

COLLECTIVE FICTIONAL STRATEGY OF REVERSE MOBBING: A NARRATIVE-BASED RESEARCH

Suzan URGAN¹

¹Assoc. Prof. Dr. 19 Mayıs University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative
Sciences, Department of Insurance and Actuarial Sciences,
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9280-4174

ABSTRACT

Reverse mobbing is one of the issues that profoundly impacts employee relations in organizations. It is a form of mobbing inflicted by subordinates on their superiors, either individually or in an organized manner. Reverse mobbing is difficult to legally prove. The persistence of conceptual problems demonstrates that the issue has not been fully addressed and solutions have not been found. This study examines a case of reverse mobbing, which has taken on a complex systemic nature, particularly when managers are targeted. For this purpose, the subject is analyzed using a narrative-based methodology, and potential outcomes are explored using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, applied to data obtained through narrative analysis of reverse mobbing, which focused on the manager and was perpetrated collectively by his/her subordinates, revealed the following themes: informal alliance power and organized manipulation, systematic erosion of institutional authority, psychological and physical destruction, informal expression strategies, the use of timing as a manipulation strategy, contradictions in expression, and distortion of reality. These themes appear to align with the elements of reverse mobbing found in mobbing theory. Furthermore, the data obtained demonstrate that in reverse mobbing, due to its nature, it is difficult to decipher the patterns and legally defend individuals. Therefore, it is crucial to uncover the factors that occur within organizations and influence their activities through techniques such as narrative analysis. The harmful effects of informal structures, which combine to engage in reverse mobbing and negatively impact organizational life, deserve frequent coverage in the literature. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the harms inflicted by these structures cannot be resolved through routine procedural practices.

Keywords: Mobbing, Reverse Mobbing, Storytelling, Collective Bullying, Informal Organization

Introduction

Studies on workplace bullying often portray managers and peers as the primary perpetrators. However, bullying targeting managers occurs within organizations. This bullying, which targets managers, is rarely covered (Patterson et al., 2018: 32). According to Zapf et al. (2008), 9.7% of managers experience mobbing (Doe, 2023). Therefore, reverse mobbing is defined as an act of intimidation by a subordinate or a group of subordinates that aims to deliberately undermine the hierarchical status of a superior through psychological

harassment due to the behavior directed at them, personal disagreements, or policy (Uysal and Gedik, 2017: 277). The difficulty of proving the case, the inadequacy of witness testimony, and the fact that unanimous testimony is directed against the manager put managers in very difficult situations. It has also been observed that maliciously targeted employees are successful in their individual or collective bullying (Özgün & Altundağ, 2017). Factors that lead to reverse mobbing include personal disagreements, conflicts within the hierarchical structure, lack of acceptance of the manager, desire to be appointed instead of the manager, perceptions of injustice, desire for promotions and rewards, attempts to strengthen the current position against the successor manager, and lobbying (Mercan, 2022).

A review of studies in the literature highlights studies that have employed strategies such as making managers a vulnerable target (Branch et al., 2007), assuming the victim role (Einarsen, 1999), challenging the organizational balance of power (Patterson et al., 2018), and deliberate intimidation (Çetin et al., 2023). These strategies aim to intimidate the target, disrupt their work life, erode their corporate identity, or drive them out of the organization (Einarsen, 1999).

This study presents a case of reverse mobbing, illustrated through fictionalized projections of real characters and the patterns of collective mobbing strategies they employed. It highlights how manipulation by subordinates neutralizes institutional authority and how the informal structure they create transforms the organization to their liking. This study is significant because reverse mobbing against a manager isolates the manager institutionally, leads to psychological collapse, and demonstrates the extent to which unethical alliances can exert their power.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of reverse mobbing is discussed within the conceptual framework. Furthermore, a fictional collective reverse mobbing narrative is presented.

Reverse Mobbing

According to Leynman (1996: 167-168), mobbing is defined as psychological violence, psychological terror, harm, and harassment. In this context, a specific individual is chosen as the target, and systematic and deliberate negative behavior is displayed towards that person (Urgan, 2025: 1-2). Within the framework of mobbing, psychological terror perpetrated by employers or other employees in the workplace can be targeted by superiors, subordinates, or employees of equal rank (Tınaz, 2006: 1). Mobbing inflicted by higher-level

employees on lower-level employees is called downward mobbing, while mobbing inflicted by lower-level employees on higher-level employees is called bottom-up mobbing. Bottom-up mobbing is rare and is more commonly practiced in groups (Gürbüz and Gürdal, 2019: 37-38). Bottom-up mobbing is also called reverse mobbing. It refers to the deliberate acts of intimidation committed by a subordinate or a group of subordinates against their superiors (Çetin et al., 2023: 112). In mobbing, managers are usually the perpetrators, but as a reality in organizational life, they become the targets in reverse mobbing. The bullying here is created by a power imbalance (Patterson et al., 2018: 32).

Power and interdependencies create harmony within organizational activities. Within such a balance, managers' power is generally derived from their roles. The legitimacy of a manager's authority depends on the perception of others. Under certain circumstances, employees may exhibit organized behaviors to undermine a manager's power. This can leave the manager vulnerable. A manager, particularly one with limited power to punish, is forced to both manage the situation and become an obvious target. Bullying methods begin with humiliation, gossip, or inappropriate comments. Furthermore, various manipulations target the balance of power within the organization, and the chosen target is eroded (Branch et al., 2007). This bullying manifest itself in four stages: aggressive behavior, bullying, stigmatization, and severe trauma (Einarsen, 1999: 19). Another strategic method is initiated by the group through prejudicial speech. In the second stage, the victim is isolated, in the third stage, they are openly harassed, and in the final stage, they are destroyed. While this concept of destruction may not be a death sentence, it can have devastating consequences, such as driving someone to suicide, elimination from work, or transferring them from one's current institution to another (Einarsen, 1999: 19-20). As mentioned above, reverse mobbing, which can produce such negative consequences, is a reality and is seen in organizations. It disrupts work discipline and affects targeted individuals in many ways, both materially and emotionally. It cannot be fully expressed through the interactions of the organizational structure. A case of reverse mobbing occurring in this context is presented in a narrative.

A Fictional Collective Reverse Mobbing Narrative

Nesrin Hanım had been working at this workplace for four years. She worked as a maid. However, she also occasionally requested clerical work, and she performed it with great skill and motivation. She had always disliked cleaning, but since it was a permanent position, she had to do it. Another employee, Emel Hanım, had come to the workplace within the last

year. Her previous employer had experienced problems, and her manager had transferred her. According to her, similar problems had occurred at the previous employers. She was quite justified in describing these problems. Other employees weren't working, and she was constantly being blamed. Her outward appearance was persuasive. Whether the facts of the situation were known or not, people would assume she was right. Indeed, problems arose at this workplace as well. Emel Hanım claimed to be highly skilled and a university graduate, and began requesting a position from the management based on her skills. There were no vacancies or jobs that matched her needs. However, the management had assured her that if such a vacancy arose, she would be considered. But Emel Hanım couldn't bear waiting; she was never convinced. She had to be given a desk job. Then even the daily routines began to be carried out with great noise, and the smallest problems became apparent. Hardly a day went by without chaos and confusion. She had set a specific work area for herself and never strayed from it. She didn't listen to anyone. If anyone reacted negatively to her, her husband had very influential acquaintances, and she would establish the necessary contacts. The other staff members had learned this very well. At this workplace, there was also a man named İlhan Bey who handled finances. He had also come from another workplace. It's important to mention the location of his work, as it was one of the farthest units from the headquarters. It was also known as a place where people experiencing problems at other workplaces were often sent. İlhan Bey was very dedicated to his own work. However, he had previously aspired to be the manager of that workplace. He was also very keen to offer spiritual guidance. He had a particular sensitivity to those experiencing problems at home. Having lived apart from his family for many years, he offered religious counsel to those experiencing family problems. He loved caring for the staff as much as he loved his own work. He made it his duty to convey the problems of female staff to his superiors. In this respect, he considered himself an authority. Around the same time as Emel Hanım, a new administrative manager, Erdem Bey, was appointed to the workplace. Erdem Bey had also worked technically within the community and was promoted to a higher position. Erdem Bey began working diligently to prove himself. He was striving to influence every aspect of the workplace and establish authority. However, there was a problem: Emel Hanım completely ignored him. They had lived in the same neighborhood and the families were acquaintances. Therefore, Emel Hanım would not listen to Erdem Bey and would not hesitate to shout at him, no matter what he said. Even verbal warnings from Erdem Bey were ineffective. Emel Hanım completely ignored him. When Erdem Bey realized he couldn't handle Emel Hanım, he appealed to his superiors, both verbally and in writing, but to no avail. Every attempt he made stalled. It was clear that

his own authority was crumbling. Although she had repeatedly explained this to her manager at the workplace, that manager had no authority over the personnel. Moreover, Emel Hanım ignored him completely. Things continued this way, sometimes leading to arguments and sometimes to shouting and screaming. Even so, a balance was maintained. That was until one Monday, when the manager of another workplace in the same area came to the manager's office. The manager's account contained a shocking story. A letter had been written to this manager by Nesrin Hanım. She had also received a phone call from an anonymous caller. The subject in both the letter and the phone call were the same. Nesrin Hanım was being bullied at this workplace. She was being subjected to both immoral things and workplace bullying. It turned out that Erdem Bey was the perpetrator. The manager, hearing this, was quite surprised. She was also a woman, and her office was across from Nesrin Hanım's. When asked, "Why didn't you tell me this the day of the incident?" she replied, "I told İlhan Bey, he knows." Furthermore, according to her own statement, nearly a year had passed since the incident. She had only felt it necessary to mention it now. Another interesting point was that Nesrin Hanım had qualified for a promotion by taking an exam. This promotion could have been hampered by a negative opinion from her immediate superior, Erdem Bey. According to her, Erdem Bey, who was struggling to get work done, had expressed this in a meeting. Another nuance was that İlhan Bey and Erdem Bey were completely at odds. Existing tasks were being carried out in some way, but the problems between them were noticeable. Furthermore, Erdem Bey had occasionally complained about other matters to his superiors, but he hadn't put them in writing. Despite all this, Emel Hanım, Nesrin Hanım, and İlhan Bey had become a close-knit group. They were now together constantly. They went to lunch together, spent time together during breaks, and even helped each other out, even though their work was separate. So much so that, despite working office work, İlhan Bey would sometimes help them by grabbing a cleaning product. One day, İlhan Bey openly declared, "Erdem Bey will be expelled from here; we don't want him." They no longer hesitated to openly display their hostility. Because all of Erdem Bey's appeals had gone unanswered, he couldn't explain his concerns. Seeing this clearly, they didn't hesitate to act recklessly. Letters addressed to Nesrin Hanım were even sent to other institutions, alleging that Erdem Bey had made inappropriate advances and harassed her. When Nesrin Hanım received no response from these letters, she filed another legal complaint approximately six months later. None of this was done through a normal process. In fact, if Nesrin Hanım had simply filed a petition with her employer when the alleged incidents against her occurred, everything would have been resolved. However, she hadn't considered such a course of action. Approximately a year had

passed since the alleged incident, and another year and a half had passed since they had filed a legal claim. She had chosen to apply at this timely pace. They hadn't followed a standard process; they had pressed the button simultaneously through letters and phone calls. Moreover, the letters to other institutions were constructed in a professional manner far beyond the style Nesrin Hanım could write. Nesrin Hanım's young age and education precluded her from using certain terms. Legally, she had been unable to provide concrete evidence in her application. Three of them had testified separately at different times. These statements contradicted each other's timing and logical constructs. Another significant factor appeared to be their failure to convince Müzeyyen Hanım, the last to arrive at the workplace. Müzeyyen Hanım refused to confirm their statements. Thus, Nesrin Hanım's case yielded no legal result and was dismissed. However, the completion of the legal process made no difference. Erdem Bey was exhausted. His family, social, and professional life were severely affected. His hair turned white in a week. His shoulders slumped. His face turned into that of an old man, and anxiety settled into that face. He began to live in a state of anxiety, as if he were about to be accused at any moment. Although he tried to extricate himself from this situation, he went to another workplace. This group acted so professionally that the plot and structure of events were shocking. Emel Hanım had experienced similar situations in previous workplaces. Letters written by the same person, mysterious phone calls, and their mutual witness testimony in the legal proceedings put Erdem Hanım in an inextricable position. How could Erdem Bey prevent Nesrin Hanım's promotion? In fact, Emel Hanım was taking the same promotion exam a year later, and would he do the same to her? So, Erdem Bey had to be dismissed from his workplace. They achieved this with what they considered a clever strategy. They planned their timing and launched three separate operations. They never followed the usual procedure here. They advanced slowly, using external networks. Nesrin Hanım is where she wants to be today, and Emel Hanım is waiting for the exam day. While İlhan Bey made several attempts to get other staff to connect with him, the newly appointed administrative manager's considerable experience prevented him from leaving his office. Ultimately, a concocted evil group was formed and they achieved their desired outcome. The most positive outcome here is that the legal process is conducted with concrete evidence. However, until all this is proven, Erdem Bey's reputation is ruined. His professional and family life are in disarray. Although he started his career as an administrative manager and personnel manager in his unit, he couldn't accept the fact that he was being arrested for organized evil.

Method

This study is qualitative research using a narrative design to examine how organized mobbing affects an individual's life. It is presented using a methodology based on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative research principles and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. Storytelling research, also referred to as narrative research, is formed by human experiences connected to life (Uğuz Arsu and Tekindal, 2021: 89). The research population consists of personnel working in a public institution. The sample consists of characters selected through purposive sampling based on the observed storyline that was transformed into a narrative. Data were obtained through direct observation in the organizational setting. The researcher can also be described as a participant observer. According to Finlay (2021), the researcher reflects his or her own subjective impact (Hınız and Yavuz, 2023: 391). The obtained data were evaluated through reflective thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021) list the steps of thematic analysis as data recognition, coding, creation of initial themes, development and revision of themes, clarification, definition, and naming of themes, and interpretation of analysis results (Hınız and Yavuz, 2023: 395). While creating codes, they focused on content such as expression strategies and psychological distress and exclusion. These codes were used to develop themes. The themes were defined descriptively, considering their internal consistency and their relationship to the text. The themes were further supported with sample sentences selected from the text and presented as findings. The findings obtained from the analyses are presented below.

Findings

The following themes emerged within the framework of thematic analysis. These themes were structured around codes extracted from the event patterns in the narrative text.

1. Informal Alliance Power and Organized Manipulation

- *Description:* Over time, Emel Hanım, İlhan Bey, and Nesrin Hanım formed an alliance and acted in an organized manner against the authority.
- *Example:* "They were no longer afraid to openly display their hostility."
- *Comment:* This theme reflects how the balance of power was transformed through informal relationships and how a union that disregarded authority created a crisis within the organization.

2. The Systematic Undermining of Institutional Authority

- *Description:* Mr. Erdem's authority in office has been weakened by dynamics such as being ignored to avoid causing problems and the failure of institutional appeals.
- *Example:* "All of Mr. Erdem's appeals were left unanswered."
- *Comment:* The lack of institutional authority and lack of support mechanisms has left the individual vulnerable and disempowered.

3. Psychological and Physical Destruction

- *Description:* The process Mr. Erdem experienced not only affected his work functions but was also physically and mentally draining.
- *Example:* "His hair turned gray in a week. His shoulders slumped."
- *Comment:* This theme points to the invisible dimensions of mobbing that can have traumatic effects on the individual.

4. Informal Expression Strategies

- *Description:* Documents such as letters, phone calls, and petitions were used to influence institutional decision-making mechanisms.
- *Example:* "Letters are being sent to other institutions as if they were written by Nesrin Hanım..."
- *Comment:* This strategy refers to the manipulation of organizational communication to exert pressure on individuals.

5. Using Timing as a Manipulation Tool

- *Description:* The timing of events in the story was deliberately planned; for example, legal applications were filed at specific thresholds.
- *Example:* "Approximately a year had passed since the incident, and another 1.5 years had passed since the legal applications."
- *Comment:* Temporal planning was used as an effective strategic tool in guiding individuals and institutions.

6. Inconsistency in Expressions and Conflict of Reality

- *Description:* Although the allegations of mobbing were brought to legal action, inconsistency in testimony and logical errors led to the case being dismissed.

- *Example:* “The three of them were questioned separately. Here, there are timing errors that contradict each other’s statements...”
- *Comment:* Clues between reality and fiction were used to prove that mobbing did not occur.

Conclusion

Managers in organizations strive to fulfill all management duties within the framework of their job descriptions. They assume full responsibility for business operations and are directly responsible for whether the work is done or not. This responsibility leads to the need to sensitively manage their subordinates in line with business objectives. However, employees within organizational activities often have requests that challenge the work system, and this can lead to conflicts. Furthermore, it is observed that they do not request these requests within the framework of normal procedures. They attempt to achieve their goals by eliminating managers they perceive as hindering them, and for this purpose, reverse mobbing is often chosen as a strategy.

This study presents a case of reverse mobbing, a real-life situation characterized by the complexity of organizational power relations and difficult to legally prove, through a narrative framework. Thematic analyses revealed clear themes related to informal alliance power and organized manipulation, the systematic erosion of institutional authority, psychological and physical destruction, informal expression strategies, the use of timing as a manipulation tool, and inconsistencies and reality conflicts in statements. These results demonstrate that a case of reverse mobbing against a manager (Gürbüz and Gürdal; 2019; Çetin et al., 2023) is consistent with existing stages of mobbing theory (Leymann, 1996; Patterson et al., 2018; Branch, 2007; Einarsen, 1999). Furthermore, all of these demonstrate that informal alliances and organized manipulation possess an invisible power, actively operating behind a visible procedure. These power struggles within an organization can lead to quite devastating consequences. They are the cogs of a system that distorts and manipulates organizational norms (Branch, 2007; Yılmaz, 2020). In this systematic erosion of institutional authority and this process of destruction, the fact that the characters have previously experienced such a thing makes their task easier. In fact, acting with the knowledge that it will lead to psychological and physical destruction is an indisputable consequence (Einarsen, 1999). Psychological and physical destruction negatively impacts not only the individual but also the organization and social well-being (Einarsen, 1999; Branch, 2007). Furthermore, through informal expression strategies and the construction of reality, the characters in the story

appear to act together and in an organized manner. This demonstrates that, even if unethical, a shared purpose and interest can bring individuals together. These alliances can deviate from ethical concerns and distort the truth for their own purposes (Branch, 2007; Çetin et al., 2023; Gürbüz and Gürdal, 2019; Özgün and Altundağ, 2017). These alliances can manipulate timing to suit their own purposes. They wait for the right time to take action, delay information sharing, and calculate that the target will become vulnerable. Thus, they seize control of power within the organization (Einarsen, 1999; Patterson, 2018). After all the strategies are determined and taken into action, some inconsistencies and calculation errors in constructing reality may occur. These data may seem positive for the manager subjected to reverse mobbing in terms of legal consequences. However, even if this is the case, they are implicitly punished, as in the example of reassignment (Özgün and Altundağ, 2017).

This study explores the concept of reverse mobbing, a real-life incident experienced within an organization and a problem in many organizations, yet one that is rarely discussed due to its systematic pattern. Reverse mobbing, which affects many employees in the organization with its antecedents and consequences, and particularly targets managers, is a significant problem for businesses. Subordinate mobbing, which appears to be a problem for managers to solve, but its consequences put managers in a difficult position, is a subject that has not been widely addressed. Organized mobbing, handled with a professional framework, targets managers. They are left defenseless, unable to receive adequate help. Furthermore, for this manager, whose sanctions are also stripped from them due to their superior's authority, material and moral devastation are inevitable. Reverse mobbing, with its devastating consequences, is perceived as a process to be resolved by the person subjected to it. However, it confines the manager to narrow frameworks. Reverse mobbing results in the disruption of the hierarchical structure that ensures the safe conduct of organizational activities. Therefore, these informal structures affecting organizations require further consideration.

REFERENCES

- Branch, S., Ramsay, S. & Barker, M. (2007). Managers in the firing line: Contributing factors to workplace bullying by staff – an interview study. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 13(3), 264-281.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Clandinin, D. J. & Connelly, F. M. (2000). Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Çetin, F., Polat, G. & Yücel, C. (2023). Okul müdürlerinin maruz kaldığı ters mobbing eylemleri. *Toplum, Eğitim ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 2(2), 110-131.

- Doe, J. (2023). Patronlar da zorbalığa uğruyor: Yukarı yönlü zorbalığı keşfet. <https://wavelroom.com/2023/06/16/bosses-get-bullied-too-exploring-upward-bullying/> (Erişim Tarihi: 05.08.2025).
- Einarsen, S. (1999). The nature and causes of bullying at work. *International Journal of Manpower*, 20 (1/2), 16-27.
- Gürbüz, H. & Gürdal, H. A. (2019). *Çalışanlarda mobbinge maruz kalma*. Ankara: İksad.
- Hınız, G. & Yavuz, A. (2023). Yansıtıcı tematik analiz: Bir doktora tez çalışması örneği. *Eğitimde Kuram ve Uygulama*, 19(2), 388-408.
- Leymann, H. (1996). The content and development of mobbing at work. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 5(2), 165-184.
- Mercan, T. (2022). Yöneticiye mobbing olur mu?. <https://www.ekovitrim.com/yoneticiye-mobbing-olur-mu> (Erişim Tarihi: 05.08.2025).
- Özgün, A. & Altundağ, C. (2017). İşler tersine döndüğünde (Reverse mobbing). <https://teidakademi.com/index.php/2017/04/11/isler-tersine-dondugunde-reverse-mobbing/> (Erişim Tarihi: 05.08.2025).
- Patterson, E., Branch, S., Barker, M. & Ramsay, S. (2018). Playing with power, examinations of types of power used by staff members in workplace bullying – a qualitative interview study. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 13(1), 32-52.
- Tınaz, P. (2006). İşyerinde psikolojik taciz mobbing. *Çalışma ve Toplum*, 4(11), 13-28.
- Uğuz Arsu, Ş. & Tekindal, M. (2021). Nitel araştırmalarda anlatı araştırmasının tanımı, kapsamı ve süreci. *Ufku Ötesi Bilim Dergisi*, 21(1), 85-124.
- Urgan, S. (2025). The projection of the classical novel in the transformation of organizational mobbing into cynicism and burnout: Reşat Nuri Güntekin “Acımak (To Feel Pity For)”. *Degres Journal*, 10(8), 1-14.
- Uysal, H. T. & Gedik, İ. A. (2017). Effect of cynical individual factor on the reverse mobbing tendency: A planned behavior. B. Christiansen H. & C. Chandan (Eds.), *Organizational culture and diversity and the modern workforce* (pp. 276-308), IGI Global, ABD.
- Yılmaz, C. (2020). Mobbing üzerine nitel bir araştırma: astlardan üstlere uygulanan mobbing. *Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi*, 12(1), 19-33.