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A study on “mobbing” in maritime field: a case study in the Turkish maritime industry

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, there are many reasons for people to be stressful and restless in their working environments. One of the reasons leading to this situation is known as “mobbing”. The term “mobbing” means “bullying of an individual by a group”. It usually happens among employees. The main effects of mobbing are the generation of stress and reduction of employee performance at work. In general, research shows that mobbing is particularly common in the public sector. The aim of this research is to understand the frequency of mobbing on employees in the Turkish maritime industry as a case study. In this study, a questionnaire survey on ship, shipyard, public and private company workers was applied to understand how often employees are exposed to mobbing. After analysing the results, it is also aimed to obtain information about the reasons and causes of mobbing, and then we can get some advice for this issue.

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Key words: occupational victimisation, bullying, mobbing in maritime

INTRODUCTION

The word “mob” is the root of “mobbing” in English. It has different connotations associated with it, such as psychological terror, abuse, disruption and inconvenience. Mobbing does not have a clear meaning, that’s why various concepts are used in literature; emotional lynching, psychological terror, workplace injury, terrorisation and bullying in the workplace. Mobbing refers to continuous negative opinions or criticism, office rumours, and the spreading of false information. The resulting effects commence with indifference to work, boredom, exhaustion, decreases in performance and end with resignation.

People of any gender, age, race and religion can be subject to mobbing. The purpose of mobbing is to inflict emotional distress on people. This can cause health and mental problems, which affects the quality of work. There is another word called “bullying”. In addition to mobbing, some researchers mention bullying under the scope of mobbing. Mobbing is sometimes referred to as “adult bullying” or “workplace bullying”. In the maritime industry, a person of lower class or rank is exposed to mobbing, which can easily be observed.

The aim of this research is to understand the frequency of mobbing (whether there is mobbing or not, and how often it occurs) between employers and employees as well as mobbing among employees and to analyse the characteristics of mobbing in general in the Turkish maritime industry. However, far too little attention has been paid to mobbing in many industries including maritime in Turkey, although it exists. After reducing the number of personnel/crew related to maritime industry (and additionally increasing the number of women workers) by adding technological developments in this industry, the concept of mobbing become more exposed in Turkey. In addition, the effect of mobbing on seafarers gradually increases due to competitive work environment, demand on qualified seafarers, and excessive workload, etc. Therefore, this phenomenon increases its impact on seafarers as a result of which working condition gets tougher in this sector.

LITERATURE SUMMARY

Looking at the development of the concept of mobbing, ethnologist Konrad Lorenz first used the definition in 1960 when describing the behaviour of [1] a group of small

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animals that are placed in danger by larger animals. The Swedish working psychologist Heinz Leymann first applied this concept to work life in the 1980s. According to Leymann [2], mobbing is not the right method/way for communication. When the action is called “mobbing”, it needs to be done *systematically* and *directly*. In other words, Leymann [3] mentioned that the academic description of the mobbing is a common interplay, which puts people into a desperate position.

According to Zapf and Einarsen [4], during work life, mobbing does not need to be committed by a single person; it can be done by several people. Mobbing can also be classified as aggressive and hostile impressions exerted regularly and directly by one person or more [3–6]. Leymann [3] explains that the mobbing process must continue for at least 6 months and occur a minimum of once a week. Contrary to Leymann [3], some researchers suggest that it would be less than 6 months and more frequent than once a week. Nevertheless, it is a common opinion that this unpleasant situation affects a person directly and puts him/her into the position that it is difficult to protect himself or herself [4].

According to Einarsen et al. [7], bullying in the workplace expresses a situation where a person/group *repeatedly* and *regularly* harasses, offends, socially excludes or negatively affects workers over a period of time. Negative or hostile behaviours occur regularly and repeatedly [8]. If these types of behaviours occur in a one-off incident, they are not regarded as bullying. In addition, Vartia [8] describes targets of bullying as defencelessness of victims. On the other hand, Niedl [9] mentions that a person is victimised only if he/she perceives himself/herself as helpless to defend himself/herself. According to this, if two equally strong parties are in conflict, it is not bullying.

According to researchers there are several similar definitions for workplace bullying such as mobbing, harassment [10, 11], non-sexual harassment [4], psychological harassment, victimisation [12], scapegoating and petty tyranny [13]. Leymann [2] expresses that bullying in working life includes hostile and unethical communication as mobbing activities. He also points out that one or a few individuals put another individual into a helpless and defenceless position systematically in bullying. Hoel and Cooper [14] identify bullying as conflict among co-workers or supervisors against Vartia [8] who mentions it is a situation between workers and supervisors due to characteristics or motivation of their superiors. The following behaviours can be seen as examples of workplace bullying [15]:

- neglect of opinion/views [12];
- withholding necessary information;
- ridiculing or insulting;
- gossip or rumours;
- ordering tasks below the competence level of employee;

- physical abuse;
- race/Gender discrimination.

In the literature, the effects of bullying are defined as helpless and defenceless situations [2], lower self-esteem [8, 16], lack of job satisfaction [17], some psychological problems such as fear, anxiety, helplessness, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder [18, 19], less organisational citizenship and more counterproductive work behaviour [7].

In the maritime sector, there are some studies on stress, psychological and physical health problems of seafarers. Firstly, perceived health and stress of seafarers was studied in relation to work stressors and personality characteristics [20]. According to the study on Finnish seafarers [20], the engine crew had the most stress, Finnish seafarers had rather good health status, and their personality characteristics (especially pessimism-optimism and ego strength) were important explanators of perceived stress and health status. In addition, it is mentioned that the quality of interpersonal relations at work did not predict stress or health status of seafarers. A wide survey was carried out to understand health, stress and fatigue of Australian seafarers [21]. The report aimed to be the benchmark of future industry reform for the benefits of seafarers and other industry groups. Later, Main and Chambers [22] made a systematic review on maritime pilots’ health and well-being for obtaining the most commonly investigated factors in the academic databases. The study of Hatem [15] is also related to mobbing in maritime industry and it deals with the effect of mobbing in producing human error. Rengamani and Murugan [23] studied influential factors to the seafarers’ occupational stress based on the occupational stress indicators; work-related stress, physical stress and psychosocial stress factors. Peplińska et al. [24] verified the correlation between the quality of emotional bonds and the level of stress and anxiety perceived by 210 mariners working on seagoing ships. State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), Stress Experience Questionnaire (PS) and Well-matched Marriage Questionnaire (KDM) were used in their study which revealed that marital satisfaction was correlated with the level of stress and anxiety among mariners, constituting a stress inhibitor in the conclusion. Another study was carried out to understand seafarers’ job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction [25]. As shown by this study, Croatian seafarers were most satisfied with payment, and least satisfied with the achieved benefits and work organisation on board. Financial stability and security, the ratio of work days to days off, and the quality of days off, and the nature and dynamics of the work were the main sources of job satisfaction, whilst separation from home and family and working and living conditions on board were the main sources of job dissatisfaction [25]. Furthermore, there were several kinds of stresses that are connected with the

different duties on board ships [26], the most significant stressor factors were: separation from family, loneliness on board, fatigue, multi-nationality, limited recreation activity, and sleep deprivation.

METHODOLOGY

There are some scales to understand and measure bullying/mobbing such as the Leymann Inventory for Psychological Terrorisation (LIPT) [27], the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) [12], and the Work Harassment Scale (WHS) [28]. Mobbing scales/questionnaires were investigated, and the questionnaire form was derived from the WHS [28]. The questionnaire was translated by the authors and applied on 5 academicians who work in a maritime university to determine whether it is comprehensible or not. The questionnaire consists of two parts. First part includes demographic characteristics of the participants (subjects). The second part of the questionnaire investigates the level/frequency of mobbing and the reasons leading to mobbing activities (such as cutting word without any reason while talking, being exposed to loud scolding in the community, being exposed to bad words and curse, receiving written and verbal threats, giving unwanted hard works, being put ridiculous situations, any pressure or restraint because of religious belief, being called degrading names, being exposed to sexual implicitness, etc.) by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “never” through to “very often”. In the questionnaire, subjects filled 8 items related to their demographics and 23 items for the mobbing part (24 from the original version [28] and 1 item taken out for this study), so they replied a total of 31 questions. Total reliability of questionnaire was determined as $\alpha = 0.832$ (mean: 1.85, standard deviation: 0.42, minimum: 1.13, maximum: 2.83). The result of Friedman’s ANOVA [$\chi^2(49) = 311.87$, $p < 0.00$] also revealed the questionnaire scale to be significant. Q_12 (Have your colleagues acted as if you were not there) in the original version was omitted because of the focus group comment. They rejected to reply this question believing that it is not a proper behaviour to comment on their colleagues.

The questionnaire was carried out around Tuzla (Istanbul, Turkey), because it was easy to reach shipyards, ships and shipping companies due to their locations. In total, 50 people participated in the survey. Normally, we reached more than 100 persons, but many of subjects refused to reply or they felt uncomfortable with their employer, although they were informed that their information will be kept confidential, which is in fact a type of mobbing). That’s why a 20-minute face-to-face interview was conducted with all subjects (with the successful participation ratio of 47.6%). All of them were voluntary participants and names of participant were not revealed. The analysis was conducted by utilising IBMPASW Statistics — SPSS (Statistical Package

for the Social Sciences), Data Mining, Statistical Analysis Software (version 18). Before the assessment and analysis of the survey, the researchers also carried out observations and took notes as the subjects were filling the questionnaire. It was observed that they were not comfortable and enthusiastic during the survey. Furthermore, they did not feel free to explain their opinions. In other words, the effects of mobbing were evident even while they were replying to the questions related to this issue. On the other hand, it should be criticized by Authors if another approach, such as anonymous self-reporting, was chosen for the survey, although the response rate would be higher than face-to-face interview. However, Authors also wanted to learn whether the participant would be strong and/or decisive enough to express their real thinking and perceptions on this issue.

SUBJECT

The demographics data of the subjects who joined the questionnaire survey is as follows: gender, education, sector, working hour, age, job change, reason to choose the job, and experience. According to their demographics as shown in Table 1:

- 11 women (22%) and 39 men (78%);
- the majority of the subjects are highly educated (76% graduated from high school and upper level);
- the percentage of subjects who are working on board are higher than others;
- average working hours is 9 h a day;
- the average frequency of job changing is one time over a 10 year period;
- the most effective motive to work in the maritime industry is “salary”. Majority of responders (30%) have chosen this job because of good salary, as indicated by previous studies;
- average age is 33 years old (mean: 33.9, standard deviation: 8.89, minimum: 22, maximum: 60, norm: 50).

PROCEDURE

The total number of respondents in our questionnaire survey was 50. The questionnaire consisted of 23 items aimed at better understanding of mobbing. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested by Cronbach’s Alpha and it was determined to have a powerful internal consistency. In the reliability analysis, “Cronbach’s Alpha if item deleted” was used to determine the items’ effects and also to increase the reliability of the questionnaire. It was determined that all items had a powerful internal consistency, due to none of the items’ alpha value being higher than the total scale of the questionnaire. The questionnaire reliability was determined as $\alpha = 0.832$. The result of Friedman’s ANOVA also revealed the questionnaire scale to be significant [$\chi^2(49) = 311.87$, $p < 0.00$]. Therefore, none of the items were neglected from

Table 1. Demographic data

		Frequency	Valid per cent
Gender	Women	11	22.0
	Men	39	78.0
Education	Elementary	4	8.0
	Secondary	8	16.0
	High	17	34.0
	University	17	34.0
	Master	2	4.0
	Doctorate	2	4.0
	Sector	Ship	24
	Private	14	28.0
	Governmental	4	8.0
	Port	1	2.0
	Shipyards	7	14.0
Change job (last 10 years/ /times)	1	25	50.0
	2	16	32.0
	3	5	10.0
	4	2	4.0
	5	2	4.0
Reason (motivation)	Chance	3	6.0
	Alternatives	4	8.0
	Salary	15	30.0
	Style	4	8.0
	Future	5	10.0
	Sympathy	4	8.0
	Others	11	22.0
	Family	4	8.0
Experience [years] (work experience in maritime sector)	< 5	20	40.0
	5–10	20	40.0
	10–20	9	18.0
	> 20	1	2.0
Age [years]	< 30	20	40.0
	30–40	20	40.0
	> 40	10	20.0

the data set, and the significance level was set to 5% for the further analysis.

RESULTS AND CONSIDERATION

Firstly, it was tested if there are significant differences among respondents or not by one way ANOVA and t-test according to demographic characteristics based on the questionnaire. According to the results, some significant

differences were obtained as summarised below. For better understanding of the results, crosstab values and χ^2 test results are used. In general:

- There were more men than women participating in the survey, which might be indicative of a men-oriented maritime industry;
- Lower-educated people are exposed to mobbing more than the others, based on subject’s rating;
- There is no difference in terms of job change, because subjects stay in the same job for a long time;
- Subjects who work less than 10 years in the maritime industry have experience with unfair or undesirable situations;
- Subjects who graduated from elementary school think that they are exposed to bad words (aimed at hurting him/her);
- Compared with work in a different sector, subjects employed on board are working under more stressful and restrained conditions. It is assumed that this is because of the at sea conditions;
- If the working hours increase, employees become tired and stressed. This is an effect on how the people show aggression towards others;
- Subjects who work at the shipyard think that they experience some enforcement and pressure because of their political opinions.

Table 2 shows the valid percentage and frequency of questionnaire items. According to statistical analysis, no statistical relationship between questionnaire items and demographic data was found except the sector that the respondents are in, education level and working position. On the other hand, some remarkable outputs are obtained based on advanced analysis such as crosstab values for the some following items (Q_5, Q_20 and Q_23).

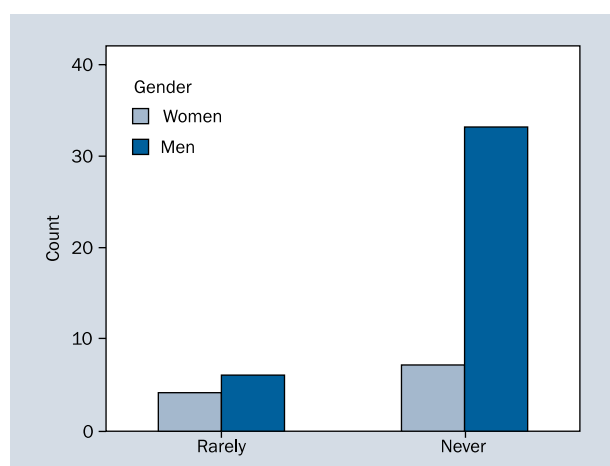
Some examples from the results of interest show that Q_5 is related to being unduly criticised. Most subjects consider that they have been criticised unduly as a mobbing effect. It is a high percentage, because the cumulative percentage of “often” and “sometimes” is 52%. Furthermore, the more subjects are experienced, the less they are unduly criticised.

As indicated by answers to the questionnaire item 20 (Q_20: Did you think your effort was not receiving the value that you deserved?), 66% of subjects consider that they were not valued equal to their expectations (answers “sometimes” and more frequent).

Questionnaire item 23 (Q_23) consist of the question “Have you ever been exposed to any kind of sexual implicitness by a word of behaviour?”. Subjects mainly selected two answers; “rarely” and “never”. The percentage of “rarely” is 20% (10 respondents) and “never” is 80% (40 respondents), as shown in Figure 1. In addition, “rarely” was chosen by

Table 2. Valid percentage (%) and frequency of questionnaire items

Q	Very often (%)	Often	Sometimes (%)	Rarely	Never
Q_1	2%, 1	14%, 7	44%, 22	28%, 14	12%, 6
Q_2	0%	10%, 5	18%, 9	40%, 20	32%, 16
Q_3	0%	8%, 4	20%, 10	46%, 23	26%, 13
Q_4	2%, 1	4%, 2	30%, 15	24%, 12	40%, 20
Q_5	0%	16%, 8	36%, 18	26%, 13	22%, 11
Q_6	2%, 1	0%	2%, 1	30%, 15	66%, 33
Q_7	2%, 1	6%, 3	6%, 3	28%, 14	58%, 29
Q_8	0%	0%	12%, 6	24%, 12	64%, 32
Q_9	0%	2%, 1	14%, 7	20%, 10	64%, 32
Q_10	0%	6%, 3	24%, 12	36%, 18	34%, 17
Q_11	0%	4%, 2	8%, 4	26%, 13	62%, 31
Q_12	2%, 1	18%, 9	16%, 8	36%, 18	28%, 14
Q_13	2%, 1	2%, 1	20%, 10	30%, 15	46%, 23
Q_14	0%	2%, 1	12%, 6	12%, 6	74%, 40
Q_15	0%	0%	8%, 4	12%, 6	80%, 40
Q_16	0%	4%, 2	16%, 8	32%, 16	48%, 24
Q_17	0%	4%, 2	10%, 5	14%, 7	72%, 36
Q_18	0%	2%, 1	10%, 5	16%, 8	72%, 36
Q_19	0%	10%, 5	22%, 11	18%, 9	50%, 25
Q_20	16%, 8	24%, 12	26%, 13	24%, 12	10%, 5
Q_21	10%, 5	16%, 8	22%, 11	30%, 15	22%, 11
Q_22	0%	0%	4%, 2	24%, 12	72%, 36
Q_23	0%	0%	0%	20%, 10	80%, 40

**Figure 1.** Frequency of Q_23 based on gender

4 (36.4%) women and 6 (15.4%) men, whereas “never” was chosen by 7 (63.3%) women and 33 (84.6%) men. According to the χ^2 test, there is no significant difference obtained between women and men [$\chi^2(49) = 2.36, p > 0.05$].

According to subjects' demographics, the majority of the employees in the survey are 33–37-year-olds, men and graduates from university or high school. Employees who participated in the survey are not from the management team. The working hours per day are around 9 h but generally it is higher on board. Most of the employees have 1–5 and 5–10 years' experience. In addition, most of employees changed companies 1 or 2 times.

General mobbing level is obtained by the average of ratings given for the each item (in total 23 items) of the questionnaire. According to the results, employees are exposed to mobbing *rarely* (mean: 1.85, standard deviation: 0.42, minimum: 1.13, maximum: 2.83), as shown in Figure 2. Also, they feel that they are suffering interrupted speech without reason, the inability to express themselves clearly, hard tasks given to them, being shouted at loudly, being the subject of insults, their efforts not being appreciated, and not being taken seriously regarding work-related decisions less frequent than sometimes.

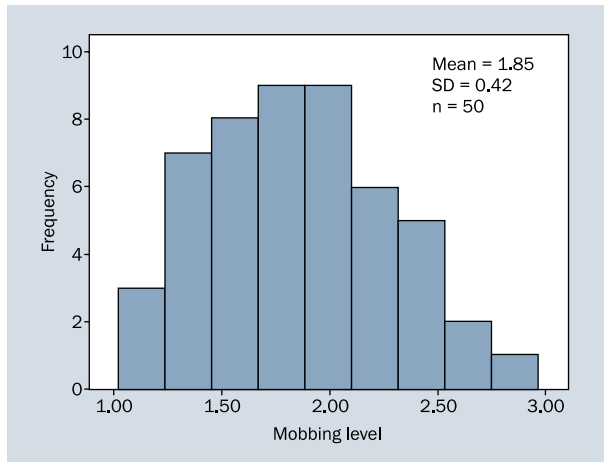


Figure 2. Mobbing level; SD – standard deviation

Level of mobbing in the Turkish maritime industry was found out to be very low and rare. It is assumed that there are two main reasons for this result; participants were either not feeling free to reply such questions (another kind of mobbing) or they did not care about this concept.

CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between mobbing and demographic variables was examined, and three items were found to have connections; “sector, education and working position”. Gender and age did not make any difference on mobbing in this study. On the other hand, pressure and enforcement factors, expression factor, the pall of intimidation and religious and political factors are notable effects on the people who were exposed to mobbing.

Considering the adverse effects of mobbing on employees, employers are required to take precaution against mobbing. If the employer wants high performance from the employees, he/she needs to put the regulations for the enforcement of mobbing cases.

The following requirements are recommended:

- Employees should inform their superiors about the problems freely, so that future mobbing can be avoided (M: 3.94 for Q_2: Do your superiors obstruct you when you are trying to express yourself?, and M: 4.46 for Q_9: Is any interview request or attempt denied with management level?);
- Communication between workers should be conducted in productive ways and the creation of a friendly environment is important;
- When mobbing is considered as a cause of conflict, the solution should be sought in the stage of formation. To do this, the source of conflict should be found and the people should be brought together to make suggestions to alleviate the problem (as the participants were declared in the interview);

- Close dialogue between managers and employees, regular visits to each other can often be extremely convenient in aiding the employees to understand their managers and vice-versa.

Employees should be encouraged to make proposals and suggestions, and innovation should be supported. If ideas resulted in a failure, new ideas should be encouraged, so that employees can feel secure and committed to their company.

HIGHLIGHTS

1. We consider the bullying factor in Turkish maritime industry.
2. For the first time Work Harassment Scale is used to measure the mobbing level for Turkish mariners.
3. We obtain similar results as in other industries, and whilst maritime industry is men oriented domain, no correlation observed related to gender differences.

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