

# The longitudinal impact of psychosocial working conditions on workplace mobbing exposure and occupational risk factors

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## Introduction

Workplace mobbing is a serious phenomenon that is costly to organizations and has various negative social, occupational, and health-related consequences. Since Leymann (1996) it is frequently assumed that a poor working environment will create conditions that encourage workplace mobbing. Theoretical explanations indicate that a poor working environment may increase the likelihood of interpersonal conflicts, that might end in mobbing of one of the conflict party (Hoel, & Salin, 2003). Another explanation points out, that a stressful work environment may lead to a reduction in performance or a violation of social norms and by thus lead to mobbing behavior (Neuman, & Baron, 2011). Many cross-sectional studies showed associations between workplace mobbing exposure and a poor psychosocial working environment (e.g., Agervold, & Mikkelsen, 2004). However, cross-sectional studies are problematic as the other theoretically plausible causal direction (i.e. workplace mobbing leads to a poor psychosocial work environment) cannot be ruled out statistically. There are only few studies that used a longitudinal design (e.g., Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Balducci, Cecchin, & Fraccaroli, 2012; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2011) that showed mixed results. The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the role of different psychosocial working conditions as predictors of mobbing exposure and its sequelae from a longitudinal perspective.

## Method

**Data Collection.** The data were collected as part of a study on quality of work and its effects on health and well-being in Luxembourg. This study was implemented by the University of Luxembourg in collaboration with the Luxembourg Chamber of Labor in 2014 and 2015 and entailed Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) with employees from Luxembourg's working population (Steffgen, & Kohl, 2014; Sischka, & Steffgen, 2015, 2016).

**Participants.** The first wave contains of 1532 employees. Of these respondents, 762 (response rate relative to T1 = 49.7%) participated in the T2 survey as well. After eliminating respondents with missing values on at least one of the crucial measures in our current study, we obtained an effective sample of 709 respondents (45.3% females,  $n = 321$ ). Respondents age ranged from 17 to 64 ( $M = 45.3$ ,  $SD = 8.6$ ). About 4.4% ( $n = 31$ ) changed their job between the two assessment points. Most participants worked in commercial or business-related service professions (34.7%,  $n = 246$ ) followed by production-oriented professions (30.5%,  $n = 216$ ), personal service professions (25.1%,  $n = 178$ ), other services (6.9%,  $n = 49$ ) and IT- and natural science services (2.8%,  $n = 20$ ).

**Measures.** Workplace mobbing has been assessed with the five item Luxembourgish workplace mobbing scale (Steffgen, Sischka, Schmidt, Kohl, & Happ, 2016) (T1:  $\alpha = .69$ , T2:  $\alpha = .70$ , ). Income satisfaction is assessed with two items ( $\alpha = .90$ ), possibilities of formation and promotion as well as workplace security is assessed with single item respectively. Cooperation relates to social support between colleagues at work and was assessed with two items ( $\alpha = .65$ ). Participation relates to the employee's possibility to participate in decision-making at work while feedback assessed whether the employee received feedback from his superior and/or his colleagues. Both have been measured with a single item. Autonomy aggregates two items (index) which are concerned with possibility to determine how the work has been done. Mental demands is concerned with mental demanding tasks at work ( $\alpha = .64$ ). Three items cover having to work on different tasks at once, working under pressure, and doing intellectually demanding work. Control variables for the regression models were job change between the two assessment points, sex, age and occupational status.

## Results

A logistic regression analysis tested if participation in the two waves versus drop-out after wave 1 (0 = retention; 1 = dropout) was predicted by sex (0 = male; 1 = female), age, job change (0 = no; 1 = yes), occupational status, and all study variables at T1. With the exception of age (younger participants were more likely to dropout) no other variable predicted dropout after wave 1, suggesting limited selection effects. Workplace mobbing at T2 is significantly correlated with all assessed working conditions at T1 (Table 1). However, when controlled for workplace mobbing at T1, job change, sex, age and occupational status, only mental demands was a significant predictor of workplace mobbing one year later (Table 2). Furthermore, data show that job change reduces the risk of being a target at T2.

Table 1. Intercorrelations.

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
(1) Sex	-	-													
(2) Age	45.3	8.63	.00 <sup>ns</sup>												
(3) Job change (T1-T2)	-	-	-.06 <sup>ns</sup>	-.07 <sup>ns</sup>											
(4) Income satisfaction (T1)	3.48	0.78	.08	.03 <sup>ns</sup>	-.05 <sup>ns</sup>										
(5) Formation (T1)	2.75	0.93	-.04 <sup>ns</sup>	-.06 <sup>ns</sup>	-.07 <sup>ns</sup>	.29									
(6) Promotion (T1)	2.27	1.10	-.09	-.13	-.02 <sup>ns</sup>	.17	.82								
(7) Workplace security (T1)	3.76	1.03	.10	-.01 <sup>ns</sup>	-.12	.35	.25	.15							
(8) Cooperation (T1)	3.98	0.72	.05 <sup>ns</sup>	-.11	-.03 <sup>ns</sup>	.15	.14	.05 <sup>ns</sup>	.03 <sup>ns</sup>						
(9) Participation (T1)	2.94	1.09	-.09	-.01 <sup>ns</sup>	-.01 <sup>ns</sup>	.24	.27	.17	.21	.20					
(10) Feedback (T1)	3.32	1.01	.03 <sup>ns</sup>	.04 <sup>ns</sup>	-.01 <sup>ns</sup>	.14	.20	.15	.03 <sup>ns</sup>	.43	.23				
(11) Autonomy (T1)	3.36	0.95	-.07 <sup>ns</sup>	.10	-.03 <sup>ns</sup>	.18	.20	.15	.11	.14	.43	.16			
(12) Mental demands (T1)	3.74	0.78	-.03 <sup>ns</sup>	-.05 <sup>ns</sup>	.03 <sup>ns</sup>	-.09	-.03 <sup>ns</sup>	-.07 <sup>ns</sup>	-.11	.01 <sup>ns</sup>	-.05 <sup>ns</sup>	.01 <sup>ns</sup>	-.03 <sup>ns</sup>		
(13) W. mobbing (T1)	1.79	0.54	-.09	-.04 <sup>ns</sup>	.10	-.28	-.22	-.15	-.21	-.19	-.27	-.26	-.20	.28	
(14) W. mobbing (T2)	1.77	0.51	-.08	-.08	-.02 <sup>ns</sup>	-.23	-.19	-.13	-.15	-.14	-.18	-.18	-.18	.25	.56

Note. ns = not significant.

Table 2. Regression model with w. mobbing at T2 as the outcome variable.

	Step 1		Step 2	
	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	$\beta$	SE $\beta$
W. mobbing (T1)	0.29***	0.02	.25***	0.02
Job change (T1-T2)	-0.22**	0.08	-.23**	0.08
Sex	-0.05	0.03	-0.05	0.03
Age	-0.03 <sup>+</sup>	0.02	-.03 <sup>+</sup>	0.02
Occupational status (T1)				
Production (omitted)				
Person related service	0.05	0.05	0.07	0.05
Organisation related service	-0.00	0.04	0.03	0.04
IT- and natural science service	-0.03	0.10	-0.03	0.10
Other	-0.01	0.07	-0.00	0.07
Income satisfaction (T1)			-0.03	0.02
Formation (T1)			-0.04	0.03
Promotion (T1)			0.01	0.03
Workplace security (T1)			-0.01	0.02
Cooperation (T1)			-0.02	0.02
Participation (T1)			0.01	0.02
Feedback (T1)			-0.01	0.02
Autonomy (T1)			-0.03	0.02
Mental demands (T1)			0.06**	0.02
$R^2$	.32***		.35***	
$\Delta R^2$			.03**	

Note. <sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

The findings (i.e. mental demands as predictor of workplace mobbing) are in line with previous study results (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011). Furthermore, the results suggest that employees, who suffer from workplace mobbing can improve their working conditions in a short term by job change. This findings underline the role of psychosocial working conditions in the emergence of workplace mobbing.

One limitation of the current study is, that most of the independent variables are single item measures. Furthermore, the time lag of one year maybe to long to uncover the causal interval of the workplace mobbing process. Nevertheless, the present study further support the work environment hypothesis.



## Literature

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