

Top Twenty Takeaways from Research on Workplace Mobbing

Kenneth Westhues

Abstract

By takeaway is meant “a key fact, point, or idea to be remembered.” From the research literature on workplace mobbing, this paper gleans what the author considers the twenty most important takeaways. These are: the concept itself, its distinction from bullying, the insufficiency of self-reports, separation of outcomes from definition, acceptance of ambiguity, a value on individualism, recognition of both nature and culture, interdisciplinarity, social contagion, the variety of causes or triggers, the centrality of envy, turning inward away from extrinsic goals, how apology fuels the fire, mobbing as a cost of job security, process as punishment, rarity of second thoughts, the place of postmodernism, variation by workplace, how courts and tribunals make things worse, and most important, the benefits of a focus on situation rather than person.

Introduction

The usual purpose of an article in a scientific journal is to disseminate new knowledge in the relevant field: new concepts, hypotheses or theories, new findings of research, new empirical evidence, new implications and applications of current scholarship. The present article serves a different but legitimate purpose. Instead of offering something new about workplace mobbing, it summarizes the twenty most important bits of knowledge, the twenty most essential ideas, that its author has learned from a quarter century of study and research in this field. If the typical article is like a bottle of wine from the newest vintage, the latest crop, this article aims to be a distillation of the best vintages over many years, a delectable brandy. That is my intention.

The word *takeaway* means “a key fact, point, or idea to be remembered.” This may be because the idea is counterintuitive, surprising, contrary to conventional wisdom. An idea may be a “top” takeaway on account of how much evidence supports it, its explanatory power, or its importance in practical applications. It is out of a combination of all such reasons that I have settled on the twenty takeaways described in this article. These ideas are not, of course, original to me. They are but my formulation of key points from a body of knowledge to which not only I but hundreds of other researchers have contributed. Other scholars would undoubtedly come up with somewhat different

lists of the top twenty takeaways. I hope some of them will do so. Then we can study and debate our differences, as a means of further advancing this field of science.

The Scientific Foundation

1. The word itself

The number-one takeaway is the word itself, the concept, the label placed on an identifiable social process, the concept operationally defined in terms of empirical indicators. The single main thing people have thanked me for over the past quarter-century is for teaching them the name that Heinz Leymann used to describe what they have seen happen in their workplaces. (See pp. 8-9 of my 2022 [Update to *The Envy of Excellence*](#).)

2. Distinction from *bullying*

Do not let *mobbing* be confused with *bullying*. These are distinct, albeit related phenomena. The words have different histories, etymologies, connotations, meanings, and implications. Orchids to Qingli Meng for her efforts to spell these differences out. (For my own efforts to do so, [take this test](#) or see my conference presentations in [Dublin in 2006](#) and [Montreal in 2008](#).)

3. Facts and evidence, not feelings

A competent researcher never takes anybody's word for deciding whether or to what extent some conflict in a workplace can accurately be called mobbing. A science cannot be based on feelings and opinions, no matter how heartfelt, how often repeated, or how widely shared. Self-reports cannot be trusted without objective evidence: who did what when and where. (See my [Checklist of Mobbing Indicators](#).)

4. Keep outcomes separate from definition

Possible consequences of mobbing must not be included in the definition of the word. Sequelae are distinct from the process itself. Outcomes for the target range from PTSD, depression, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, bankruptcy, and divorce, to winning a lawsuit, switching to a new career, and getting rich. No outcome should be tied by definition to the process itself. (For examples of variation in outcomes, see pp. 1-6 of my 2022 [Update to *The Envy of Excellence*](#).)

5. Ambiguity and nuance

A researcher sometimes comes across an archetype or textbook case, but most cases brim with ambiguity and conflicting evidence. Humans are clever and complex, especially when embroiled in conflict. Scoring cases from 1 to 100 on a mobbing scale is no substitute for thoughtful, nuanced, balanced prose. (My [books](#) and [website](#) include dozens of case studies of mobbing in academic and nonacademic workplaces, ranging in length from a few pages to several hundred.)

6. Individualism

The scientific study of mobbing is rooted in a value on individualism, the sacredness of the human person, a core value of Christianity and Western civilization. Proponents of individualism find something problematic about people surrendering their individualities to a group and scapegoating or sacrificing one person for the group's purposes. Through the lens of a collectivist mindset, this is not a problem, it's just the way life is. (Nobody teaches this lesson so well as the French historian René Girard; see [my review](#) of his most accessible book.)

7. Both nature and culture

Without denying insights offered by scholars who think our world is entirely socially constructed, I argue that mobbing is best understood as a distinctly human expression of natural impulses common to many bird and animal species. It is the coming to the surface of innate instincts to gang up and to attack. The Nobel Laureate Konrad Lorenz, from whom we get the word *mobbing*, understood this well, in opposition to his critic Ashley Montagu. (This argument was the main theme of my [lecture at the University of Graz](#) in 2007.)

8. Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity would scarcely be worth mentioning were pressures not so intense in our time for academics to sequester themselves in specific disciplines. Mobbing is best understood by pooling insights from many specialties. Every discipline is a distinct lens or window on this social process. The present conference, like the science of mobbing as a whole, is a collaboration between experts in law, criminology, art history, political science, education, business, sociology, economics, anthropology, musicology, chemistry, psychology, theology, and so on and on. (See contributors' biographies in my own and others' [edited collections](#).)

9. Social contagion

The defining attribute of mobbing, the key to understanding it, is social contagion, monkey see monkey do, humans forming themselves into a herd or crowd, surrendering their independence of mind, mimicking as if in an echo chamber each other's vilification of a workmate. The pooling of people's judgments is often a step toward truth, as Francis Galton showed in his famous study in 1907, of 800 people guessing the weight of an ox. But that is only if they are *not* a crowd, if their judgments are independent, uninfluenced by one another. Otherwise, it is what Charles Mackay called, in the title of his 1841 book, [the madness of crowds](#).

Research Findings

10. Origins

Just as outcomes of mobbing vary, so do origins. Workmates who dissent from the local orthodoxy, who blow the whistle on perceived wrongdoing, who differ from most in an elemental way like sex

or race, who speak with a foreign accent, who opposed the appointment of whoever is the current boss, or who defend a local pariah – these are more likely to trigger the mobbing process and become targets. ([Here](#) is my summary of origins; [Brian Martin's work](#) is invaluable.)

11. Envy

Mobbing is often inspired by envy. “To calculate the odds of your being mobbed, count the ways you show your workmates up: fame, publications, teaching scores, connections, eloquence, wit, writing skills, athletic ability, computer skills, salary, family money, age, class, pedigree, looks, house, clothes, spouse, children, sex appeal. Any one of these will do.” (These are the most quoted lines from *The Envy of Excellence*, p. 163.)

12. Turning inward

Mobbing involves a turning inward, a shift of the focus of a workplace away from serving extrinsic purposes toward a matter of internal housekeeping, namely getting rid of a targeted co-worker. Mobbing is therefore less affordable in workplaces subject to market discipline (businesses) than in publicly funded organizations. The latter sometimes muddle along for decades, sunk in swamps of infighting, to the neglect of their public purposes.

13. Counterproductive apology

In a typical mobbing case, an apology by the target fails to dampen but instead inflames the mobbers' hostility. Odds are they misconstrue the apology as confession of worse wrongdoing than the target intends, or reject the apology as inadequate, insincere, misdirected, or too little too late. This finding signals how different is the circumstance of mobbing from normal civilized life, wherein saying sorry for mistakes and misdeeds routinely wins forgiveness and strengthens social bonds. (See, for example, my [2018 commentary](#) on the ouster of Judge Robin Camp.)

14. The cost of job security

Workers with much job security (tenured professors, for instance, or workers with union protections like seniority), workers who can be terminated only for cause, are more likely to be mobbed than workers with little job protection, those on at-will contracts. The latter can be and often are fired for any or no reason. By contrast, getting rid of a competent co-worker who has job security may require the long, tortuous process of mobbing.

15. The process is punishment

In most mobbing cases, the target is formally accused of some kind of misconduct, and this leads to formal adjudication. The verdict of the court or tribunal is important, but it must be seen in the context of the overall mobbing process. The process is itself punishment. The target's life is turned upside down by the indictment, literal or metaphorical arrest, and the decision to prosecute. Eventual exoneration does not compensate for lost years. (See [pp. 228ff](#) of *The Envy of Excellence*.)

16. Rarity of second thoughts

The main perpetrators of a mobbing are unlikely ever to change their minds about the target. They may possibly do so, as the jurors at Salem did five years after the witch trials. More likely they carry to their graves their conviction of the target's guilt and wickedness. The records of wrongful convictions overturned conclusively by DNA evidence show how hard it is for police, prosecutors, and judges to admit they were wrong. There is usually more ambiguity in cases of workplace mobbing. This makes it even harder for the perpetrators to have second thoughts.

17. Postmodernism

By *postmodernism* I mean the outlook associated with Lyotard and Foucault, an outlook that elevates subjectivity and puts objective truth in doubt. The more an academic discipline has been influenced by this outlook, the more likely is mobbing to occur in it: in anthropology and literature, for example, more than in engineering and math. When personal passion can substitute for hard evidence, accusers have an easier time of it. (In a [much-discussed essay in 2012](#), I spelled out this finding in detail with specific examples.)

18. Variation in damage by workplace

Workplaces vary in how much they are damaged by workplace mobbing. In a [presentation in Ottawa in 2001](#), I made the point succinctly: "A tight ship cannot be a university. The latter differs fundamentally from a business or industrial plant. It has to be full of contradiction and brimming with debate in order to fulfill its public purposes." Like professors, judges also have to be able to speak freely, without fear of being ganged up on and run out of their jobs. There is less excuse for mobbing in academe and the judiciary than in the army or an income tax bureaucracy.

Practical Applications

19. Avoid courts and tribunals

The priority in any science is on accurate, truthful knowledge, not applications. Yet applications matter. The last two takeaways on this list of 20 are the two main recommendations of the [Waterloo Strategy for Prevention of Mobbing in Higher Education](#). One is to "replace quasi-judicial campus tribunals with administrative decision-making." A court or quasi-court should be a last resort, after all possible avenues of discussion, dialogue and politics for resolving the matter have been exhausted, and it must be absolutely independent of administrative authority.

20. Focus on issues, not persons

The final takeaway on this list is my single main recommendation for prevention of mobbing in universities, indeed in any workplace: "Focus on the situation, issue, or behaviour, not the person." Dwelling on personalities rather than issues, dividing co-workers into good guys and bad guys, sheep and goats, and then joining to expel a really bad guy – all this takes scarce resources away from getting

work done. The [WAMI](#), Waterloo Anti-Mobbing Instruments, rely heavily on Daniel Yankelovich's book, [The Magic of Dialogue](#).

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

