

Aggression Among University Employees

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Harassment among university employees (n = 338; 162 males, 176 females) was investigated by help of the Work Harassment Scale (WHS), developed for the study. Nineteen cases of severe victimization by harassment were interviewed. Subjectively experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety were estimated with two subscales from SCL-90 [Derogatis LR, Lipman RS, Covi L (1973): *Psychopharmacology Bulletin* 9:13-28] and aggressiveness was measured with the Buss-Durkee Inventory [BussA, DurkeeA (1957): *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 21:343-349]. Females experienced themselves as significantly more harassed than men. Position was related to harassment: individuals in superior positions harassed more often than individuals in subordinate positions. Less victimization by harassment was experienced among individuals involved in research and teaching than among individuals involved in administration and service. The experienced reasons for harassment were predominantly envy and competition about jobs and status. In 25% of cases, victims felt that their sex might be a reason. Victims of harassment experienced higher levels of depression, anxiety, and aggression than others. The interviewed cases showed evidence of symptoms reminiscent of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). © 1994 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

The social group formed by colleagues at work forms, perhaps with the exception of the family, the most important social network for the adult individual. Each person's self-image is to a large extent dependent on how he/she is daily treated by fellow employees. Sometimes it happens that the atmosphere at a workplace turns more than sour; conflicts escalate, and one individual may, for one reason or another, acquire a disadvantaged position. The individual may become a victim of work harassment.

Repeated activities, with the aim of bringing mental (but sometimes also physical) pain, and directed toward one or more individuals who, for one reason or another, are

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not able to defend themselves, will in the following be defined as harassment. Harassment is thus conceived of as a specific type of aggression, leading to victimization of the individual(s) subjected to these activities. Harassment may be directed toward one individual or a group of people. Harassment may be short in duration and extremely intense, as in the case of torture or rape. Harassment may also, however, be less intense but stretched over a long period of time, as in the cases of bullying in schools or in the army. The effects in both cases might be equally disastrous for the individual. In a recent study, Leymann [1992] gives evidence that victims of work harassment frequently show symptoms of the so-called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), typical for victims of torture and rape. If an employee is exposed to continuous pecking and harassment from his/her colleagues, the mean length of time for serious symptoms to appear is as short as 15 months [Leymann, 1992].

Work harassment as defined here should not be confused with sexual harassment at a workplace, focused upon in North American studies [e.g., Brewer, 1982; Collins and Blodgett, 1981; Dziech and Weiner, 1984]. Sexual harassment is a specific form of work harassment, utilizing sexuality as a means of oppression. One may speculate upon the question of why sexual harassment has been a focal interest in North America, while other forms of work harassment have been the object of study in Scandinavian research.

Work harassment is probably a much more severe and frequent problem in Western society than people are aware of. On the basis of a study conducted in Sweden, Leymann [1992] estimates that approximately one of every seventh suicide is related to work harassment, and among male Swedes the figure is even higher: Leymann's estimation is as high as one in five. If the figure is correct, suicide due to harassment is a far more frequent cause of death than physical accidents at the workplace. In Scandinavian countries, laws regarding industrial welfare also stipulate regulations about mental welfare at the workplace, and several lawsuits have been successfully filed against work harassment. This may explain the great interest in issues related to the question in Scandinavia.

Despite the cost in human suffering and probably also in work efficiency, surprisingly few studies have investigated the problem in English-speaking countries [Brodsky, 1977; Adams, 1992] compared with the number of studies published in Scandinavian languages, which unfortunately are not easily accessible for an English-speaking audience [e.g., Einarsen and Raknes, 1991; Jankola, 1991; Kile, 1990; Leymann, 1986, 1988, 1992; Leymann and Tallgren, 1989; Matthiesen et al., 1989]. The small number of studies indicates that the problem is still sensitive and "taboo."

A parallel may be drawn to the issue of bullying in schools. Twenty years ago, bullying was a phenomenon which received almost no serious scientific recognition. It was also, to a great extent, a "taboo," which teachers and principals tended to disregard. Similarly, managers and heads of departments today hesitate to admit that harassment takes place at their workplace, as they see it as a disqualification of their own leadership abilities.

Bullying in schools has been thoroughly investigated in a number of studies, again particularly in Scandinavia [e.g., Olweus, 1973, 1978, 1986; Björkqvist et al., 1982; Lagerspetz et al., 1982] and in the United Kingdom [e.g., Lowenstein, 1977; Stephenson and Smith, 1989; Smith, 1991]. Bullying has in these studies been defined and described as a specific social psychological phenomenon, which should not be confused

with short-term aggressive conflicts between individuals of equal strength, usually leading to an equilibrium when the conflict is over. Bullying is long-term aggression directed toward a person who is not able to defend him/herself, leading to victimization of that individual. The victim, not being able to escape the social situation and thereby his/her tormentor, is exposed to escalating harassment leading to loss of self-esteem and gradually increasing mental stress. Bullying as a concept is, however, not easily understood in everyday English, as shown in a recent study by Madsen and Smith [1993]. Bullying is common, but it does not exist in all school classes: there are classes with, and classes without, bullying problems [Olweus, 1978]. Similarly, there are workplaces in which harassment takes place and places where it does not [Leymann, 1986, 1992].

A typical "bully" personality was, in these early studies with adolescent subjects, identified: a bully is an aggressive individual, lacking in empathy, who finds joy in seeing his/her victim suffering. Instead of gaining self-respect and social status by competence and skills, the bully seems to have learned to boost these by harassing a suitable victim. One fifth, or 20%, of the other pupils in the class tend to openly side with the bully, while 70% remain silent in fear of retaliation [Olweus, 1978; Björkqvist et al., 1982].

Lagerspetz et al. [1988] and Björkqvist et al. [1992a,c] found adolescent boys to use predominantly direct, especially physical, means of aggression, while adolescent girls preferred indirect means, such as social manipulation, when behaving aggressively toward their same-sex peers.

Being a bully is a stable personality trait, and a bully in one social situation tends to be one in another situation, too [Olweus, 1979]. On the other hand, it has not been shown that a victim in one situation is more likely than others to become victimized in another situation, and a change of environment may accordingly save a victim from further harassment.

There has been much speculation about whether personality traits typical of victims may be identified, but there is no evidence for this so far. Anybody may become a victim, provided that the individual has less power than the tormentor. Studies on bullying in schools have made only one systematic finding regarding proneness to become a victim of bullying: they are significantly weaker than the bullies [e.g., Olweus, 1978]. Regarding harassment among adults, poor verbal defensive skills may be a comparable trait. It is important, however, to keep in mind that low power alone does not explain harassment. The reason why a victim has poor possibilities of defense at a workplace is usually of a hierarchical-organizational nature: e.g., when a person in a higher position harasses a subordinate or when a group wants to get rid of a single competitor [Leymann, 1992].

A popular myth claims that being different from the majority of the group may lead to victimization, but studies have not supported this notion [Olweus, 1978; Björkqvist et al., 1982; Lagerspetz et al., 1982]. As Olweus [1978] points out, since 80% of all people are deviant from the mode in one way or the other, it is hardly likely that deviance is enough as an explanation. Rather, any extraordinary feature of the victim may be identified by the tormentor and used as an excuse, and a rationalization for, the harassment of the victim. Leymann [1992], in his studies on work harassment, claims that the question of who becomes a victim of harassment is completely a matter of coincidence and unlucky circumstances. A parallel may be drawn to research on rape.

Twenty years ago, it was seriously discussed whether victims of rape were careless and provocative, and thereby themselves to blame [e.g., Amir, 1971]. There is, however, no scientific evidence supporting that claim [Conklin, 1986].

It is important to bear in mind that harassment does not start from the victim, but from the tormentor, the same way as torture starts from the torturer and rape from the rapist. Without a tormentor, there will be no harassment. However, risk factors related to harassment are an important object of study.

There are known risk factors in the social group facilitating the process of work harassment. A strict hierarchical organization, an authoritarian atmosphere, and poor communication within the work group are some of these factors [Leymann, 1986, 1992]. This may be compared to the characteristics of the structure of groups resorting to group-think, as described by Janis [1972]. A leader, uncertain of himself and his position, may easily resort to harassment. Johansson [1988] suggests that the leader is always responsible, in one way or another. The leader is either actively participating in the harassment (true in almost 40% of the cases, according to Leymann [1992]), or if not participating, the leader is closing his eyes to what is going on, and therefore responsible.

A series of studies, labeled the "Work Harassment Project," was initiated to investigate the prevalence of work harassment in various types of workplaces in Finland. Aggressor-victim relationships were investigated. Who are experienced as harassing whom, why, and how? Furthermore, factors facilitating the process of harassment were investigated, as well as the consequences of work harassment for the individual in terms of human suffering. The first study in the project focused on work harassment among university employees and is presented below.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

A questionnaire was sent out to 726 employees (401 males, 325 females) of Åbo Akademi University. Three hundred thirty-eight, or 47% (46% of the males and 54% of the females), returned the questionnaire.

Questionnaire

The experience of having been harassed was assessed with the Work Harassment Scale (WHS; 24 items, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$ [Björkqvist et al., 1992b]). Subjects assess how often they feel they have been exposed to 24 types of degrading and oppressing activities by their colleagues during the last half year. They do this on a 5-point scale (0 = never, 1 = seldom, 2 = occasionally, 3 = often, and 4 = very often). In the instructions, it is underlined that these activities must have been clearly experienced as a means of harassment, not as normal communication, or as exceptional occasions. The 24 items, or activities, are: unduly reduced opportunities to express yourself; lies about you told to others; unduly disrupted; being shouted at loudly; unduly criticized; exposure to insulting comments about your private life; isolated; sensitive details of your private life used as pressure; exposure to direct threats; exposure to insinuating glances and negative gestures; exposure to accusations; sneered at; refusal to speak with you; belittling of your opinions; refusal to hear you; treated as non-existent; exposure to words calculated to hurt you; given meaningless tasks; given insulting tasks; malicious ru-

mors spread behind your back; ridiculed in front of others; your work is judged in an incorrect and insulting manner; your sense of judgment has been questioned; exposure to accusations of being mentally disturbed.

Subjects were also asked whether they had seen harassment occur at their workplace. The sex of both tormentor and victim was further inquired about, as well as whether the tormentor was in a position above, below, or at the same level as the victim.

The atmosphere at the workplace, the style of communication within the work group, and the experienced reasons for harassment were measured with individual items. Symptoms of depression and anxiety were identified by help of two subscales from SCL-90 [Derogatis et al., 1973]. In the present study, the internal consistencies of these scales were $\alpha = 0.86$ for depression and $\alpha = 0.73$ for anxiety. The subjective experience of aggressive feelings was investigated by help of the Buss and Durkee [1957] Hostility and Guilt Inventory, $\alpha = 0.70$.

Interviews

Participating subjects, who considered themselves as having been exposed to severe work harassment, were requested to describe what had happened in more detail.

Nineteen such subjects volunteered to do so, and open-ended clinical interviews were conducted on the basis of which qualitative analyses were made.

RESULTS

Females Experience Harassment More Than Males

Figure 1 presents a distribution of WHS scores for males and females. As shown in the figure, women claimed having experienced work harassment more often than men. Almost 70% of the men said that they had never, or almost never (mean WHS score 0–0.25) had been exposed to harassment, while the same was true for only 45% of the women. The mean WHS score for women was 0.50 (S.D. = 0.45) and for men was 0.29 (S.D. = 0.33). This difference was significant [$t(336) = 4.79, P < 0.001$]. The single highest mean score on all items was 2.33. Women scored significantly higher than males on 15 of 24 items.

Subjects were divided into two groups, those scoring above or below 0.75 on WHS. As many as 24.4% of the women had a mean WHS score this high, while this was true for only 16.9% of male employees.

Thirty-two percent of the subjects claimed to have observed others being harassed at their workplace, and 17.8% had seen more than one case.

Of the observed 137 cases (i.e., cases when the respondent him/herself was not a victim), 76 were harassed by a person in a superior position, 44 were harassed by a person with a position equally high as the victim, and 17 were harassed by a person in a lower position. This distribution was statistically significant [$\chi^2(2) = 38.37, P < 0.001$]. No significant difference was found with respect to the sex of the tormentor.

Harassment in Relation to Type of Work

WHS scores were also related to type of work: research, teaching, administration, or economy and service. Most university employees have work tasks which may be classified as belonging to one or more of these categories. Subjects were divided into two

Victimization of harassment: Sex differences

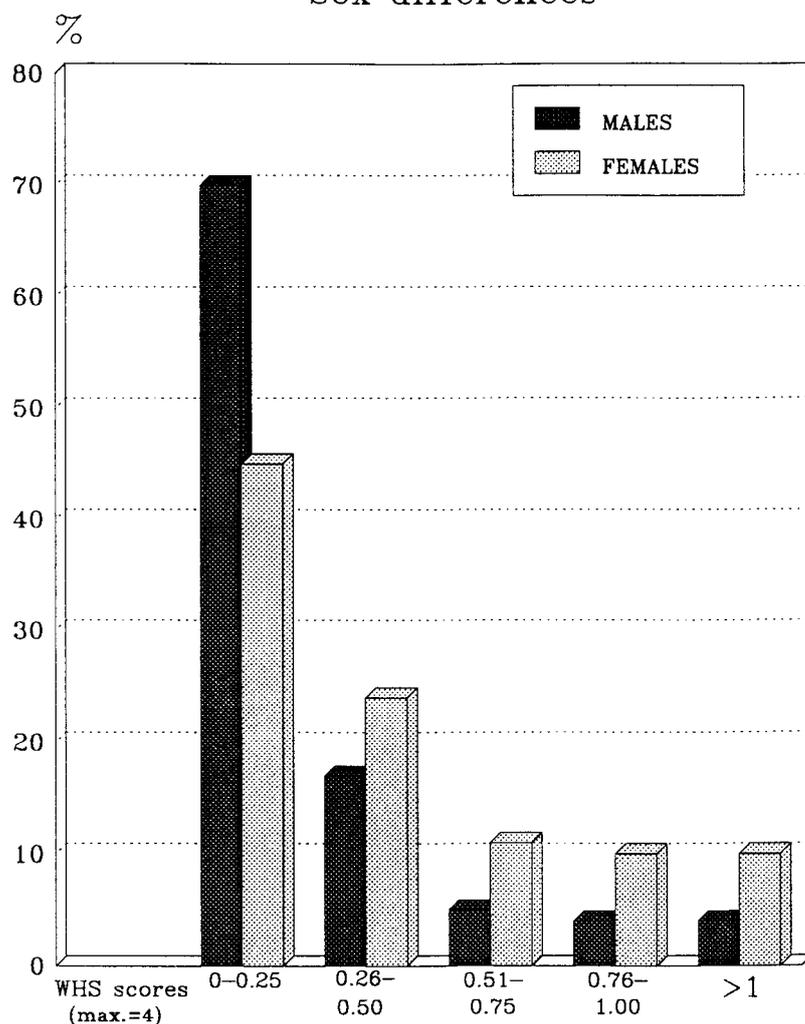


Fig. 1. Distribution of WHS scores among males and females.

groups, those scoring above or below 0.75 on WHS. The relation between type of work and high or low WHS scores is presented in Figure 2.

If administration, economy, and service (a common combination of tasks) is compared with the other three most usual combinations, this category comprised significantly more cases of individuals with WHS scores higher than 0.75 [$\chi^2(1) = 12.46, P < 0.05$].

Another finding seems related to this: subjects who worked office hours (9:00–16:00) belonged significantly more often than others to the high WHS score group [$\chi^2(1) = 12.75, P < 0.001$].

Frequency of harassment related to sphere of activity

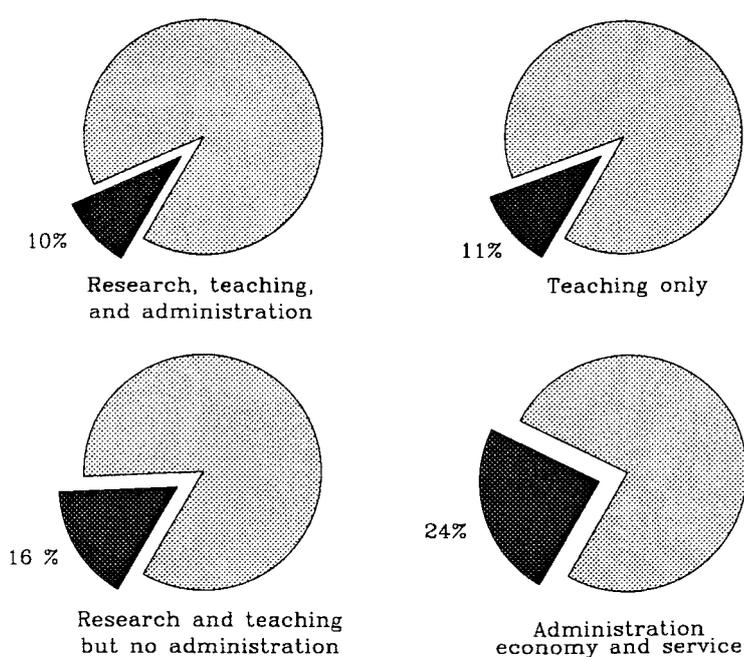


Fig. 2. Proportion of individuals scoring high or low on WHS in relation to type of work.

Experienced Reasons of Harassment

A list of plausible reasons for harassment was presented to the subjects, who could answer either "yes, I think this is a reason," "I do not know," or "no, I do not think it is a reason" to these suggestions. Frequencies of yes, do not know, and no answers to some of these are presented in Figure 3.

It may be noted that envy and competition about jobs and status are mentioned as important, but personality features of both tormentor and victim are also attributed as reasons. Interestingly though, a high percentage of "do not know" answers are given to questions about personality. Victims seem not to be sure of whether their own personality has something to do with the fact that they are harassed or not. The victim's sex is mentioned as a reason in 25% of the cases.

Work Harassment and Mental Health

A multivariate analysis (MANOVA) was conducted in which subjectively experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety (according to SCL-90) and aggressiveness (according to Buss-Durkee) served as dependent variables, while sex and group

Experienced reasons of harassment

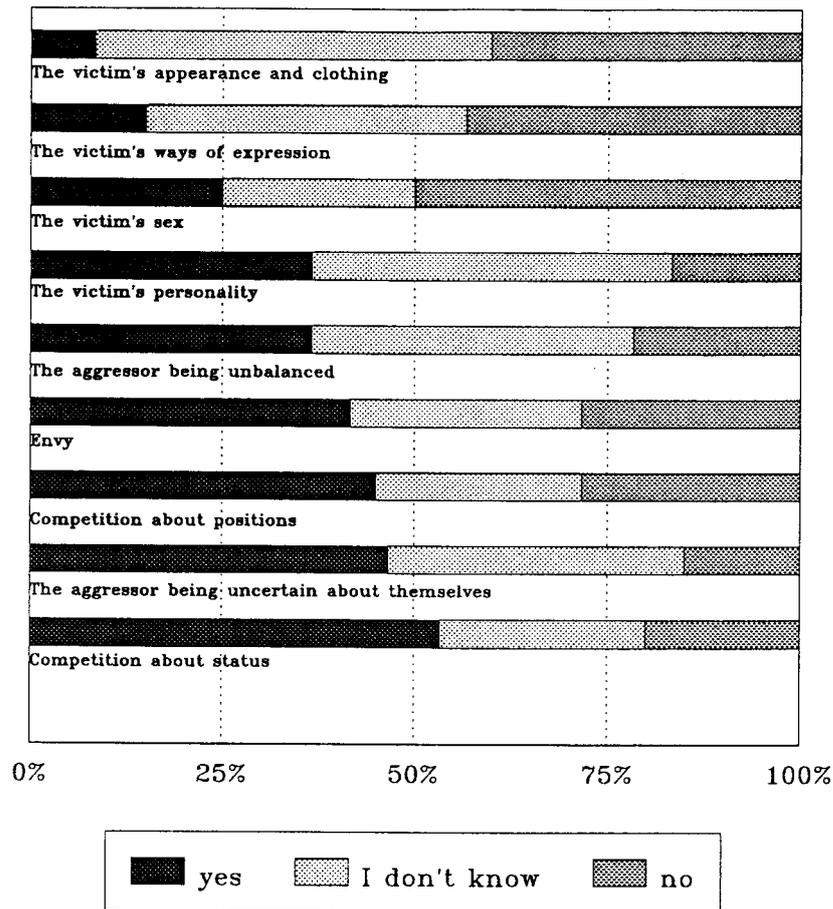


Fig. 3. Experienced reasons of harassment: yes, do not know, or no. Proportion of answers.

belonging, based on high (above 0.75) or low WHS scores, served as independent variables.

The MANOVA with sex (male or female) as independent variable revealed no significant effect. Accordingly, males and females claimed equally often to feel depressed, anxious, and aggressive.

The multivariate effect of group belonging (high or low WHS scores) was significant ($F(3,270) = 15.03, P < 0.001$). The univariate analyses revealed a significant group difference on all three dependent variables: depression [$F(1,272) = 29.54, P < 0.001$], anxiety [$F(1,272) = 13.03, P < 0.001$], and aggression [$F(1,272) = 30.96, P < 0.001$]. Victims scored higher on all three (cf. Fig. 4).

There was a significant interaction between sex and group belonging on aggression:

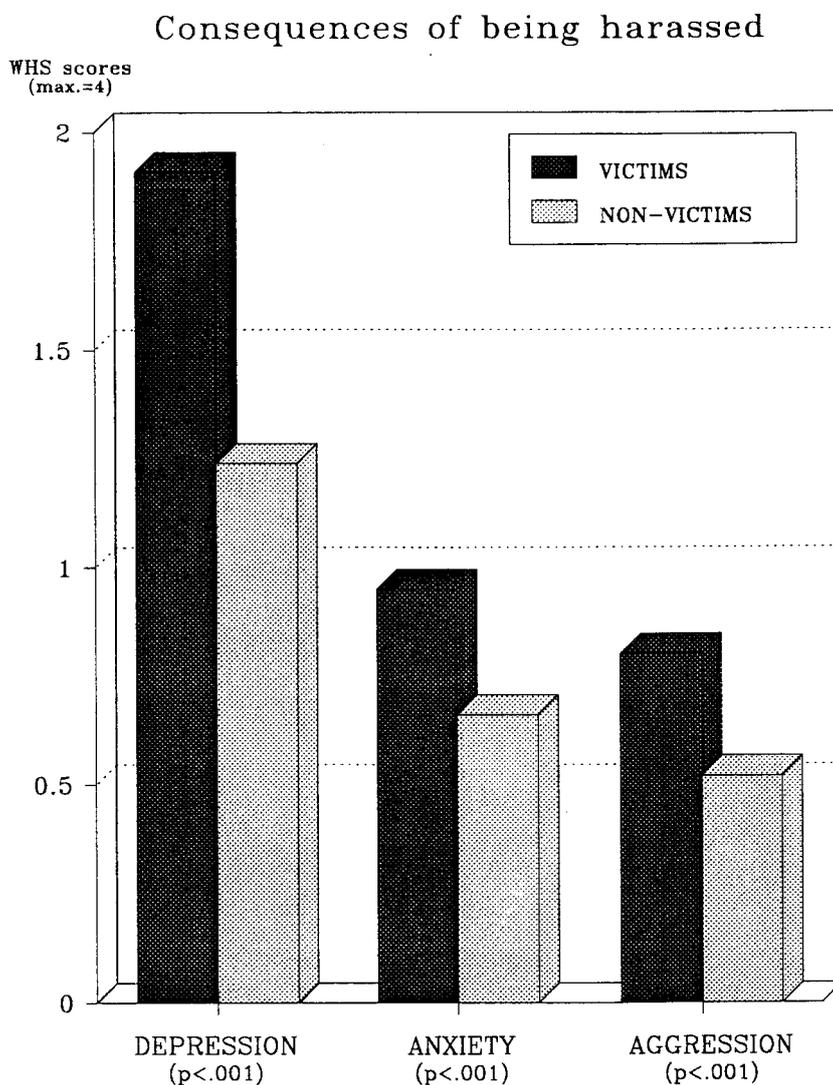


Fig. 4. Work harassment and mental health: depression, anxiety, and aggression among individuals scoring high or low on WHS.

harassed women felt significantly more often aggressive than harassed men [$F(1,272) = 2.82, P < 0.05$].

The subjects were asked whether they had felt depressed, anxious, and aggressive before, or whether these feelings were a consequence of the harassment they had experienced. Victims claimed, with no exception, that the feelings of depression, anxiety, and aggressiveness were a direct consequence of the treatment they had been exposed to. Reports of insomnia, various nervous symptoms, melancholy, apathy, lack of concentration, and sociophobia were given by practically all cases interviewed. These find-

ings fit well with Leymann's [1992] suggestion that victims of work harassment show symptoms of PTSD.

DISCUSSION

Research of this type encounters methodological problems. As far as research on aggression among adolescent subjects is concerned, the peer nomination technique has by far been the most favored one, and for good reasons. The main argument why peer nominations are considered more valid than self reports is the fact that, since aggressive behavior is usually condemned by social norms, people tend to underestimate their own aggressiveness. The first to use peer nominations was the Chicago group [Eron et al., 1972; Lefkowitz et al., 1977; Huesmann and Eron, 1986; Huesmann et al., 1984]. Olweus [1973, 1978, 1979] also used a peer nomination technique, as did Lagerspetz et al. [1982] and Björkqvist et al. [1982] in Finland. The Finnish group developed an instrument for measuring not only direct, but also indirect aggression [Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Björkqvist et al., 1992a]. A discussion of the history and development of the peer nomination/peer rating technique for the measurement of adolescent aggression is presented in Björkqvist et al. [1992c]. Why, then, was not a similar technique used in the present study: all individuals in a work group could have been interviewed and they could have assessed the degree to which every other individual in the group was either harassing, or being harassed by, others. This was not possible, for the sake of anonymity of the subjects. Since employees are economically dependent on their work, they are very reluctant to identify others by name, especially superior colleagues. It may be noted that when subjects were asked whether they had observed others being harassed, 32% mentioned that they had seen such cases, and individuals in superior positions were more often harassing colleagues in lower positions than the opposite. This information would hardly have been gained if subjects had been asked to name those who harassed others. It would have required a very high level of trust. Despite the methodological problems, it was felt that the issue was important enough to be investigated, but interpretations of results have to be made with caution.

Are victims likely to overestimate the degree to which they have been victimized? The answer is, of course, that we do not know. However, it should be remembered that having been exposed to harassment is a hard blow for any individual's self-esteem, and much is required to admit it. It is not certain that we have an overestimation of harassment; the opposite is also possible.

In the present study, 47% of the 726 posted questionnaires were returned. This figure may seem low, but it is quite normal in research of this type, in which sensitive questions are asked. In the study by Einarsen and Raknes [1991], the response rate also was 47%, and in the study by Leymann and Tallgren [1989], it was 51%. Would a higher response rate have affected the results? According to Einarsen and Raknes [1991], who managed to reach and collect information from many subjects who first refused to return the questionnaire, this is not likely. At least in their study, it did not significantly change their results.

Keeping these objections in mind, it may be concluded that what was studied in this particular case was the subjective experience of having been exposed to work harassment and the factors related to it. The main finding was that the experience of harassment was common, and in 19 cases the experience was serious enough for the victims

to want to participate in clinical interviews and a support network to help them to cope with their situation. Severe stress symptoms, reminiscent of PTSD, were encountered in their cases, and high WHS scores were related to high levels of subjectively experienced depression, anxiety, and aggressiveness.

Women felt harassed more often than men. Harassment was more frequent in administrative and service jobs than among professors doing research and teaching. Harassment was most often attributed to envy and competition about jobs and status, and victims felt uncertain about the degree to which personality features were important. Twenty-five percent felt that their sex might be a possible reason.

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