

## Sociology of Workplace Bullying (Mobbing): An Analysis of Structures and Relationships within the Work Environment

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### Abstract

This study falls within theoretical-analytical research of a critical sociological nature. It aims to deconstruct the phenomenon of workplace bullying (mobbing) within the work environment through a structural symbolic approach that goes beyond individualistic psychological and managerial explanations. The study adopts a critical analytical method, supported by a comparative theoretical approach, to analyze and comment on both classical and contemporary sociological frameworks explaining the phenomenon, with a focus on concepts such as power, symbolic violence, organizational culture, and social control.

The study is grounded in a critical sociological perspective, drawing on conflict theory to analyze relations of domination within organizations, as well as Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence and Michel Foucault's analyses of power and institutional control. The findings highlight that workplace bullying is a product of dysfunctional organizational and cultural structures, and that characteristics of the work environment such as high centralization and role ambiguity contribute to creating a social climate that enables its spread, with mediating factors playing a role in shaping its intensity and direction.

**Key words:** Bullying, Workplace Bullying, Social Structures, Work Relationships

### Problematic

Workplace bullying (mobbing) is considered one of the contemporary sociological issues that reflects profound transformations in the patterns of social organization of work. It manifests through systematic and prolonged hostile practices aimed at excluding social actors within the organizational system and undermining their symbolic and professional capital. These practices take multiple forms, such as symbolic denigration, social isolation, deliberate withholding of information, or the coercive assignment of menial tasks, making it a form of symbolic violence exercised within the workplace.

In this study, workplace bullying is viewed as a **dependent variable** resulting from the organizational work environment, which represents the central **independent variable** with its structural and cultural characteristics. The work environment is not merely a neutral framework for interaction; rather, it is a social system within which power relations, patterns of domination, and mechanisms of social control are reproduced through leadership styles, the degree of organizational hierarchy, the nature of professional relationships, and the mechanisms for distributing material and symbolic resources and rewards.

The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in a critical sociological perspective based on conflict theory and the analysis of power relations. It assumes that workplace bullying cannot be reduced to individual deviance or psychological dysfunctions; rather, it is an expression of a structural imbalance within the organizational system, which in turn reflects the social inequalities and

structural conflicts characterizing the broader society. In organizations with rigid organizational cultures where values of pathological competition dominate and human considerations are marginalized in favor of efficiency and productivity bullying becomes an informal mechanism for restructuring professional positions and consolidating control.

When applying this theoretical perspective to a specific research context such as a particular organization or professional sector .It becomes possible to observe how characteristics such as excessive centralization, role ambiguity, and the absence of channels for expression and accountability contribute to creating a social climate that normalizes practices of exclusion and domination, transforming them into “legitimate” behaviors within the prevailing organizational culture.

However, this relationship is not entirely deterministic. Sociological observation reveals cases in which power structures do not necessarily lead to the spread of bullying, and bullying may also emerge in less hierarchical organizations. This opens the way for analyzing the mediating and moderating factors that shape this relationship, such as the presence of ethical leadership, the level of rights awareness among actors, the effectiveness of institutional control mechanisms, and the degree to which values of organizational justice are entrenched.

Accordingly, the central research problem of the study revolves around the following question:

What is the nature of the relationship between the characteristics of the organizational work environment and the phenomenon of workplace bullying, and how do structural, cultural, and interactional factors intervene in shaping this relationship and determining its direction and intensity?

### **Conceptual Framework of Workplace Bullying**

#### **1. Concept of Workplace Bullying (Mobbing) and its Development in Sociological Literature**

Workplace bullying (mobbing) is defined in sociological literature as an organizational social phenomenon manifested in hostile and unethical behaviors that are systematically and repeatedly exercised within the work environment by an individual or a group against another individual or group, in a context characterized by an imbalance of power. This leads to the marginalization of the victim and the undermining of their psychological, social, and professional status.

This definition is among the most widely cited, as Leymann argues that bullying is not measured by the intensity of a single act, but rather by its continuity and organized nature within the professional context (Leymann, 1996).

This conceptualization distinguishes workplace bullying from transient professional conflicts, as it requires repetition, duration over time, and an imbalance of power relations, making it a form of structured symbolic violence within the organization.

#### **2- Development of the Concept of Workplace Bullying in Scientific Literature**

##### **A. The Foundational Phase (1980–1990)**

This phase witnessed the first theoretical foundation of the concept of workplace bullying by Swedish researcher Heinz Leymann, who borrowed the term *Mobbing* from behavioral biology to describe hostile group behavior targeting a weaker individual within a group. Leymann focused his analysis on the psychological and social dimensions of bullying, identifying five main categories of bullying behaviors, including: damaging communication and interaction, disruption of social relationships, damage to personal reputation, undermining professional status and work quality, and negative effects on physical and psychological health (Leymann, 1996, p. 171).

##### **B. The Expansion Phase (1990–2000)**

With the beginning of the 1990s, the concept of workplace bullying expanded to include organizational and structural dimensions. It was no longer viewed solely as an individual behavior, but rather as the outcome of complex organizational interactions. Within this context, Einarsen and colleagues developed a classification of bullying patterns according to power directions within organizations, distinguishing between:

- Downward vertical bullying (from supervisor to subordinate)
- Horizontal bullying (between colleagues)
- Upward vertical bullying (from subordinate to supervisor) (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, p. 98)

This typology contributed to the incorporation of organizational power into the analysis of bullying, paving the way for more sociological approaches to the phenomenon.

### **C. The Institutional Phase (2000–present)**

Contemporary studies have shifted toward analyzing workplace bullying as an institutional and structural phenomenon, closely linked to modern work structures and the transformations of the labor world under globalization. This phase has highlighted the role of factors such as: toxic organizational culture, flexible work arrangements and job insecurity, and increasing competition and performance pressure (Salin & Hoel, 2013, p. 242).

In this context, bullying has come to be understood as an informal mechanism of social control and a means of reproducing relations of domination within organizations.

### **3- Workplace Bullying and Related Concepts (Organizational Conflict, Workplace Violence, Harassment)**

Workplace bullying (Mobbing) is considered a complex sociological and organizational concept that is often confused with closely related notions such as organizational conflict, workplace violence, and harassment. However, distinguishing between these concepts is essential for ensuring a precise scientific analysis of the phenomenon.

#### **Workplace Bullying vs. Organizational Conflict**

Workplace bullying differs from organizational conflict in terms of nature, dynamics, and objectives. While workplace bullying is based on a clear imbalance of power between a dominant aggressor and a weaker victim, organizational conflict is often characterized by a relative balance of power between the conflicting parties.

Moreover, bullying is defined as an intentional, hostile behavior that is repeated over time and aims at psychological harm and the destruction of the victim's professional and social identity. In contrast, organizational conflict may be temporary or situational, linked to a specific issue or organizational interest, and can sometimes lead to constructive solutions (Zapf & Gross, 2001, p. 451).

In the Arab context, some studies suggest that the lack of institutional awareness may cause professional conflict to gradually evolve into systematic bullying, particularly in contexts where organizational control mechanisms are weak (Bouachrine & Othmane Boubaker, 2024).

#### **Workplace Bullying vs. Workplace Violence**

Workplace bullying is primarily associated with forms of indirect psychological and social violence, such as exclusion, humiliation, and reputational damage. It is a gradual and chronic form of violence that is difficult to detect, as it is often hidden and not directly visible.

In contrast, workplace violence is more explicit and direct, often taking a physical or verbal form that occurs suddenly (Neuman & Baron, 1998, p. 311).

Arab literature also emphasizes that the danger of workplace bullying lies in its “silent” nature, which leads to long-term psychological exhaustion that can sometimes exceed the effects of direct physical violence (Al-Khubayzi, 2023).

### **Workplace Bullying vs. Harassment**

Although there are overlaps between workplace bullying and harassment, the fundamental difference lies in motivation and context. Workplace bullying is not necessarily related to sexual motives and can be perpetrated from any organizational level. Its primary aim is to undermine the victim’s professional status and social identity.

In contrast, harassment is often associated with sexually oriented behaviors, aiming at humiliation or exploitation, and typically occurs within a vertical power relationship (Samnani & Singh, 2012, p. 525).

## **4- Sociological Concepts Explaining Workplace Bullying**

### **A. Power and Organization**

Power is considered a central sociological concept for understanding the dynamics of modern organizations, given its decisive role in shaping professional relationships, distributing influence, and regulating behavior within the work environment. In this context, workplace bullying is viewed as an indirect form of exercising power, particularly within organizations characterized by rigid hierarchies and imbalances in power relations between social actors.

#### **Weber’s Theory of Authority**

Max Weber provided a classical analysis of authority within organizations, distinguishing between three types of legitimate authority: traditional authority, which derives its legitimacy from established customs and traditions; charismatic authority, which is based on the exceptional personal qualities of the leader; and rational-legal authority, which rests on formal rules and regulations and represents the dominant form in modern bureaucratic organizations (Weber, 1978).

Weber’s analysis shows that bureaucratic organizations, despite their apparent rationality, may create structural conditions that facilitate workplace bullying. This is due to factors such as excessive centralization in decision-making, rigid hierarchical structures, and a prevailing culture of obedience and compliance. Within such a framework, formal authority can be transformed into a tool of pressure and exclusion, where bullying is exercised in a top-down manner as a form of disguised organizational control.

### **B. Theory of Capitalism and Class Conflict**

The Marxist analysis is based on the view that economic organizations are spaces that reflect relations of production and class struggle between owners of the means of production and the working class. Karl Marx argued that labor under the capitalist system leads to a state of alienation, where workers feel separated from their work, their product, themselves, and their colleagues, as a result of the dominance of profit logic and surplus value (Marx, 1976).

Within this framework, workplace bullying can be interpreted as a mechanism of domination used to reproduce power relations within the workplace, through the fragmentation of labor solidarity, the spread of fear, and the weakening of workers’ ability to claim their professional rights. Bullying is thus not understood as an individual deviant behavior, but as a social tool employed to regulate the workforce and maintain class-based privileges within the organization.

### **C. The Theory of Power and Discipline in Michel Foucault**

Michel Foucault develops a different conception of power, where it is not seen as property monopolized by a specific actor, but rather as a network of interrelated relations exercised in everyday life within institutions. According to Foucault, power is productive of knowledge, operates at a micro level, and is embodied in bodies, behaviors, and disciplinary practices (Foucault, 1977).

This perspective allows workplace bullying to be understood as one manifestation of disciplinary power, exercised through continuous surveillance, evaluation, and symbolic marginalization, without necessarily relying on direct physical violence. Bullying thus appears as a mechanism of social control that contributes to the production of compliant and disciplined subjects within organizations, through subtle and often unobservable mechanisms that are difficult to detect or challenge.

#### **D. The Theory of Elites within Institutions**

The elite theory, as formulated by C. Wright Mills, asserts that power within institutions is not evenly distributed but is concentrated in the hands of a limited group of elites who control decision-making centers and act to protect their own interests (Mills, 1956). Within this context, practices of exclusion and marginalization—including workplace bullying—are used as tools to preserve privileges and exclude undesired actors.

This perspective helps explain cases of bullying directed at highly competent employees or individuals with critical positions, who may be perceived as a potential threat to internal power balances within the organization. Accordingly, bullying becomes an informal mechanism for reproducing institutional elite dominance and regulating the organizational field.

#### **E. The Theory of Symbolic Violence by Pierre Bourdieu**

Pierre Bourdieu provides a crucial framework for understanding the invisible dimensions of violence within organizations through the concept of **symbolic violence**. This refers to a subtle and non-physical form of violence exercised through symbols, meanings, and cultural representations, without the need for direct physical coercion (Bourdieu, 1991). What characterizes this form of violence is that it is often exercised with the tacit consent of the dominated themselves, due to what Bourdieu calls **misrecognition**, where practices of domination are perceived as natural or legitimate.

Symbolic violence is closely linked to the concept of **habitus**, which refers to a system of socially acquired dispositions that shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and their positions within the organization. Through professional habitus, workers may come to accept humiliation or marginalization as a normal part of the "rules of the game" within organizational life.

Furthermore, **symbolic capital**—embodied in reputation, prestige, and professional recognition—plays a central role in the reproduction of power relations. It can be used as a tool of influence and pressure within the workplace, thereby reinforcing structures of domination and exclusion.

#### **Secondly: Organizational Culture as a Tool of Symbolic Violence**

Organizational culture contributes to the production of symbolic violence when it is based on a system of values and beliefs that legitimizes practices of exclusion and marginalization. In some institutions, excessive work and maximum productivity are glorified at the expense of psychological well-being and human dignity, while intense competition is promoted as a positive value. This creates an environment that justifies bullying as a "natural" means of professional success (Schein, 2010).

This culture is also reflected in everyday organizational rituals and practices, such as meetings characterized by public humiliation or performance evaluation methods that diminish individuals' worth. It is further expressed through the language and symbols used within the organization, including the use of derogatory labels or humiliating terms that reproduce relations of superiority and

inferiority. In this sense, bullying becomes an institutionalized practice rather than a mere individual deviance.

### **Thirdly: Toxic Organizational Culture and the Reinforcement of Bullying**

Contemporary literature refers to the concept of **toxic organizational culture** as an important explanatory framework for the spread of workplace bullying. This culture is characterized by several features, most notably a **culture of fear**, where a constant climate of threat—such as dismissal or punishment—prevails. This generates job insecurity and pushes individuals toward silence or complicity (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007).

It is also marked by a **culture of organizational silence**, which does not encourage the reporting of misconduct; instead, victims are often stigmatized as weak or incompetent. In addition, a **culture of exclusion** emerges, based on favoring certain groups within the organization and practicing various forms of discrimination based on gender, age, or social background. Within such a cultural context, bullying becomes an institutionally tolerated or implicitly accepted behavior.

### **F. Social Systems Theory of Niklas Luhmann**

Niklas Luhmann views institutions as self-referential social systems that are operationally closed, producing their own norms and rules, and reproducing themselves through internal communication (Luhmann, 1995). From this perspective, organizations may justify bullying practices as “organizational necessities,” while excluding critical or divergent voices as threats to system stability. This approach helps explain how organizations can normalize and legitimize bullying through internal mechanisms that make resistance difficult, transforming the victim into an “incompatible” element within the system. Thus, workplace bullying is not understood merely as an individual act, but as a socio-systemic product reflecting the operational logic of the organization itself.

### **1-2-3 Social Control (Formal and Informal) within the Organization**

Social control is considered one of the fundamental sociological concepts for understanding how behavior is regulated within institutions and how compliance with professional norms and rules is ensured. In the context of workplace bullying, this concept becomes particularly significant, as mechanisms of social control—whether formal or informal—may play a dual role. They can contribute to limiting bullying behaviors, while in other cases they may become tools that legitimize bullying and reproduce it within the organizational system.

#### **First: Formal Social Control within the Organization**

Formal social control refers to the set of legal and regulatory rules and mechanisms established by the institution to regulate employees’ behavior and organize their professional relationships. This type of control is embodied in written regulations and systems, such as labor laws, contracts, internal regulations, and systems of sanctions and rewards, which are intended—at least in principle—to ensure fairness and discipline within the work environment.

Formal control is also reflected in hierarchical organizational structures that define lines of authority and responsibility and regulate relationships between supervisors and subordinates. In addition, it includes monitoring and evaluation mechanisms such as performance reports, electronic surveillance, and internal investigation committees.

However, despite their legal and formal nature, these mechanisms may, in some organizational contexts, be exploited to justify bullying practices. This occurs particularly when evaluation and accountability tools are used selectively or arbitrarily, transforming formal control into an instrument of pressure and exclusion rather than a means of protection.

### **Theoretical Approaches Explaining Workplace Bullying**

## 1. Conflict Theory and the Analysis of Domination Relations in the Workplace

Conflict theory is considered one of the most important sociological approaches for explaining workplace bullying, as it is based on the fundamental assumption that organizations are not neutral spaces, but rather arenas where power relations are enacted and where interests, resources, and privileges are contested. From this perspective, workplace bullying is not understood as an isolated individual behavior, but as a social mechanism used to reproduce domination within the work environment and maintain existing power imbalances.

The conflict-based analysis of workplace bullying draws on classical Marxist contributions, which argue that relations within workplaces reflect the structural conflict between the capitalist class, which owns the means of production, and the working class, which sells its labor power. In this context, workplace bullying can be seen as an indirect tool for fragmenting class consciousness and preventing labor solidarity, by psychologically exhausting workers and preoccupying them with internal conflicts that hinder collective organization and demands for professional rights (Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1998).

This perspective was further developed within the Frankfurt School's critical theory, which focused on analyzing forms of cultural domination within modern institutions and the role of instrumental rationality in justifying oppressive practices under the guise of efficiency and productivity. From this viewpoint, domination is reproduced through the "manufacture of consent" to bullying practices, which are presented as organizational necessities or performance-enhancing tools, while concealing underlying unequal power relations (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002).

Ralf Dahrendorf also contributed to the development of modern conflict theory by viewing conflict as a natural and structural phenomenon within organizations, resulting from unequal distribution of authority and organizational positions. According to this perspective, workplace bullying emerges as one manifestation of interest-based conflict between social actors, particularly in contexts where fair mechanisms for conflict resolution or power sharing are absent (Dahrendorf, 1959).

### Mechanisms of Domination in the Workplace

Domination within organizations is exercised through a set of social mechanisms that contribute to the production and normalization of workplace bullying. Among the most prominent of these mechanisms is **isolation and exclusion**, where employees are separated from one another through spatial or functional division, thereby limiting opportunities for solidarity and collective coordination. This isolation is used as a means of weakening the victim and making them more vulnerable to bullying.

Another key mechanism is **taming and normalization**, through which bullying practices are presented as normal behaviors or as part of the "work culture." In this process, humiliation, pressure, and exclusion are redefined as professional requirements or legitimate managerial practices.

In addition, **policies of fragmentation and division** play a central role, as competing groups are created within the organization. The logic of "divide and rule" is then exploited to weaken workers' bargaining power and prevent the formation of a collective front against organizational authority.

### Workplace Bullying as a Strategy of Organizational Control

In light of conflict theory, workplace bullying can be understood as a conscious or unconscious strategy of control within organizations. This is reflected in several organizational models, including the **rigid bureaucratic model**, which is characterized by a strict hierarchy, top-down unilateral decision-making, and the use of punishment as a means of behavioral regulation. Such conditions create a fertile environment for downward bullying from supervisors to subordinates.

It is also evident in the **competitive model**, which promotes unethical competition among employees and rewards aggressive behaviors as indicators of “success” or “efficiency,” thereby normalizing bullying as a tool for career advancement.

Additionally, the exclusionary model emerges, aiming to marginalize those who are different or highly distinctive and to standardize behavioral and professional patterns. This leads to the suppression of creativity and the reproduction of organizational obedience.

## **2- Symbolic Interactionism and the Construction of Meaning in Everyday Practices**

The symbolic interactionist approach to workplace bullying starts from the assumption that social reality within organizations is not objectively given in advance, but is constructed and continuously reconstructed through everyday interactions among social actors. George Herbert Mead is considered one of the earliest theorists of this perspective, arguing that the self is not formed in isolation from society but through interaction with the “generalized other,” which represents the system of social expectations and norms within the group. Through this interaction, the self takes shape in two dimensions: the “I” as the spontaneous and creative aspect, and the “Me” as the internalized representation of social norms and values. In the workplace context, this dynamic helps explain how victims may internalize negative evaluations imposed by bullies, leading to the normalization and acceptance of humiliation as part of the professional role (Mead, 1934).

Erving Goffman deepens this understanding through his dramaturgical approach to social interaction, where organizational life is compared to a theatrical performance. He distinguishes between a “front stage,” where formal behaviors are displayed during meetings and evaluations, and a “back stage,” where informal practices of ridicule, exclusion, and collusion occur. Goffman shows that workplace bullying is often enacted in this backstage area through indirect signals and language, while being justified in the front stage under labels such as discipline or performance improvement. Impression management strategies also contribute to legitimizing the bully’s behavior, while producing a social stigma that labels the victim as incompetent or problematic within the organization (Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959).

Herbert Blumer further formalized symbolic interactionism through three key premises, emphasizing that individuals act toward things and people based on the meanings they assign to them, that these meanings arise from social interaction, and that they are continuously modified through interpretive processes. From this perspective, workplace bullying is not an isolated individual behavior, but the result of shared meanings produced within the organization, where humiliation is redefined as “constructive criticism” or “professional motivation,” and aggression is framed as managerial competence (Blumer, 1969).

In light of these theoretical foundations, it becomes clear that the construction of meaning around bullying operates through processes of labeling and stigmatization. Victims are assigned labels such as “weak” or “incompetent,” while bullies are attributed positive characteristics such as “firmness” and “efficiency.” These labels contribute to the reconfiguration of the victim’s professional identity, leading to a forced negotiation of identity in which the self-shifts from a recognized professional actor to an object of marginalization and devaluation. Organizational dramaturgy also plays a central role in distributing roles between the bully, the victim, and the silent observer, thereby reinforcing bullying as an ordinary organizational practice (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008, p. 118).

Empirical studies support this perspective, as Lutgen-Sandvik’s discourse analyses of bullying show how language of productivity and efficiency is used to conceal symbolic violence and transform

humiliation into a legitimate organizational practice. Similarly, Tracy's studies demonstrate that victims construct personal narratives to make sense of their experiences and reconstruct their professional identities after exposure to bullying, confirming the interactive and symbolic nature of the phenomenon (Tracy, 2012).

### **Social Exchange Theory**

Social Exchange Theory is considered one of the central explanatory approaches for understanding behavior within organizations. It is based on the fundamental assumption that social relationships, including work relations, operate according to a logic of mutual benefit and calculations of costs and rewards. George Homans was among the first theorists to develop this perspective, arguing that individuals behave in a relatively rational manner, seeking to maximize rewards and minimize costs, and that the continuity of relationships depends on actors' perception of their fairness and balance (Homans, 1961).

From this perspective, organizational behavior is not seen as a mechanical response to formal rules, but rather as the outcome of mutual expectations regarding reward and fairness.

Peter Blau further developed this approach by distinguishing between economic exchange, based on formal contracts, and social exchange, based on commitment, trust, and unwritten expectations. Blau argues that an imbalance in social exchange within organizations generates unequal power relations that may evolve into domination and exploitation, particularly when organizational or symbolic resources are used without fair reciprocity (Blau, 1964).

Within this framework, workplace bullying can be understood as the outcome of unbalanced exchange relationships, where costs are imposed on one party without equivalent compensation.

### **Organizational Justice Theory**

Organizational justice theory is closely linked to social exchange theory, as it focuses on employees' perceptions of fairness in treatment within an organization. The literature distinguishes between three main dimensions of justice.

The first dimension is distributive justice, which was addressed by John Adams within the framework of equity theory, where he argues that individuals compare what they contribute in terms of effort with what they receive in return, not only in absolute terms but also in comparison with others (Adams, 1965, p. 298). A sense of injustice leads to feelings of anger, withdrawal, and aggressive behavior.

The second dimension is procedural justice, which focuses on the fairness and transparency of the procedures used in decision-making, as well as providing employees with opportunities to express their opinions and participate in the organizational process (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). The third dimension is interactional justice, which relates to the quality of day-to-day treatment, respect for human dignity, and honest communication between supervisors and subordinates (Bies & Moag, 1986, p. 54). This dimension is considered one of the most closely related to workplace bullying due to its direct association with humiliation and disrespect.

Workplace bullying can be analyzed as a complex form of violation of organizational justice across its three dimensions. At the level of distributive justice, bullying appears in depriving victims of deserved rewards, assigning them unfair workloads, or obstructing their career progression. At the level of procedural justice, bullying is manifested through the absence of effective complaint channels, biased procedures, or unclear and non-transparent investigations. At the level of interactional justice, bullying is reflected in humiliating treatment, harsh or misleading communication, and the disregard of the victim's feelings and human dignity.

## **Organizational Work Environment as a Generative Framework for Workplace Bullying**

### **1- Structural characteristics that generate bullying**

Sociological studies indicate that certain structural features of organizations act as predisposing factors for the occurrence of workplace bullying. Among the most prominent of these features are:

**Structural rigidity:** This refers to resistance to change and the difficulty of restructuring relationships, along with the rigidity of roles and responsibilities. This limits adaptation to individual needs and increases the likelihood of interpersonal conflict.

**Functional isolation:** This includes the separation of departments from one another, weak formal communication channels, and a lack of integration between organizational units. This leads to poor understanding and the escalation of minor conflicts into bullying behaviors.

**Bureaucratic complexity:** This reflects the multiplicity of administrative levels, the complexity of procedures and regulations, and the lack of operational flexibility. As a result, some individuals become more vulnerable to pressure or exploitation by those holding power.

#### **Parsons' Social System Theory**

Parsons (Parsons, *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Sociological Theory*, 1961) views the workplace social system as an integrated system whose functions are based on four main dimensions, according to the AGIL model:

**Adaptation:** the organization's ability to respond to environmental changes.

**Goal Attainment:** achieving defined organizational objectives.

**Integration:** maintaining harmony between units and departments.

**Latency (Pattern Maintenance):** preserving values and institutional norms to ensure the continuity of the social system.

This framework shows how organizational structure can create an environment that is conducive to the reproduction of unequal relationships, which may contribute to the emergence of bullying as a manifestation of conflict within the organization.

### **2- Characteristics of the Organizational System that Generate Conflict**

Lockwood (1964, p. 256) suggests that conflicts within organizations often arise from the contradiction between individual and collective interests, the scarcity of limited resources, and the incompatibility of expectations and roles. When these factors intersect with a rigid and complex organizational environment, they increase the likelihood of workplace bullying as an informal mechanism for distributing power or asserting dominance among individuals.

#### **Organizational Structure as a Framework Generating Bullying**

According to Salin's model (*Ways of explaining workplace bullying: A review of enabling, motivating and precipitating structures and processes in the work environment*, 2003, p. 1232), workplace bullying can be explained through three levels of factors:

**Enabling factors:** such as low organizational flexibility, weak control mechanisms, and the absence of anti-bullying policies.

**Motivating factors:** including high competitive pressure, unfair distribution of resources, and threats to professional identity.

**Precipitating factors:** such as unresolved interpersonal conflicts, poor stress management, and the absence of ethical leadership.

This interactional model reflects how organizational structure can evolve into an environment that generates workplace bullying by providing conditions that facilitate repeated abuse, encourage it, and accelerate its emergence, both at the individual and collective levels within the organization.

### 3- Hierarchy of Authority and Centralization in Decision-Making

The hierarchy of authority within organizations is considered a fundamental framework for understanding how power and responsibility are structured in the workplace, and how this affects bullying practices. According to Max Weber (1978), several key features, including a clear chain of command, specialization of roles and functions, the existence of written formal rules, as well as rational decision-making and impersonal relationships among individuals, characterize the traditional hierarchical structure. This structure may create an environment in which bullying behaviors emerge if those in positions of authority misuse their power.

Centralization in decision-making is one of the most important factors influencing power dynamics within organizations. Absolute centralization concentrates decision-making in the hands of a single individual, leading to the absence of collective participation and the emergence of a culture of blind dependency. Functional centralization, on the other hand, involves the monopolization of information at the top of the hierarchy and control over the flow of knowledge, creating cognitive dependency among subordinates. In contrast, pseudo-decentralization refers to formal delegation without real authority, where employees are assigned responsibility without being truly empowered, resulting in a “responsibility trap.”

The relationship between power and bullying illustrates how hierarchical structures can be used to reinforce control. Michel Crozier (1964) suggested that bullying can become a strategy for strengthening power, where information is used as a tool of control and zones of uncertainty are created to reinforce dominance over subordinates. Mechanisms of power abuse within hierarchies include discriminatory treatment such as favoritism or manipulation of promotions, arbitrary monopolization of decision-making, and abusive delegation through assigning impossible tasks or abandoning employees when failure occurs.

Furthermore, Power-Dependence Theory, developed by Emerson (1962), explains that mutual dependency relationships between individuals can generate imbalances in power. In such cases, bullying becomes a tool used by the more powerful actor to strengthen their bargaining position within the organization, benefiting from centralization, information monopolization, and decision-making authority.

### 4- Distribution of Resources and Rewards as Symbolic Capital

The distribution of resources and rewards within the work environment represents one of the most important mechanisms that determines the balance of power and authority. It can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which refers to a form of capital that grants its holder symbolic authority and influence once its legitimacy is socially recognized. In organizational contexts, this form of capital is translated into social and professional authority and enhances individuals’ status within the organization.

Workplace bullying is sometimes used as a tool to reinforce symbolic capital. According to organizational game theories, bullying strategies can be manifested in three forms:

**Exclusion strategy:** aims to exclude potential competitors, monopolize opportunities and resources, and create barriers to others’ advancement.

**Weakening strategy:** involves undermining others’ reputation, reducing their symbolic value, and destroying their self-confidence.

**Containment strategy:** seeks to prevent others’ development and career progression by placing obstacles in their professional path and controlling the pace of their growth.

### The Bully and Positions of Power within the Organization

### 1- The psychosociology of the bully

Sociopsychological approaches highlight that the workplace bully is not merely defined by isolated individual traits, but that their behavior is shaped within an organizational context that allows the reproduction of patterns of control and domination.

Organizational narcissism is considered one of the most prominent traits associated with bullies. It is reflected in an exaggerated sense of entitlement, a constant need for admiration and recognition, as well as a lack of empathy toward others. A study by Matthiesen and Mikkelsen shows that the bully often seeks to compensate for an underlying sense of insecurity by exerting control over others, using bullying as a mechanism to enhance self-esteem and consolidate their position within the organization (Matthiesen & Mikkelsen, 2004, p. 167).

In addition, bullying practices are linked to what is known as the authoritarian personality, characterized by reverence for authority and hierarchy, hostility toward those who are different or less compliant, and excessive rigidity in enforcing rules. This personality type tends to justify oppressive behaviors as a necessary organizational requirement or as adherence to discipline and order, thereby granting bullying a false moral legitimacy within the institution.

### 22- Organizational Power Positions of the Bully

The bully derives their power from multiple positions within the organization, where formal and informal dimensions are intertwined. At the forefront of these positions is **functional power**, which is associated with administrative rank and the authority it grants in decision-making, resource control, and influencing others' career trajectories. This formal power creates a favorable environment for practicing bullying without direct accountability.

In addition, some bullies possess **personal power**, which stems from charisma, persuasive skills, or the ability to build influential social networks within the organization. This enables them to form alliances and mobilize support even in the absence of direct formal authority. **Knowledge-based power** also plays a crucial role, as the monopolization of information or possession of rare specialized expertise creates cognitive dependency among others, which can be exploited as a tool for dominance and bullying.

### 3- The Bully's Strategies for Maintaining Power

Bullies rely on a set of organizational strategies to preserve their dominant position. One of the most prominent is the **division strategy**, which involves creating internal conflicts among colleagues, preventing the formation of collective alliances, and weakening professional solidarity, thereby keeping others in a state of continuous competition and fragmentation.

They also employ an **distraction strategy**, through which they fabricate artificial crises or shift blame onto others in order to divert attention away from their own mistakes or abusive practices.

Another key strategy is **normalization**, considered one of the most dangerous approaches. In this case, the bully works to make bullying appear as a normal and acceptable practice within the organizational culture, often by justifying it as an administrative necessity or professional pressure. This leads to an implicit acceptance of symbolic violence and its continuous reproduction.

### 4- Bullying as a Strategy for Career Advancement

Organizational literature suggests that bullying can evolve into a functional strategy for advancing one's career in certain institutional environments. Salin's study shows that some bullies use bullying as a means to eliminate competitors, weaken others, and construct a self-image as a "strong leader"

or “firm manager,” which may be rewarded in organizational cultures that prioritize strictness and results over human values (Salin, 2003).

### **General Conclusion**

This study concludes that workplace bullying cannot be reduced to an individual deviant behavior or an isolated psychological disorder, but rather represents a complex social phenomenon shaped within organizational and cultural structures that enable the reproduction of symbolic violence in the workplace.

The findings show that organizations, through their unbalanced hierarchical structures and administrative cultures based on silence and fear, create objective conditions that facilitate the emergence and persistence of bullying, even transforming it into a “normal” and implicitly accepted practice in some professional contexts.

The study also demonstrates that bullies exploit organizational power positions—functional, personal, and knowledge-based—as social resources to consolidate control and enhance professional status, benefiting from weak accountability mechanisms and the absence of institutional protection. Meanwhile, victims experience a gradual deconstruction of their professional identity through systematic exclusionary practices, confirming that bullying constitutes a form of symbolic violence that operates silently but produces profound effects on psychological well-being, career trajectories, and organizational stability.

Furthermore, the study highlights the central role of bystanders in bullying dynamics, showing that silence is not a neutral stance but an active social practice that contributes to legitimizing organizational violence. The theoretical approach reveals that organizational silence culture produces multiple patterns of bystander behavior—ranging from complicity to neutrality to defense—shaped by rational calculations of risks and benefits, as explained by theories of organizational silence as a coping strategy in unsafe work environments.

By employing sociological approaches, particularly theories of power, symbolic violence, and symbolic interactionism, the study addresses the central research question: How is workplace bullying constructed and reproduced within modern organizations? It demonstrates that bullying emerges from a triadic interaction between key social actors—the bully, the victim, and the bystanders—within an organizational context that defines patterns of action and limits of resistance. Accordingly, the persistence of bullying is not only attributable to the power of the bully but also to structural fragility and collective silence.

Finally, the study emphasizes that addressing workplace bullying requires a shift from individual-level remedial interventions to structural and cultural transformation, through enhancing transparency, reinforcing accountability, building safe reporting mechanisms, and promoting ethical courage and professional solidarity. In doing so, this study contributes to sociological literature on work and organizations by offering a critical explanatory understanding of bullying and opening future research perspectives for building more just and humane work environments.

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