Moral harassment from psychosocial support as prevention of illness and promotion of mental health

Assédio moral a partir do acolhimento psicossocial como prevenção de adoecimento e promoção de saúde mental

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ABSTRACT
The objective of this research was to provide psychosocial support for the identification, evaluation and intervention of interpersonal and organizational moral harassment from the multidisciplinary team of a commission to prevent and combat harassment, in the context of work at a public university. The method used has a qualitative approach, based on semi-structured interviews and theoretical-methodological foundations of support from a psychosocial support. In total, the commission had access to and accepted 92 cases of harassment and/or conflict, highlighting three distinct cases in which conflict (harassing conduct) and interpersonal, organizational and sexual harassment were identified. The results demonstrate how harassment negatively impacts the mental health of victims. The importance of building institutional policies to prevent illness and harassment, as well as promoting mental health at work, is highlighted.

Keywords: workplace moral harassment, public university, illness prevention, mental health promotion, institutional policies.
RESUMO
O objetivo dessa pesquisa foi realizar acolhimento psicossocial para a identificação, avaliação e intervenção do assédio moral interpessoal e organizacional a partir da equipe multidisciplinar de uma comissão de prevenção e combate ao assédio, no contexto de trabalho em uma universidade pública. O método utilizado possui abordagem qualitativa, a partir de entrevistas semiestruturadas e embasamentos teórico-metodológicos do acolhimento na perspectiva psicossocial. Ao todo a comissão teve acesso e acolheu 92 casos de assédios e/ou conflitos, enfatizando três casos distintos nos quais foram identificados conflito (conduetas assediosas) e assédios moral interpessoal e organizacional e sexual. Os resultados demonstram como o assédio impacta negativamente na saúde mental das vítimas. Ressalta-se a importância da construção de políticas institucionais para a prevenção do adoecimento e dos assédios, bem como a promoção da saúde mental no trabalho.

Palavras-chave: assédio moral no trabalho, universidade pública, prevenção de adoecimento, promoção de saúde mental, políticas institucionais.

1 INTRODUCTION

The context of the work is challenging and can be a source of suffering and cause illness in workers (DEJOURS, 2007; MENDES, 2007; SOUZA; OLIVEIRA, 2020). Although it is not an illness, organizational psychological harassment and/or interpersonal psychological harassment at work have an impact on workers' health, but more specifically mental health (OLIVEIRA; BOABAID; MORAIS, 2021; SANTOS; FEIJO, 2021; TELLES et al., 2019).

According to Soboll (2008), and Lázaro Camargo, Sousa Almeida and Goulart Júnior (2018), moral harassment is demarcated by hostilization directed at an individual, who becomes incapable of defending himself, resulting in physical, psychic, social aggravation and even illness. According to Hirigoyen (2015), psychological harassment is any abusive conduct (whether gesture, word, behavior or attitude), humiliating, vexatious, embarrassing that with its character of repetition or systematization causes physical and/or mainly psychological harm to the victim, causing exclusion from the workplace, corroborating the studies of Queiroz Matta e Melo (2020) and Nunes e Torga (2020).

The more traditional theoretical perspective of bullying at work is advocated by Hirigoyen (2015), in which it approaches case analysis and intervention in a more interpersonal perspective. That is, one in which it depicts harassment
between two or more people, one person and another, one person and one group and the combination of those. Further, reports that psychological harassment, which is violence at work (DEJOURS, 2007; HELOANI, 2003), can occur in some directions: a) horizontal, in which people are of the same hierarchical level; b) vertical, which can be descended, from higher hierarchical level to lower (which occurs more frequently) and the opposite, ascending (which occurs less frequently), according to Heloani (2003) and Hirigoyen (2015), and/or horizontal and mixed; vertical.

However, Soboll (2017) advances and contributes with his studies arguing that it is necessary to go beyond the interpersonal perspective to deal with strategies to prevent and combat bullying at work. Therefore, it announces the existence and importance of a psychosocial support, capable of widening the look and understanding of the phenomena of harassment. Soboll (2017) states that only with a "macro" perspective, offered by the psychosocial support, is able to deepen in the phenomenon of interpersonal harassment and recognize another moral harassment: the organizational one. Thus, organizational moral harassment is that in which a set of rules, norms, values and impositions advocated by the organization oblige workers to take unethical, immoral, embarrassing, vexatious, humiliating and even prejudiced, racist, irresponsible, inconsequential and illegal/criminal conduct and behavior (MEDEIROS; GOMES, 2016; MELO; FARIA, 2022).

Workers do not always have the skills to identify harassment behavior and often confuse occasional conflicts with harassment (MAGALHÃES et al., 2022). When addressing conflict in the workplace, one must consider that it is not always characterized as violent behavior, and can only stand out as a model of divergence between the parties (SOBOLL, 2008). However, without effective mediation, the conflict can extend over time and become a situation of psychological harassment.

Thus, measures against the practice of bullying should be part of a general policy of preventing occupational risks, because occupational health, including mental health (NEVES et al., 2019; SANTOS, 2021), is a fundamental right provided for in the Magna Carta and guidelines of the World Health Organization.
WHO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO). Thinking about the possible prevention within institutions implies the understanding of the psychological, institutional, legal or even social meanings of the phenomenon (Hirigoyen, 2015). The objective of this research was to carry out psychosocial support for the identification, evaluation and intervention of interpersonal and organizational moral harassment from the multidisciplinary team of a commission for preventing and combating harassment, in the context of work in a public university.

2 METHOD

It is a qualitative research approach (REY, 2011) with use of semi-structured interview (GUAZI, 2021) during the reception process. The questions of the interview during the reception refer to the process of identification and possibility of intervention to bullying at work (SOBOLL, 2017). The hospitalizations took place remotely and were recorded (video and audio) by the free platform aTUBE Catcher (2022). The recording is for purely academic use, supported by every ethical procedure in research. The audios were transcribed, generating a text for proper interpretation. The analysis of the data is based on the Bardin Guidelines (2010), from the Content Analysis (CA).

The Commission that carries out the receptions is formed by a multidisciplinary team, with support from undergraduate and postgraduate students in Psychology. Up to the time of writing this manuscript, the commission has carried out psychosocial support covering 92 cases of servers who reported conflict situations, harassment and psychological harassment proper, whether organizational and/or interpersonal. For this study, we emphasize 3 cases hosted by the commission: one with a teaching staff member (fictional name "Suelen"), a technical staff member (fictional name "Cida") and another, and last, with a case of prevention of harassment involving a student, a professor, the course coordinator and the university psychologist investigated (without fictitious names, being identified as "student"; "professor" and so on). This research was approved by the Ethics Committee (CAAE: 26045119.8.0000.5020).
The psychosocial welcoming was carried out in the theoretical-methodological perspective of Soboll (2017), in which emphasizes the obligatory characteristics (CO) and complementary characteristics (CC) for the recognition of harassment and planning of actions for prevention and/or coping with it. The obligatory ones (CO) are a set of characteristics that constitute hostile acts and an offense to dignity. The latter have both physical and subjective elements, allowing analysis and framing of the phenomena of interpersonal harassment and/or organizational harassment at work. Complementary ones (CC) are those that contribute to the configuration of harassment with regard to intentionality, difficulty to defend oneself and damage to health.

It is worth mentioning that before, during and after the reception, the team of the commission follows each singularity of the case, requesting various documents and use instruments, when applicable, to assist, mainly, in the identification of harassment (such as the LIPT - Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror - for example (SILVA) et al. The psychosocial support of Soboll (2017) follows procedures of interaction with the subjects in which, in the first place, there is an affective and attentive listening as an integral part of the method, opening a space of speech/listening between the commission and the subjects. It is a safe space for dialog whose central objective is to welcome the suffering of the subject and to seek psychosocial alternatives, beyond the legal-administrative context that constitutes the phenomenon of harassment, in favor of more dignity and health at work. This whole process unfolds in an opinion of the commission that legitimizes the psychosocial aspects of harassment and carries out the due referrals.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to construct the results, we cut out some of the talk of the hospitalizations from the cases, identifying and intervening in the episodes of harassment, either for health promotion or for prevention of harassment.

3.1 SUELEN CASE

Suelen is a teacher, with a master's degree, and was allocated in an educational unit (through public competition for a career in higher teaching). It was
hosted by the multidisciplinary team in mid-2019. When she began the reception, she gave a thorough account of the events surrounding the harassment she had suffered during the 10 years that she had been assigned. During his speeches, we highlight some excerpts:

I've already lost count of how many things have happened. I think up to 30 more things have happened to me in there. I never complained [...] to prove that there is harassment there, to prove that there is harassment within the institution, is no longer relevant to me. I'm not the only person who gets harassed there. Someone will prove that there is harassment, in my case, no one needs to say anything else, the documents are there. (Suelen)

Characteristics of episodes of harassment: the treatment with indifference received by colleagues; the lack of access to the documentation relating to the probationary opinion; the impediment to achieving career progression and the unjustifiably awarding of 21 absences in the year 2017:

In which sector of the entire Brazil is a person 12 years working without the probationary ordinance? Where does that fit? I told you, that day, I die and I'm out of that gatehouse, is that it? Because to report many things, these are courses that don't allow me to take part, they are things spoken at meetings, they are teachers that tell us to shut up, because we don't have doctorates, they are moments that open up the coordination space and were told that we couldn't, I couldn't and didn't have doctorates. [...] The last document I saw was a medical leave report, I was not understanding until today and sent an e-mail asking what this document is for, or what this document means, this report of absences. Because one thing is medical leave, what I was entitled to because of maternity or even because of illness. And another thing is 21 unjustified absences. I didn't understand the relationship between one thing and the other and again I didn't receive any reply. (Suelen)

The server Suelen reports her psychological illness (SOUZA; OLIVEIRA, 2020) during this period, with anxiety crises and depressive condition, clinical condition that motivated several removals and continuous treatment with psychiatrist. The server had a diagnosis of Recurrent Depressive Disorder, as characteristics the repeated occurrences of depressive episodes (Lázaro-Camargo, Sousa-Almeida & Goulart-Júnior, 2018). Suelen also reported the suicide attempt several times.
With listening, three other behaviors were identified that characterize moral harassment: isolation and refusal of communication; lack of access to documents; acted in order to prevent it from obtaining promotion or progression and, finally, Suelen was prevented from obtaining promotion or progression and finally, the server was prevented from obtaining her rights (HELOANI, 2003; HIRIGOYEN, 2015; OLIVEIRA; BOABAID; MORAIS, 2021; SOBOLL, 2008; 2017).

The university context has its uniqueness of work and consequently some peculiarities of the manifestation of harassment (PENA; REMOALDO). Nunes and Torga (2020), for example, highlight the scenario of productivity and competitiveness of postgraduate studies, making analogies to the capitalist political-economic system. In which, in this case, the university loses itself in the demands of standing out in the academic milieu, following the evaluation and ranking systems of the programs and universities, in which the concern with production, in terms of quantity and quality, is more relevant compared to the mental health of the professors and students. Thus, the relations between the program, teachers and students are mediated by excessive charges for publication and activities that highlight the program and university, maintained by harassing conduct and the organizational and interpersonal bullying proper.

Magalhães et al. (2022) highlight the episodes of overburdens in the work carried out by everyone that makes up the university collegiate. Nunes, Rosa Tolfo and Pellegrini (2021), besides the overload, also discuss about vexatious situations and vulnerability in the context of probation stage, in which is deposited in the novice servers dubious jobs in relation to the worker's technical skills (misuse of function), as well as the fulfillment of abusive workload and interpersonal relations based on hostile conduct and threats for the fragility of not becoming effective in the probation process, as occurred in the case of Suelen.

The lack of training on harassment, among other training activities of the entire university population, the lack of policies and programs, the absence of the deepening of the subject in strategic courses, mainly medicine and law, aggravate the construction of a dignified environment, impacting negatively on the mental health of the subjects (BOTELHO CALDAS et al., 2022; NEVES et al., 2019;
TELLES et al., 2019). In the historical time that the main episodes of Suelen’s harassment occurred, there was no commission to carry out the psychosocial support, and the investigated university does not, to date, have policies to combat harassment or mental health, which aggravated the entire process of Suelen’s suffering and illness arising from the harassment. In this sense, there are indications of organizational harassment by the omission of practices to prevent and combat harassment. Suelen herself acknowledges that her case has not been isolated. That there was, on the part of the university, harassing conduct in the form of negative career growth, approval of the end of probationary period and impunity in cases of harassment, which it recognized in the history of other employees as well, in her reports. Therefore, the university perpetuated, in some way, episodes in the macro, organizational sphere, in which its activities are marked by rigidity, excessive punishments, humiliating, abusive, embarrassing behaviors and conduct; policies based on an institutional culture that causes insecurity, anguish, fear, neglect, trivialization of injustice and other violence of harassment, reaching the workers’ collective (MEDEIROS; GOMES, 2016; MELO; FARIA, 2022).

In addition to the occurrence of interpersonal and organizational psychological harassment, Suelen narrates episodes of sexual harassment that were part of, went through some cases of harassment that she suffered. Sexual harassment, work and gender relations constitute a scenario of psychological terror especially for women (FARENCENA; KOCOUREK; COSTA, 2021; FIGUEIREDO; SILVA; SANTANA, 2020; GAMBOA-SOLÍS, 2019; LIMA, HECK-MANN; GOMES-SOUZA, 2022). D’Oliveira (2019) argues about the feeling of impotence and situations of impunity, without rules, clear and effective normative to discipline cases of harassment, in particular the sexual one in which the victims are women. As a consequence, cases are invisibilised, giving effect to injustices and irreparable constraints, building a context of work that trivializes violence against women in the university (D’OLIVEIRA, 2019; SOUZA; SILVA FRANÇA; PEREIRA, 2020; SOUZA; ROCHA, 2019).
Lima, Heckmann and Gomes-Souza (2022) add on the phenomenon of the occurrence of the two harassments simultaneously (moral and sexual) as occurred in the case of Suelen. She initially reports a series of hostile and humiliating situations that, on the part of a manager, the abuses also had a sexual stamp. Besides being a victim of psychological harassment, she suffered oral and gestural chants and advances, on the part of the male servant, who harassed and threatened her, mainly in the probationary stage.

As a result of this case, we won a great deal by reversing the initial decision of the medical board that did not recognize Suelen’s harassment, preventing her from having access to her health rights. Today Suelen lives in another state, has her rights guaranteed and improved, is no longer with suicidal thought and intention, continues taking care and with hopes of new life plans, due to the intervention of the psychosocial support of the commission.

3.2 CIDA CASE

Cida is a Nursing Assistant who is part of a clinical unit of a Federal Hospital. The server informs that started in the public organ in 2004, was tasked to carry out intensive and semi-intensive patient care. As of 2018, it reports the beginning of harassing conduct exemplified below when communicating to its direct boss regarding misuse of function. According to Cida, after this conversation, she began to be treated differently:

Then, when it was now in April, the fact happened that it was well... outside the manager, this was the second that was very impressive for me, for the fact that they said that I shouldn’t be there, since I didn’t know how to do everything that I reported. And then I spent three days digesting that, right?! Three days like that, very heavy. (Cida).

Cida adds that the direct leadership assigned tasks that did not fall within its competence at various times. In some episodes, she reported that she was idle inside the hospital by order of the management who intentionally put her in this position so that she would not develop any activities, because, in the view of the management, she was incompetent for the position of assistant nurse and should occupy her with other duties. Which left Cida feeling guilty, feeling devalued, diminished, disqualified, and powerless.
At another moment of the reception, Cida reports that when she was working as a nurse technician, she was constantly monitored and harassed with questions about her skills at work and with her interpretations of her own health status. When being watched, she doubts herself and starts to watch herself to the point of getting sick (HELOANI, 2003; HIRIGOYEN, 2015; KUHN; LOPES, 2019; MENDES, 2007; SOBOLL, 2008; 2017). She describes being asked about the palpitations she was feeling, as well as insomnia:

Always those little questions, if that’s what I’m feeling: why am I feeling these palpitations?... why am I feeling this anxiety?... why can’t I relax at work?... So I’m always policing myself about this. But then, this vigil so direct, I think it brought a very bad wear and tear, the question of sleep, I can’t, has that already... I had nightmares with the manager’s gestures. (Cida).

In addition to these episodes, Cida was assaulted in 2011, being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), whose symptoms lasted about two months. She went to a psychiatrist and was medicated. However, the symptoms of PTSD reappeared after the episodes of bullying at work, worsening the mental health of Cida, who told us that he had lived many episodes of crying, anguish and sadness (OAK, 2021; LÁZARO CAMARGO, SOUSA ALMEIDA & GOULART JÚNIOR, 2018). Still on the worsening mental health, Mendes (2007) emphasizes the importance of the sense of belonging and the sense of usefulness of the worker in which she can feel important and be recognized at work. When there is no recognition, this becomes the basis for the onset of illness. We follow how the episodes of harassment aggravated Cida’s mental health, by experiencing the feeling of uselessness, incompetence, disqualification, questioning all the time about his training and technical and interpersonal competence to deal with the demands of his own work, among others.

The team from the commission has already forwarded reports and an opinion, starting from the receptions, and is under analysis at the university unit. The hospitalizations were essential as mental health promotion for the female servant. Cida argues that she felt listened to and supported. While the process is ongoing, we provide emotional support to the server to continue the fight for more dignity and health at work (BOTELHO CALDAS et al., 2022).
3.3 CASE OF PREVENTION OF HARASSMENT - STUDENT/TEACHER/COORDINATOR/PSYCHOLOGIST

This case was a mediation to prevent harassment on a campus of the university studied, which is in the interior of the state of the northern region of the country, resulting in meetings and accommodations between a student who had a harassing conduct towards a professor, mobilizing a strategic plan between the course coordinator, the university's educational psychologist, mediated by the commission team to prevent the conflict from turning into violence of harassment (FARENCENA; KOCOUREK; COSTA, 2021; HELOANI, 2003).

The reason that gave rise to such an event was that the student in question said that a teacher had been for 45 days without contacting the class to give the lessons. The student took the situation to the Board of Directors (CONDIR - which can be composed, in this case, by teachers, students and managers of the unit, who meet to plan, organize, debate and forward, in a democratic manner, different schedules and demands of interest of the same), exposing the name of the teacher in the social network of the university, which did not please the teachers and coordinators present at the meeting. The student states that:

There, at CONDIR, I had my opportunity to speak. I explained it, I said it, I mentioned the teacher’s name. Because I believe that when the teacher gets paid, if he's getting paid up to date, everything's okay. He has to teach [...] I exposed the name of the teacher there and many of the counselors did not like it because I exposed the name of the teacher. (Student).

In addition to this report, there were comments made by the student on a teacher’s social network, through a Facebook group made to disseminate the work of students and faculty, in which the teacher made a publication “talking badly” of the municipality where the Campus is located. The student responded to the post with offensive and disrespectful comments. Afterwards, the teacher contacted the student privately to understand what made him act in such a way, but the student remained firm in his opinion:

I told him that I maintained my same posture, my same opinion, because the teachers were lazy. That's what's in the text, I remember. The teachers were lazy because Professor X wasn't teaching. [...] Are
you receiving?! Then you have to teach. If you're not teaching, then I put it as lazy. (Student).

A topic strongly discussed by the student was the "rotation" of teachers who go to the municipality in probation stage and, when they finish, ask for redistribution and leave, "abandoning" the classes. He says that there is facilitation on the part of the collegiate body for these redistributions to occur and he has demonstrated that he feels very unjustified in the face of these situations, classifying these professionals as "adventurers".

Teleworking, mediated by platforms and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), such as smartphones, computers etc. and access to the internet, challenged practices, the organization of work and functioning of universities, opening space for virtual organizational moral harassment (SANTOS, 2019). That is, using the virtual space of the university to spread hate speech, detractors, disqualifying, oppressing, humiliating others, inciting collective actions, encompassing the university with harassing, abusive, violent conduct, whether by texts, videos, or both or other manifestations that the platforms allow. The use of ICT has been increased, especially in the pandemic context, and has changed and become part of the activities of the academic collegiate.

In the case in question, a social network was used to disqualify a teacher. Although the student has the right to take lessons, the way of solving the problem was questionable, to say the least, certain that he used an institutional communication channel to do so, leaving the action of others vulnerable to the trivialization of symbolic and psychological violence. Before turning into harassment itself, the commission intervened strategically, listening to all the parties involved (student, professor, coordinator and psychologist) mediating the conflict and offering training to the campus psychologist to integrate preventive practices and training for future cases, avoiding transforming the official virtual resource of the university as an instrument disseminating harassing conduct.

The focus of the commission was to try to prevent the case from unfolding into harassment and illness, clarifying and punctuating practices that defended dignity, respect and democracy as inherent in the work of the university. The psychologist developed activities with course coordinators and faculty to guide
fairer and healthier practices on campus. As there were no preventive practices against harassment in a systematic and legitimized manner by the university, this intervention was carried out, once again, in addition to the training programs and courses that the commission offers, the creation of policies for preventing and combating harassment. The commission listened to the professor involved and course coordinator. She held meetings and training with the psychologist to continue with the prevention work at the unit and promote more dignity and health among the servers and students of the campus in the interior.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The committee has held receptions, identified interpersonal and organizational harassment in cases, and has carried out interventions in both mental health promotion and prevention of illness from harassment violence. We also show, with the case cuttings, the importance of institutional policies for preventing illness and violence from harassment (moral and/or sexual; interpersonal, organizational - virtual or not) and how episodes of harassment aggravate people's mental health.

In this process, we managed to institutionalize the commission at the university. Meanwhile, we continue to face limitations in building institutional policies to prevent and combat bullying at work. More studies and actions are needed to continue fighting for more dignity and health in the university and in different work contexts.

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