

## SHEDDING LIGHT ON HIDDEN VIOLENCE: HARASSMENT IN BRAZILIAN ORGANIZATIONS

### LANÇANDO LUZES SOBRE VIOLÊNCIAS OCULTAS: ASSÉDIO EM ORGANIZAÇÕES BRASILEIRAS

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### Abstract

This study aimed to analyse the peculiarities of moral harassment as a form of hidden violence in the Brazilian organizational context, based on multiple case studies. An exploratory research with a qualitative approach was conducted. The analytical corpus of the study consisted of data from 27 interviews conducted with subjects who were victims of harassment in Brazilian organizations during 2018. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim so that the discursive corpus could be submitted to Linguistic Discourse Analysis. In the Brazilian context, harassment practices have a number of peculiarities, all of which are supported and legitimized by cultural aspects, weak laws and scarce (or non-existent) governmental/corporate action that could remedy, or at least minimize, such a perverse phenomenon. In this context, this paper has sought to shed light on obscure aspects that have been rarely addressed in the organizational, social, and academic spheres. This concerns the silencing of all actors involved in harassment; there seems to be a “deaf-blind side” of Brazilian organizations and this study, as well as other ones that deal with this subject, try to break with this deafening silence that people and organizations make about this phenomenon, for diverse reasons and with varied consequences. Added to this are the difficulties of accessing the individuals who have experienced harassment, hampering the very

research on the subject, which does not fail to acquire a trait of denouncement and engagement that goes beyond the Brazilian academia.

**Keywords:** Bullying; Sexual Harassment; Violence; Organizations; Peculiarities.

### Resumo

Este estudo foi desenvolvido com o objetivo de analisar as peculiaridades do assédio moral enquanto forma de violência oculta no contexto organizacional brasileiro, baseado em um estudo de casos múltiplos. Foi realizada uma pesquisa exploratória com abordagem qualitativa. Para tanto, o corpus analítico do estudo foi composto pelo conjunto de dados oriundos de 27 entrevistas realizadas com sujeitos que foram vítimas de assédio em organizações brasileiras durante o ano de 2018. Todas as entrevistas foram gravadas e transcritas na íntegra para que o corpus discursivo pudesse ser submetido à Análise Linguística do Discurso. No contexto brasileiro, as práticas de assédio possuem uma série de peculiaridades, todas elas amparadas e legitimadas tendo como base aspectos culturais, além de uma legislação deficitária e uma fraca (ou inexistente) atuação governamental e/ou empresarial na tentativa de sanar, ou ao menos minimizar, esse perverso fenômeno. Frente a esse contexto, buscou-se lançar luzes sobre pontos turvos e pouco discutidos, tanto nos âmbitos organizacional e social, como acadêmico. Isso diz respeito aos silenciamentos de todos os atores envolvidos pelo tema do assédio; parece tratar-se de um "lado cego e surdo" das organizações brasileiras e, este estudo e os demais que tratam do tema, tentam romper com esse silêncio ensurdecido que pessoas e organizações fazem acerca de tal fenômeno, por motivos diversos e com consequências de variadas ordens. Soma-se a isso as dificuldades de acesso a pessoas que vivenciaram o assédio, escamoteando o próprio estudo sobre o tema que não deixa de assumir um tom de denúncia e engajamento para além da academia brasileira.

**Palavras-chave:** Assédio Moral; Assédio Sexual; Violência; Organizações; Peculiaridades.

### 1. Introduction

Studies addressing harassment in organisations have as a background the precariousness of employment and work, the interest in reducing production costs, outsourcing, increased productivity and competitiveness, among other factors that pressure workers to accumulate labour activities. Added to this fact is a form of leadership that is often imposed through lies and scaremongering, in order to demand from them a better performance in the workplace (MARTININGO FILHO; SIQUEIRA, 2008).

The precarization of labour has consolidated two "invisible" poles, in which on one side are those who hold power and on the opposite side, those who for whatever reason are submissive to this power. The effects of this are observed in the lives of workers both individually and in their interpersonal relationships (BAPUJI, 2015). In Brazil, in particular, paternalistic culture, population diversity, discrimination in its various forms (gender, race, age, among others), and the absence of federal legislation

regarding moral harassment, are factors that have contributed to the occurrence of this phenomenon in the workplace (HELOANI; BARRETO, 2018).

Harassment has been addressed in organisational studies since the 1980s, when the pioneer of the research on mobbing, Heinz Leymann (1990), defined it as a hostile situation in which one or more persons coerce an individual aiming at their psychological debilitation. Unethical and disrespectful practices and behaviours in organisations are forms of violence experienced and perpetrated by managers or workers, sometimes habitually. They can be characterised as moral harassment in the workplace (NUNES; TOLFO; ESPINOSA, 2019). In this context, workplace bullying was established as a social stressor resulting from relationships between employees, which can cause a series of harmful effects both to employees (BAILLIEN et al., 2017) and to the organization (RAI; AGARWAL, 2018; ROBERT., 2018; Yao et al. 2020).

Several national and international studies have been conducted on this subject over the last decades, expanding and deepening the theories about it, which, in turn, have guided the development of this paper. In Brazil, these studies have focused on the relationship between harassment and the role of trade unions (NOGUEIRA; CARVALHO-NETO; NUNES, 2018), harassment and organisational culture (SILVA; NAKATA, 2016; SILVA; CASTRO; SANTOS, 2018), harassment against young workers (OLETO *et al.*, 2018), harassment in educational institutions (GUIMARÃES; ANÇADO; LIMA, 2016; RODRIGUES; FREITAS, 2014), and big companies (TEIXEIRA; MUNCK; REIS, 2011), as well as harassment analysed from different approaches (legal, victims, perpetrators, and managers) (VALADÃO JÚNIOR; MENDONÇA, 2015).

However, since the characterisation of this phenomenon has proved a complex task, it is still necessary to broaden the scope of investigations and debates and strengthen the field of study of harassment, for a better understanding of this phenomenon in organisations (MENDONÇA; SANTOS; PAULA, 2018). In addition to the scarcity of research on the subject, especially with public managers, there is also a lack of studies analysing the banalization of harassment as a management tool, for example (MENDONÇA; SANTOS; PAULA, 2018).

Seeking to fill these research gaps, this study aimed to analyse the peculiarities of moral harassment as a form of hidden violence in the Brazilian organisational context, based on multiple case studies. As a differential, this paper has focused on the peculiarities of workplace harassment from practices that create and recreate new work forms, making them similar to slavery as a mode of management in organisations, which includes the exploitation and isolation of workers (CRANE, 2013). Such peculiarities undermine the dignity and make way for violence – physical, moral or sexual – (HIRIGOYEN, 2014), that is, they have consequences for the lives of workers who experienced harassment in their workplace.

## **2. Characterization of mobbing and sexual harassment**

Mobbing and sexual harassment can be analysed at several levels, considering their multiple forms of occurrence, such as the interpersonal, which focuses on relationships between individuals and is the most recurrent research perspective in Brazil and abroad. However, it is necessary to consider three other dimensions, namely: the economic-organisational, which includes moral pressures that may

comprise the physical (sexual) aspect and derive from competitive economic contexts; the national, expressed by a permissive culture, insofar as it naturalizes differences and discrimination forms; and institutional, which deals with the legal framework that formally governs such situations.

We adopted the concept of **workplace bullying** elaborated by Hirigoyen (2005, p.65), due to its international representativeness. That is:

[...] any abusive conduct (gesture, work, behaviour, attitude, etc.) that undermines the dignity or the psychic or physical of a person by repeating or systematising it, jeopardise its use or degrading the working climate.

Observable behaviours in situations that frame bullying denotes hostility, namely: deliberate deterioration of working conditions; isolation and refusal of communication; violation of dignity; and verbal, physical or sexual violence (HIRIGOYEN, 2005); more specifically, sexual harassment falls within the latter. In this study, we understand **sexual harassment** as “unwanted sexual behaviour that manifests itself in physical, verbal or non-verbal form, in order to violate an individual’s dignity and create an intimidating, hostile, humiliating or offensive environment” (DIAS, 2008, p. 02).

Like mobbing in the workplace, sexual harassment in organisations is also a form of psychological violence, as the victim is harassed in or outside the workplace through unwanted sexual approaches that make the victim feel morally and physically intimidated (PRATA, 2010).

In both phenomena, which are distinguished into concepts that complement each other as perverse attitudes, it is necessary to recognize them as part of the debate on **violence**, understood as “all forms of aggressive or abusive behaviour that may cause physical or psychological harm or discomfort to its victims, whether they be intentional targets or innocent bystanders involved only impersonally or incidentally” (WARSHAW, 1998, p. 51).

These considerations exclude isolated events, in the case of bullying and shed light on repetitive and persistent behaviour on the part of the harasser or perpetrator (LEYMANN, 1990; FREITAS; HELOANI; BARRETO, 2008). As for sexual harassment, a single incident is enough to characterise this form of attack against one’s dignity, which means that its characterisation is regarded as easy. Sexual harassment is not a “pickup line,” a “joke,” or a form of seduction, but a form of sexual blackmail instead (FREITAS, 2001).

## 2.1 Consequences of bullying and sexual harassment

Among other factors, the occurrence of moral or sexual harassment in organisations frustrates the worker’s search for the strengthening of their values, which reflect a positive personal and professional transformation in the workplace. Such frustration can bring many severe consequences to the victims of harassment (NUNES; TOLFO; ESPINOSA, 2018).

Regarding the consequences of bullying, Vartia (2003) mentions a decrease in the degree of job satisfaction, increased stress symptoms and psychosomatic complaints, increased risk of stress-related diseases such as depression,

cardiovascular disease, of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as absenteeism.

Along these lines, Freitas (2007, p. 289) points out that:

At the individual level, harassment affects the personality, identity and self-esteem of the individual, generates mental problems of various orders, disrupts social, professional and family relationships; destabilizes the professional; and induces error and dismissal. Depression is an almost certain condition for all victims, and suicidal thoughts may cross the minds of a significant percentage of individuals.

At the organisational level, it is understandable that the company does not come unharmed from harassment [perpetrated by its employees]. According to Martiningo Filho and Siqueira (2008), the harassed employee may become ill and avoid work, which, in turn, may lead to absenteeism or staff turnover in the company. These factors bring costs to companies, besides the possibility of harming the organisational environment and lead other employees to feel unmotivated as well.

As for sexual harassment in the workplace, one of the professional consequences may be linked to the victim's activities and career; that is, the harasser may adopt threatening, retaliatory, or retaliatory attitudes, promoting unexpected employee removals, foreclosure on a promotional list, or even dismissals. In the latter case, the harassed individual often requests their dismissal "spontaneously" (PRATA, 2010).

Regarding the victim individually, the consequences of sexual harassment consist of physical and psychological sequelae caused by the violence suffered, which defames the victim's sexual freedom and dignity. It is noticeable that organisations often present cases of sexual harassment. Added to that are effects related to anxiety, irritability, depression, fatigue, insomnia, among others, can be detected in sexual harassment's victims (FREITAS, 2001).

In the organisational scope, sexual harassment incidents may result in loss of credibility, in addition to imposing costs in terms of maintaining activity efficiency, increasing sick employees and staff turnover (FORSTER, 1992). After all, it would be ideal if there were no harassments at all, and that organisations acted to prevent situations of moral or sexual harassment. This form of idealisation shows itself as a complex challenge to overcome, such is the perversity of a harasser. Therefore, it is vital to deal with the appropriate means to reprimand violent acts in organisations (HIRIGOYEN, 2014).

## **2.2 Combating bullying and sexual harassment**

Since bullying can severely harm the victims, in addition to the negative consequences for the organisation itself, it is relevant that moral and sexual violence within organisations has the direct intervention of their managers to prevent and combat such situations (NUNES; TOLFO, 2013). In order to reduce bullying incidents, it is necessary to curb the factors that could lead to such hostile behaviour and actions, as well as punish the perpetrator in cases where harassment has already been consummated.

Some ways to prevent bullying are to address and clarify the issue (which still receives little attention in organisations), as well as the possible consequences for the aggressor. Also, it is necessary to develop and implement policies and actions of prevention, intervention and combat designed for each organisation, considering the context of social relations, as well as the disseminated culture (EINARSEN; HOEL, 2008; NUNES; CUGNIER; TOLFO, 2015).

It should be emphasised that a corporate responsibility attitude requires that employees are encouraged to seek support in the event of workplace harassment. When this intention is not real, it creates a scenario favourable to the disdain and its possible consequences, as is the case of an individual who finds in silence a (mistaken) way of confronting the suffering they are experiencing (MOURA-PAULA, 2014).

Self-silencing, often used as a strategy to combat or cope with embarrassing or uncomfortable situations in organisations, may actually have an opposite effect, with consequences at different levels. At the individual level, these include stress, anxiety, low self-esteem and cognitive dissonance; at the organisational level, absenteeism, turnover and low productivity; and as for society in general, the absence of allegations of illegalities committed by organisations (MOURA-PAULA, 2014).

Another way to support harassment victims is to resort to the law. In this sense, it is worth noting the still insignificant commitment on the part of the Brazilian Legislative Branch, which has direct implications in the institutional dimension mentioned above. Therefore, the legal apparatus addressing this issue is considered fragile.

As for bullying, there are local and state laws providing for the subject, but these are still scarce (NASCIMENTO; SILVA, 2012). The first law regarding moral harassment was enacted in the 21st century (IRACEMÁPOLIS, 2000), and “provides for the application of penalties to the practice of moral harassment in the premises of the Municipal Direct Public Administration perpetrated by municipal public servants.” On the other hand, federal legislation does not have a specific law addressing the issue. There are other dispositions concerning moral damage, as is the case of the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988; however, these confirm the lack of direction for such situations before the law and, consequently, insufficient support to the victims.

As for sexual harassment, it is characterised as a crime under Brazilian law since 2001 and provided for in article 216-A of the Brazilian Penal Code (BRASIL, 1940): “Art. 216-A. To constrain a person in order to obtain sexual advantage or favour, with the offender relying on his or her status as a supervisor or having influence over the victim as a result of his or her employment status.”

Hirigoyen (2014) points out to the difficulty of victims of sexual harassment providing evidence of non-consent to courts, even though there is legal support for those who practice sexual harassment as a criminal individual and that this is an advance for Brazilian society, especially when compared to the absence of federal legislation addressing harassment. This is because the stalkers themselves seek to reverse what is claimed by the victim, under the argument that they are the victims of a scam themselves; that is, in this case, the victim is actually accused of being the perpetrator of the sexual violence (OLETO *et al.*, 2018).

#### 4. Brazilian studies on bullying and sexual harassment

To identify studies on moral and sexual harassment in the workplace in Brazil, where the present study was conducted, we conducted a search on the website of the National Association of Postgraduate and Research in Administration (ANPAD), using the query terms “harassment” and “sexual harassment,” corresponding to the last five years (2015-2019). Similarly, we searched on the Scientific Periodicals Electronic Library (SPELL) database.

The search found eight papers published by the ANPAD and 18 papers published by SPELL, which, in turn, revealed how the Brazilian academia has analysed the themes. Frame 01 shows the ANPAD publications and Frame 02 shows the ones published by SPELL, sorting them by their essential aspects, namely: authors and year of publication, thematic association to bullying and sexual harassment, methodology, and main findings. Following the table are the highlights, congruences or divergences of the selected studies on bullying.

**Frame 01** – Studies on Moral and Sexual Harassment published in the last five years (2015-2019) by ANPAD

Authors (Year)	Thematic association	Methodology	Main findings
Mendonça <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Theoretical studies on bullying	Bibliometrics	We found 38 papers, which were analysed in terms of the methodology adopted, the origin of the authors, the yearly average of publications, and the ranking of the primary references used. Also, a research agenda was proposed based on the gaps reported in the articles and the indications made by international research.
Oleto, Silva and Paiva (2016)	Disabled people and labour lawsuits	Documentary research	The texts of nine judgments were objects of content analysis, which made it possible to identify, describe and verify the recurrence of its characteristics, namely: the regions of the originating lawsuits (South and Southeast); the type of organisation in which the harassment occurred (legal entities of private law, specifically banking institutions); the gender of the harassed subjects (men); the types of disability of the harassed subjects (physical); the admissibility of the litigation (valid); the type of moral harassment (downward vertical); and the hostile attitudes practiced by the perpetrators (purposeful deterioration of working conditions).
Heinzmann and Valadão Júnior (2016)	Theoretical studies on bullying	Bibliometrics	We analysed 83 papers and found out that the publications on the subject have been carried out in different fields of knowledge, which demonstrates its interdisciplinary character. The publications of the national journals are more pulverized in different journals; the intellectual production on the theme, both in international and national studies, is concentrated in authors who write in partnership with small groups and also individually; in the publications by national journals, the qualitative method predominates, which points out for opportunities for conducting quantitative research. We concluded that it is necessary to expand knowledge and scientific production on the subject.

Authors (Year)	Thematic association	Methodology	Main findings
Vasconcelos and Bertino (2017)	Power	Documentary research	The results revealed unequivocal evidence of a correlation between harassment patterns and the most recurrent aggressions (vagueness doctrine). Likewise, they established objective differences between bullying and professional bullying.
Castro et al. (2017)	Organisational culture	Quantitative: questionnaire	The results indicated that a) clan and adhocratic cultures are predictors of bullying with negative estimators, while market culture positively influenced bullying; b) adhocratic and hierarchical cultures influenced satisfaction positively, whereas market culture influenced satisfaction negatively; c) bullying is negatively associated with satisfaction; and d) bullying as a mediator between culture and satisfaction has significant effects on all cultural types.
Teixeira and Rampazo (2017)	Workplace bullying in academia	Narratives	The results confirm the difficulty of addressing this subject in this academic area.
Cançado et al. (2018)	Implementation of programs to prevent and combat moral harassment	Quantitative: survey Qualitative: interview	The leaders who participated in the research also pointed out to the non-existence or informality because of the internal control programs to prevent and combat bullying in the cooperatives surveyed, which indicates a lack of preparation.
Costa (2018)	Workplace bullying in academia	Quantitative: survey Qualitative: interview	The occurrence of cases of moral harassment in the postgraduate program was verified, mainly perpetrated by professors and counsellors. Some consequences include loss of confidence, decreased productivity, desire to switch areas of activity, stress, anxiety, depression and, in more serious cases, suicide attempts.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Thus, in the papers published in the events promoted by ANPAD, thematic associations on “theoretical studies on moral harassment” (two studies) and “harassment in the academia” (two studies) predominated. Regarding the methodology used, the most recurrent was “quantitative: Survey” (three studies), followed by “qualitative: interviews” (two studies). It is noteworthy that only one among the eight papers found dealt with sexual harassment in the workplace.

**Frame 02** – Studies on Moral and Sexual Harassment published in the last five years (2015-2019) by SPELL

Authors (Year)	Thematic association	Methodology	Main findings
Lucas and Romano (2015)	Psychological impacts on victims of bullying	Case study - interview	The results of the interviews revealed that the phenomenon causes depressive experiences, mood alterations, generalised anxiety, low self-esteem and constant anguish, which in turn leads to disinterest in life and body care practices.
Medeiros, Valadão Junior and Possas (2015)	Corporate Psychopath	Non-participant observation case study	The goal was to understand the actions of corporate psychopaths, given the difficulties exposed in research on moral harassment, especially regarding how to interview them. This study also contributed to raising awareness



Authors (Year)	Thematic association	Methodology	Main findings
			about this behaviour in organisations among managers and non-managers.
Nunes and Tolfo (2015)	Workplace bullying in academia	Case study - questionnaire and interview	It was found that universities are not immune to the occurrence of this kind of violence and that these occurrences cause disruption to the health (particularly mental) of these workers, as it implied the deterioration of working conditions, isolation and refusal to communicate, as well as verbal, physical or sexual violence. It is concluded that universities should create and develop measures to prevent and combat bullying since current actions have been ineffective.
Valadão Júnior and Mendonça (2015)	Legal proceedings addressing moral harassment	Documentary research and interview	The results showed significant divergences in the categories in the views of victims and managers. Moreover, they revealed not only a form of myopia regarding the multiple causes of harassment in the workplace among the respondents but also in the legal proceedings. With the emphasis on managers, the contradictions and misconceptions about the matter cause concern, and the alibis naturalised in their expressions and speeches try to shift the problem to the margins of the subject by adopting a tone of “mockery” or “joking”, as well as euphemisms.
Vasconcelos (2015)	Legal proceedings addressing moral harassment	Documentary research	As a main result, the study contrasts the need to contextualise the motive of the complaint and the characterisation of harassment, without neglecting the relevance of the meaning attributed by the individual to the analysed phenomenon.
Guimarães, Cançado and Lima (2016)	Workplace bullying in academia	Documentary research	It was verified that the non-performance of the Human Resources sector in the intermediation of the conflict, the culture and the structure of the institution might have favoured the occurrence of the case and led to the impunity of the harasser. Also, bullying is a multidimensional process that violates the fundamental guarantees of the individual and brings severe impacts to their health, as well as damage to the organisation and society as well.
Silva and Nakata (2016)	Conflict relationships	Questionnaire - survey	The analysis of the results showed that the main reasons that lead subjects to remain in a job in which they suffer moral harassment are related to the context of labour, which enables the satisfaction of the individuals' basic needs.
Maciel and Helal (2017)	Conflict relationships	Qualitative; movie	The dialogues reveal the overvaluation of perfect work, narcissistic behaviours and malicious intentions, reflecting the secretary's dilemma regarding whether to go on working in the magazine.
Teixeira and Rampazo (2017)	Bullying impacts	Exploratory qualitative research: interview	The attitudes listed in the research correspond to the types of moral harassment in the specialised literature.

Authors (Year)	Thematic association	Methodology	Main findings
Marazzo et al. (2018)	Mental health	Quantitative: survey Qualitative: interview	The study presented the staging, impacts, consequences and solutions regarding bullying.
Ventura et al. (2018)	Sexual harassment in academia	Qualitative: interview	The results confirm the difficulty of addressing this subject in academia.
Mendonça, Santos and Paula (2018)	State of Art and research gaps	Bibliometrics	The study observed the need to expand the debates and studies to face the moral violence from multidisciplinary views by acting collaboratively.
Picironi and Augusto (2018)	Gender	Qualitative: interview	Although women's work has proven to be recognised and valued in the workplaces surveyed, there are still variables contributing to the perpetuation of female discrimination.
Nunes, Tolfo and Espinosa (2018)	Violence in the workplace	Qualitative: interview	Those who participated defined bullying primarily from certain aspects of hostile practices such as humiliation, disrespect, abuse; and, in sequence, as a consequence/effect, such as shame, fear, or anger.
Nogueira, Carvalho-Neto and Nunes (2018)	Collective bargaining	Qualitative	Clauses dealing with prevention issues, programs, lectures and others, in addition to being associated with sexual harassment, were the most frequent in this study.
Silva, Castro and Santos (2018)	Organisational culture	Quantitative: survey	The study identified clan and adhocratic cultures as predictors of bullying, as well as the effect of bullying on the relationship between organisational culture and degree of job satisfaction.
Oleto et al. (2018)	Young workers	Qualitative: interview	The study identified that youngsters who have suffered sexual harassment are predominantly female and that the situation leads to both personal and professional consequences.
Nunes, Tolfo and Espinosa (2019)	Policies, actions and institutional discourses	Quantitative: survey	The study found that the university does not clearly demonstrate its policies and actions regarding harassment, which influences its practices and internal complaints.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Therefore, among the works published on the SPELL database, thematic associations related to "moral/sexual harassment in the academia" (three studies), followed by "conflict relations" (two studies) and "legal proceedings addressing moral harassment" (two studies). Regarding the methodology used, the most frequent was "qualitative: interviews" (six studies) and "quantitative: survey" (four studies). There is a recurrence of studies on moral harassment in academia, and few studies focused on sexual harassment (three studies).

Having clarified the aspects of the study on the subject in Brazil, we present the research methodology adopted herein.

## 5. Methodology

To achieve the proposed goal, we carried out exploratory qualitative research. Qualitative studies deal with the intensity, singularities and meanings of phenomena; that is, they turn to the socio-cultural dimension expressed through “beliefs, values, opinions, representations, relationship forms, symbolism, habits, customs, behaviours, and practices” (MINAYO, 2017, p. 2). In this sense, Agervold (2009) encourages qualitative research on harassment to understand the relationship between harmful acts and the occurrence of moral harassment in greater depth.

The methodology adopted to collect data from individuals who recognise themselves as victims of harassment in organisations was multiple case study, which allows understanding the experience lived and narrated by the research participants and comparing the information collected with the current and competing theories (YIN, 2005). The study of bullying cases in different companies, located in Belo Horizonte (MG, Brazil), with the participation of 27 different subjects, although the number of cases is not as relevant in this research strategy as in a statistical analysis, as we do not seek numerical generalizations, but in-depth analyses of the phenomenon instead. It is worth mentioning that in each case, we sought to highlight specific aspects of the research subjects’ experiences, as well as to highlight the contrasts between the cases studied.

Therefore, the analytical corpus of the study was composed of data collected from 27 in-depth interviews with a semi-structured script, conducted with subjects who were victims of harassment in Brazilian organisations. The interviews were closed when the theoretical saturation was reached, that is, when the interaction between the researchers and the field (interviewed) could not provide new elements to guide and deepen theorization (PIRES, 2008). All interviews were conducted outside the research subjects’ workplace at prearranged hours and locations to avoid embarrassment and retaliation. The names of the respondents were preserved and replaced by pseudonyms (R1, R2, R3, up to R27), in order to guarantee the confidentiality of the information and the anonymity of the subjects. The interviews were conducted in 2018, with an average duration of three hours and, after being recorded, were fully transcribed for data analysis.

The in-depth interviews enabled the respondents to discuss their experiences in the workplace in a broad way, promoting the comfort and interaction between the researcher and the researched, a fact that contributed significantly to the study proposal (DEVOTTA *et al.*, 2016). Thus, we seek to give voice to individuals whose experience could contribute to the discussion of the phenomenon on the frame (SAUNDERS; TOWNSEND, 2018).

The discursive corpus was submitted to Discourse Analysis, which is based on articulations between the fields of Linguistics, Philosophy and Social Sciences (FAIRHURST; PUTNAM, 2019). This approach allows us to examine the constitutive effects of language, processes of production, distribution and consumption of texts, hence promoting an interpretive and reflexive analysis that aims to understand the role of discourse in a socially constructed reality (FAIRHURST; COOREN, 2018).

Its relevance lies in the possibility of focusing the analyses on the symbolic aspects that produce meaning and significance for subjects (PÉCHEUX, 2014). It should be emphasised that this type of analysis is commonly adopted in research in organisational studies, both in Brazil (SARAIVA; SANTOS; PEREIRA, 2020) and

abroad (ALVESSON; KÄRREMAN, 2011; FAIRHURST; PUTNAM, 2019; COYLE, 2021).

## 6. Data Presentation and Analysis

Given the methodological proposal of this study, we initially synthesised in Table 01 a brief characterisation of the respondents' profiles, in order to identify their gender, age, level of education, position, total working time in the company, and sector of activity.

**Table 01** - Characterization of subjects interviewed and their organisations

Code	Gender	Age	Level of education	Position	Total working time in the company	Company sector
R1	Female	30	Bachelor's Degree	assistant Administrative	5 years	Public
R2	Female	28	Bachelor's Degree	assistant Administrative	3 years	Public
R3	Female	38	Bachelor's Degree	Nursing technician	10 years	Public
R4	Female	45	Bachelor's Degree	Psychologist	8 years	Public
R5	Female	39	Bachelor's Degree	assistant Administrative	5.5 years	Public
R6	Female	34	Bachelor's Degree	assistant Administrative	5 years	Public
R7	Female	33	Bachelor's Degree	Psychologist	3 years	Public
R8	Female	33	Bachelor's Degree	Pedagogue	6 months	Public
R9	Male	23	Some College	Pedagogue	1 year	Public
R10	Male	26	Bachelor's Degree	assistant Administrative	1.5 years	Public
R11	Female	35	Bachelor's Degree	IT technician	2 years	Public
R12	Female	32	Bachelor's Degree	assistant Administrative	1ano	Public
R13	Female	22	Some College	assistant Administrative	1.5 years	Bank clerk
R14	Female	27	Bachelor's Degree	Financial assistant	1 year	Bank clerk
R15	Female	22	Some College	assistant Accountant	1.5 years	Logistic
R16	Female	29	Bachelor's Degree	assistant Administrative	1 year	Logistic
R17	Female	23	Bachelor's Degree	Archive clerk	3 years	Logistic
R18	Female	21	Some College	assistant Financial	3 months	Publicity
R19	Female	25	Some College	HR assistant	2 years	Publicity
R20	Male	26	Bachelor's Degree	Occupational manager	1 year	Public
R21	Female	20	Some College	Intern	2 years	Bank clerk

R22	Female	21	Some College	Intern	1 year	Outsourced employee
R23	Male	19	Some College	Intern	1 year	Logistic
R24	Male	22	Some College	Intern	2.2 years	Educational
R25	Female	23	Some College	Intern	1 year	Educational
R26	Female	25	Some College	Assistant	1.7 years	Lottery clerk
R27	Male	28	Some College	Intern	6 months	Financial

Source: Prepared by the authors.

It should be noted that 18 respondents are classified, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2011), as young workers, that is, they are workers under the age of 29. Therefore, age seems to be a preponderant factor in understanding harassment and its peculiarities in Brazilian organisations, as most of the cases have young workers as victims. Also, these subjects are at the beginning of the process of establishing themselves professionally, a fact that makes them relatively more vulnerable to such practices, both in the interpersonal dimension and in the other three ones considered in this study (economic-organisational, national and institutional).

In the Brazilian context, the practices of moral or sexual harassment take place having as background a powerful movement on the part of the organisations to conceal it (HELOANI; BARRETO, 2018; MENDONÇA; SANTOS; PAULA, 2018). In other words, such abusive practices occur continuously in the routine of many organisations scattered throughout the country, but little (or nothing) is said by the companies, which fear the negative impact on their reputation. However, this silencing seems to immobilize organisations, which do not take protective measures to aid the harassed and/or punitive ones against the harasser, especially when we consider that the most common type of harassment in the country is the downward vertical, i.e., that which is committed by people at the highest levels in the organisational hierarchy against their subordinates (VALADÃO-JÚNIOR; MENDONÇA, 2015).

The data revealed that harassment practices in Brazilian organisations occur daily in the corridors, rooms and other facilities, without any modesty or reflection on the act. Notably, due to a Brazilian cultural particularity, harassment practices are more frequent committed against individuals who do not fit into the so-called “normal” social standard.

The saddest thing here is to see people discriminating against others because you are what makes you happy. I am a transsexual woman, and I have to deal with it every day; they speak behind my back or even to my face. When I step in the hallways, they stop the conversation as if I were an alien. But I’m learning how to deal with it better and better every day. I don’t care anymore, because what matters is to be happy, to be who I want to be; I’m a woman [R3].

Jokes about my mental condition [bipolar disorder] in my workplace, in meetings, at lunchtime. When I started this job, there was an embarrassing situation where I was alone with a colleague, and he tried

to kiss me and insinuate massages and run his hands over my body. Later I found out that some co-workers made bets on who would hook up with me, among other embarrassing situations [R17].

These and other discursive passages highlight the interdiscourse of prejudice, a type of violence that is already part of the structure of Brazilian society. Beyond the work context, the social structure of prejudice brings suffering to workers who are victims of harassment (PRADO; MACHADO, 2008) and is reinforced by it. As multi-determined practices, it would be a mistake to analyse them in isolation. It is also necessary to consider other structural aspects that encompass phenomena such as social exclusion and inequality; the interpersonal dimension that involves conflict between people; and, above all, the symbolic dimension, which involves the processes of representation, as well as the meanings they assume in the Brazilian social reality (CAMPOS; TORRES; GUIMARÃES, 2016).

Exactly [due to] the position that this person has, it is believed that having certain “power” allows people to act as they please, because the employees need the job, and especially today, in view of the crisis the country is going through, they claim that finding a job is difficult and that if they want to resign, they can go ahead, because the following day someone will show up willing to get the job. They do this kind of emotional blackmail, and unfortunately, no one says or does nothing, and that’s why harassment like this will always happen [R16].

Remarkably, the passage narrated by interviewee R16 highlights the fact that the current Brazilian socioeconomic situation, in which more than 13 million people are out of a job, legitimises and contributes to the naturalisation of perverse practices, which have become more frequent in Brazilian organisations. In this sense, it is possible to perceive the existence of a diffuse power system, which imposes on the weaker its submission to retracted labour relations (the political aspect) and debased labour relations (the legal aspect), which, in turn, sheds light on the most perverse power practices in organisations.

However, it should be emphasised that harassment practices in Brazil are more common than they should be, and they are primarily legitimated by a cultural element that attributes a strong sexualised character to daily social relations, making the line between usual everyday practice and actual harassment thinner. These facts become apparent in the following report:

I did this internship, and there was an older man, I worked more in the administrative area. He would always come to us and hug us and lean his body on us, and all that. He had already given me a ride home once, and he talked about relationship issues, about his daughter’s sex life and how she always told him everything. At first, it seemed to me that he was a cool type of father, who liked to talk about everything with his children, who wanted to understand the younger people; and since he was older than me, I never thought he wanted to take advantage of me. But then I realised that his behaviour was becoming very frequent; sometimes he would greet me with a kiss on the cheek, but it was not that greeting type of kiss, it was malicious. Then I got a little “*cabreira*” [suspicious] about it; I didn’t know if he was going overboard or if it was all in my mind. I think not saying anything is a common mistake because everyone will tell you that you’re wrong, that it’s a normal attitude and that we’re too immature to realize it (R22).

This discursive passage reveals a process of silencing that is naturalised and legitimised by Brazilian cultural aspects. Remarkably, the silencing identified in several excerpts from the testimonies of the participants of this study (both by the harassers and the victims who have become accustomed to such practices) ensure a normalization process of bullying as a form of violence in the organisational structure of Brazilian companies, as well as in the everyday life of non-business entities. In this context, a common perception among the respondents is that their companies neglect such occurrences, fearing scandals that may negatively impact their results.

A guy, a son of a bitch once grabbed me; with much effort, I managed to let go off him, grabbed a tape holder and hit him hard on his head, then ran out screaming. At the time, they wouldn't let me press charges; they told me that since I'd also attacked him, I could be punished as well. As I was very young, I wasn't studying yet; I wasn't aware of anything, and I didn't press charges. I stayed there for another three months, but I suffered so much persecution that I later asked to be dismissed [R12].

This discursive passage also demonstrates the inversion of guilt between the characters in question, in which the victim becomes the one to blame since the attacker-harasser held a higher position in the company's hierarchy. We understand that bullying becomes possible because it includes victim disqualification, its silent acceptance, peer pressure, or an exercise in cruelty that makes them believe that "they were asking for it" or that "they deserved what happened" (FREITAS, 2001).

We realise that ethical principles and values involving the world of work have been increasingly lost, emptied, threatened, and vulnerable, and workers do not know whom to turn to or trust (VALADÃO-JÚNIOR; MENDONÇA, 2015). This highlights one more aspect of the precariousness of labour relations in contemporary times (BAPUJI, 2015), related directly to the economic-organisational dimension of analysis and indirectly to the institutional dimension, due to the fragility of national laws.

I often missed class because the work shift ended at 5:00 p.m. Then at 4:50, my boss would put a stack of paper [in front of me] and say: 'You have to do this today, you can't leave here today until you finish this.' Instead of leaving work at 5, I would leave at 6 or 7, and I had to stay there. What was I going to say? 'I won't do this because I have a class.' She was going to fire me; I'm a trainee. What was I supposed to do? If I were a CLT (Labour Laws Consolidation) employee, I could still do something, but interns have no protection at all. And I worked as much as or more than any other CLT employee. And it was horrible the way she treated me, the way she yelled at me in front of others; she was never polite, she was mean. She called me a moron several times in front of other people, and I only tolerated it because I really needed that job (R27).

This speech affirms the scarce (or absent) legal action against harassment practices in organisations, which is another factor that legitimates harassment in the workplace in Brazil. This discursive passage reveals the interdiscourse of fragmentation and precariousness of labour relations in the country. On the other hand, it also reflects the social condition of the workers who, amid adversity, are forced to learn to be resilient, given their social and economic situation. Therefore, it is a relation of labour exploitation, using as a subterfuge the social condition of most Brazilians.

During the interviews, various forms of harassment practices and hostile attitudes were identified, ranging from the attempted professional disqualification of the victim, and malicious comments and verbal offences, to extreme and even more perverse cases of harassment, which sometimes materialised from sexual harassment practices.

I was called things like dumb, retard, and a moron. I was watched all the time, every time I left my cubicle to go to the bathroom or have a snack was timed; they prevented me from having contact with superiors for fear of “taking their place;” I was accused of robbery and had my things searched, and my purse tossed on the floor [R18].

I remember it as if it were today: my boss and I were in the room by ourselves, and he'd tell me ‘let's go to that corner’, ‘come and sit on my lap’, and I refused. He held my arm and said, “you'd better respect me, or you'll end up living under the bridge, you nasty tranny” [R3].

An important aspect to be emphasised from this discursive passage is the use of the lexical item “traveco” (“tranny”), a derogatory term used to demean transsexual individuals in Brazil. Also, it should be noted that the living conditions of transsexual individuals in the country in most cases leads them to prostitution, due to the discrimination to which they are subjected (CARRIERI; SOUZA; AGUIAR, 2014); according to the respondent, having a “decent” job opportunity corroborated to keep her slavish to harassment. In other testimonials, similar situations can be perceived:

My boss is always hugging and kissing everyone, but when it was me, I felt his evil intentions and rejected him. But then he went on hugging me longer and longer, touching me in a way that made me angry and threatening me on WhatsApp. He'd send me nudes and blackmail me so I wouldn't tell anyone, or else he would kill me [R5].

He got up, locked the room, lowered his pants and began stroking his penis. I felt terrible and kept quiet; I didn't tell anyone, because everything is [always] the woman's fault [R8].

One day the director's secretary locked me in the living room, turned off the lights, and began rubbing her body against me and sliding her hand over me. I tried to get rid of her, but she said if I did this, she would scream. She said that a man like me couldn't be gay, that she would make me ‘into a man’ [an expression used to say that she would turn the individual into a heterosexual] (R10).

In these passages and other ones that mentioned such perverse practices, we observe the interdiscourse of a chauvinistic and patriarchal structure in the Brazilian labour culture and relations, an aspect that supports and legitimizes the actions of harassers (HELOANI; BARRETO, 2018). In addition to the deterioration of working conditions, such actions induce the victims of harassment to isolate themselves and refuse to report the fact, in addition to constituting an attack on human dignity (HIRIGOYEN, 2005). This work context is similar to slavery, in terms of the management forms in organisations and the exploitation of workers (CRANE, 2013).

Finally, the last semantic course refers to the consequences of harassment on the life of the workers interviewed, ranging from stress symptoms and low self-esteem to, in more serious cases, the development of disorders and health problems, whether physical or psychological.



I felt uncomfortable, my heart was panting very hard, I felt dizzy, but I went to the doctor, and he found nothing. They said it was a panic attack, because of very high stress. I felt awful; that was when my cholesterol went up, so the doctor said I was going through a tough time. I now cry all the time; I'm very sensitive. I'm afraid of everyone. I was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder: I'd check the door ten times, and the gas stove ten times. I'm always worried that one day [it will happen] what the stalker told me [about killing my family and me] [R6].

I now have several psychological problems; I suffer from disorders, delusions, hallucinations, persecutory delusion, and aggressiveness. I sometimes can't control it, and it even disrupts my having a relationship, a healthy social and family life [R8].

It caused many emotional traumas. I started to feel unmotivated and depressed. I didn't believe in success anymore. I gave up many of my dreams [R13].

These excerpts corroborate the literature on the harms that harassment can cause to the victims, such as the development of depressive disorders, increased risk of suicide, and the appearance of psychosomatic disorders (HIRIGOYEN, 2005). Also, there was a case where the victim became what she had been accused of, that is, she became incapable, null, paranoid, psychotic and lost hold of the meanings of work and life (HIRIGOYEN, 2005).

## 7. Final Remarks

In the Brazilian context, harassment practices have several peculiarities, all of which are supported and legitimised by cultural aspects, weak laws and weak (or non-existent) governmental/corporate action in an attempt to remedy, or at least minimise, this perverse phenomenon.

In this context, this paper has sought to shed light on obscure aspects that have been rarely addressed in the organisational, social, and academic spheres. This concerns the silencing of all actors involved in harassment; there seems to be a "deaf-blind side" of Brazilian organisations and this study, as well as other ones that deal with this subject try to break with this deafening silence that people and organisations make about this phenomenon, for diverse reasons and with consequences of varied scopes.

Added to this are the difficulties of accessing the people who have experienced harassment, hampering the actual research on the subject, which does not fail to acquire a trait of denouncement and engagement that goes beyond the Brazilian academia.

Faced with this limitation and considering the contributions of an analysis that encompasses levels other than the interpersonal one, we suggest that future studies further investigate how cultural aspects shape and influence the practice of harassment. In Brazil, for instance, harassment is perceived as a form of "victim mentality" by the harassed, a view that neglects the subtleties and refinements of cruelty and perversity still naturalised and endorsed by society and in organisations in particular. The impacts of harassment on workers' physical and psychological health

are undeniable, but they need to be investigated at broader scales in terms of their connections to organisational outcomes, intending to contribute to changes in human management policies and practices and the country's current legislation on the subject.

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