning av frekvensen vuxenmobbning inom SSAB med ett nytt formulär. (A study about the prevalence of workplace bullying in SSAB with a new inventory).* Münniska. Arbete.
4. Leymann, H. (1990). Mobbing and Psychological terror at workplaces. *Violence and Victims*. 5:119-126.
5. Leymann, H. (1996). *Mobbing. La persécution au travail.* Paris. Ed. du Seuil.
6. González de Rivera, J.L. & Rodríguez-Abuin, M. (2003). Cuestionario de estrategias de acoso psicológico: el LIPT-60 (Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorization) en versión española. *Psiquis.* 24(2):59-66.
7. Piñuel, I. & Zabala, I. (2005.) Libro blanco. Los riesgos psicosociales en la administración. Madrid: Sindicato GESTHA y Asociaciones Profesionales de Técnicos del Ministerio de Hacienda. Available at: www.acosomoral.org/pdf/LBM.pdf. Accessed June 8, 2010.
8. Einarsen, S. & Raknes, B.I. (1997). Harassment at work and victimization of men. *Violence and victims*. 12:247-263.
9. Abajo Olivares, F. (2006). *Mobbing. Acoso en el ámbito laboral.* Buenos Aires: LexisNexis.
10. Bustos Villar, E. (2010). *¿Y por qué no gato por liebre? Una mirada diferente sobre el estrés.* Buenos Aires: Dunken.
11. Bustos Villar, E., Caputo, M. & Aranda Coria, E. (2011a). Evaluación del hostigamiento laboral. *Sexo y poder. Clínica, cultura y sociedad.* Editors: Trimboli, A., Fantim, J.C., Raggi, S., Grande, E., Fridman, P., Bertran, P. Buenos Aires: Argentinean Mental Health Association, Serie Conexiones.
12. Asociacion Argentina de Estudio e Investigacion En Psicodiagnostico. (1999). Código de Ética el Psicodiagnosticador. Pautas Mínimas para el Uso de Tests. Asociación Argentina de Estudio e Investigación en Psicodiagnóstico.
13. Asociacion Argentina de Estudio e Investigacion En Psicodiagnostico. (2000). Pautas Internacionales para el Uso de los Tests. Versión Argentina. Asociación Argentina de Estudio e Investigación en Psicodiagnóstico.
14. International Test Commission. (1995). *Guidelines on Adapting Tests.*
15. Hirigoyen, M.F. (2001). *El acoso moral en el trabajo.* Barcelona: Paidós.
16. Mansilla Izquierdo, F. (s/a) Manual de Riesgos Psicosociales en el trabajo. Teoría y práctica. Available at: http://www.psicologia-online.com/ebooks/riesgos/index.shtml. Accessed September 30, 2010.
17. Scialpi, D. (2004). *Violencias en la Administración pública. Casos y miradas para pensar la administración pública como ámbito laboral.* Buenos Aires: Catalogues.
18. Bustos Villar, E., Caputo, M. & Aranda Coria, E. (2011b). *El Hostigamiento Laboral: más frecuente que lo relevado. Su evaluación en nuestro contexto.* II Congreso de Psicología del Tucumán-Nacional e Internacional. (Unpublished manuscript).
19. Bustos Villar, E., Caputo, M., Aranda Coria, E. & Messoulam, N. (2011). El hostigamiento laboral: la importancia de contar con técnicas que lo identifiquen en nuestro contexto. *Libro de Actas del XV Congreso Nacional de Psicodiagnóstico. XXII Jornadas Nacional de ADEIP.* Faculty of Psychology, National University of Tucumán.
20. Meseguer de Pedro, M., Soler Sánchez, Ma., García Izquierdo, M., Sáez Navarro, Ma. & Sánchez Meca, J. (2007). Los factores psicosociales de riesgo en el trabajo como predictores del mobbing, *Psicothema*. 19(2):225-230.
21. Niño Escalante, J. (2002). Evaluación de los riesgos laborales y factores psicosociales. MAPFRE SEGURIDAD Nº 85; 25- 35. Madrid.
22. Bustos Villar, E., Varela, O., Caputo, M., Aranda Coria, E. & Messoulam, N. (2011). *Evaluación del hostigamiento laboral en nuestro contexto: Avances en el estudio de validez y confiabilidad.* III Congreso Internacional de Investigación y Práctica Profesional en Psicología, XVIII Jornadas de Investigación de la Facultad de Psicología y VII Encuentro de Investigadores en Psicología del MERCOSUR (Unpublished manuscript).