

## **PROFILES OF SOCIAL SKILLS, COPING STRATEGIES, AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT IN MOBBED WORKERS**

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### **Resumen**

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las habilidades sociales, las estrategias de afrontamiento y el apoyo social percibido en una muestra multiocupacional perteneciente a la población activa española compuesta por 2861 trabajadores, empleándose para ello un instrumento específico de medida del acoso laboral (NAQ-R), un cuestionario sobre aspectos sociodemográficos y sociolaborales elaborado *ad hoc*, un instrumento sobre habilidades sociales en el lugar de trabajo elaborado *ad hoc*, una escala sobre estrategias de afrontamiento (*Brief COPE*) y un instrumento que valora la percepción de apoyo social (MSPSS). Se realiza un análisis de conglomerados en dos fases encontrándose la existencia de dos tipologías de trabajadores que han sido denominadas “trabajadores acosados” (n=374) y “trabajadores no acosados” (n=2147). Los resultados obtenidos señalan que los “trabajadores acosados” perciben un menor apoyo social, muestran menores habilidades sociales y emplean de forma más evidente todo tipo de estrategias de afrontamiento frente a los “trabajadores no acosados”. Finalmente, se discuten las implicaciones y utilidad de los perfiles victimológicos obtenidos por parte de los “trabajadores acosados” en relación a sus habilidades sociales, estrategias de afrontamiento y apoyo social percibido.  
PALABRAS CLAVE: *mobbing, acoso laboral, habilidades sociales, estrategias de afrontamiento, apoyo social percibido, perfiles victimológicos.*

### **Abstract**

The goal of this article was to analyze the social skills, coping strategies, and perceived social support in a multi-occupational sample of 2861 workers from the active Spanish population. For this purpose, we used a specific instrument to measure mobbing (NAQ-R), a questionnaire of sociodemographic and sociowork aspects, elaborated *ad hoc*, an instrument to measure social skills in

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the workplace, also elaborated *ad hoc*, a coping strategies scale (Brief COPE), and an instrument that assesses people's perception of social support (MSPSS). A two-stage cluster analysis was performed, revealing two typologies of workers, which we called Type A or "non-mobbed workers" ( $n = 2147$ ) and Type B or "mobbed workers" ( $n = 374$ ). The results obtained indicate that the mobbed workers perceive less social support, display fewer social skills, and clearly use many kinds of coping strategies in comparison to the non-mobbed workers. Lastly, the implications and usefulness of the victimological profiles of the mobbed workers with regard to their social skills, coping strategies, and perceived social support are discussed.

KEY WORDS: *mobbing, social skills, coping strategies, perceived social support, and victimological profiles.*

### Introduction

Currently, *mobbing* in the workplace is considered one of the main psychosocial risks faced by workers during their working life (Pérez-Bilbao, Nogareda, Martín-Daza, & Sancho, 2001). Mobbing is a process that, firstly, alludes to direct or indirect psychological violence that can be wielded over someone; secondly, it refers to a kind of behavior that is performed continuously over time; and thirdly, it describes behaviors of isolation, discrimination, and humiliation that are directed at a worker so he or she will quit the job (Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Garrosa, & Morante, 2004).

Although the data about mobbing are very heterogeneous (Einarsen, 2000; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; González-Trijueque & Graña, 2007; Leymann, 1996), authors are unanimous in considering mobbing a phenomenon with a clearly multi-causal etiology (Einarsen & Hauge, 2006; Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Garrosa, & Morante, 2005; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996) that can have negative consequences, both for the affected workers and their sociofamiliar setting, and even for the work organization itself (Borrás, 2002; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; González de Rivera & Rodríguez-Abuín, 2006; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001, 2002a, 2002b).

Diverse investigations developed to date have focused on determining and analyzing the variables of interest in the dynamics of mobbing (i.e., antecedents, consequences, modulating variables), although investigations of the etiology of mobbing have traditionally been divided into three approaches: 1) the personality characteristics of the mobber and the victim; 2) the characteristics inherent to interpersonal relations within organizations; and 3) the psychosocial

risks of the work setting (Einarsen, 2000). In this article, we shall focus on the aspects related to the first approach; that is, the individual aspects of the victims are the object of study. Thus, from this approach, we propose the existence of a strong link between certain deficiencies or personal lacks and suffering from mobbing behaviors. These characteristics are very important because of their modulating effect between the antecedents and the personal consequences of mobbing (Einarsen, 2000). Some authors describe the victims as paranoid, rigid, compulsive (Brotsky, 1976), lacking social competences—for example, social skills deficit, social anxiety, excessive attention to details, low assertiveness, social aggressiveness, low frustration tolerance, low self-esteem (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire, & Smith, 1998; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), and with higher levels of neuroticism (Vartia, 1996). In line with this, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2001) indicated that the results of the studies carried out show that some victims of mobbing are more sensitive about it or react more dramatically than others when faced with mobbing situations.

However, no definite conclusions have been reached about the typical coping behavior of mobbing victims (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001; Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Oakland & Ostell, 1996). Nevertheless, it has been reported that, at first, most mobbed workers adopt an active stance, trying to solve the problem (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001). But, as the victims come to see the ineffectiveness of their strategy, they start to use other strategies, among which are a sense of humor (Keashly, Trott, & McLean, 1994), seeking support from close people or from syndicate organizations (O'Moore et al., 1998), or simply adopting a passive stance about the problem (Rayner, 1997). Quitting the work organization is also very common (Niedl, 1996; Rayner, 1997) and, on the contrary, the victim is very unlikely to directly confront the mobber (O'Moore et al., 1998).

In this study, we have two goals: The first consists of verifying whether, using the variables of perceived mobbing at work and the sociodemographic and sociowork variables considered most relevant, we will find two differentiated typologies of workers in the work setting, using a representative multi-occupational sample of the active Spanish population. Secondly, we will compare the differences in sociowork skills, coping strategies, and perceived social support in the typologies obtained from the active population. We propose that mobbed workers more frequently use diverse coping strategies when faced with work problems and, at the same time, they display fewer social interaction skills and they perceive less social support than non-mobbed workers.

## Method

### *Participants*

For this study, there was a total sample of 2861 participants from the active Spanish population, of both sexes (55.4% female and 44.6% male), ages between 16 and 67 years, mean age 34.26 years ( $SD = 12.04$ ). In fact, 51.7% of the participants were not older than 30. Of the total sample, 97.5% participants were Spaniards. Regarding participants' civil status, most of them were single and had no partner (49.4%), whereas 8.8% were single with a partner, 36% were married, 4.9% were separated/divorced, and 0.9% were widowed. Of the sample, 74.6% considered themselves as middle social class, and, regarding the educational level, 43.1% had higher studies (university studies), 39.7% middle studies (i.e., high school, professional training, pre-university studies), and the remaining 17.2% had primary studies or incomplete studies.

### *Procedure*

Two-hundred-fifty students from the Psychology Faculty of the Complutense University of Madrid, who were studying courses in the Department of Clinical Psychology, and who wanted to participate in research on mobbing, acted as collaborators. They were duly trained in the data collecting procedure; each student coordinated the management of 16 protocols that they handed out to people from their environment who belonged to the active population. This was the only condition to be considered. All the members of the definite sample participated voluntarily and confidentially in this study. The protocols were anonymous and had simple introductory instructions.

Initially, 4000 protocols were handed out, using subjects from the active Spanish population as a study universe. The response rate was 77.7%, that is, a total of 3111 protocols were returned, of which 250 were rejected because they had faulty data, had been completed randomly, or had low response consistency. This latter aspect was detected by means of four items of similar content that had been included in the battery so that the protocol could be eliminated if any of these items were responded to inversely/contradictorily.

### *Instruments*

All the participants filled in a sociodemographic and sociowork data sheet, elaborated ad hoc, and completed the *Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised* (NAQ-R, Einarsen & Raknes, 1997), a questionnaire of sociowork skills elaborated ad hoc (González-Trijueque, 2007), the brief coping strategies

questionnaire (Brief COPE, Carver, 1997), and the *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS, Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988).

The sociodemographic and sociowork questionnaire had 25 items referring to sociodemographic aspects (i.e., age, sex, nationality, civil status, educational level, social class) and sociowork aspects (i.e., amount of time working, number of jobs, workday, work sector, number of workers, type of contract, syndicate affiliation, antecedents of sick leave, current sick leave).

The NAQ-R (*Negative Acts Questionnaire - Revised*) is an instrument that divides the negative behaviors perceived at the workplace into two subscales, personal harassment and mobbing, according to the original studies. It is a Likert-type scale on which the respondents rate the frequency with which they experience each behavior described (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). It has satisfactory psychometric properties, with internal stability indexes (Cronbach's alpha) higher than .80 and negative correlations with mental/physical health variables ( $r = -.42$ ), workers' general performance ( $r = -.24$ ), degree of job satisfaction ( $r = -.44$ ), and degree of health and psychosocial well-being ( $r = -.52$ ). It also has positive correlations with the intention of quitting the current job ( $r = .36$ ) and the presence of psychosomatic complaints ( $r = .32$ ) (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). In the present study, we decided to include an item related to sexual harassment. Therefore, in addition to the subscales of psychological harassment and mobbing, the factor analysis performed yielded a third factor, called physical harassment, which included this item of sexual harassment and an item of physical threats.

Likewise, it was deemed necessary to design an assessment instrument of social skills at the workplace, to evaluate aspects related to assertiveness, fear of negative evaluation, social avoidance, and social desirability. The final result was a 17-item Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always or very frequently*), with a (Cronbach's alpha) reliability index of .73 (González-Trijueque, 2007).

The brief coping strategy questionnaire (Brief COPE) was designed for the general appraisal of coping strategies and to assess the different ways that people act in moments of stress, providing information about 14 different strategies: 1) active coping, 2) planning, 3) seeking instrumental social support, 4) seeking emotional social support, 5) religion, 6) acceptance, 7) denial, 8) consumption of alcohol/drugs, 9) humor, 10) self-distraction, 11) disengagement, 12) venting, 13) reframing, and 14) self-blame. This scale has good psychometric properties (Perczek, Carver, Price, & Pozo, 2000), with an internal consistency index of .91 in the Spanish adaptation employed (González-Trijueque, 2007).

The MSPSS (*Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support*) of Zimet et al. (1988) is an instrument for the subjective assessment of social support. It is a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*), easy to use and cheap, due to its brevity. It also has good psychometric properties, with reliability indexes .88 (Zimet, Powell, Farley, Werkman, & Berkoff, 1990), and it provides information about the three different sources of perceived social support: 1) social support provided by the family, 2) social support provided by friends, and 3) social support provided by significant others (i.e., emotional partner).

## Results

### *Cluster analysis*

We classified the participants in this study by means of a two-stage cluster analysis. Compared to other traditional cluster techniques, this one has a series of advantages that make it more functional (i.e., treatment of variables of different measurement scales). The procedure provides the descriptive statistics and frequencies of the clusters for the final groups, creating a variable that identifies the cluster to which each particular case belongs (Pardo & Ruiz, 2002). With this procedure, we obtained two clearly differentiated clusters, one called Type A, which groups a total of 2147 workers with no mobbing problems, and Type B, with 374 workers who had difficulties related to situations of mobbing in the workplace.

After grouping the subjects, we performed various Pearson chi-square tests to establish differences in the proportions of categorical variables that made up the clusters. We also carried out various Student's *t*-tests for independent samples to verify the differences in means with regard to the continuous variables analyzed.

Regarding the categorical variables, we found significant differences in sex, work sector, syndicate affiliation, interference in personal life, less interest in current profession, possibility of changing jobs, antecedents of sick leave, current sick leave, previous specialized treatments and current treatment (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Significant differences in the categorical variables of the clusters obtained

		Clusters		$\chi^2_{(1)}$
		Type A (in percent)	Type B (in percent)	
Sex	Male	45.6 (n = 979)	39.6 (n = 135)	4.679*
	Female	54.4 (n = 1168)	60.4 (n = 226)	
Sector	Public	76.4 (n = 1641)	66.8 (n = 250)	15.618***
	Private	23.6 (n = 506)	33.2 (n = 124)	
Syndicate Affiliation	Yes	12.7 (n = 273)	22.7 (n = 85)	26.204***
	No	87.3 (n = 1874)	77.3 (n = 289)	
Interference in private life	Yes	45.8 (n = 983)	68.2 (n = 255)	63.931***
	No	54.2 (n = 1164)	31.8 (n = 119)	
Less interest in profession	Yes	30 (n = 645)	56.4 (n = 211)	98.805***
	No	70 (n = 1502)	43.6 (n = 163)	
Change of profession	Yes	47.1 (n = 1011)	64.7 (n = 242)	39.543***
	No	52.9 (n = 1136)	35.3 (n = 132)	
Current sick leave	Yes	2.5 (n = 53)	21.9 (n = 82)	42.385***
	No	97.5 (n = 2092)	78.1 (n = 292)	
Previous sick leave	Yes	52.4 (n = 1126)	70.6 (n = 264)	92.465***
	No	47.6 (n = 1021)	29.4 (n = 110)	
Previous psychological treatments	Yes	16.2 (n = 347)	37.4 (n = 140)	156.723***
	No	83.8 (n = 1800)	62.6 (n = 234)	

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

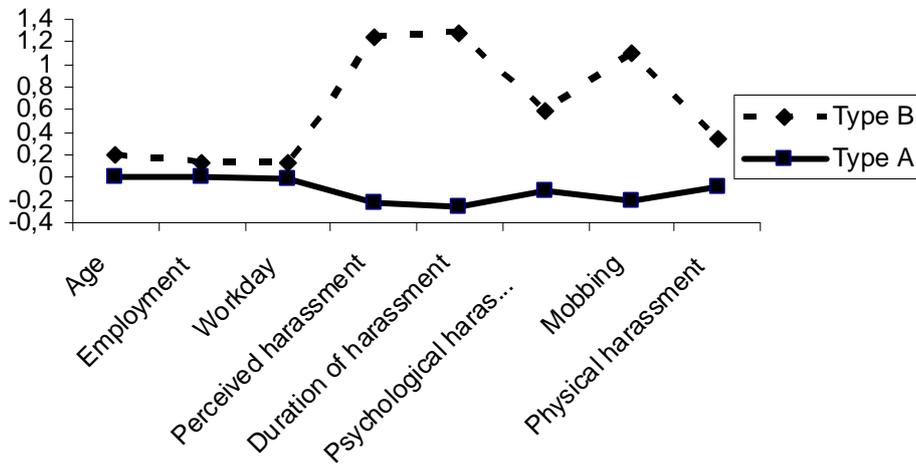
Regarding the quantitative variables taken into account, we found no significant differences between the clusters in age, amount of time at current job, and duration of workday; however, significant differences were found in perceived total harassment, duration of harassment, mobbing, psychological harassment, and physical harassment, always higher in Type B cluster than in Type A (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and statistical analysis of the clusters obtained

CHARACTERISTICS		Type A ( <i>n</i> = 2147)		Type B ( <i>n</i> = 374)		Statistical analysis	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Df</i>
Sociodemographic Work	Age	34.40	12.11	36.56	11.26	-3.39	534.8
	Time in current job (years)	7.98	9.80	9.13	9.65	-2.11	251.9
	Duration of workday (hours)	7.68	1.96	7.96	1.67	-2.85	569.5
Mobbing in the workplace	Total perceived harassment (NAQ-R)	30.46	7.71	52.33	17.11	24.28	399.7***
	Duration of perceived harassment (months)	0	0	19.81	26.01	14.73	373***
	Mobbing	9.54	3.29	15.19	5.56	19.05	419.6***
	Psychological harassment	19.88	5.30	35.8	13.14	23.93	394.4***
	Physical harassment	2.07	0.39	2.64	1.43	-7.69	382.8***

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Lastly, we standardized these variables (in *z*-scores) in order to elaborate a graphic profile of the clusters (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Profile of the inter-cluster continuous variables

*Inter-cluster profiles: social skills, coping strategies, and perceived social support*

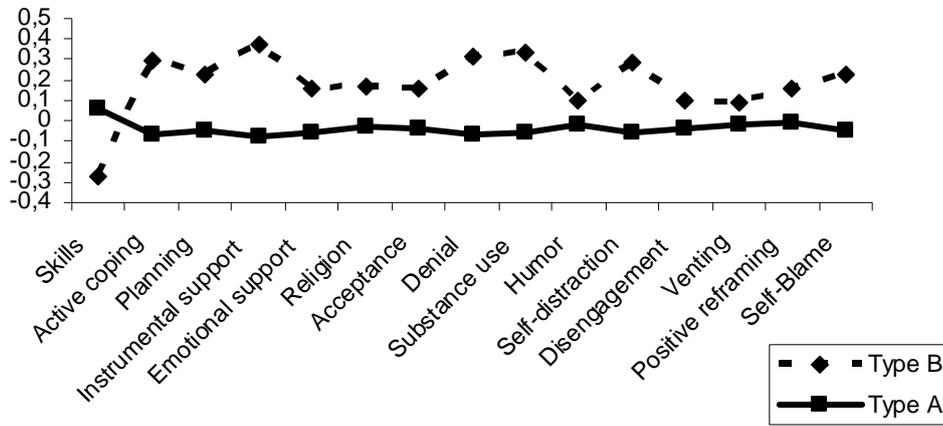
Once we had standardized the dependent variables, we performed several repeated measures analyses of variance to study the effect of one or more factors when at least one of them is a within-subject factor (all its levels are applied to the subjects). This procedure provides a profile (in z-scores) that visually displays the interaction between the factors, showing the differences found as a function of three effects: (a) fixed or principal, (b) interaction, and (c) simple. The results are displayed in Tables 3 and 4 with the means and standard deviations of the groups resulting from the between-subject variable at the different levels of the within-subject variable.

As the sociowork skills scale elaborated ad hoc for the present study has only a single scoring level (total score of the questionnaire), we decided to take into account this level along with those corresponding to the coping strategies questionnaire and thus obtain a profile of both clusters regarding what has been called personal work resources. In Table 3 are displayed the descriptive statistics of the analysis of both clusters under the different levels, both of the ad hoc sociowork skills scale (one level) and the coping strategies scale (14 levels), and in Figure 2 is displayed the graphic representations in z-scores.

**Table 3.** Inter-cluster differences in personal work resources

		<b>CLUSTERS</b> <b>(between-subject factor)</b>	
		<b>Type A</b> <i>(n = 2147)</i> <i>M (SD)</i>	<b>Type B</b> <i>(n = 374)</i> <i>M (SD)</i>
<b>LEVELS OF PERSONAL WORK RESOURCES</b> <b>(within-subject factor)</b>	<b>Sociowork skills</b>	44.06(8.01)***	40.80(8.80)***
	<b>Active coping</b>	4.85(1.70)***	5.43(1.58)***
	<b>Planning</b>	4.81(1.76)***	5.54(1.59)***
	<b>Instrumental support</b>	4.45(1.68)***	4.85(1.58)***
	<b>Emotional support</b>	4.29(1.72)***	4.71(1.58)***
	<b>Religion</b>	2.94(1.50)**	3.23(1.65)**
	<b>Acceptance</b>	4.69(1.72)*	4.93(1.66)*
	<b>Denial</b>	2.82(1.30)***	3.57(1.80)***
	<b>Substances</b>	2.29(0.86)***	2.56(1.16)***
	<b>Humor</b>	3.50(1.56)**	3.80(1.77)**
	<b>Self-Distraction</b>	3.76(1.59)***	4.45(1.60)***
	<b>Disengagement</b>	2.93(1.25)***	3.53(1.52)***
	<b>Venting</b>	3.93(1.54)***	4.65(1.52)***
	<b>Reframing</b>	4.71*(1.71)*	4.97(1.73)**
<b>Self-blame</b>	3.62(1.55)***	4.16(1.72)***	

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



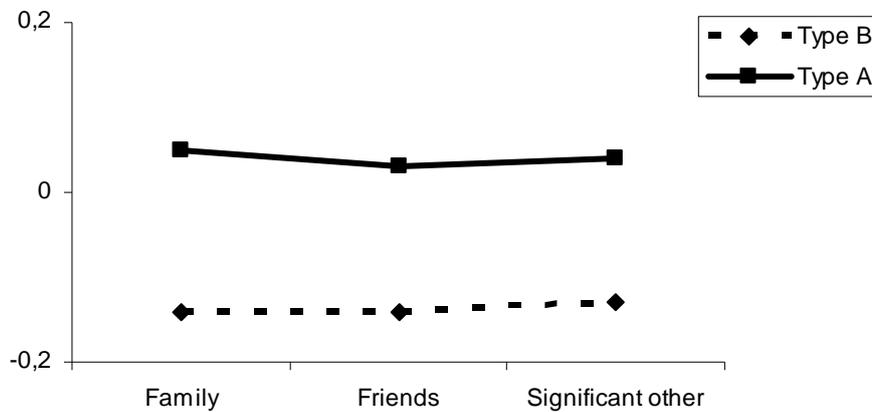
**Figure 2.** Inter-cluster differences in personal work resources

In Table 4 are shown the descriptive statistics of the analysis of the clusters with regard to perceived social support (3 levels) and Figure 3 shows the graphic representation in z-scores.

**Table 4.** Inter-cluster differences in perceived social support

		CLUSTER (between-subject factor)	
		Type A (n = 2147) M (SD)	Type B (n = 374) M (SD)
LEVELS OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT (within-subject factor)	Family support	10.98 (4.71)***	18.78 (5.76)***
	Support of friends	19.05 (4.85)***	18.00 (5.70)***
	Support of significant others	20.15 (5.16)***	18.49 (5.69)***

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Figure 3.** Inter-cluster differences in perceived social support

### Discussion

Starting with a typology distinction of the active population based on cluster analysis of three groups of variables (sociodemographic, sociowork, and mobbing), we analyzed the differences in the levels of social skills, coping strategies, and perceived social support between mobbed workers and non-mobbed workers.

The results show that the mobbed workers perceive less social support, an important aspect when performing an assessment and/or a psychological intervention, as noted in other studies (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; O'Moore et al., 1998). These data are logical, because the harm inflicted by mobbing on the victims transcends their individual sphere and produces a chain of collateral damage of enormous magnitude. The social and familiar environment of the mobbed person will suffer the consequences of having a close person who is unmotivated and who may suffer some kind of problem and/or psychological disorder (Piñuel, 2001).

We also found a lack of social competence in the victims of mobbing, similar to that found in other studies (Coyne et al., 2000; O'Moore et al., 1998; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), a deficit that is essential because, in order to become adequately adapted to their work setting, people need personal and social competences (Hulin & Judge, 2003).

Regarding the coping strategies observed in the mobbed workers, and considering that this concept involves both behavioral and the cognitive efforts to deal with the internal or external demands of a situation perceived as stressful (Dewe & Guest, 1990; Folkman, 1984), we point out that the victims used the coping strategies we assessed more frequently than did the non-mobbed workers, and these results are similar to those obtained in other investigations (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Keashly et al., 1994; O'Moore et al., 1998). Of all the strategies that mobbed people use frequently, planning, denial, self-distraction, disengagement, venting, and self-blaming are particularly noteworthy.

The results obtained reveal the importance of assessing the vulnerability of mobbing victims in order to determine the modulating effect of these variables on the harm caused, because some individual variables allow people to more effectively resist conflicts or perceived threats to their personal well-being (Einarsen, 2000), although we should always contemplate two possibilities: 1) the individual's status prior to the harm, and 2) the fact that harm aggravates the prior status (González-Trijueque, 2007).

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