

The Moment of Truth in Workplace Mobbing

In honor of Qingli Meng

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Abstract

This paper adds a new concept, “moment of truth,” to the vocabulary for studying workplace mobbing. It begins with identification of key turning points in two mobbing cases. It then identifies six similarities between them: (a) escalation of hostility to a higher threshold; (b) hostile communication from a collective of workmates, not just an individual; (c) senders’ obvious intention to remove the target with finality; (d) accusation not just of inadequacy but of moral turpitude; (e) official indictment calling for formal punishment; and (f) in sum, compelling evidence that a full-blown mobbing is underway. For choosing a name for this turning point in the mobbing process, this paper relies on Emily Godbey’s discussion of Francisco Goya’s depictions of the Spanish bullfight. It relies also on Ernest Hemingway’s 1932 book about the bullfight, *Death in the Afternoon*, from which the term, “moment of truth,” is taken. The relation between the new concept and existing terms in the research literature is explained, and the concept is applied briefly to the cases of Hector Hammerly, Ricardo Duchesne, and Justine Sergeant.

Keywords: *workplace mobbing; moment of truth; escalation of conflict; collective hostility; moral accusation; organizational punishment; academic workplaces*

This paper introduces a new concept for enlarging our understanding of the distinct form of conflict in organizations called “workplace mobbing.” I have been researching this phenomenon for a quarter-century and have published many books and articles about it. I maintain a [large website](https://www.kwesthues.com/mobbing.htm)¹ on the subject. By now, I have set down in print just about everything I have learned about mobbing. It’s rare for a new concept to occur to me, but it happened in the summer of 2024. This paper is my report on it.

¹ <https://www.kwesthues.com/mobbing.htm>

The foundation of any body of scientific knowledge is a conceptual framework, a vocabulary, an interconnected set of labels identifying different parts or aspects of the subject matter under investigation. In the case of workplace mobbing, the existing conceptual framework consists of words for

- participants in this social process, like *mobber*, *chief eliminator*, *target*, *rescuer*, and *bystander*;
- stages of the process, from *exclusion*, *shunning* and *petty harassment* to *elimination*;
- events that often occur in the process: *critical incident*, *formal accusation*, *indictment*, *degradation ceremony*; and
- origins and sources of the process, like *elemental difference*, *ethnocentrism*, *achievement*, *persecutory unconscious*, *envy*; and
- general processes that may affect this particular one, examples being *dissent*, *social contagion*, *group pressure*, *moral panic*, *hierarchy of authority*, *whistleblowing*, and *diffusion of responsibility*.

Concepts are the basic building blocks of any science, as these above-mentioned 25 examples demonstrate for the science of workplace mobbing. They can be joined into propositions and testable hypotheses, and further into theories for devising an overall explanation of the subject matter. This paper adds a heretofore unnoticed building block for the science of workplace mobbing, the concept of “moment of truth.”

The next five sections of this paper recount the events that have led me to introduce this term. These sections may have value even beyond the study of mobbing, as one example of how innovation in science happens. Rituals and drudgery are essential parts of it: slogging systematically through endless swamps of data to test hypotheses. Yet in his classic essay on “[Science as a Vocation](#),²” Max Weber observed that a scientist’s best ideas often come not from hard work but from playtime, smoking a cigar on the sofa or taking a walk. This paper is a case in point, arising as it did from a serendipitous mix of scholarship, personal experience, unplanned conversation, and solitary reflection.

A scholar’s entrance and exit at the University of Northern Iowa

This paper is written in honor of Qingli Meng, an American criminologist originally from China, who has devoted herself more or less full-time since 2023 to the development of workplace mobbing as a scientific field. In conversation after dinner on August 19, 2024, Meng recounted to my wife Anne Westhues and me a story from her own experience that set my mind on the train of thought that has led to these lines I am writing now. To understand that story, I need to give you some background on Meng.

In 2014, Meng accepted a prospectively permanent job, a probationary appointment as Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology (SAC) at the University

² <https://sociology.sas.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/Weber-Science-as-a-Vocation.pdf>

of Northern Iowa (UNI) in Cedar Falls. She had recently completed her PhD and a postdoc at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte. In addition to book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals, mainly about white-collar crime, she had published a substantial book from her doctoral thesis, *Corruption in Transitional China: A 33-year Study*³ (Wolf Legal, 2014).

For five years, Meng's work went well in her new academic home. By available evidence, she enjoyed her research, her teaching, and the UNI environment. During this period, she received ten semi-annual evaluations by the department head and five annual evaluations by the department's Professional Assessment Committee (PAC). These were not perfunctory or pro forma. Each was a detailed statement of 200-500 words, obviously composed with care. These 15 evaluations were uniformly supportive, approving, in favor of continued appointment, and sprinkled with compliments and accolades. Here is the best one: "Congratulations on receiving the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences Tenure-Track Faculty Award for Scholarship and Creative Activity! What a wonderful affirmation of your diligent work and research productivity."

On the basis of these fifteen evaluations over a five-year period, Meng was confident she would receive tenure when she would be eligible to apply for it, in 2019. The universe seemed to be unfolding as it should.

Instead, on December 16, 2019, Meng received a letter from the Professional Assessment Committee reporting a vote of eight to one, with two abstentions, against her receiving tenure and promotion. The letter said she had met expectations for service to the university and her profession but not for teaching or for scholarship. By the up-or-out policy at UNI, as at most universities, denial of tenure meant that she would lose her job.

The contrast between five years of pats on the back and then in year six a terminal kick in the behind, by exactly the same PAC members, was staggering, incomprehensible. In a decision two years later, on March 5, 2022, Arbitrator Hugh J. Perry would say this about the PAC's termination letter: "If one read the previous series of evaluation letters and then this, one might think they are dealing with a completely different professor." Perry concluded that "Dr. Qingli Meng was improperly denied tenure and promotion at the University of Northern Iowa in violation" of the university's policies.

Meng's first response to the PAC's termination letter was to take a semester of paid sick leave, during which she might remedy any deficiencies in her record and then reapply for tenure and promotion. This was to no avail. The PAC reaffirmed its negative decision in December of 2020. Meng appealed to higher authority within the university, as allowed by policy, but the institution seemed to have circled all its wagons against her. Arbitrator Perry's decision firmly in her favor after a thorough vetting of the case was vindication in spades, but it made no difference. The UNI

³ <https://www.amazon.com/-/he/Qingli-Meng/dp/9462400024>

president rejected Perry's decision and reaffirmed the PAC's decision to get rid of Qingli Meng. (See [Qingli Meng v. Iowa Board of Regents \(2024\)](#)⁴ for an appeal court's recounting of these events.)

Meng's discovery of research on workplace mobbing

A common pattern in cases of workplace mobbing is that the target spends months or years in a mire of dispute-resolution procedures: consultations, appeals, mediations, arbitrations, adjudications. These generate reams upon reams of paper, take lots of work, cause stress, cost money, strain relations with family and friends, and distract from productive work, but they rarely stop the mobbing or obtain redress for it. The target therefore feels intense frustration and desperately craves knowledge by which to explain such a debilitating predicament. If at this point the target discovers the research literature on mobbing and sees that it fits his or her own experience, it is a Eureka moment. Now at last the target has an explanation for what has happened.

Qingli Meng's mobbing case appears to have followed this pattern. By September of 2022, she had been fighting the termination decision for almost three years, first within the university and then in the Iowa District Court and the Iowa Civil Rights Commission. This was the point at which Meng happened to be introduced by a mutual friend to Gail Pursell Elliott, who lived nearby. Elliott is a veteran human relations consultant. Decades earlier, she had learned about Heinz Leymann's research in Sweden on workplace mobbing. This led to her co-authoring with Noa Davenport and Ruth Schwartz the first trade paperback on workplace mobbing published in the United States, [Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace](#)⁵ (Civil Society, 1999).

Having learned from Elliott an intriguing new word, Meng took a deep dive into the associated research literature. I do not know what all she read. What I do know is that she went through my first book on mobbing, [Eliminating Professors](#)⁶ (Mellen, 1998), with a fine-toothed comb. I know this because I got an email from her on October 19, 2022, just a month after she met Gail Elliott. It was my first acquaintance with Meng. She attached to that email a paper she had just completed, an 8,000-word compilation of a hundred quotations from my book, along with her commentary on each one, describing to what extent what happened to her at UNI squared with the general point about mobbing I had made. Her email said she was amazed that her case fit almost everything I had written more than twenty years earlier.

Meng's husband, Yonghong Tong, was and is a computer science professor at Niagara University in New York, just across the Niagara River from my home in Niagara Falls, Ontario. Meng and Tong drove across the border to meet with me on October 27, 2022. We went for a long walk together along Niagara River, Ontario side. Meng was still on something of a high from having discovered the mobbing research. She said she wanted to develop the field further, that this was near the top of her scholarly agenda for the coming years. She saw the study of mobbing as a logical sequel to her many years of research on corruption and white-collar crime in governmental organizations. Her

⁴ <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/ia-court-of-appeals/115982044.html>

⁵ <https://workplacemobbing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/MOBGING-PDF-Version-2014-2.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.kwesthues.com/elimprof.htm>

mind was racing ahead to research projects with rigorous quantitative methods, and to conferences and a scholarly journal focused on mobbing research.

Meng emailed me a month later to say she had attended the annual meeting in Atlanta of the American Society of Criminology and conducted there an informal survey of 50 attendees about research on mobbing, explaining the concept to them, asking if they were familiar with it, and how important they thought it was. She said four of her interviewees told her they had been mobbed at work. Her excitement for this field of study deepened. She wrote a long review of relevant literature that spelled out with some precision the differences between *mobbing* and *bullying*. She proposed a roundtable on workplace mobbing for the 2023 annual conference of the American Society of Criminology, to be held in Philadelphia. I agreed to take part. So did well-known criminologists. The session [materialized](#)⁷ on November 15, 2023.

Meng, Peltz-Steele, and the 2024 Niagara Conference

Sometimes the stars align. Qingli Meng was one of two scholars in touch with me independently in the fall of 2023, about holding a conference specifically on workplace mobbing. [Robert Ashford](#)⁸, Professor of Law at Syracuse University and the main driving force behind the socio-economics section of the Association of American Law Schools, had gotten interested in the mobbing research back in 2010, and had organized a session on the subject at that year's annual meeting in New Orleans. Ashford's focus was on the apparent mobbing of a law professor at the University of Arkansas, Richard Peltz. Two professors at Southern Illinois, Joan Friedenberg and Mark Schneider, along with Peltz and me, gave papers at [that session](#)⁹.

Now 13 years later, Ashford wanted to revisit the topic, focusing especially on the relation between mobbing and academic freedom. Toward that end, he contacted Peltz, now long recovered from his troubles at Arkansas, now Chancellor Professor of Law at the University of Massachusetts, now also married, with a new surname of Peltz-Steele. The latter responded to Ashford with enthusiasm, then emailed me to renew acquaintance and to ask if I was interested in some kind of conference on mobbing. I said yes and put Rick Peltz-Steele in touch with Qingli Meng. Despite their differences in discipline and background, these two scholars hit it off. They had a common interest and complementary skills. Their initial plan was an event at the University of Tampa in March of 2024. They later shifted the venue to Niagara University, New York, whose president and provost were friendly and quick on the uptake, and the dates to July 21-23, 2024.

Anybody who has ever organized an academic conference knows the mountain of work involved on both the intellectual side (inviting, receiving, and reviewing proposals for papers) and the practical side (the logistics of publicity, equipment, insurance, hotels, meals, transportation). Thanks to Meng's and Peltz-Steele's attention to endless details, the conference came off without a hitch, a

⁷ https://asc41.org/wp-content/uploads/ASC_Annual_Meeting_2023_Program.pdf

⁸ <https://law.syracuse.edu/deans-faculty/instructors/robert-ashford/>

⁹ <https://www.kwesthues.com/AALS10.html>

lively and stimulating event. Some 70 scholars from a dozen countries took part, about equally divided between in-person and virtual. About 30 of them made formal presentations.

Different participants would give different answers to questions of how many new ideas about workplace mobbing came out of the conference, and what they were. I have traced here the events that led to the conference simply as background and context for the new idea that occurred to me soon afterwards.

The news Meng saw on her phone in Niagara Falls, January 2021

During the twenty months between our first meeting on October 27, 2022 and the First Niagara Conference on Mobbing in July 2024, my knowledge of Meng's mobbing at UNI was based entirely on the official documents Meng sent to me: written statements of individual professors and administrators, committees, the arbitrator, and the courts. This is the standard way I get a handle on a mobbing case. Such documents are more factual than interviews, also more reliable, less laden with fancies and feelings. Meng and I had many email exchanges and several meetings during this period, but these had to do with research questions and conference planning rather than with Meng's experiences at UNI.

Then came a social occasion. Meng and her husband invited my wife and me for dinner a few weeks after the conference. Our conversation was relaxed, light and easy, drifting from one topic to another. Somehow we got to the question of how Meng dealt with the stress of being mobbed. Maybe I asked her what was the low point in her dealings with UNI.

Meng then recounted in detail what happened on a day in January 2021. She had by then done all she could to strengthen her case for tenure and promotion, but the Professional Assessment Committee had turned her down a second time. Meng was in western New York, spending quiet time with her husband. The night before, they had sat together as a family and made a difficult but resolute decision: to leave, to move on, and not to return to UNI. That morning, she told her husband that she felt an unexpected sense of relief. For the first time in a long while, she did not have to think about the turmoil. Health, she said, was what mattered most. They decided to go shopping together, hoping for a simple, ordinary day. As they drove, with their son in the car, Meng reached for her phone to check her messages—almost absentmindedly. In that quiet moment, her fragile sense of peace collapsed. On the screen was the news she never expected to receive: the acting head of her department at UNI had filed a formal accusation against her, alleging research misconduct.

For an academic whose career is defined by research and publication, such an accusation is a kiss of death. Unless withdrawn or officially ruled false, it effectively kills the career of the accused, imposes an indelible stigma.

The accusation itself was not unusual in mobbing cases, though Meng may not have realized this at the time. Those who engage in mobbing often level multiple allegations against a target, introducing new ones over time and overwhelming the individual with attacks of varying kinds.

In Meng's case, the PAC evaluation letters expanded dramatically—from the customary three to five pages to eighteen pages in the 2019 tenure evaluation, and then to twenty-six pages in the 2020 evaluation. The logic behind this strategy is that even if one accusation is dismissed, another can take its place. In this way, a succession of charges—one after another—can ultimately wear down and undermine the target.

Fortunately for Meng, the accusation of research misconduct against her ultimately fizzled, like a guided missile that goes off course and plunges into the sea. To assess the accusation, UNI's Research Integrity Office appointed a committee of six professors from outside Meng's department. These academicians were distant enough from the workplace mob that had formed against Meng to dismiss the accusation entirely just a few months later, in April 2021. By unanimous vote, the committee quickly ruled that the accusation did not warrant any further investigation. This attack on Meng therefore missed its mark. In a just world, it might have recoiled against her accuser.

In the short run, however, when Meng first saw the accusation on her phone while riding with her husband and son on a cold winter's day in Niagara Falls, New York, the accusation overwhelmed her with what Leymann called "[psychological terror](https://www.mobbingportal.com/LeymannV&V1990(3).pdf)".¹⁰ It was three and a half years later that Meng was telling my wife Anne and me about this event, but even then her tone of voice and body language showed the devastation she felt when she first learned that she was accused. Now she could no longer just walk away from UNI, not with a lethal allegation hanging over her head. Withdrawing now would look like admitting guilt. She would have to fight it, even while she had decided to exit. She had no choice but continuing to fight. Now the stakes were raised. What was on the line was not just her position at this one university but her future in academe.

The news I found in my university mailbox, late December 1993

Listening that evening to Meng talk about the terror she felt over the accusation of research misconduct, I had flashbacks to the eerily similar terror I felt on a day during the Christmas holidays twenty-seven years earlier.

My fall-term courses had ended, and I had finished marking at home huge piles of exams and essays. I was feeling great relief, more than ready for the sabbatical leave that was due to begin on January 1. On top of the usual stress of teaching, a dispute in my department had preoccupied me in recent weeks. An exceptionally accomplished PhD student, my supervisee, had been flunked on his doctoral exams. I was supporting his appeal, arguing that the exam had been unfair. This strained relations between me and several colleagues. I felt in need of a break. Whatever might become of the

¹⁰ [https://www.mobbingportal.com/LeymannV&V1990\(3\).pdf](https://www.mobbingportal.com/LeymannV&V1990(3).pdf)

student's appeal, I would be free from teaching and departmental politics for the next eight months.

The university was closed for the holidays, but I drove to campus anyway. I wanted to get my students' exams, essays and final grades off my desk at home and secure in my university office.

Before returning home, I stopped to check my university mailbox. There I was shocked to find two missives unlike any I had received in a quarter century of academic life: two long denunciations of me, both directed to the department chair, with requests that I be punished. One petition was signed by seven of my colleagues, the other by four – almost the entire departmental faculty. The nastier petition was copied to the university president and other senior administrators.

The two petitions used different words but had the same gist: passionate accusation against me for alleged verbal assaults, character assassinations, personal denigrations, work-related harassments, intimidations, vicious personal attacks, serious misconduct, and abuse, behaviors said to be unwarranted, uncollegial, unethical, academically reprehensible, and downright cruel. The petitions asked that I be removed from all graduate teaching for at least the next five years. I made these petitions publicly available online years later ([here](#)¹¹ and [here](#)¹²), after our conflict was public.

The petitions hit me like a ton of bricks. I felt the same personal devastation Meng said she felt on reading the accusation of research misconduct. I had worked with most of the petition-signers for ten, even fifteen years. Together we had taken on and resolved all kinds of issues, met challenges, held parties and special events, celebrated the department's successes and bemoaned its failures. I had served a term as department chair and supervised more PhD theses than anybody else. We knew each other's failings and foibles.

Identifying the essential similarity between Meng's experience and mine

In the days and weeks following that evening meal in August 2024, I pondered the story Meng had told from her working life, the story that resonated so powerfully with the parallel story from my working life. Pinpointing the key similarities between these two stories was hard, since there were many big differences. Her alleged misconduct had to do with research, but mine with deportment toward colleagues. She was accused by her department head, but I by eleven colleagues. She was junior, female, and untenured, from an ethnic and racial minority, and her first language was Mandarin. I was senior, male, and tenured, ethnically and racially mainstream, and my mother tongue was the vernacular.

Some similarities between Meng's and my stories were obvious, but hardly momentous enough to cause deep distress. Each was about an unhappy surprise – but so, in Meng's case, was the PAC's decision to deny her tenure and promotion, or in my case, the exam committee's decision to flunk my supervisee. Not all unhappy surprises are even remembered years later. Another similarity is

¹¹ <https://www.kwesthues.com/memo4-931220.pdf>

¹² <https://www.kwesthues.com/memo7-940105.pdf>

that the bad news arrived in written form rather than in a face-to-face encounter. Still a third similarity is that criticism of job performance was at the core of both Meng's story and mine – but like it or not, criticism is intrinsic to academic life, routinely dished out by students, colleagues, administrators, book reviewers, and more.

What was it about the particular unhappy surprise that Meng received in 2021, and I in 1993, that cut so deeply? What gave this particular criticism its sting? Answers to these questions permit abstraction from Meng's and my experiences toward an empirical definition of the new concept this paper is about.

Here are six key similarities between Meng's experience and mine, attributes that collectively define what I will call the “moment of truth” in workplace mobbing:

1. The messages to Meng and to me each amounted to escalation of workmates' hostility. Meng had already felt much hostility, I only a little, but in both cases the hostility rose to a higher threshold.
2. The negative sentiment signaled by each piece of news came from a group. The ill will was collective. Eleven signatures made this obvious in my case. The accuser in Meng's case was one professor, but he was the department's official leader, its head, and he had earlier belonged to the PAC that denied Meng tenure.
3. The messages to Meng and to me left no doubt of the sender's intention to remove the target conclusively, with finality, from the circle of respectability. Indeed, so far as the sender was concerned, the target was already removed.
4. To justify removal, the messages each posited not just inadequacy or insufficiency (like “not enough publications” in a tenure case), but something more noxious and dirtier: intentional wrongdoing, moral turpitude.
5. Each of the two messages was more than an insult screamed in a colleague's face, flung in an email, or whispered behind the target's back. Each meant business. It was an official accusation directed to workplace authorities and intended to result in formal punishment. Each was an *indictment* (in French, *dénunciation*), an aggressive act that cannot be shrugged off.
6. In sum, each of the two messages made crystal clear what the target may not have been sure of earlier, that a full-blown mobbing was underway, that the mobbers' end game would be nothing less than the target's dispatch.

From normal squabbling to eliminationist attack

For understanding the more advanced stage of the mobbing process signaled by Meng's and my similar experiences recounted above, a useful distinction can be drawn from Daniel Goldhagen's well-known analysis of the Holocaust, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*¹³. The distinction Goldhagen makes is between two kinds of anti-Semitism. First is the run-of-the-mill anti-Semitism common in Christian civilization: dislike of Jews, prejudice and discrimination against them, but at the same

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hitler%27s_Willing_Executioners

time tolerance, acceptance of Jews' right to live, work, and worship. Second is the kind of anti-Semitism that became state policy in Nazi Germany, what Goldhagen calls *eliminationist*, an attitude beyond dislike, a passion to destroy Jews utterly, wipe them off the face of the earth.

The typical mobbing begins with hints of dislike toward the target, withholding of the normal rewards for good work, and criticism for failings that are overlooked in other co-workers. What the present paper is about is the turning point when run-of-the-mill workplace squabbling gives way to an eliminationist attack on the target, a collective action aimed at destroying the target utterly, erasing him or her from the workplace landscape, possibly even from the larger profession. The use of Goldhagen's term *eliminationist* must not be pressed too far. Workplace mobbing is normally nonviolent and the target is rarely killed. Still, the focus of the present paper is on that moment

when normal squabbling turns unmistakably into an impassioned collective drive to get rid of a workmate absolutely, once and for all.

The question is what name to place on this turning point, this critical juncture in the mobbing process. In research for my 2003 book, *The Envy of Excellence*¹⁴, long before I met Qingli Meng, I observed this turning point in a number of mobbing cases. In that book I called it "the point of indictment," meaning the advanced stage of the mobbing process when formal charges of some kind are laid against the target. I described this as an exacerbation of the process, since it obliges the target to mount a defense, answer the charges, maybe hire a lawyer and look for witnesses. Even if eventually declared innocent, the target's life is never the same after being charged. The taint endures.

While "point of indictment" accurately describes the turning point, at least in many cases, this term does not capture the depth or intensity of its effect on the target. This is the value of the term, "moment of truth": while an observer can see that an escalation of the process has occurred, this moment of truth *dawns* on the target. The reality of what is happening becomes clear, just as the rising of the sun reveals what may until then have been cloaked in darkness. The story I heard from Meng in August of 2024 brought this home to me. The target's moral worth – honesty, character, rectitude, decency – is placed in doubt. The target can never thereafter be described as beyond reproach or of unquestioned integrity. Indictment is reproach beyond doubt, a formal questioning of integrity. Loss is threatened: of time, money, position and livelihood. That is not all. The threat extends to the target's name, reputation, identity. That is why, when this turning point occurs, the target is often shaken to the core.

Godbey, Goya, and the bullfight

Art historian Emily Godbey pointed me in the direction of a better, more adequate name for this step in the mobbing process by her insightful presentation at the first Niagara Conference on Mobbing in July of 2024. This presentation was still fresh in my mind when I heard Meng's story a month later.

¹⁴ <https://www.kwesthues.com/envyexc.htm>

Godbey's focus was on the bullfight, as documented in paintings and etchings by Francisco de Goya (1746-1828), who is generally considered the greatest Spanish artist of his time. Goya's depictions of the bullfight, Godbey explained, especially the 33 prints in his *La Tauromaquia* series of 1815-1816, showed essentially the same stages of that drama as researchers like me have pointed out in workplace mobbing. In other words, the bullfight ritual is a template or metaphor for how human mobbing unfolds. The bull is not killed quickly, just as a human mobbing target is not summarily fired. The process begins with teasing, making sport of the bull. The matador waves his cape, the bull charges, the crowd roars. The matador watches how this specific bull responds to the torment.

Next come the picadors: two bullfighters, each armed with a long lance and mounted on a blindfolded horse well covered with padding. When the bull charges the horse, the picador tries to stab the bull in the neck. The object is at once to weaken the bull and rouse its aggressive instincts.

The next stage is defined by three bullfighters on foot, called *banderilleros*. Each has two long sticks with sharply pointed, brightly colored darts at the end, called *banderillos*. One after another, each *banderillero* tries to lodge his *banderillos* on the ridge of the bull's shoulder. The bull suffers more loss of blood and is further enraged.

In the final stage of the drama, the matador re-enters the ring carrying a red cape and a special sword called an *estoque*. This is the stage that is begun in a human mobbing by the turning point described above.

Actually, in most bullfights there are two different *estoques*. First is the *estoque simulado*, a fake sword made of wood or aluminum, for further taunting the bull and tantalizing the spectators. With each pass of the bull near the matador's body, the crowd is thrilled, shouts *ole* in unison.

Then the matador exchanges the fake sword for a real one: slender, steel, and pointed at the end. This is called the *estoque de verdad*, the sword of truth, and this point in the bullfight, this stage of the drama is called the *momento de verdad*, the moment of truth. The bull charges as before at the matador's cape, but this time, if the ritual proceeds as planned, the matador thrusts the sword of truth between the bull's shoulder blades all the way down into its heart. The bull's knees buckle, it falls to the ground and dies.

Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*

The term "moment of truth" entered the English language, so far as I can discover, mainly from Ernest Hemingway's 1932 nonfiction book, *Death in the Afternoon*¹⁵, about the history and meaning of bullfighting in Spain. Since then, the term has come to be applied more broadly to any event of lasting consequence.

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_in_the_Afternoon

Despite this regrettable broadening, “moment of truth,” as a scientific concept in research on workplace mobbing, is best understood more strictly in its original meaning. The initial stages of the Spanish bullfight might be mistaken for play, a kind of fun taunting of the bull as occurs in the bullfight in Portugal, where the bullfighters make sport of the animal but do not kill it. Analogously, a lot of squabbles in workplaces do not culminate in the utter humiliation and elimination of the target. “We were just messing with you,” a co-worker might say afterwards, “you mustn’t take us seriously.” Or again, “You were dead wrong that day and you deserved the ragging we gave you, but then you redeemed yourself.” The wielding of metaphorical hatchets is commonplace, even routine, in human workplaces, but so is burying hatchets, resolving differences, and moving on.

The “moment of truth” refers to that point in a workplace conflict when routine squabbling turns into eliminationist attack, when the ethic of live and let live falls by the wayside and is replaced by collective effort to put the target down. “We’ve had enough of you,” the mobbers say implicitly, “no more fooling around.” It is the same thing the matador says implicitly to the bull when he exchanges the fake sword for the sword of truth, and plunges it between the bull’s shoulder blades.

The moment of truth in other mobbing cases

For the concept, “moment of truth,” to be worth adding to the scientific vocabulary for understanding workplace mobbing, it is obviously not enough that it has been shown to fit an important turning point in Meng’s case and in mine. The concept must be shown to apply also to mobbing cases *in general*.

Researchers of mobbing who read this article will undoubtedly reflect on the cases with which they are most familiar, and assess the worth of the concept of “moment of truth” according to how well it describes some stage in how those cases unfolded. If this concept helps elucidate cases in other researchers’ files, it will little by little be incorporated into this field’s conceptual framework. If, on the other hand, this concept fails to shed additional light on other cases, then it will fall by the wayside.

To start the ball of further research rolling, the following paragraphs show the applicability of the concept of “moment of truth” to three well-known cases from my own research.

Hammerly. In the late 1990s, I acted as expert witness in court proceedings involving Hector Hammerly, a senior, tenured linguistics professor at Simon Fraser University who was forced out after 30 years on the faculty. In that connection I studied in detail the record of conflict between Hammerly and the top SFU administrators over several years (see the [Memorial Website](https://www.kwesthues.com/hhammerly.htm)¹⁶). Hammerly’s public criticisms of them culminated in a scathing letter on April 7, 1997, in *Maclean’s*, Canada’s national newsmagazine, wherein he called them “officious poohbahs.” Four days later, in an angry conversation with the university’s vice-president, Hammerly called them “ten little Indians.” This was taken as a reference to the Agatha Christie play in which the “ten little

¹⁶ <https://www.kwesthues.com/hhammerly.htm>

Indians” are murdered one by one. Hammerly was arrested for threatening behavior and jailed overnight. This made headlines in the Vancouver daily newspaper. Less than a month later, he took early retirement. He was 61 years old. Plainly, his being charged and thrown in jail was the moment of truth in the process of his being mobbed. It was similar to how the moment of truth arrived in Meng’s case, but more extreme: Meng was indeed charged with a serious offense, but she was not jailed and the case against her fairly quickly collapsed.

Duchesne. The moment of truth arrived in a different way for another professor whose mobbing I have written about: [Ricardo Duchesne](#)¹⁷, a senior tenured professor of sociology at the University of New Brunswick, who was forced into early retirement in 2019, when he was 62 years old. In a [2025 interview](#)¹⁸, Duchesne recounted the events that led to his ouster. Following publication of his *magnum opus*, [The Uniqueness of Western Civilization](#)¹⁹, in 2011, he became increasingly outspoken in his defense of Euro-Canadian culture and in his opposition to Canada’s open immigration policy. As a result, he found himself increasingly marginalized and criticized in his department, but still tolerated. To use Goldhagen’s term, the anti-Duchesne sentiment was not yet eliminationist. He clashed pointedly with his colleagues over his support of doctoral student Clare Ellis in 2017. Then in May of 2019, as Duchesne recalls, a national leftist organization orchestrated “a united opposition against me,” including “an open letter signed by over 100 academics published in the media, a few articles, and some radio discussions.” This was the moment of truth for Duchesne, and he officially resigned on June 4:

There were no complaints from students. I was not pressured into early retirement by the administration. I just knew it would not have been possible for me to work in a department where every one of my “colleagues” had signed the open letter, and filed other complaints, including numerous professors in departments below and above the floor where my office was located. This toxic environment compelled me into early retirement.

Sergent. In both the Hammerly and Duchesne cases, the moment of truth was defined primarily by formal accusation of wrongdoing but also by the public humiliation of those accusations being publicized in mass media. Such public humiliation was the primary aspect of the moment of truth in [the case of Justine Sergent](#)²⁰, a professor in the Montreal Neurological Institute in 1994. She had been formally charged with research misconduct – mistreatment of her research subjects – in July of 1992. This does not appear to have devastated her. There was otherwise no official or collective action against her. She knew she was innocent, thought the charges were a mistake. Nonetheless, she was issued a formal reprimand in January of 1994. Even this did not lay her low. She filed a grievance according to policy, confident she would be found not guilty in the arbitration. An adversary, however, leaked news of the reprimand to the *Montreal Gazette*, sent the paper a letter calling Sergent a scientific fraud. The *Gazette* ran with the story. “Researcher disciplined by McGill for breaking rules,” the headline read on April 9, 1994. This was the moment of truth in the

¹⁷ <https://www.kwesthues.com/Duchesne1906.html>

¹⁸ <https://cjmillerauthor.substack.com/p/interview-with-dr-ricardo-duchesne>

¹⁹ <https://www.amazon.ca/Uniqueness-Western-Civilization-Ricardo-Duchesne/dp/9004232761>

²⁰ <https://www.kwesthues.com/suicidemcgill.htm>

mobbing of Justine Sergent. The next day she and her husband Yves took their own lives. Her suicide letter described the past two years since she was charged as a nightmare. She said there was no end in sight, now that it was

exposed in a newspaper and blown out of proportion, and it allows a discredit on myself, my work and my career, which I cannot tolerate. ... I love research too much to even consider tampering with data or making false claims, and anyone working in my research field or participating in my experiments could testify that I have always paid much attention to the quality and rigor of my studies and to the welfare of the subjects or patients participating in them. ... I had a rich and intense life, but there comes a point when one can no longer fight and one needs a rest. It is this rest that my husband, who has supported me in all aspects of my activities and my life, and myself have decided to take.

These three examples show some of the variety in the way the moment of truth occurs in cases of workplace mobbing. The details of cases vary, but the essential, defining message conveyed by the mobbers to the target is the same: No more fooling around, it's serious business now, we want you gone.

Methods of human science

Lest this article inflict apoplexy on readers of a positivist bent, let me clarify here at the end the methodology on which it is founded. I have relied heavily on my own personal experience and on Qingli Meng's personal experience, as she related it to me and my wife Anne in an after-dinner conversation. Accordingly, this article can appropriately be described in part as an exercise in [autoethnography](#)²¹. There is no denying sundry biases and conflicts of interest. Skeptical readers may have noticed that the person in whose honor this paper is written is the editor in chief of this journal and that I myself am on this journal's editorial board.

The philosophy of science that has guided my professional career over the past half century is rooted in the positivism of Comte and Durkheim, but only partly, rather more in the pragmatism of [William James](#), [Alvin Gouldner](#)²², and [C. Wright Mills](#)²³. In my view, a good social scientist does not at all ignore personal experience but instead broadens it. Ever since graduate school, I have treasured [Mills's definition of sociology](#)²⁴ as the study of "the intersections of biography and history within society." In my view, it is far better for a scientist to acknowledge biases and conflicts of interest, bring them out into the open, than to try to hide personal information in a pretense of pure objectivity.

As I said at the start, the additional reward of this article – a reward beyond introducing the concept of "moment of truth" – is insight into how a science develops or advances. The process is stumbly, chaotic, rich in serendipity: intensely human. That is the value of the stories herein about

²¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autoethnography>

²² <https://www.kwesthues.com/kierkegaardian.htm>

²³ <https://www.kwesthues.com/humanists.htm>

²⁴ <https://bpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/sites.middlebury.edu/dist/5/2398/files/2013/02/The-Promise.pdf>

how the Niagara Conferences on Workplace Mobbing and the present journal came to be, about how Qingli Meng learned of a serious accusation against her in 2021, about how I learned of accusations against me in 1993, about Emily Godbey's presentation in 2024 on Goya's drawings of the Spanish bullfight, and about Ernest Hemingway's 1932 book about that ritual, *Death in the Afternoon*.

For explaining why and how I appropriated the term "moment of truth" for research on workplace mobbing, I could reach even farther back in my biography. Early in 1956, as an inquisitive eleven-year-old on a family vacation in Mexico City, I watched a bullfight in the Plaza de Toros. The spectacle stayed in my mind. I was a farm boy, well acquainted with killing animals, both livestock like calves and pigs and wild game like rabbits and racoons. The ritual slaying of a bull, by contrast, was new to me and strange. I wondered why it was so popular, why it had such elemental appeal. That wondering undoubtedly lies somewhere near the root of this article.

Postscript: an email from Ann Marie Flynn

A chemical engineer, former department chair and graduate program director of the School of Engineering at Manhattan College in New York City, Ann Marie Flynn has been doing research, writing, and consulting in the field of workplace mobbing for the past ten years. This journal published in its first issue her article on [the essential role of university leadership in mobbing prevention](#)²⁵. At the Second Niagara Conference on Workplace Mobbing in July of 2025, Flynn attended by zoom my oral presentation of the present paper. She promptly emailed me her reactions, which I took as an encouraging sign that "moment of truth" is indeed a worthwhile addition to the conceptual framework for research on mobbing. With respect and thanks to her and with her permission, here are the comments she sent me:

The moment after the moment of truth

The moment of truth is sharp and undeniable—a flash of recognition that what is happening is not petty, not accidental, and not in your head. It is real. Coordinated. Intentional. The comments. The silence. The looks. The erasure. All of it clicks into place.

The stories you used to tell yourself—that maybe this is a misunderstanding, or maybe you are overreacting—no longer hold. You see the truth clearly and it is bad. You are not being hypersensitive. You are not imagining things. People are doing this. To you. And they know it.

The world has not changed, but your assumptions about the world are shattered—and that makes everything feel unsafe and unstable. You are no longer asking if this is happening. You are asking how this could be happening. And you are asking, why me?

²⁵ <https://journalofworkplacemobbing.org/index.php/jwm/article/view/406>

Because what is happening is so abnormal, so contrary to how you thought people were supposed to treat each other, so bizarre, and so difficult to understand—it simply will not fit into your head. But PTSD does. Your body will absorb what your mind cannot.

So, like many targets, you blame yourself. It is easier to believe that you are the problem than to accept that the people around you, your colleagues, your friends are intentionally harming you.

The moment after the moment of truth is when the confusion disappears, and with it, your last bit of protection. What hurts is not doubt. What hurts is certainty.

Author

Kenneth Westhues (PhD Vanderbilt, 1970) is Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. He has taught also at Guelph and Western in Ontario, Fordham in New York, Graz in Styria, and Memorial in Newfoundland. He discovered the work of Konrad Lorenz and Heinz Leymann in 1994, and has been building on their work ever since, toward the science of workplace mobbing. Among his twenty books are *Eliminating Professors* (1998), *The Envy of Excellence* (2003), *Workplace Mobbing in Academe* (2005), and *The Remedy and Prevention of Mobbing In Higher Education* (2006). Much of his scholarship is available online at <https://www.kwesthues.com/mobbing.htm> He can be contacted at kwesthues@uwaterloo.ca