

Workplace harassment and mental injuries: Examining root causes

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Summary

Abstract: Harassment is a leading cause of stress and mental injury, with particular patterns and consequences for marginalized workers. Oppression is a root cause of harassment. Marginalized workers are most affected, but all workers suffer. Poor working conditions contribute to harassment of marginalized workers, and privatization is making things worse. We need far-reaching solutions.

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As unions, we now recognize harassment as an occupational health issue and understand more and more the mental health dimensions. We also have a better grasp of structural factors like work organization and other working conditions. What we still sometimes miss is the connection between human rights and mental injuries, from an occupational health perspective. This paper attempts to connect those dots.

This paper is primarily for union occupational health and safety specialists, though we hope it will also be used by activists, educators, researchers and others fighting harassment, discrimination or privatization. It considers the structural dimensions of harassment and aims squarely at prevention. Anti-harassment efforts that stop at interpersonal hostility will fail to shift underlying organizational factors.

We need to understand the differential harassment hazards and effects for socially marginalized groups and how those connect to all workers' health and safety interests. To build unity, we need to be mindful of the diverse social positions, experiences and needs of members.

Harassment is a major occupational hazard. It directly threatens workers' physical and psychological safety, and it makes workers vulnerable to other work hazards. Harassment is one of the main types of workplace stressors.

Workers who are marginalized by sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, colonialism, ableism and other forms of oppression often experience workplace harassment hazards and effects differently than other workers. There are differential exposures and effects *between* marginalized workers too.

Understaffing, job insecurity and other poor working conditions contribute to harassment. Restructuring, cuts and privatization are worsening those conditions. Marginalized groups suffer most from these changes, as workers and as users/clients.

Oppression harms all workers, not only marginalized workers. It poisons the work environment even in the absence of harassment incidents.

We can only eliminate oppression and organizationally-derived harassment with concrete and enforceable rights that address root causes.

This paper draws mainly on academic literature. Much of the research, particularly on racism and work, comes from the United States and Europe. Canadian data is used where possible.

We use the term “harassment” in this guide except when citing research that emphasizes the term “bullying”. The term “harassment” is clearer and stronger. Bullying is not specifically mentioned in health and safety or human rights legislation. (British Columbia refers to bullying in policy related to health and safety law, as a synonym for harassment.) In other laws and rules, bullying is sometimes defined more narrowly than harassment. For example, the definition might require intent, repetition or threat, or equate bullying with only personal harassment or psychological harassment.

1. Definitions and concepts

What is harassment?

By legal definitions, harassment is offensive behavior that a reasonable person would consider unwelcome. *Stop Harassment: A Guide for CUPE Locals* describes harassment, workers’ rights and employer and union responsibilities within those legal contexts.

The present paper considers the structural dimensions of harassment and aims squarely at prevention. It is not a legal how-to guide. It takes a broader view, considering oppression, work organization and the framework of structural violence.

In an international review of bullying regulation, Katherine Lippel explains the constraints of the law:

Legislative definitions are the product of political compromise; they are often intentionally convoluted, and should not be used by occupational health and safety or social psychology practitioners as guides to determine when prevention interventions are justified (Katherine Lippel 2011).

Union stewards, officers and other activists should use the document *Stop Harassment: A Guide for CUPE Locals* to assess what counts as harassment under the law and what they can do to support members. The section of the guide titled “Demand better working conditions” is the launching pad for the present paper.

What is oppression?

Oppression captures racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism and other socially constructed systems of power and domination. These systems are intersecting and mutually reinforcing and cannot be addressed in isolation.

Tina Lopes and Barb Thomas offer this definition of oppression:

Oppression exists when one social group exploits (knowingly or unconsciously) another social group to its own benefit. It results in privilege for the dominant group and disenfranchisement for the subordinated group. Oppression is achieved through force or through the control of social institutions and resources of society. After a while, it does not require the conscious thought or effort of individual members of the dominant group, and unequal treatment becomes institutionalized, systemic, and looks “normal” (Barb Thomas and Tina Lopez 2006: 268).

Oppression can be interpersonal (one on one or group interactions) or structural (embedded in our institutions of custom, practice and law). Structural oppression is so pervasive that these inequalities often appear ‘natural’, serving to justify and reinforce the hierarchies. In both forms, individual and structural, oppression plays a big part in harassment.

Oppressive systems of power operate through social location as well as through relationships and structures. People self-identify and are labeled by others using markers like language, gender, gender identity and expression, ethnicity, skin colour, sexual orientation, class, dis/abilities and age. Each is associated with stereotypes and power differentials. Some social locations (e.g., maleness and whiteness) are considered more powerful in our society. Differences are not the problem; the problem is the oppressive systems and the violence used to sustain them.

What is structural violence?

Structural violence captures the role that institutions and social practices play in causing physical and psychological harm. Oppression and unhealthy working

conditions such as heavy workloads, low levels of decision-making autonomy, low status and rigid work routines are forms of structural violence (Banerjee et al. 2012). They harm workers' health directly, and they prevent workers from providing the care and services they know are needed, compounding the suffering.

In terms of harassment specifically, oppression and poor working conditions increase harassment, a specific and recognized form of violence, and they are a form of violence in and of themselves. Structural violence is less visible than interpersonal violence but no less damaging.

2. Prevalence of harassment

Marginalized workers¹ - that is, women, LGBTTI, racialized, Aboriginal and immigrant workers and workers with disabilities – experience, on average, more workplace harassment than workers from socially advantaged groups.

- Canadian occupational health scholars Katherine Lippel and Anette Sikka found that women are disproportionately affected by psychosocial risk factors at work, including psychological harassment (Katherine Lippel and Anette Sikka 2010).
- The vast majority of sexual harassment perpetrators are men, and while both men and women experience sexual violence, the vast majority of victims/survivors are women (Linda L. Baker, Marcie Campbell, and Anna-Lee Straatman 2012; Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).
- According to a 2003 meta-analysis covering 86,000 respondents in the United States, 24 per cent of women report having experienced sexual harassment at work (Ilies et al. 2003). In the only national survey of sexual harassment in Canada, conducted in 1993, Statistics Canada found that 23 per cent of women had experienced work-related sexual harassment (Holly Johnson 1994).
- Racialized workers are more likely than white workers to report high levels of exposure to workplace harassment (Duncan Lewis and Rod Gunn 2007; Stale Einarsen et al. 2010), including being targets of derogatory comments and having their work duties and activities made difficult by others (Okechukwu et al. 2014).
- Workers with disabilities or long-term health conditions are more likely than their co-workers to report harassment (Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).

¹ Marginalized workers/groups are also referred to as equity-seeking workers/groups.

- The 2008 General Social Survey, a national probability survey representative of the US population, found that 27 per cent of LGB respondents had experienced workplace harassment (Brad Sears and Christy Mallory 2011).
- Ninety percent of the 6,540 respondents in the US Transgender Discrimination Survey reported experiencing harassment, mistreatment or discrimination on the job or took actions like hiding who they are to avoid it (Grant, J. M. , L. A. Mottet, J. Tanis, J. Harrison, J. L. Herman and M. Keisling 2011).

Most surveys likely under-estimate the disproportionate exposure to harassment by marginalized workers. Marginalized workers often under-report harassment even in a confidential survey, fearing reprisals or unaware of their rights. Many are excluded from surveys by cultural and language barriers, precarious employment status, isolated work sites or other barriers.

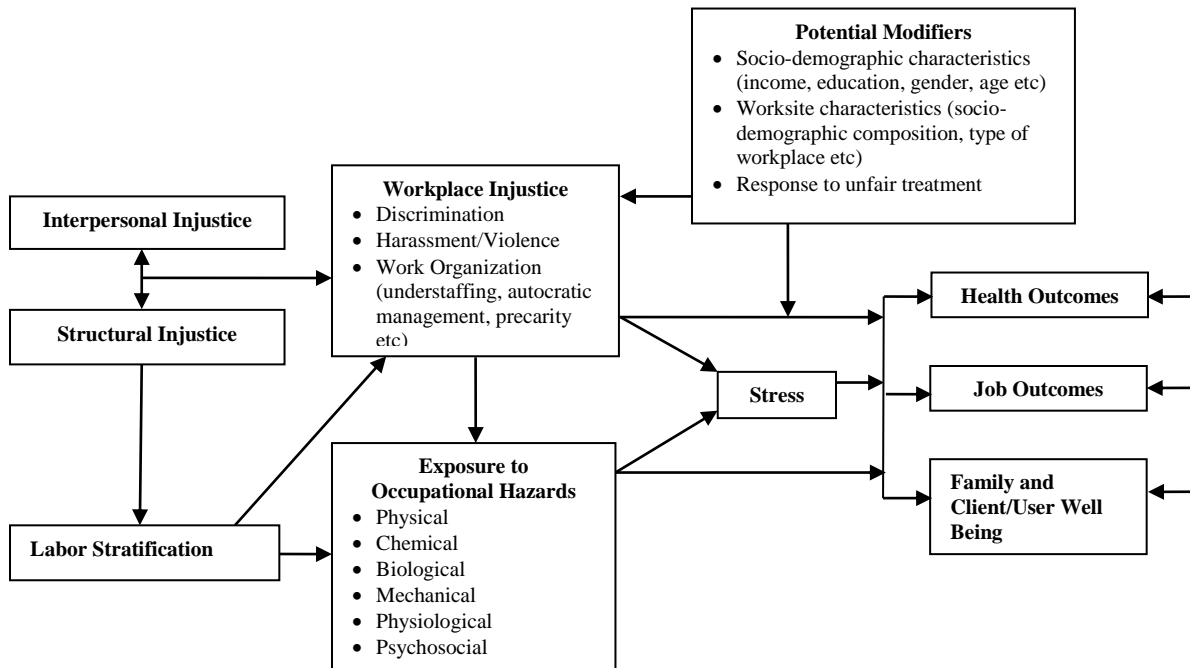
Workers not only experience different levels of harassment, they also experience different types of harassment, depending on their social position. A survey of 247 workers across 13 public sector workplaces in Australia found that instigators of harassment, whether line managers or co-workers, use different tactics when targeting racialized workers compared to white workers. Line managers bully white respondents by attacking their work role and racialized respondents by attacking their personal characteristics. In cases of peer bullying, racialized workers are more often told to 'quit the job' (Duncan Lewis and Rod Gunn 2007).

The role of labour stratification

Higher rates of harassment against women, immigrant and racialized workers partly reflect their over-representation in high-risk and insecure occupations, for example, in health, education and social services (Grace-Edward Galabuzi and Sheila Block 2011; Daniel Wilson and David Macdonald 2010; Pat Armstrong and Armstrong 2010; Landsbergis, Grzywacz, and Lamontagne 2014; D. Zapf et al. 2003).

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model that illustrates how labour stratification fits with other pathways linking workplace injustice exposure and negative outcomes.

Figure 1: A Model of Workplace Injustice and Occupational Health



This model draws from the work of Okechukwu and colleagues (Okechukwu et al. 2014) and Krieger and colleagues (Nancy Krieger et al. 2008).

3. Effects of harassment

3a. Harassment is a serious occupational hazard. It directly threatens workers' physical and psychological safety, and it makes workers vulnerable to other work hazards.

- Harassment harms workers' physical health (e.g., health satisfaction and physical symptoms) and psychological health (e.g., well-being and distress) (Chan et al. 2008). On the latter, there is strong empirical evidence linking harassment to psychological stress responses that can lead to a multitude of chronic negative health conditions (Okechukwu et al. 2014).
- Negative job outcomes from harassment can include higher sick leave, fewer promotion opportunities, reduced productivity, social isolation and higher turnover (Okechukwu et al. 2014) as well as less job satisfaction (Chan et al. 2008).

Workers who experience discrimination are at increased risk for work-related injury or illness, with potentially serious and long-term negative health outcomes (Okechukwu et al. 2014; Andrew Smith et al. 2005).

There are important differences in how workers from different social positions experience harassment and its effects.

3b. The effects of harassment vary for different groups of workers.

Marginalized workers have different negative physical and psychological health outcomes than workers from dominant social groups.

- Racialized workers have been reported to have increased risks of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)-related effects when exposed to workplace bullying (Rodríguez-Muñoz et al. 2010).
- In another study, even though experiences of workplace bullying were significantly associated with negative emotional reactions for all targets, African Americans reported significantly higher emotional response to racial bullying compared to other groups (Fox and Stallworth 2005).
- Generalized bullying (collectively experienced) has been associated with higher numbers of psychological symptoms and increases in drinking to intoxication for women compared to men (Rospenda et al. 2005).
- African American women who did not tell others about the unfair treatment they received were four times more likely to report high blood pressure than women who told others. A similar association was not significant for white women (N. Krieger 1990).

Workers marginalized in more than one way (with overlapping social locations) face higher rates of harassment and the multiplier effects of harassment.

- Black women report experiencing more frequent incidents of unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion than do white women (Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).
- Female employees exposed to multiple types of harassment report more negative outcomes than those reporting fewer types of harassment (Schneider, K.T. et al. 2000).

Studies have shown that the dual marginalization of race and sex are in fact compounding, not additive or independent factors, amplifying racialized women's experience of both sexual and racial harassment (Berdahl and Moore 2006). For example, the interactive effect of sexual and racial harassment have been shown to worsen anxiety, depression and PTSD symptoms (Okechukwu et al. 2014).

3c. Workplace harassment affects more than just the target – it also harms co-workers and clients/users. The negative effects are both direct and indirect.

- Studies have shown that witnesses of workplace harassment can be at risk for adverse health outcomes (Okechukwu et al. 2014).
- Clients/users are also indirectly harmed by higher rates of absenteeism, turnover and other negative outcomes of harassment (Canadian Union of Public Employees 2009a). Marginalized groups are disproportionately represented among clients/users of public services and therefore suffer disproportionately from the domino effects of harassment.

4. Responses to harassment

Marginalized workers are also **treated differently** when the harassment comes to light. On the whole, they are less likely to have the harassment recognized as work-related or even acknowledged; in fact, they are more likely to face blame and reprisals.

- A study of harassment in health care, education and social services workplaces in the United Kingdom found that management made little or no effort to investigate complaints by black workers (Alleyne 2004).
- Lippel and Sikka's review of legal protections for work-related mental health in Canada found that women's reports of psychosocial harassment are seldom recognized as work-related and even less likely to be compensated as a workplace illness (Katherine Lippel and Anette Sikka 2010).
- A 2004 Canadian study on workplace violence documented the serious barriers to reporting sexual harassment that remain in place even after decades of education and legal gains (Carr et al. 2004).

Marginalized workers experience additional stress when their harassment complaint is unheeded or turned against them.

5. Structural determinants: Work environment and privatization

Often an incident of harassment is the tip of the iceberg, signaling an unhealthy workplace and revealing deeper power structures. Harassment prevention and response often focus on interpersonal relations, ignoring the context. Situational factors, however, can be independent precursors to harassment and certainly compound the problem. The organizational factors that contribute to the development of harassment are amplified by privatization.

5a. Employer responsibility

One of the important contexts is the power structure in the workplace, and management's distinct role in harassment. A lot of anti-harassment initiatives assume that the problem is the same whether managers or co-workers are the perpetrators. In fact, the specificity of managerial harassment is important.

Employers frequently initiate or enable harassment, sometimes under pressure from government and other forces. According to available surveys, managers are responsible for a large share of workplace harassment, varying from about 50 per cent of reported instances in Scandinavian research to about 80 per cent in the UK (Peter Armstrong 2011). Some managers wrongly believe that fear of harassment makes workers more productive and "disciplined" (Stale Einarsen et al. 2010; Peter Armstrong 2011). Other managers may not consciously initiate harassment or consider it a rational form of administration, but nonetheless invite it by creating an unhealthy and unsafe psychosocial work environment.

Some argue that these harmful conditions are in fact the default in capitalist economies. Ironside and Seifert see bullying as a management control tactic built into the capitalist employment relationship, not the result of misguided or malevolent managers (M. Ironside and R. Seifert 2003).

Whatever the degree of intentionality or driving forces, organizationally-derived and compounded harassment is significant and worsened by privatization.

5b. Work environment factors

Understaffing, autocratic management, job insecurity, discrimination and other forms of structural violence have been shown by empirical studies to increase the risk of harassment.

- The pressure of work, performance demands, autocratic management, and role conflict and lack of role clarity, as well as a poor social climate in a working group, can contribute to higher incidences of harassment (Agervold cited in Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).
- The specific contribution of role conflict, role ambiguity, and lack of clear goals were documented as early as the 1990s. This was confirmed by a meta-analysis of empirical studies undertaken between 1987 and 2005, which included 90 separate samples and which concluded that role conflict and role ambiguity were among the strongest predictors of harassment (Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).
- Organizational change, job insecurity and workload are additional work organization characteristics that have been specifically linked to harassment (Elfi Baillien and Hans De Witte 2009).

- In organizations with high rates of hostile behaviours, workers report problematic supervision, low morale, weak teamwork and insufficient employee involvement (Keashly and Jagatic cited in Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).
- Reduced job mobility has been linked to intensification of abusive supervision (Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).
- Autocratic leadership and an authoritarian way of settling conflicts have been shown to contribute to harassment (Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).

Oppressive labour stratification is another aspect of the work environment that poses additional risk to marginalized workers. For example, traditionally masculine jobs or jobs where women are gender pioneers pose a higher risk for sexual harassment for women (Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).

Beyond the specific risks of job ghettos, oppression creates a hazardous psychosocial work environment that harms workers even in the absence of personal hostility. Marginalized workers bear the brunt of the ill effects, but all workers can suffer from working in the context of perceived oppression.

- A study of 289 public sector employees found that working in an organizational context perceived as hostile toward women affects workers' well-being, both men and women, even without specific incidents of harassment (Kathi Miner-Rubino and Lilia M. Cortina 2004).
- Heterosexism enforces norms of male dominance in the workplace, punishing any worker who violates gender roles (Julie Konik and Lilia M. Cortina 2008).

5c. Privatization

Privatization and the associated trends of restructuring, budget cuts and precarious employment in the public sector are worsening the quality of jobs and work environments, triggering more harassment.

- Public sector budget cuts, restructuring and adoption of private sector managerial methods have led to work intensification and higher rates of harassment (M. Ironside and R. Seifert 2003).
- One study found that the strongest predictors of aggression were the use of part-time workers, change in management, and pay cuts or pay freezes (Hodson, Roscigno and Lopez cited in Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).

- Performance-based reward systems, one aspect of business-inspired “new public management”, have been associated with increased harassment (Stale Einarsen et al. 2010).
- In the colleges and universities sector, for example, globalization and government downloading have created pressure-vessel situations where bullying is regarded as commonplace (Duncan Lewis and Rod Gunn 2007).

Some go so far as to argue that intimidating management tactics arising from privatization schemes are a form of harassment. Peter Armstrong coined the expression “budgetary bullying” to capture the budget constraint and performance tracking style of management whose stressful effects are broadly similar to the effects of harassment (Peter Armstrong 2011).

Sticking with the current legal definition of harassment, there is a well-documented association between work environment and harassment, and the evidence linking privatization and harassment is accumulating.

6. Solutions

6a. Build solidarity

Harassment and other forms of violence undermine our solidarity as workers. A united union membership that challenges the complex dimensions and root causes of harassment is stronger and able to make gains elsewhere too. Government and employer attacks on union security make this especially important now.

Norwegian union activist and harassment expert Jon Sjøtveit saw workplace harassment as an attack on workers’ informal patterns of solidarity and the cultural foundation of effective trade unionism.

Bullying has an effect on not only those who are its victims, but also strikes at our sense of community. If the community is unable to protect the individual, the individual will be reluctant to take an interest in the community. The social web breaks down. (Sjøtveit cited in Einarsen et al. 2010: 288)

Interpersonal dynamics can unify or divide us. For example, banter (the cheeky remark) in the workplace can be an expression of community, but when it transgresses social boundaries, it can isolate individuals and lead to harassment.

To build unity, we need to be mindful of the diverse social positions, experiences and needs of members. As Lewis and Gunn note in their research on bullying

and racism in the UK public sector, “adopting a blanket approach to tackling bullying is too simplistic since different groups use different bullying tactics” (Duncan Lewis and Rod Gunn 2007). There are also differences in the effects and responses to bullying, depending on the social location of the target.

6b. Demand far-reaching changes

Unions improve the work environment through bargaining, workplace mobilizing, lobbying and other collective actions. Specific, concrete and enforceable legal rights that get at root causes are the most effective way to combat structural violence; for example, legislated minimum staffing levels (Jansen 2011), collective agreement language limiting and reversing privatization (Canadian Union of Public Employees 2009b) and employment equity programs.

Anti-harassment training is important and needs to address structural factors and inspire collective action; “diversity” training in a superficial form may simply shift harassing behavior from overt to covert (Duncan Lewis and Rod Gunn 2007) and even perpetuate stereotypes (Duncan Lewis and Rod Gunn 2007; Okechukwu et al. 2014).

Similarly, anti-harassment efforts that stop at interpersonal hostility will fail to shift underlying organizational factors. As Peter Armstrong put it:

Single-issue activism, like all short-range politics, is the art of the possible and anti-bullying campaigns are no exception. Prioritising the immediate relief of suffering over any challenge to the social fundamentals which might lie behind it, the activist seeks to achieve her or his objectives by working with and through existing structures of power. (Peter Armstrong 2011)

This paper is a tool for the many union activists who regularly challenge the social fundamentals and will use the research connecting harassment, oppression, structural violence and privatization to achieve systems change.

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