

**Paper: Mobbing: children the unlikely victims**  
**Presenter: Charmaine Hockley JP RN PhD FRCNA**

**Abstract**

Children, as victims of sexual, physical and psychological abuse, have recently gained national and international attention by various governments, police and the media. Research is showing that children who witness domestic violence experience a strong emotional impact. What is poorly recognised is the impact on the children of parents who are experiencing mobbing and associated workplace activities. The literature is silent in this area. Given the damage that mobbing can inflict it is unfortunate but likely that the children who grow up in a household where the outcomes of their parent's workplace experiences are brought home will also be affected. Drawing on the findings of various studies, (for example, Hockley 1999; 2002; 2003a; 2003b), this paper explores the reactions of families to mobbing and how these reactions have the potential to impact on the social and mental wellbeing of their children.

**References**

- Hockley, C. (1999) Organisational Violence: An ethnomethodological perspective of nurses' experiences. PhD thesis. Faculty of Nursing, University of South Australia. Unpublished
- Hockley, C. (2002) The silent third party victims of workplace bullying: Family members. Adelaide International Workplace Bullying Conference - Skills for survival, solutions and strategies, 20–22 February 2002, Adelaide, South Australia.
- Hockley, C. (2003a). *Silent Hell : Workplace Violence & Victims*, Norwood, South Australia: Peacock Publishers. Reprint.
- Hockley, C. (2003b) 'The impact of workplace violence on third party victims: A mental health perspective, AeJAMH - The Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health - Volume 2 Issue 2 (July 2003) is now online at <http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/journal/vol2iss2/index.php>

## **Introduction**

For more than a decade mobbing and other antisocial workplace behaviours has been recognised as an important workplace issue and yet an adequate solution to address this phenomenon remains a challenge. Organisational tolerance to this behaviour has oscillated between complacency and frantic policy development but overall a conservative approach to managing mobbing continues. Numerous studies have identified the serious affects of mobbing and its closely associated neighbour, bullying (Einarsen, 2002; Sheehan 2002; Westhues 2004). Moreover, it is increasingly being recognised that these antisocial workplace behaviours affect not only the primary victim but also impacts significantly on the lives of their family. Several studies have focused on the effects of the workplace violence on families (Hockley 1999, 2002; 2003a; 2003b) but surprisingly there are no significant studies specifically addressing the impact on children whose parents are experiencing mobbing.

The purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of the scant existing literature concerning the children whose parents have experienced various forms of workplace violence including mobbing. In this paper, mobbing, in an Australian context is established and explored; followed by the effects it has on the family. The focus then changes more specifically to children who live within these families emphasising their comparative invisibility in mobbing literature. Only by raising awareness of the impact that mobbing has on children – by exploring their experiences - will effective child protection be possible.

## **Defining the problem**

Unfortunately, there is no agreement on what terms we should use to describe various antisocial workplace behaviours and there is not enough time here to enter this debate. However, I would like to put forward my thoughts on the subject.

The term *mobbing* is often interchangeable with the term *bullying* with many continental European countries preferring the term mobbing whilst UK and Australian researchers and practitioners refer to this behaviour as bullying. My personal opinion is that there are differences between these two behaviours but what the differences are is often in the eyes of the targeted person. At the conference there have been many explanations regarding mobbing and bullying so I will briefly cover it as follows. My interpretation of mobbing is that it is a non-physical approach to abuse in the workplace using various forms of communication to instil fear in an employer or

employee. I say employer as often the concept of mobbing is interpreted as an 'upward bullying', for example employees targeting employers. This concept is quite different to the general perception of bullying, for example, where employers are often perceived as the perpetrators. Even as I speak, I can see flaws in my argument as I can recall examples where a victim has called it bullying even though the behaviour has been very subtle, or from other employees. I believe there are many antisocial workplace behaviours that defy encapsulation and this is one of the major issues in addressing this phenomenon.

Over the years there have been many explanations put forward in an attempt to describe the concept of mobbing and bullying, however the common thread in these definitions is that they all appeared to refer to a time factor. The father of mobbing, as we know it today, Heinz Leymann, believed that to call the behaviour mobbing it must occur repeatedly (e.g. at least once a week) and for a long time (e.g. at least 6 months) (Leymann 1993, 1996 in Zapf & Gross 2001). Other authors often used less restrictive definitions with regard to the time frame (e.g. less than 6 months) and the frequency (less often than once a week) (c.f. Hoel, Rayner & Cooper, 1999; Zapf 1999 in Zapf & Gross 2001).

Various studies into mobbing show that it is not a passing problem with some researchers reporting the minimum duration of mobbing as 6 months (Zapf & Gross 2001). Leymann (1996) reported an average duration of 15 months. Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) reported 18 months, and Zapf (1999a) summarising various German studies reported a mean duration of between 29 and 46 months (Zapf & Gross 2001). Therefore, it is not surprising that researchers into mobbing are proposing that the behaviour escalates as the conflict is allowed to continue leaving the victim in a non-control situation (Zapf & Gross 2001). The outcome of being victimised over a long period of time has led people to be physically, socially, professionally, economically and spiritually harmed (c.f. Hockley 2002; 2003a; 2003b).

My work generally refers to workplace violence and, like many authors on this subject, may include terms such as mobbing, bullying or stalking as a focus of the research or publication. With a plethora of interpretations on what these behaviours are I prefer to focus on the outcome of this behaviour – that is the harm it causes.

### **When does mobbing become a problem?**

When does mobbing become a problem is a difficult question to answer. When I first started to explore the concept of people being harmed in the workplace,

my thoughts focused on the harm it was doing. From the late 1980s to the mid 1990s when I was formally, and informally, collecting data for my research, nurses did not use the terms mobbing or bullying or even violence. Some used the term abuse, but rarely. The participants were more inclined to describe what was happening and how they felt about it, often using metaphors or euphemisms. What I saw or heard at the time was that some nurse were harmed by this behaviour, even having difficulty speaking about it 20, 30 and even 35 years after the event. Furthermore, some of these incidents may have only happened once by one perpetrator, or similar incidents had occurred successively to them over the years by different people. What I also found interesting was that not all the participants were affected in the same way by the same behaviours. I then focused on the impact of these behaviours and the harm it did to some but not to all. My operating definition of workplace violence states that it is:

The outcome of any act that causes harm to another person....  
Along a continuum, these acts can range from non-physical, such as abuse of power to physical, including homicide. Violence is not so much the act itself; it is the outcome of a harmful experience .... Harmful experiences may include professional, social, economic, or personal harm, such as loss of career, ostracism, loss of wages. Workplace violence can also include third parties such as colleagues and family members (amended from Hockley 1999).

This definition may seem deceptively simple but defining any antisocial workplace behaviour can be problematic. As with all attempts to define and label there is a danger that this may be perceived as applying warranted or unwarranted attributes to individuals or their behaviour. One of my favourite statements which I offer endlessly to my students is by Wittgenstein who stated that: 'labels terminate thinking!!' For example, prior to the recent election the latest generated label was "doctors' wives". Before that we often heard the expression 'soccer mums'.

Therefore a simple answer to my original question – when does mobbing become a problem? – is "when someone is harmed by this behaviour" and in the context of this paper it is the children of the primary target.

### **What do we mean by 'harmed'**

In Australia, 'there are three types of harm recognised at law. They are physical, economic and psychological harm' (Wallace 2001, p. 231).

Of the three types of harm two can be objectively measured: physical harm and economic harm. Psychological harm, on the other hand, is much more difficult to measure. Successful litigation may result in compensation 'for medically recognised, permanent and significant psychological harm which results from someone's negligence' (Wallace 2001, p. 232). According to Wallace 'Generally, the only people eligible [for compensation] are those who directly experience or witness a harmful event, or relatives who suffer nervous shock as a result of learning of the harm' (Wallace 2001, p. 232).

The collateral effects of mobbing are a cause of concern when other people, such as family, friends and work colleagues could be harmed by mobbing behaviour in addition to the person who has been targeted at work. Hockley's (2002a; 2003a) studies show that antisocial workplace behaviours can devastate the family system, adversely affecting the marriage, parent-child relationships and the psychological development of children.

### **Mobbing and the Australian context**

I first heard the term in 1996 when I was fortunate to attend a conference here in Brisbane where Heinz Leymann was keynote speaker. It was at this conference that I heard that he had associated this workplace behaviour with animal behaviour where the smaller animals ganged up on a larger animal. Although the term originated in Europe in 1980s, (Leymann 1996), it has gradually been accepted by other countries such as Canada (Westhues, 2004); USA (Davenport, 2000), and Australia (Shallcross, 2003).

Because there is an established acceptance of the term *bullying* to describe this behaviour in Australia, there is very little data available on the extent of mobbing *per se*. Nevertheless, it is possible to demonstrate that mobbing occurs and is now increasingly being recognised as a part of the workplace culture (Shallcross 2003). Furthermore, the rise in recognition of mobbing as a workplace issue that urgently needs addressing in the workplace is evident in the speed that the concept has entered into some parliamentary discussions (WA Legislative Council, 2004 in personal correspondence). This expansion in the visibility, acceptance and potential to cause harm to the primary target is rightly being recognised. The potential to cause harm to family members and their children also needs acknowledging.

## **What is the cost of mobbing?**

### **Financial cost**

It is difficult to assess the cost of mobbing because of the lack of available data. Nevertheless the cost of bullying in the workplace in Australia has been estimated to be between 6 billion to 13 billion Australian dollars every year and when hidden and lost opportunity costs are considered the cost to the Australian community may rise as high as 36 billion Australian dollars (Sheehan 2003). With an Australian population of approximately 20 million the cost of workplace bullying could be explained as follows – for every man, woman and child living in Australia, it is between AUS\$650 to AUS\$1800. It is very difficult to make meaningful comparison between bullying and mobbing costs but even if these figures were doubled, or halved, whatever the case may be, mobbing is a growing problem which has both an unacceptable social cost as well as a substantial economic impact on the community.

The financial cost to families often goes unrecognised because it is absorbed within the family budget. The demands made on family finances eventually impacts on both the victim and their families, in particular their children (Hockley 2002a). Because of Australia's current OHS legislation colleagues who witness this behaviour at work are financially covered but family members not employed by that organisation are not. Therefore, family members, particularly the spouse, can find themselves in a very difficult financial position. The financial harm caused to the family is often influenced by the primary target's health and financial status (Hockley 2002a).

Financial problems that affect the primary target are further compounded when family members begin to be affected. For example using up all paid leave and then when that has expired resorting to taking unpaid leave to support the primary target's care (Hockley 2002b).

### **The human cost**

The human costs for the person experiencing any form of workplace violence, including mobbing, are extremely high, some even taking their own lives as a way of solving their problem (Hockley, 1998; 2002b). Suicide appeared to be an issue for those who I have interviewed about this behaviour. Nearly every person I have spoken to who has been targeted at work has had suicidal thoughts even if it was only a fleeting thought as a solution to their problem. I can recall several incidents where family members have talked about what it is like to have their husband, wife or child

commit suicide after years of being a workplace target. An interesting and very important issue that I have noted from conversations with the victim and their families is that to my knowledge not one employing organisation approached the family or offered assistance following a suicide of an employee because of bullying or other associated activities. Suicide at any time is horrific for those left behind but to lose a family member because of the way they have been treated at work desperately needs attention. Moreover, for the family members to consider suicide because of what is outside their control is even more devastating, particularly for the children who are left behind without one or both parents. The extract below is one such example:

*In the pursuing weeks, with both of us depressed (and on one occasion both feeling suicidal simultaneously), we found it best for us to live separately in the same house .....(Hockley 2002b, p. 158).*

### **The effects of mobbing on the family**

The potential devastating collateral effects on families suggest that in order to develop a more complete understanding of this problem researchers need to study the experiences of all those who are likely to be affected. While a majority of national and international studies relating to mobbing, bullying, and workplace violence have focused on the primary victim, several studies have widened their research to examine the effects on the families of the primary target (Hockley 2002b). However, the effects of the parental problem on children have seldom been investigated.

What is known is that these families can be severely disrupted, experiencing difficulties such as emotional distress from arguments, divorce and uncertainty, financial problems and physical problems. What is that doing to the children?

### **What are the effects of workplace mobbing on children?**

Currently there is no significant data on the impact of workplace mobbing on children. From other antisocial workplace behaviours, we can show that the impact varies depending upon how much the children know or not know. For example, some parents did not tell their children. On the other hand, some parents did tell their children; but these children were generally older than 10 years of age. What is not known, and requires urgent research, is how much children know or sense without telling their parents of their fears. In these circumstances, the children are the silent sufferers as the result of this mobbing behaviour on a parent.

In many of the cases I have been involved in parents have not necessarily sat down with their children to explain what has happened. At times, it is because they

think the children are too young to understand, at other times they do not burden them. On occasions, it is because they think they are hiding it well from them and unfortunately, some are too shattered by their own experiences to worry about what impact it is having on anyone else but themselves. I have included some of their responses below to the question –"How did your children feel about your workplace experiences?"

Their responses were:

*"I never asked the children."*

\*\*\*

*I was oblivious as to how our children (now aged in their teens) were coping at this time, but I would guess that both of our work circumstances would have been perplexing to them at times worrying. I can remember many occasion where Jed and I were desperately trying to 'brighten ourselves' just before our children returned home from school. With our children witnessing our suffering physical and mental due to the workplace, I often wonder about how their sense of safety and security in the workplace will be in their future careers. I feel convinced, though that neither of our children will choose a career in nursing.*

\*\*\*

*Leon, our son, who was nearly a teenager at the time, was unaware (I think) of the problem. I tried to spend time with him and initially when Angelica first went on sick leave her sisters and her father took over the school runs and as far as I am aware he quite enjoyed having Mom at home cooking and looking after everyone. We tried to pass it over as a long holiday for everyone and although there was always the background fighting with management and union we barbecued, cooked, baked and generally tried to relax and enjoy the time at home. I hope that Leon would not have been affected although he was aware of the situation I tried to make him feel as secure as possible and distract him if Angelica was upset.*

These responses indicate that the parents may not necessarily appreciate the impact that these experiences were having on their children.



On occasions, the children of a targeted person have spoken to me about their experiences and I would like to share one case study with you today. This young adult, then in her early teens, talks about her feelings. She begins by telling me what it is like to live with someone who has been bullied. Her responses were:

*Horrible. Hell. Made me feel like I wanted to die, I felt I was to blame*

\*\*\*

*[I was] Frustrated, concerned and very worried about my mother's well being after she informed us about [her experiences]*

\*\*\*

*Mum really went inside herself when she [used to be] open. Mum would hide away from everyone at home.*

\*\*\*

*Bullying at work has stopped but the effects and changes to our lives have continued.*

\*\*\*

To the question "What did you do during this time?"

*[I] Buried it, pretended it wasn't happening. When dad was upset tried to help. Because of what was happening, we needed to keep our personal stuff and family stuff private so I couldn't talk to anyone in case it caused more trouble (Hockley 2003b).*

This range of responses from one child where a parent has been targeted at work is of particular concern because of the impact in the short and long term it may be having on her. At this stage, it is difficult to assess. However, because of the limited research in this area data gained from other studies, such as the effect on children in domestic violence, drug and alcohol dependent families, and the experiences of children in problem gambling families, may be similar.

Studies (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergast, Slavens & Linder 1994; Freeman, Mokros, & Poznanski, 1993; cited in O'Donnell, Scwab-Stone, and Muyeed 2002) reported that children exposed to violent behaviour also threatens children's formation of healthy relationships, their capacity to experience trust and their development of self-confidence and autonomy. Furthermore, multiple studies have shown that children exposed to various forms of violence are at a heightened risk of a variety of disorders, including depression, anxiety and aggressive behaviours.

## Conclusion

The protection of our children is one of society's most urgent issues that require ongoing attention. The aim of this paper was to present an overview of the potential harm to children of parents who are or have experienced workplace mobbing. Few studies have focused on the short or long term social and mental wellbeing of these children. It is obvious we need answers. It is vital we get answers.

One approach is to re-examine mobbing – we need to get beyond the victim's experiences and identify:

- What is going on in the perpetrators mind that makes them act that way?
- Why do organisations allow this behaviour to occur?
- How can we develop appropriate processes to protect not only the primary targets but also third party victims – their children?
- Where to next?

I would like to offer some solutions. First we need to get past our anger. Anger may be the impetus we need to get answers but anger will not solve the problem.

We need financial, human and physical resources to research why mobbing happens in the first place because it is only then can we begin to put into place processes and set up programs to help not only the perpetrator and primary target but also the children who are witnessing the impact of this behaviour on their parents. The government has a huge role in this process and could begin by acknowledging that mobbing and other associated workplace activities have the potential to impact on children and put services in place help these children not becoming psychologically and socially dysfunctional.

Thank you.

## References

Available on request.

### **Selected list of publications in past 5 years by author on subject**

- Hockley, C. (1998) Costs of silence: Women bullying women, in P. McCarthy, M. Sheehan, S. Wilkie, & W. Wilkie (eds.) *Bullying: causes, costs and cures*, Bullying Association, University of Queensland, QLD. Chapter 8, pp. 101-114. ISBN 0 9585698 0 0
- Hockley, C. (1999) *Organisational Violence: An ethnomethodological perspective of nurses' experiences*. PhD thesis. Faculty of Nursing, University of South Australia. Unpublished
- Hockley, C. (2000) 'Horizontal Violence'. *Institute of Nursing Executives, NSW/ACT Journal*. July. pp. 12–14.

- Hockley, C. (2000) 'Intra-workplace Violence: A Management perspective'. Healthcare. February. pp. 22–24.
- Hockley, C. (2000) 'The language used when reporting interfemale violence among nurses in the workplace'. The Collegian, Journal of the Royal College of Australia. October. 7(4): 24–29.
- Hockley, C. (2000a) Women stalking women at work: A preliminary study on nurses' experiences, paper presented at Australian Institute of Criminology. Stalking: Criminal Justice Responses. 7–8 December, Sydney. Australia.
- Hockley, C. (2002) Bullying in the workplace, Aggression and Violence in the Workplace, You can make a difference Conference, 13–14<sup>th</sup> November, North Adelaide. By invitation.
- Hockley, C. (2002) Dealing with workplace bullying: Practical suggestions for HR practitioners Workplace bullying. Focus on Diversity, Centre for Professional Development, Thomson Legal. November.
- Hockley, C. (2002) Staff hostility and aggression in the workplace. Night Duty Nursing Conference, Presented by Ausmed Publications. 2–3 December, North Adelaide, SA.
- Hockley, C. (2002) Workplace bullying. Focus on Diversity, Centre for Professional Development, Thomson Legal. June 2002.
- Hockley, C. (2002b) The silent third party victims of workplace bullying: Family members. Adelaide International Workplace Bullying Conference - Skills for survival, solutions and strategies, 20–22 February 2002, Adelaide, South Australia.
- Hockley, C. (2003a). *Silent Hell : Workplace Violence & Victims*, Norwood, South Australia: Peacock Publishers. Reprint.
- Hockley, C. (2003b) 'The impact of workplace violence on third party victims: A mental health perspective, AeJAMH - The Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health - Volume 2 Issue 2 (July 2003) is now online at <http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/journal/vol2iss2/index.php>
- Hockley, C. (2003c) Theme: Workplace Well-being, Title: Workplace violence: A collaborative approach to a global issue. International Council of Nurses Conference, Building Excellence Through Evidence, Geneva. 27-29 June.
- Hockley, C. (2003d) Positive outcomes for victims of workplace violence: Looking backwards before moving forwards. Theme: On the management of psychosocial problems in the workplace. Work Trauma Foundation – DENOSA International Conference, Gauteng, South Africa. 18-20 November. Key note speaker.
- Hockley, C. (2005) 'Violence in Nursing: The Expectations and the Reality,' In Huston, C. (ed) *Professional Issues in Nursing: Challenges and Opportunities*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams, and Wilkins). Chapter 12. In progress, due for publication 2005.
- Hockley, C. (2005). Staff violence against those in their care. In Fisher, B. Bowie, V. Cooper, C. (Eds.) *Countering the many faces of workplace violence*. In progress. Devon, UK: Willan. Chapter 8. In progress, due for publication 2005.