

# Workplace moral harassment and its consequences: A case study in a federal higher education institution

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## RESUMO

### Assédio moral no trabalho e suas consequências: Estudo de caso em instituição federal de ensino superior

Neste artigo, tem-se como objetivo caracterizar um caso de assédio moral ocorrido em uma instituição federal de ensino superior e identificar suas consequências para diferentes atores. Foi realizado um estudo de caso, de natureza descritiva e qualitativa. Os dados foram coletados por meio de pesquisa documental, com a análise do processo administrativo, que traz depoimentos de alguns dos envolvidos no caso, e de entrevista em profundidade com o servidor assediado. Os resultados evidenciaram a ocorrência de assédio moral do tipo vertical descendente, em uma situação caracterizada por abuso de poder, autoritarismo e manipulação perversa, com severas consequências para a saúde física, psíquica e emocional do assediado. Verificou-se que a não atuação da área de Recursos Humanos na intermediação do conflito, a cultura e a estrutura da instituição podem ter favorecido a ocorrência do caso e motivado a impunidade do assediador. Para a organização, as ocorrências geraram degradação do ambiente de trabalho, desmotivação e cisão da equipe, bem como declínio do rendimento e outras perdas financeiras. À sociedade, além das questões financeiras, couberam sérios prejuízos, por tratar-se de uma instituição pública que deveria zelar pelos bens e direitos do cidadão, tanto no âmbito financeiro como no produtivo ou no social. Conclui-se que o assédio moral se trata de um processo multidimensional, que viola as garantias fundamentais do indivíduo e traz severos impactos à sua saúde, além de danos à organização e à sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** assédio moral, gestão de pessoas, administração de recursos humanos, instituição federal de ensino superior.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades, studies have proved the increase of psychological violence in the workplace, characterized as bullying or moral harassment (Guimarães & Rimoli, 2006; Hirigoyen, 2010). Several theoretical approaches and significant contributions have been given by different scholars on the subject, such as: i) Hirigoyen (2010, 2011), in France; ii) Leymann (1990, 1996), Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper (2005), Zapf (1999), in Sweden; iii) Zabala (2003), in Spain; iv) Ege (2000), in Italy, and others. Leymann (1996) says that harassment practices cause stigmatization and deprivation of individuals' fundamental rights. Harassment constitutes a form of psychological terror that generates mental damage, leading to the victim's exclusion from the workplace and even from the labor market. In Brazil, Barreto (2006), Freitas (2001; 2007), Heloani (2003, 2004, 2005) and Soboll (2008a, 2008b) started the discussion about the subject. They aroused academic interest in the topic and they also contributed to debates by the unions and the society in general.

Moral harassment has consequences for the victim, the harasser, the organization and the society, in different forms and intensity (Alkimin, 2012). According to Hirigoyen (2011), the harassment deeply affects the victim's identity by changing its mental functioning. In the organization environment it can cause decline in work quality and productivity, absenteeism, illnesses and accidents, loss of qualified workers. It can also lead to judicial processes and negative impact on the organization's image. Costs of illness, medical expenses and unemployment also impact on society (Barreto, 2009). For public institutions that are financed by citizens to provide good services at reasonable prices, the occurrence of such events doubly penalizes the society. They compromise the quality of work, they cause unproductive or counterproductive efforts, and they also burden the public purse (Scialpi, 2002).

Workplace violence and unethical practices are growing around the world, reaching epidemic levels in some countries. Professionals of education, social services, library services and health care, formerly considered immune, have also become the target of this kind of violence (OIT, 2006). In higher education public institutions in Brazil, there are some specificities of public service that may contribute to violence and moral harassment. The public sector is related to the public good, and its mission is to provide services to the society (Scialpi, 2002). But its environment may encourage moral harassment, because of factors such as political patronage, personal favours and privileges, and influence networks. Those factors work as trade currency or indicators of power and overlap the institutional norms (Carbone, 2000; Pires & Macedo, 2006). Labor relations in the public service are ruled by stability and hierarchy, so they can favour an environment with power struggles, jealousy and greed (Hirigoyen, 2010; Lopes, 2009). Research about moral harassment in the workplace carried out

by Nunes (2011) with teachers and technical-administrative staff at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina found that 47.7% respondents said that moral harassment is common in the university environment.

Concerned about this situation, the *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores nas Instituições Federais de Ensino* (SINDIFES) union has sponsored seminars about moral harassment since 2010. In these seminars studies are presented and discussed with professionals and scholars. According to information from the union, many employees claim to have been harassed but do not take action, either for convenience or fear of exposure. In our conversation, they had mentioned a case of an employee dismissed and subsequently reinstated in the institution during his probation period in a higher education federal institution (*Instituição Federal de Ensino Superior* – IFES). This employee had consented to be interviewed and to provide and clarify data related to the process documentation. The others actors – the harasser, the managers, the team and other employees – could not be interviewed, and their opinions and perceptions were collected from their statements in the process documentation.

The current paper therefore aims to characterize a case of moral harassment in a federal institution of higher education and to identify its consequences for the different actors. We carried out a descriptive and qualitative case study. The data were collected by means of analysis of the case-related administrative process and an in-depth interview with the harassed employee.

This paper contributes on both the organizational and academic level, as studies about moral harassment are relatively new, as pointed out by Lage and Emmendoerfer (2010), Lorentz, Lima, and Maestro Filho (2011), Nunes (2011) and Rodrigues (2010). This study fills the gaps identified by Lima, Bispo, Gonçalves and Coelho (2014), who indicate the need to broaden understanding about the subject, focusing on both the harassed employee's discourses and other aspects surrounding the phenomenon. Paixão, Armond, Souza-Silva and Cerquinho (2013, p. 528) argued that studies could give information and reflection for "more ethical means to defend the rules of social coexistence". Nunes (2011) and Alves (2011) emphasized the importance of focusing the discussion on moral harassment in the public service. This study can fill some of these gaps and enrich theoretical debates, by analyzing the consequences of moral harassment for the different involved actors – the harassed employee, the perpetrator/harasser, the organization and the society.

This paper is organized in five sections. Section 2 provides theoretical references, section 3 the methodology, section 4 presents and discusses the results, and section 5 concludes.

## 2. THEORETICAL REFERENCES

Leymann's seminal work (1996) refers to mobbing as an extreme social syndrome, triggered by social stressors and with

negative effects, such as biological and psychological reactions. The term mobbing is used interchangeably with bullying, psycho terror or psychological terror, and harassment. To configure harassment, there must be frequency and duration of at least once a week for over six months. This process affects the individual's fundamental rights and, if occurred for long periods, may result in physical and psychological damage and even the employee's exclusion from the labor market (Leymann, 1996).

Considered a pioneer in the use of the term moral harassment, Hirigoyen (2010) studied the phenomenon in organizations. She characterized it as perverse practices intended to destabilize another person by means of repeated attacks, with intensity and intentionality. These perversity and discriminatory practices are also related to issues such as gender, colour, age, performance and work style. According to Freitas, Heloani and Barreto (2011, p. 25), "violence and bullying arise from the meeting of envy of the other's power and perversity" (translated from the Portuguese by the authors). The perverse one praises itself, disregards the other's work and appropriates the other's qualities. This process is called vampirization (Hirigoyen, 2010). Moral harassment is seen as the reflection of an abuse of power, emanating from the hierarchy and from the command lines, presenting multiple configurations (Lima *et al.*, 2014).

Harassment can be identified by its origin (Araújo, 2012) and classified as vertical descendant (from the top against the subordinate), vertical ascendant (from the subordinated against the chief), horizontal (among colleagues) and mixed (among several people).

There are some fundamental elements that outline moral harassment (Freitas *et al.*, 2011; Nunes & Tolfo, 2011; Soboll, 2008b):

- a) temporality: event that triggers the process;
- b) duration: between 15 and 40 months;
- c) intentionality: reflects the intention, subtle or implied, to cause damage to the other;
- d) directionality or personhood: hostile actions have a specific target;
- e) repeated and customary actions: hostile conduct repeated over a prolonged period of time;
- f) geographic limits: spaces of everyday practices in the field of tasks; and
- g) deliberate degradation of working conditions, by means of psychological attacks, repeated conduct and omissions.

Hirigoyen (2010) proposed four analysis categories considering the repetition and intentionality criterion, from the most subtle to the most perceptible. Harassment starts with the purposeful deterioration of working conditions in order to remove the victim's autonomy; not to give him/her more information concerning tasks; to contest all his/her decisions; to criticize his/her work unfairly or in an exaggerated way; to deprive him/her of access to work tools – telephone,

computer, etc; to take away under his/her responsibility; to put pressure on the victim so he/she does not assert his/her rights (holidays, schedules, awards); and acting to prevent him/her from getting promotion. The second category, isolation and refusal to communicate, refers to not talking with the victim; forbidding colleagues to talk to him/her; not to allow him/her to talk to anyone; communication only in writing; and setting the victim apart from colleagues. The intensity grows, even as far as attacks on dignity and verbal violence, that is, making disdainful allusions to disqualify the victim; discrediting the victim in front of higher and lower ranking colleagues; spreading rumours about him/her; and criticizing his/her private life. Finally, verbal, physical or sexual violence can occur, which means threats of physical violence; screaming; invasion of private life with telephone calls or letters; stalking the victim on the streets; spying on his/her home.

Leymann (1990) understands moral harassment as a dynamic process and classifies it in four phases. It starts with critical incidents, when sudden changes occur in personal relationships and there are direct or indirect attacks. Then, moral harassment and stigmatization occur, with repeated negative behaviour, aggressive and humiliating, so as to stigmatize the victim. In the third phase, if the human resources management intervention happens, the problem can be formalize and explanations can be sought, even if they are related to personal characteristics to the detriment of work conditions. Guilt feelings, emotional responses and psychosomatic symptoms arise. In this phase, an assertive human resource management action and follow-up by a multidisciplinary team could interrupt the process. The last phase, exclusion, is when the victim leaves the workplace, either by voluntary resignation, dismissal, sick leave, or early retirement, or even in extreme forms, such as attempted suicide or suicide itself.

There are five types of attitudes and behaviours that indicate the occurrence of moral harassment in the workplace: regarding communication, the individual's isolation; the upper hierarchy practices aimed at reducing the social contacts; attitudes that impact on the individual's reputation and image; actions that affect the individual's occupation and work activity; and actions that cause damage both to physical and mental health (Leymann, 1990).

Notwithstanding the validity of Leymann's model, Ege (2000) suggested some adjustments to adapt it to the Italian culture that is different in many aspects from the northern European culture. He proposed a process that occurs in six stages. Zero condition refers to a situation with everyday conflicts; in phase 1, direct conflict, competitiveness, competition and individualism are evident. In phase 2, the beginning of the mobbing, the personal relationship deteriorates, highlighting the "scapegoat" role and a feeling of discomfort; in phase 3 begin the psychosomatic sickness symptoms. In phase 4 – wrongdoing and abuse from the personal administration – the issue becomes public and the worker feels that he/she has

become a problem for the staff, because of health problems, sick leaves and there are extra workloads for the group. In phase 5, there is serious deterioration of the victim's physical and mental health, which can lead to depression and medical or psychotherapeutic treatments. Problems worsen, since the administration ignores or dismisses the problem. Finally, in phase 6 – exclusion from the workplace – the process culminates with the worker leaving the company, either by voluntary resignation, removal, early retirement, disability or an extreme act such as murder or suicide.

The different proposals above are similar when they consider moral harassment as a process that occurs in phases. It can begin as everyday life conflicts that are gradually intensified. The relationship between the harasser and the harassed become more and more aggressive, until it generates deterioration to the work conditions and to social relations, with consequences to the victim's physical and mental health.

Hirigoyen (2011) pointed out some consequences for the victim: resignation, confusion, doubt, stress, fear and isolation. At the mental level, she highlighted sadness, anxiety, tiredness and sleep loss, as well as visible and persistent fear. Zabala (2003) and Barreto (2006; 2009) pointed out insecurity and threat, feelings of oppression, nervousness, inability, helplessness, frustration and impotence, low self-esteem, cognitive distortions, decline of concentration and memory, paranoid disorders and suicide ideas. In addition, Zapf (1999) emphasizes symptoms such as anxiety, depression and obsessive disorders. Hirigoyen (2010) indicated other consequences, such as shame and humiliation, loss of sense, mental changes and psychoses. Zabala (2003) points out that the moral harassment victim can internalize the feeling of being the permanent target, as the victim experiences the phenomenon in thoughts, images, and emotions both during wakefulness and during sleep time. These psychological manifestations are expressed at the physical level through psychosomatic diseases such as hypertension, digestive disorders, coronary diseases, endocrine disorders, generalized pain (Barreto, 2009), sudden weight loss or weight gain (Rufino, 2011).

Regarding the consequences for the harasser, no papers were found in the field of administration literature, so we seek law literature to fill the gap. The lack of specific laws regarding moral harassment does not mean the harassed employee's defencelessness. The Brazilian Constitution (*Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil*) includes some articles that indirectly protect the victim and can lead to the harasser's punishment (Cahali, 2007). Yet the Civil Code, in articles 186, 187, 927, 932 and 933, provides for unlawful acts and responsibilities at the workplace. In this context, the legislation states the responsibilities of the stalker, who can answer for the moral and material damages suffered by the victim (Brasil, 2009).

There are also some laws that indirectly protect the harassed employee. Law n. 8.112, of 11 December 1990, article 116, sets out the public employee's duties. Article 117

deals with prohibitions, highlighting item IX, "not to make use of the position to achieve personal or another's benefit, to the detriment of public service dignity" (translated from the Portuguese). Article 127 provides penalties: warnings, suspension, and termination, forfeiture of retirement or availability, commissioned function or job dismissal (Brasil, 1990, 2009; Minassa, 2012).

Decree n. 1.171, of 22 June 1994, item XV, among other prohibitions, states in line f) "persecutions, likings, dislikes, quirks, passions or personal interests to interfere in dealing with the public, the administrative jurisdiction or with higher, or lower ranking colleagues" (translated from the Portuguese) (Brasil, 1994, 2009). It is worth mentioning Law n. 9.784, of 29 January 1999 that governs the administrative process within the Federal Public Administration (Brasil, 1999a) and the IFES General Rules that set relevant provisions concerning articles 81 to 93 and 115 to 130. Thus, the damages suffered by the victim can entitle him/her to compensation for moral and material damages. In public service, it implies compensation for consequential damages related to loss of wages owed to illness and medical treatment expenses. There is also profit and loss, which deals with the income that the employee failed to gain because of dismissal caused by harassment (Brasil, 2009). Furthermore, this violence offends the rules of social coexistence causing irreversible damages, describing the "moral damage arising from the infringement of a right or a non-materialized subjective interest" (translated from the Portuguese) (Paixão *et al.*, 2013, p. 517).

Regarding the consequences for the organization, moral harassment can contribute to a discouraging and hostile workplace, low efficiency, decline in the team revenue, loss of qualified staff and expense on employee replacement and new qualifications (Freitas *et al.*, 2011; Rufino, 2011). We can also highlight demotivation, dissatisfaction and decline of leadership, team spirit and employability (Chapell & Di Martino, 2006), as well as sick leave and transfer requests (Hirigoyen, 2010). Ferreira (2010) points out that productivity can be affected by two phenomena: presenteeism, when the worker is present but does not produce; absenteeism, related to the worker's absence because of sick leave or disability retirement. The individual under harassment demonstrates gradual psychodynamic alterations and reduced work motivation (Ege, 2000). At the workplace fear becomes isolation, as colleagues avoid the victim, joining the harasser (Zabala, 2003; Rufino, 2011). There are also expenses with actions and labor layoffs, illnesses, replacement and sick leave. Therefore, the direct costs can be estimated as those such as absenteeism, turnover, illness, disability and death. The indirect costs are related to reductions in job satisfaction, commitment, efficiency, performance and productivity. There are also intangible costs, such as loss of creativity and innovation, knowledge and learning, and the deteriorated organization climate (Chapell & Di Martino, 2006).

Researches carried out by British authorities point to a minimum cost of GBP 28,109 (around USD 44,000), related to absenteeism, staff replacement costs, reduced productivity, lawyers, investigations, and others. Although litigation costs' impact on the company brand and image has not been calculated, they are significant (Di Martino, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003). Regarding sick leave, in the United Kingdom harassed victims have an average of seven days added to sick leave compared with other workers. Based on a rate of intimidation of 10%, this represents 18 million lost days (Tehrani, 2005).

Therefore, these consequences affect collectivity, also generating losses to the society. There are costs of unemployment, illnesses and absenteeism, medical-hospital expenses, productive workers' potential loss (Barreto, 2009); benefit payments due to Health, Welfare and Social Security (sick leaves, hospitalization, subsidized medication, long-term medical treatments) (Rufino, 2011), health expenses of social security, unemployment compensation and early retirement (Hirigoyen, 2010), besides costs of rehabilitation to reintegrate the victims at work and retrain those who have lost their job (Chapell & Di Martino, 2006). There are also the loss of the social investment on education and professional formation; costs of the productive potential of early retired professionals because of disability or reduction of the employment potential, affecting the victim's family and social context. Beside cost, lawsuits overload the judiciary (Freitas *et al.*, 2011).

Based on this literature, we decided to draw up the framework presented in Figure 1. To identify the moral harassment dynamics, we chose Leymann's (1996) approach that considers moral harassment a process that starts with critical incidents and culminates with the individual's exclusion from the organization. Ege (2000) complements these phases, emphasizing the deterioration of physical and mental health and management negligence. Freitas *et al.* (2011) and Soboll (2008b) list the essential elements for the occurrence of the moral harassment dynamics. The consequences for the harassed employee, for the harasser, for the organization and for the society are informed on studies by Barreto (2006, 2009), Ege (2000), Freitas *et al.* (2011), Hirigoyen (2010, 2011) and Zabala (2003).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

We carried out a descriptive and qualitative case study. We collected data by a document survey on the harassment case, in order to characterize the event and the different actors' opinions. We realized an in-depth interview to identify the victim's perception of the real-life context of the harassment, experiences and meanings (Collis & Hussey, 2005; Yin, 2010).

The unit of analysis was the case of an employee who suffered moral harassment whilst on probation in an IFES, in 2006. The choice is justified by the fact that this case characterizes unethical conduct in the workplace and has

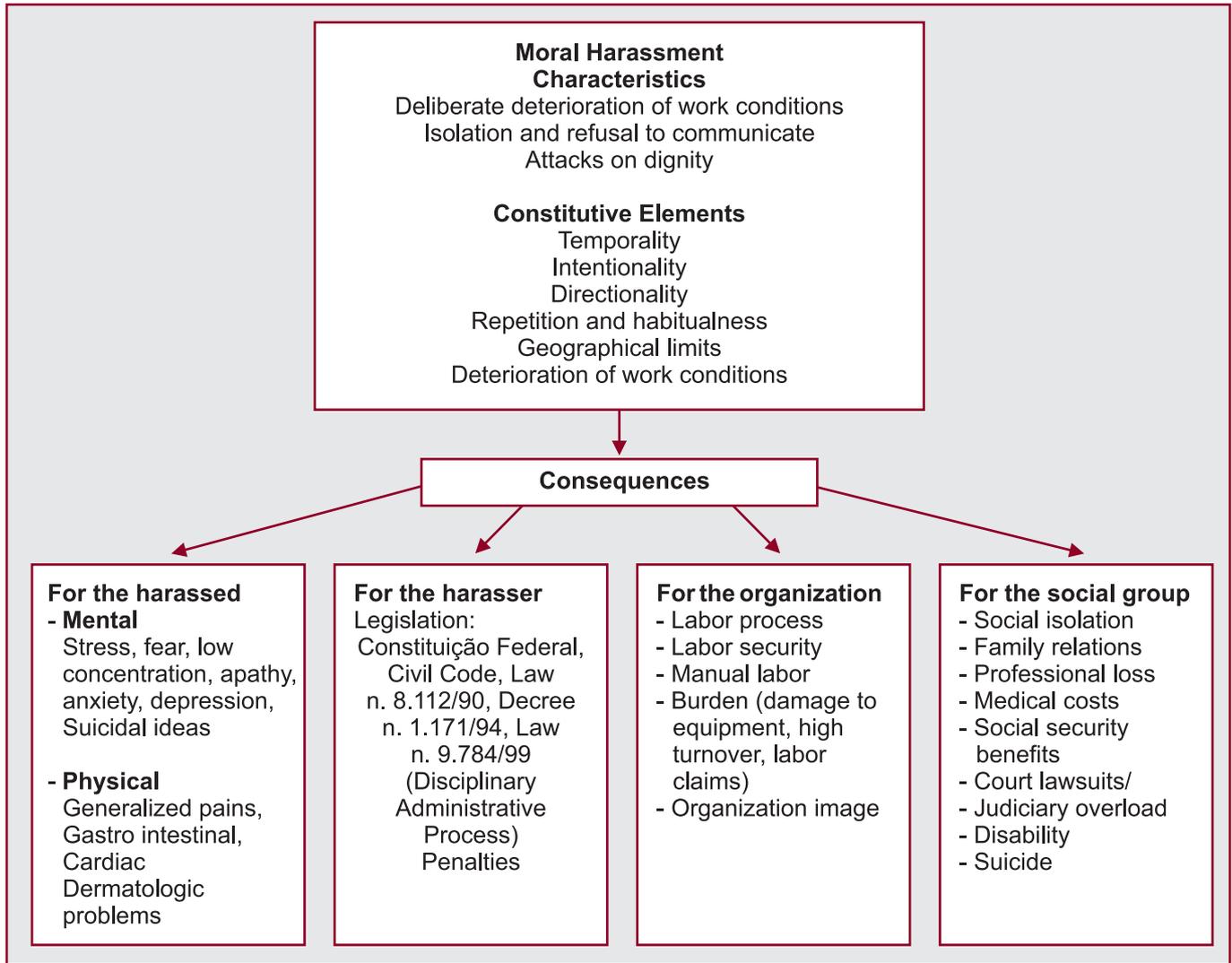
resulted in the employee exclusion from the institution and later reintegration to the IFES staff. The President of the SINDIFES pointed this case to the researcher and the harassed employee agreed to participate fully.

The collection of the primary and secondary data proceeded according to the framework. The secondary data collected through document research enabled closer examination of the real facts and understanding of the moral harassment process. The documents provided information about the case, allowed questions and confirmation of the facts and increased the information evidence (Collis & Hussey, 2005; Yin, 2010). We analyzed the following documents: the three probation training assessments, statements from the probation training commissions, disciplinary administrative process, electronic mail, memoranda, Minutes of the Board of Directors' Ordinary Meeting, Minutes of the University Board Meeting, and the defence prepared by the lawyer. From these documents we could identify statements from the different actors involved in the process: the harassed employee, the harasser, colleagues from the work team, staff and directors of the institute where the case took place, as well as statements from experts.

The researcher explained the study objective and ensured the interviewee anonymity, as well as the secret of data related to the institution. He signed a Term of Free and Informed Consent. The employee requested to be present at the documentation analysis, and thus eight meetings were held in the IFES library and in the SINDIFES headquarters. At these meetings, the researcher asked questions and registered the information.

The primary data were collected by an in-depth interview with the employee, following the interview guidelines according to the framework. The interview was realized in a room at SINDIFES, lasted two and a half hours, was recorded and transcribed for analysis, all with the employee's authorization. The recording option allowed the researcher to observe the interviewee's attitudes, gestures and expressions. In this interview the employee deepened his history, searching his memory for facts that filled the gaps in the analysed documents and reporting details and episodes from the process, expressing feelings and emotions in his speech and attitudes.

The interview was analyzed by means of content analysis, focusing on these phases: pre-analysis, codification and data treatment (Bardin, 2011). First, we briefly read the notes related to the documents and the transcript interview in order to assimilate the first impression from the registers. Then we proceeded to codify the material, guided by the theoretical references and categories defined in the framework. Cut-outs were taken to demarcate the universe, aiming to consolidate a document consistent with the analytical procedures of the moral harassment case under study (Bardin, 2011). Finally, we set relations between the analysis categories and the theoretical framework, allowing inferences and interpretations.



Source: Barreto (2006, 2009), Ege (2000), Freitas et al. (2011), Hirigoyen (2010, 2011), Leymann (1996), Soboll (2008b) and Zabala (2003).

**Figure 1: Framework for the Research**

In order to preserve the identity of the actors involved in the process, we decided to call the harassed employee the Employee. The immediate superior, that is, the harasser, was called the Chief. The institution located in a capital city was called IFES, and the unit where the event took place, located in the State internal region, was called Institute X.

In the next section, we present the case of the Employee's moral harassment, from his admission to his reintegration in the institution. We used the secondary data, with the vision of the different actors involved in the process as well as the data from the interview. We also present the Employee's perception from the interview and observations, reporting the sequence of the processes and the consequences for himself, for the harasser, for the organization and for the society.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Moral harassment case

The Employee applied for library information officer in 2003 and took the job at *Instituto X*, located in a city in Minas Gerais. The 21-year-old man was hired in December 2004 for a probation period. As provided in the legislation, this stage lasts for 36 months, and is evaluated by the manager every year.

In the first year, the Employee achieved excellent results in his evaluation. By that time, the Employee had applied for a specialization course, but he was rejected. They said it would not be appropriate for Instituto X to invest in the Employee, since he was willing to be transferred to the unit at the capital

city (First self-assessment of the employee, Evaluation of Probation Stage, 2005) (translated from *1ª Autoavaliação do servidor/trabalhador, avaliação do estágio probatório, 2005*).

Some months before the second evaluation, the Employee managed an exchange with another employee located at the capital unit, but was rejected by a local Commission. In this second evaluation, in 2006, the Employee was evaluated as “regular” for Work Team factor. Then he underwent the performance evaluation, for merit progression, getting the minimum score (70.3125%). He appealed to the Local Committee and obtained higher scores. Then he formalized his removal request, which was rejected by the Chief. In this period, when he replaced the Chief in her vacation period, a difference was found in the values for fines, which generated an administrative inquiry. However no evidence was found against the Employee.

During the third evaluation, in November 2007, the Instituto X Director informed the Employee that a Disciplinary Administrative Process (*Processo Administrativo Disciplinar – PAD*) had been opened, aiming to investigate his misconduct at the workplace. In this evaluation, the Chief pointed out that he was incompetent for public service, highlighting 11 negative points to the evaluation form. The PAD started in December 2007, with the following accusations: relationship difficulties; drunkenness; acting in an insubordinate and subversive way; instigating boycott of colleagues; wrong guidance to academics; participation in a party during office hours; failures in receiving fine values; noise in the library at night, during the Employee’s shift; and inappropriate use of computers.

The Employee appealed but he lost on all levels. The Chief’s evaluation and the PAD were key elements for the final rejection in the probationary stage. He was dismissed on 8 December 2008. Then, guided by the SINDIFES union, the Employee appealed to the University Board. The processes occurred in parallel, the PAD in the city where Instituto X is located and the Probationary Stage Process in the capital.

After a comprehensive examination of the accusations, the Process Commission concluded “[...] there is a personal problem between the accuser and the accused, and it is not possible to find the origin. In the public administration the facts should be treated impersonally, guided by legality, morality and ethics” (PAD Report, 2008; authors’ translation). Finally, it emphasized “the principle of legality, guiding all acts of public administration” and suggested closure of the case (Minutes of the Board of Directors’ Ordinary Meeting / *Ata de Reunião Ordinária do Conselho de Diretores*, September 02, 2008, p. 6). The University Board Meeting on 4 August 2009 concluded with the “revocation of the Employee dismissal act, determining his immediate reinclusion in this University’s permanent staff” (Minutes of the University Board Meeting on August 04, 2010 / *Ata de Reunião do Conselho Universitário* de August 04, 2010).

This process highlighted the errors and biases of the PAD and, above all, the lack of evidence regarding the accusations.

The dismissal act was administratively reversed and the Employee reinstated to the IFES. In the civil sphere the process is underway, as the Employee has filed a criminal complaint and denounced in the professional category Board of Ethics. The Employee does not nominate the process as a moral harassment; however, he lists the Chief’s unethical conduct, pointing out the damages caused to his personal and professional life.

#### 4.2. The voice of the harassed

In this section, we present the characterization and dynamics of the moral harassment case. It is about the perception of one who has suffered violence. Therefore there is an emotional element. However, although it was a subjective experience, the document research gives evidence of facts that characterize moral harassment. As an *ex post facto* research that deals with a sensitive issue, we could not interview the other actor in the case, such as the harasser, the team, Human Resource Management and others.

For the Employee, the case started in mid-2006, when the Instituto X General Manager proposed to Employee to exchange with a librarian of an unit in a rural town. The General Manager called him

[...] to make an irresistible proposal [...] He had arranged a very cool thing. He had already talked to HRM, it was all set. I had just to sign the document. At that time, he even had a pen. I was supposed just to sign and change with the librarian [...] (Interviewee).

At the time, the Employee did not know the librarian was his Chief’s brother, whose exchange had already been approved. Since then, the Employee felt he had been “systematically persecuted” by his Chief and by two members of the Institution X board (Interviewee). At the beginning, the Employee had not perceived the Chief’s perverse conduct, but by the second evaluation changes were evident as a result of his refusal to accept the General Manager’s proposal.

Going back to theory, we can say that it was the condition zero, with a situation of everyday conflicts (Ege, 2000). This report denotes imposition and unilateral communication (Leymann, 1996), as there is no dialogue and the abusive power prevails. It also reveals the paternalism of relations, the authoritarianism and the power centralization favoured by the structure and policies of public organization. Further, the manipulations about the exchange with the librarian revealed personal objectives, privileges and influence networks (Carbone, 2000; Pires & Macedo, 2006). The Employee’s refusal characterizes the temporality and the event that motivated and triggered the process (Freitas *et al.*, 2011).

In the Employee’s view, two board members reinforced the Chief’s aggressive behaviour. This description shows the

occurrence of vertical descendant harassment (Hirigoyen, 2010). The school institution delineates the geographical limits and the library, the place where the tasks are performed (Soboll, 2008a).

By then, the Employee realized that the Chief no longer allowed him to replace her on her holidays. She claimed that his tasks were made “in a hurry”. She removed his autonomy, controlled his tasks performance and disqualified him (Hirigoyen, 2010). Leymann (1996) highlights criticism of work quality and Zabala (2003) confirms the devaluation of the individual’s efforts.

According to the Employee’s perception, she was jealous:

She was the librarian, I was just a boy, I was just 21 years old. I graduated at the IFES, one of the best in the country, if not the best. She graduated in ....., a private school [...] (Interviewee).

Hirigoyen (2010) warns that jealousy and insecurity can arise in the hierarchy or between the supervisors and subordinates in the face of a more qualified and more competitive subordinate. Zabala (2003) confirms that the individual can arouse a chief’s jealousy of skills acquired and extraordinary performance of the work.

The Employee reveals that the Chief installed a “spy” in his computer and edited his personal documents. This confirms the restriction on working tools and leads to the abuse of power by imposing overt surveillance (Hirigoyen, 2010). Such monitoring leads to the control of and aims to catch some “fault” of the individual (Zabala, 2003).

The unethical conduct started with the second evaluation, and was intensified by the administrative inquiry, the performance evaluation, the third probation evaluation and the PAD. The Chief’s memorandum to the *Instituto X* Director (2007) disqualified the Employee, describing him as “unscrupulous, unethical, gossip maker, irresponsible and insubordinate”. Criticism and insinuations related to his work quality were frequent. According to the Employee, the Chief used to say: “You victimize yourself... I’ll make a crown of thorns for you. Come to work with a crown of thorns” (Interviewee). This characterizes the reiterate humiliations, indifference and depreciation, emphasizing the feeling of uselessness and low self-esteem (Barreto, 2006). The successive assignments of errors, reduction of intensity and frequency between actions, attacks to the dignity denote the stages of moral harassment (Hirigoyen, 2010, 2011), evidencing the “scapegoat” and stigmatization (Leymann, 1996).

The lack of a clear human resources management policy endorsed power abuses. The document research and the Employee’s interview revealed that there was no mediating action from HRM. Sobol (2008b) says that in this phase, it is possible to interrupt the process if there is an human resources management intervention and the follow-up by a

multidisciplinary team. There was a clear lack of management preparation to intervene assertively (Ege, 2000). Hirigoyen (2011) argues that aggression increases when the organization allows it.

#### 4.3. Moral harassment consequences

Such facts had serious consequences for the Employee’s physical and emotional health. To remember his own history during the interview brought up his suffering, revealed by his ragged breathing, eyes fixed on the horizon, the emphasis of some quotes, a change of tone, and even some relief after talking about some situations.

According to the Employee, the Chief’s attitudes had an impact on his own behaviour, leading to isolation from the team. The Employee remembers that he “went through the first evaluation without talking to anyone” (Interviewee). After the second evaluation, he kept doing just the central tasks. He used to be silent for eight hours and he thought that “if it could be always so, he would have had less suffering” (Interviewee). He thought he would go crazy as the aggression increased. He reported that two colleagues who supported him had suffered retaliation. These reactions of resignation and evasion could be related to the avoidance of further impacts on the work relations and to protect himself from potential conflicts (Hirigoyen, 2010, 2011). We can also identify the presenteeism phenomenon (Ferreira, 2010), as the Employee started to do only the central tasks, which affected his productivity.

The Employee reports the feeling of fear because of the intimidating and threatening way the General Manager referred to the performance evaluation. He had said that he would be an example because he was the first employee to be evaluated. This feeling reached a climax with the PAD opening. The Employee reports

[...] I peed in my pants [...] That thing was like fifteen stab wounds at once, just as in Clarice Lispector’s *Mineirinho* [Figure of the literature of Minas Gerais, Brazil]. *Mineirinho* took a volley of bullets. I think that thing had a machine gun effect on me... (Interviewee).

As Leymann (1996) pointed out moral harassment leads the individual into a stress situation that triggers negative reactions, both biological and psychological. Stress impacts the organism’s self-defence as an attempt to adapt to and face aggression (Hirigoyen, 2010). Urinary incontinence constituted a stress symptom (Zabala, 2003).

After the dismissal, the Employee lost 13 kilos. Due to physical disorders and depression, he underwent medical and psychotherapy treatments. He says he felt so bad and had suicidal intentions which led him to seek “[...] psychiatric treatment to ward off the persistent desire to die [...]” (Personal

Report, September 2011). Rufino (2011) says that fast weight loss indicates reactive depression (Zabala, 2003). Hopelessness points out paths such as suicide, explains Zabala (2003). The loss of job causes loss of identity and loss of dignity, in turn causing feelings of displeasure and lack of interest in life, and thus death may seem a last alternative to rescue lost dignity (Barreto, 2006).

The Employee mentioned loss of appetite, sleep disorders, and obsessive (repetition) and paranoid (persecution) ideas. According to him, “There are times your head turns so much you go nuts... You do not sleep; when you sleep those people are inside your head chasing you all the time” (Interviewee). As Hirigoyen (2010) says this is mental violation, with permanent or transitory disorders. The harassment victim feels invaded by the memory of the violences undergone, revived in sleep and while awake (Zabala, 2003).

After the dismissal, the Employee felt confused, absorbing the blame and the negative outcomes: “You begin to think that you are the guilty one [...] You somatize... internalize the error, the pseudo error... This destroys you; you cannot articulate smallest things” (Interviewee). We observed that the Employee had developed what Zabala (2003) calls avoidance reaction, which can make it impossible to continue or to adopt another occupation. Hirigoyen (2010) underscores the feeling of shame and humiliation, the loss of sense and the mental changes. The Employee reports “[...] I achieved the feat of being dismissed. With this reputation, going out on the street was a shame... hard to manage my own disgrace” (Interviewee). As Hirigoyen (2010) says the aggressions marks persist even despite the aggressor’s physical distance, by the feeling of recurring shame that extends over other environments, with effects on the victim’s personality.

According to the Employee, the support from the family and some friends was fundamental to face the situation, confirming Zabala’s warn (2003) about the support from family, friends and specialized professionals, as psychiatrist, psychologist and lawyer for the harassed person recovery.

Despite the evidence of the Chief’s persecution conduct related to the Employee and the law violation, as well as the absolute denial regarding the misconduct charges against him in the PAD process, no clear consequences were detected concerning the harasser.

There were unethical actions carried out by the Chief, when she reordered and edited, with no judicial order, the Employee’s personal documents, and when she violated his computer. She acted against the provision in article 10 of Law n. 9.296, of 24 July 1996 (PAD Instructions Report /*Relatório de Instrução do PAD*, 2007). There was violation of the worker’s fundamental guarantees as provided in the Federal Constitution (1988). In the case of public service, Law n. 8.112 of 11 December 1990 provides in Chapter I, Duties, article 116, item III: “comply with the legal norms and regulations”. In XII: “fight against illegality, omission or abuse of power”. In Chapter II,

Prohibitions, article 117, item V: “promote manifestations of appreciation or dislike within the workplace”, and IX “to take advantage of the post to achieve personal or others’ profit in detriment of the public function dignity” (Brasil, 1990).

The Chief also broke the Law, the provisions of Decree n. 1.171, of 22 June 1994, which approved the Code of Professional Ethics of the Civil Public Employees of the Federal Executive Branch, Section III, Prohibitions to the Public Employees, item XV: “not allow personal persecution, likes, dislikes, quirks, passions or interests to interfere in dealing with the public, the administrative jurisdiction or with higher or lower-ranking colleagues”.

Therefore, we concluded that there was misuse of purpose as the Chief, who was given official power, showed detachment from the public interest, breaking the Law on behalf of private interests. However, the Chief kept her functions, with no punishment at all.

Such a situation caused disbelief to Employee: “the institution awards those who harass... [...] Maybe it is a cultural trait [...] So much so that she continues as the Chief... Despite all the included documents” (Interviewee). He also argued that justice has to be done, as “the institution itself produced the process evidences [...]” (Interviewee).

Lack of motivation, dissatisfaction and isolation were the consequences in the workplace. The Employee perceived that the institution culture favoured the abuse of power, which created a growing lack of motivation: “[...] one gets a certain displeasure [...]” (Interviewee). According to Zabala (2003), decrease in identification with the institution and fall in motivation lead to changes in the individual’s personality, and also to changes in team behaviour. The Employee perceived that the second evaluation resulted in his isolation and that the work team avoided him: “It was as if I had a contagious disease, as everyone in Instituto X kept their distance [...]” (Interviewee). Authoritarian relationships create indifference to others’ suffering and weaken the links among peers (Barreto, 2006) and the individual’s stigmatization causes the group to join the aggressor and ignore the victim (Zabala, 2003).

The Employee dismissal implied losses in terms of the system operation and the institution’s investment in his training as he had been trained to operate the library system. The dismissal caused a gap in the institution staff, as he was a trained professional qualified for the librarian functions. Freitas *et al.* (2011) emphasize that when a qualified individual becomes unable to exercise his/her functions, all the members of the social group assume the burden. In addition to the loss of the social investment in education and professional training, there is a decline in productive potential and employability.

The losses in the psychical, social, professional and emotional levels, besides health damages, sickness and dismissal, generated costs related to Social Security (Freitas *et al.*, 2011). Employee’s family had to hold the medical-psychotherapeutic treatments and his personal living expenses.

The Employee's perception points to a deviation from the institution's mission, which has the social function of education and is supported by the federal government (Scialpi, 2002). According to the Employee, the Chief did not act consistently with her official duties, generating a burden for the society: "[...] in the end the bill is more negative than positive for the society. It is public money [...]" (Interviewee). Although the losses are frequently small or ignored, it is the society in general that pays for them (Freitas *et al.*, 2011).

## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This paper aimed to characterize a moral harassment case in a higher education federal institution (IFES) and the consequences for the different actors by means of a case study. Despite the limitations, as the case deals with a sensitive issue, the document research allowed us to get statements from the different actors. A deep interview gave voice to the harassed, here called the Employee. The case can be characterized as vertical descendant moral harassment.

Data have shown evidences of abuse of power, authoritarianism and perverse manipulation during the Employee's probationary period. Aiming to achieve personal objectives and supported by the General Manager, the Chief broke the institution rules and the legislation. There were degradation of work conditions, isolation and communication denial, and offence to the Employee's dignity. The Employee's refusal to accept the General Manager's exchange offer triggered a sequence of repeated and intentional misconduct by the Chief, as so as abuse of power.

The deterioration in working conditions is revealed by unilateral communication. The work interest was the Chief's justification for the contradictions and manipulations. The Chief's disqualified the Employee by the removal of his autonomy, which led to his weakening to the work team. The Chief, with the intention of controlling the Employee by extensive vigilance, deprived him of access to working tools, monitored his personal computer by means of an electronic tool, and edited his personal mail. Isolation and refusal to communicate were imposed on the Employee, and the colleagues who showed sympathy suffered retaliation.

Moral harassment of the vertical descendant type was practised by the Employee's hierarchical Chief, with the explicit support of General Manager and other Director from *Instituto X*. The intentionality was confirmed by the deliberate triggering of the Employee's dismissal from the institution. Other elements confirm the moral harassment, such as temporality, evidenced by the event that triggered the process – the refusal to the exchange proposal that would benefit the Chief's brother. The directionality and the personhood are shown by the actions explicitly addressed to the Employee. The repetition and habitualness are shown by the Employee's evaluations, except the first one.

In the harassed Employee's view, the moral harassment started with the refusal for a postgraduate course participation, and got worse after he refused the exchange and continued up to the second and third evaluations, the administrative inquiry, the performance evaluation and the PAD, resulting in his dismissal. The successive unfavourable evaluations confirmed the Chief's intentional misconduct in order to blemish his image and stigmatize him among the work team. We also identified confusing instructions, no transfer of information related to the work process, malicious and disqualifying comments and attempts to denigrate the Employee's relationship with the team through retaliation against his colleagues.

The moral harassment consequences for the Employee have been severe, causing isolation, growing stress and depression. The dismissal increased the isolation symptoms, the feeling of going crazy, intense weight loss, sleep disorders, delusion, confused thoughts and feelings of guilt, in addition to depression and suicidal ideas, which required medical and psychotherapeutic treatments. Continuous stress was detected, amplified by post-traumatic disorders. The symptoms still emerge when the Employee remembers facts related to the experienced aggression, either when he attends justice hearings or at institution events where he meets his former Chief. Despite all his suffering, the Employee sought to reverse the situation, whereupon family and friends' unconditional support was essential, as well as union encouragement.

Although the IFES processes have well proved the Chief's misconduct and abuse of power, there has been no punishment or consequences for her. Her behavior constitutes infringement of the legislation. In the Employee's view, the institutional culture seems to approving of and stimulating the abuse of power.

There were some consequences for the organization, such as the loss of the technical knowledge investment, demotivation, isolation, and revenue decline. The team cohesion was damaged, as the indifference of some colleagues and the feeling of being betrayed generated social detachment. The institution also incurred the financial burden of the Employee's reimbursement for the period when he was dismissed. Therefore, there was abuse of its purpose, as well as public resources misuse. The conflicts could have had treated, saving public resources, as the judicial processes and the consequent reimbursements could have been avoided, if the human resources management had mediated it.

Despite such losses are difficult to measure, quantify or characterize, they imply damage to the society. In social terms, the isolation experienced by the Employee in the workplace extended to his social group. There was significant economic impact because of medication, psychotherapeutic and psychiatric treatments, lawsuits and damage compensation. In this specific case, as it deals with a public institution that should take care of public property and citizens' rights, the losses are even more severe, in financial, productive and social contexts alike.

The current study suggests that the IFES culture may have favoured personal interests, abuse of power and perverse

manipulations, making the institution liable to moral harassment occurrences. The lack of action and the non-intervention from the human resources management also favoured the harassment. We should pay attention and reflect about the functional evaluations carried out by public institutions and develop tools to reduce vested interests.

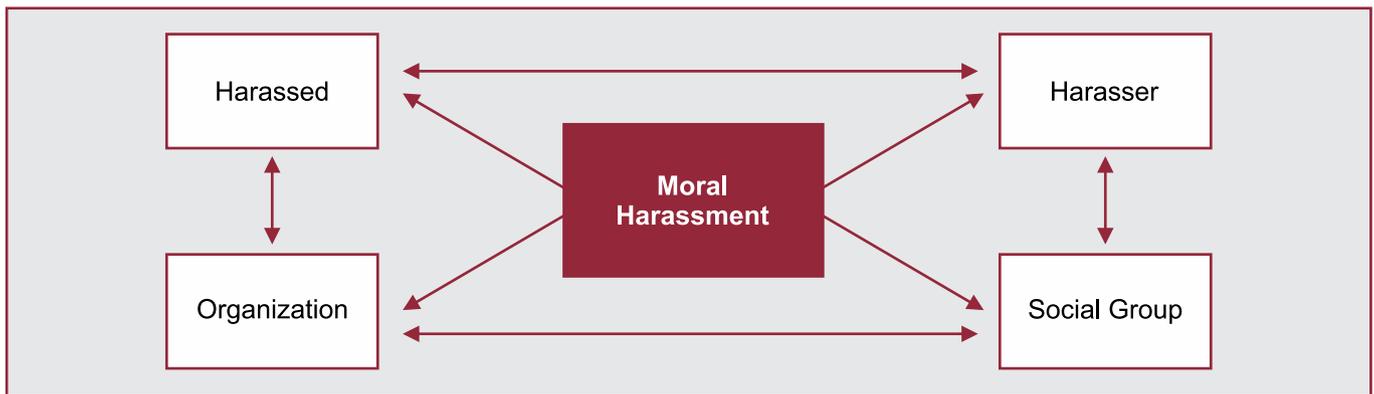
By the investigative process, we could access the different actors views. The research design allowed the extrapolation of the harassed Employee's perception. By the document analysis we achieved the other actors views recorded by the processes. The interview with the harassed Employee was relevant to reconstruct the event, focusing on his perception, feelings and emotions, which were essential for understanding the consequences and impact on his own physical, mental and emotional health.

As this is an *ex post facto* study, there were some limitations. It was impossibility to interview other actors, as the fact occurred in 2006. In-depth interviews with the harasser, members of the work team and other actors could enrich the analysis. Thus, the report by the process commission was a rich data source, perennial and unambiguous. This reinforces the study's consistency and the relevance of the document analysis.

The case under analysis allowed consistent theoretical generalizations as represented in Figure 2, reinforcing academic

knowledge, even though it is not possible to generalize the data. The rigorous investigation method led to the relevance of the case study.

From the research and theoretical analysis we concluded that moral harassment at work refers to illicit and surreptitious practices and actions, constitutes a way to control, dominate and annihilate the individual's psyche, with impacts on personal and professional life, compromising physical and emotional health, and reducing the harassed person's employability. Moral harassment at work is defined as a set of perverse and unethical practices, based on authoritarianism and power asymmetry, which occur repeatedly and systematically through verbal and non-verbal communication. The intention is to humiliate, to belittle and to denigrate the individual's image and reputation, causing stigmatization, and can even result in exclusion from the workplace. Although the consequences are manifested in different spheres and with different weights, they are interdependent and are not restricted to the individual and organizational spheres, as there is also a continuous and overlapping process that also affects the society. Therefore, moral harassment is a multidimensional process that violates the individual's fundamental rights with severe impact on his/her health, on organization and on the society in general. ♦



Source: research data.

Figure 2: Consequences of Moral Harassment at Work

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ABSTRACT

**Workplace moral harassment and its consequences: A case study in a federal higher education institution**

This paper aims to characterize a case of moral harassment in a federal institution of higher education and to identify its consequences for the different actors. We carried out a descriptive and qualitative case study and collected data by means of documentary research with an analysis of the related administrative process, which includes statements of those involved in the case, and an in-depth interview with the harassed employee. The results revealed the occurrence of vertical descendant moral harassment characterized by abuse of power, authoritarianism and perverse manipulation, with severe consequences for the harassed employee's physical, mental and emotional health. We found that the institution's human resources management department's non-action in terms of intermediating the conflict and the institutional culture and structure may all have favored the occurrence of the case and the harasser's impunity. For the organization, the occurrences generated degradation in the workplace and in motivation and the team split, as well as income decline and other financial losses. Beyond the financial issues, there was also even more serious damage to the society, as a public institution should look after citizens' properties and civil rights, whether concerning finances, productivity or social areas. We can conclude that moral harassment is a multidimensional process that violates the individual's fundamental rights with severe impact on his/her physical and psychological health, on organizations and on the society in general.

**Keywords:** moral harassment, people management, human resources management, higher education federal institution.

RESUMEN

**El acoso moral en el trabajo y sus consecuencias: Estudio de caso en una institución federal de educación superior**

El objetivo en este artículo es caracterizar un caso de acoso moral ocurrido en una institución federal de educación superior e identificar sus consecuencias para los diferentes actores. Se llevó a cabo un estudio de caso descriptivo y cualitativo. Los datos se recopilaban por medio de investigación documental, con el análisis del proceso administrativo, que trae declaraciones de algunas personas implicadas en el caso, y se realizó una entrevista en profundidad con el funcionario acosado. Los resultados constataron la presencia del acoso moral vertical descendente, en una situación de abuso de poder, autoritarismo y manipulación perversa, con graves consecuencias para la salud física, mental y emocional del acosado. Se encontró que la falta de actuación del departamento de recursos humanos en la mediación del conflicto, la cultura y la estructura de la institución posiblemente favorecieron el caso y dieron lugar a la impunidad del acosador. Para la organización, los eventos ocasionaron la degradación del ambiente de trabajo, la desmotivación y la escisión del equipo, así como la disminución de los resultados y otras pérdidas financieras. Para la sociedad, además de las cuestiones financieras, hay perjuicios, ya que se trata de una institución pública que debería cuidar de los bienes y derechos del ciudadano, sea en el ámbito financiero, productivo o social. Se concluye que el acoso moral es un proceso multidimensional, que viola las garantías fundamentales de la persona y trae graves consecuencias para su salud, así como daños a la organización y la sociedad.

**Palabras clave:** acoso moral, gestión de personas, gestión de recursos humanos, institución federal de educación superior.

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