

**Turning Pain into Gain: The Effect of Downward Mobbing on
Employees' Stress-Related Growth**

by

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STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for any award or any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. It is affirmed by the candidate that, to the best of her knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

The present thesis investigates the effect of downward mobbing on employee's stress-related growth with the mediator role of burnout, and the moderator role of personality hardiness and co-worker support. Data were collected from 367 employees (177 females, 186 males) through Amazon Mturk. Self-report measures were administered to participants who have been exposed to mobbing by their supervisor/ manager in at least one of their previous work experiences. Moderated mediation analysis suggested that burnout mediates the relationship between mobbing and stress-related growth where burnout and growth were negatively associated. Co-worker support appeared as a significant but inadequate moderator to promote growth. Post hoc analysis suggested that there is a curvilinear relationship between burnout and growth, and hardiness is a significant – but insufficient – moderator in the direct relationship. Implications for science and practice will be discussed.

Keywords: stress-related growth, mobbing, burnout, hardiness, social support

ÖZET

Bu tez, tükenmişliğin aracı rolü ile aşağı yönlü mobbingin (yöneticinin çalışanına uyguladığı psikolojik şiddet), çalışanın strese bağlı büyümesi üzerindeki etkisini, kişilik dayanıklılığı ve iş arkadaşı desteğinin düzenleyici rolü üzerinden araştırmaktadır. Veriler Amazon Mturk aracılığıyla 367 çalışandan (177 kadın, 186 erkek) toplanmıştır. Daha önceki iş deneyimlerinden en az birinde amiri/yöneticisi tarafından mobbinge maruz kalan katılımcılara öz bildirim ölçekleri uygulanmıştır. Düzenleyicili aracılık analizi, tükenmişlik ve büyümenin negatif ilişkili olduğunu, ve tükenmişlik sendromunun mobbing ve strese bağlı büyüme arasındaki ilişkiye aracılık ettiğini ileri sürmüştür. İş arkadaşı desteği, büyümeyi desteklemek için önemli ancak yetersiz bir düzenleyici olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Post hoc analizi, tükenmişlik ve büyüme arasında eğrisel bir ilişki olduğunu ve dayanıklılığın doğrudan ilişkide önemli – ancak yetersiz – bir düzenleyici olduğunu ileri sürmüştür. Çalışmanın literature katkısı ve pratisyenler için çıkarımları tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: strese bağlı büyüme, mobbing, tükenmişlik, dayanıklılık, sosyal destek

I am dedicating this thesis to all the women who build and earn their lives from scratch.

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1. Introduction

When the German philosopher Nietzsche wrote in his book *Twilight of the Idols*, “Out of life’s school of war: What does not destroy me, makes me stronger” (1888), the underlying idea behind this quote was quite appealing for most by its very nature. However, growth from suffering was not a new concept even in the 19th century. Religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam emphasize the importance of suffering, signifying that growth is possible out of suffering. Starting with religion, the concept flourished into philosophy (Nietzsche, 1888) and early existential psychology due to its relationship with meaning-making (Frankl, 1968). However, since the concept entered into the scientific field within the last 30 years, it has been rarely investigated in the work context, with an extremely limited scope. Therefore, this research aims to understand growth following adversity in the workplace.

Researchers have used several terms to describe the concept such as post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), stress-related growth (Park, Cohen & Murch, 1996), thriving (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995) and benefit finding (Affleck & Tennen, 1996), all of which point to “the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). For the current study, the term “stress-related growth” will be used since not all experiences are traumatic but nevertheless stressful in the workplace. Since the term has entered the scientific literature, researchers have mostly focused on the occurrence of growth as a result of highly-traumatic experiences such as natural disasters, terminal illnesses, and the death of significant others (e.g., Bellizzi & Blank, 2006; Xu & Liao, 2011; Wolchik, Coxe, Tein, Sandler & Ayers, 2009). However, highly-stressful events may also cause growth if the individual has the necessary resources (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, Updegraff, Taylor, Kemeny & Wyatt, 2002). Considering both the prevalence of highly-stressful

events in the workplace, such as mobbing, accidents in high-risk sectors (e.g., oil and gas, production), and sexual assault, as well as the extent to which we give importance to work in our lives, the potential for growth is expected to be prevalent in modern working life. However, there is a dearth of literature on stress-related growth in the workplace.

Among those highly stressful events in the workplace, mobbing is one of the most prevalent and destructive behaviors. In the USA, 19% of workers suffer from mobbing (Namie, 2017), and in European countries, the prevalence ranges between 3.5% and 14.4% (European Risk Observatory Report, 2010). Within all types of mobbing, downward mobbing, which is “the intentional and repeated inflictions of physical or psychological harm by superiors on subordinates within an organization,” (Vandekerckhove & Commers, 2003, p. 42), is the most widespread due to the power imbalance in a mobbing experience (Duffy & Sperry, 2014). This can be seen in how 61% of mobbing cases in the US and between 41% to 93% of mobbing cases in Europe are downward mobbing (see Namie, 2017; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel & Vartia, 2003).

Therefore, in this study, the effect of downward mobbing on employee’s stress-related growth will be investigated. Since growth from suffering requires intense meaning-making effort following the stressful event (Park, 2010), a major breakdown leading to this process can be considered as essential. Burnout – as a major point of breakdowns (Rotenstein et al., 2018) – is expected to mediate the relationship between downward mobbing and stress-related growth. In other words, we expect growth to occur only after an employee hit rock-bottom following the mobbing experience.

Although growth is a general tendency for human beings (Maslow, 1968), stress-related growth after a highly-stressful event and burnout is not inevitable. To experience a positive change after adversity, an individual needs to have some personal resources. The literature

mentions several individual characteristics and external resources that are associated with growth after traumatic or highly-stressful events, such as openness to experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), social support (Rzeszutek, 2017) and coping style (Armeli, Gunthert & Cohen, 2001). This study investigates the moderator role of hardiness and co-worker support on the basis of the following arguments. As will be discussed in detail later, we conducted interviews with several victims of mobbing at work to inquire about the organizational context and personal resources that helped participants deal with the mobbing experience as the first proposed model involved the moderator role of organizational context (grievance mechanisms, perceived organizational support, organizational fairness), and personal resources (social support, emotion regulation strategies, problem solving abilities). After the interviews and an intensive literature review, the research model involved the moderator role of personality hardiness (to represent personal resources) and social support from co-workers as (to represent organizational support mechanism) (see, Figure 1). Moreover, the growth following adversity literature constantly suggests that the appraisal of life's challenges is an important factor in promoting growth (e.g., Park et al., 1996; Schaefer & Moos, 1992). Since hardiness is a personality trait and consists of three different dispositions two of which are closely related with appraisals of stressful situations and acting upon them (Maddi, 2004), we suggest that this trait might be helpful in dealing with mobbing exposure and further promote growth. Second, our interview phase suggested that the people who grow following mobbing experiences are the ones who are committed, appraise challenges as a part of life and have internal locus of control. Relatedly, hardiness is a personality trait which covers these three. Additionally, co-worker support was also an important theme of the interviews where colleagues helped people deal with the emotional demands of mobbing more than other types of social support (see Table 1) and it has been suggested as one

of the most important factors in dealing with interpersonal traumas (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008). Based on the interviews and literature reviews, we propose that, in the work context co-worker support might be a better facilitator of growth than non-work support due to the proximity, intersection of the experiences, and the lack of spillover effect all of which will be expanded in later sections.

While investigating the aforementioned relationship, we controlled several variables on the basis of their effects on growth which were empirically proven. Since females report greater level of growth (Akbar & Witruk, 2016), we controlled gender; older people are more inclined to report growth regardless of their adverse experience (Boyle, Stanton, Ganz & Bower, 2017), we controlled age; and considering that over time participants' growth experiences are likely to change (Park, 1996), we controlled the time passed after mobbing exposure.

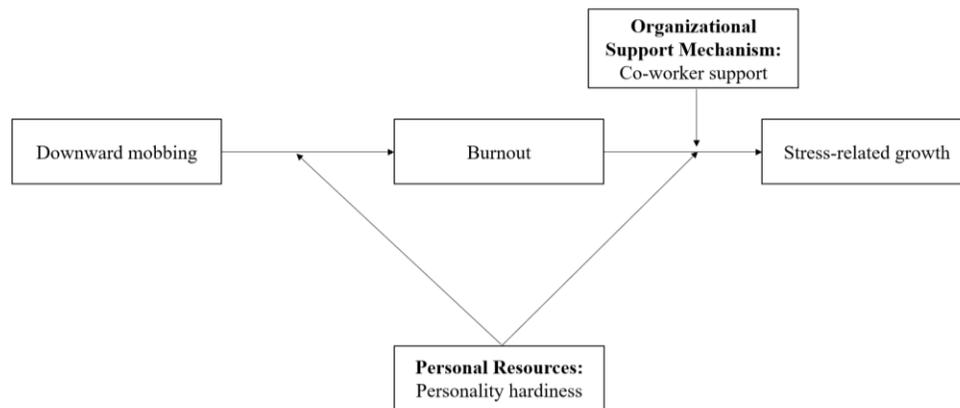


Figure 1. Research model of the present study.

The current study aims at making significant contributions to both science and practice by taking a counterintuitive approach and suggesting growth after stressful events at work. Except for limited studies on specific occupations such as firefighters and the military (e.g., Gallaway, Millikan & Bell, 2011; Yang & Ha, 2019), the effects of common and highly stressful events on employee growth have not been extensively studied. Only recently, Vogel and Bolino

(2020) published a theoretical paper on how exposure to abusive supervision may lead to post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth. However, there is no empirical study investigating the propositions of that paper. This study aims to be embedded in the positive organizational psychology literature, which also discusses strengths and positive traits of the employees to cope with adversities in work life. Potential results are expected to contribute to the positive organizational science literature (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003) by focusing on the positive experience triggered by stressful work events.

The relationship among those constructs can generate helpful understandings for practitioners especially in the prevention of mobbing and burnout. Since the growth following abusive supervision has the potential to increase the likelihood of making radical career shifts (Vogel & Bolino, 2020), that possible change might damage organizations both financially (due to turnover costs) and in terms of reputation. Within the age of talent war, organizations are striving to retain their true talent and maximize the productivity of their employees. Since mobbing and burnout are associated with increased turnover intentions and counterproductive work behavior (e.g., Ansari, Maleki & Mazraeh, 2013; Ertüreten, Cemalcılar & Aycan, 2013), organizations may look for further prevention mechanisms to avoid financial loss. However, the ultimate aim should be to prevent the occurrence of mobbing, rather than having a silver lining to it.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Stress-related growth at work

Stress-related growth is defined as positive psychological, spiritual and social transformation as a result of stressful life experiences (Park et al., 1996). Although the positive psychology literature has adopted several different terms to explain the concept, the most widely

used terms are post-traumatic growth and stress-related growth, and there are only minor differences. This is why the literature review will encompass both.

Since the concept of growth from suffering has become the topic of scientific inquiry, most researchers focused on the effects of highly traumatic experiences, such as bereavement, terminal illnesses and natural disasters (e.g., Bellizzi & Blank, 2006; Xu & Liao, 2011; Wolchik et al., 2009). In a similar vein, growth from suffering has rarely been investigated in the work context and the focus was on traumatic work experiences which occur in military work, fire service, and sports (e.g., Gallaway et al., 2011; Galli & Reel, 2012; Yang & Ha, 2019). However, work life is a source of constant stress itself even without the presence of adversities. Besides life-threatening experiences at work, considerably more prevalent and highly stressful events in the workplace such as mobbing, sexual assault, and harassment, may lead to the growth of the employee. However, there is a dearth of literature about the possible growth as a result of more common adversities at work (Maitlis, 2020).

Recently, Maitlis (2020) proposed a conceptual model which explains the mechanism behind growth from suffering at work. According to the model, as a result of traumatic or highly stressful work experiences, individuals' assumptive worlds are challenged which is associated with failure in adaptive emotion regulation and cognition. This process may promote ruminative thoughts, and then towards sensemaking and adaptive emotion regulation. Those are facilitated with the help of social support, organizational support, and attentive companionship. Ultimately, growth occurs in combination with increased well-being and positive psychological changes. This process may also affect other work-related outcomes such as positive work identity, career proactivity, and prosocial leadership (Maitlis, 2020). The present study puts several of these ideas into an empirical test.

Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain growth from suffering (see Joseph & Linley, 2006) and the most prolific mechanisms behind this concept are explained through the Assumptive World Theory (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) and the Meaning Making Model (Park & Ai, 2006). According to the Assumptive World Theory, the assumptive world is a personal and unique schema reflecting individuals' beliefs about the world and the self, based on earlier experiences, and it gives meaning, reality and purpose to life (Beder, 2005). The theory proposes that negative life events affect three deep-rooted assumptions: *benevolence of the world, meaningfulness of the world, and self-worth* (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Through exposure to traumatic or highly stressful events, those assumptions are shattered and need to be rebuilt to integrate incompatible information with the existing schema (Armeli et al., 2001). The model that Maitlis (2020) has proposed is mainly based on the Assumptive World Theory (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) with major extensions.

The second mechanism that has been suggested to explain growth from suffering is through the Meaning Making Model (Park & Ai, 2006) based on the theoretical work of Victor Frankl (1968), who suggests that the main motive of human beings is to find meaning in their lives (Park & Ai, 2006). The model argues that when individuals experience traumatic or highly stressful life events, the incongruence between the event and global meaning determines the level of distress, and the effort to reduce this discrepancy leads to meaning-making efforts which may lead to growth as an end-product (Park & Ai, 2006). The Meaning Making Model (Park & Ai, 2006) posits that there are two aspects of meaning: global and situational. Global meaning refers to an encompassing schema of beliefs, goals, and feelings; situational meaning refers to how individuals interpret specific experiences and form their lives in conjunction with global meanings (Park & Ai, 2006). Although the Meaning Making framework seems to overlap with Assumptive

World Theory, the situational meaning extension of this framework makes it more comprehensive to explain the mechanism behind stress-related growth since growth after adversity is a function of environment, personal system, characteristics of the event, and cognitive processes (Schaefer & Moos, 1992). This framework is more commonly used to explain stress-related growth than it is used to explain post-traumatic growth.

As a result of the aforementioned processes, positive transformation is expected in three major areas of life: *perception of self*, *relationship with others* and *philosophy of life* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Change in perception of self can be described as a realization of one's own strength and feeling more capable to deal with further adversities in the future. Change in relationship with others signifies a change in the ways of seeing others and feeling more compassionate towards who are experiencing pain. Lastly, change in life philosophy signifies having a meaning and purpose about life, changed priorities, and developing wisdom due to the path experienced on the way to growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Those changes are seen in a positive way however they do not signal the end of distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

2.2. Downward mobbing and stress-related growth

Mobbing is defined as persistent, sustained harassment of an individual by colleagues or superiors in the workplace (Zapf & Einarsen, 2001). The literature used mobbing and bullying interchangeably. However, bullying refers to more direct aggression and the emphasis is on the bully rather than the target (Leymann, 1996; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). Mobbing, which is the term used for the present study, indicates more subtle, sophisticated ways of harassment and is centred on individuals exposed to mobbing (Leymann, 1996; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). Although frequency and duration are assumed to be important components of mobbing, there is no specific agreement upon these characteristics. While Leymann (1990) proposed that it needs to occur

weekly for at least six months; Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) suggest that it may occur ‘now and then’. Cowie et al. (2002) asserted that while the repetition is a crucial characteristic, there is no consensus on its frequency and duration.

Besides duration and frequency, power imbalance is considered one of the core components of mobbing (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). While this might be the result of the informal power within the social environment, it mostly manifests in the formal power structure within the organizational hierarchies (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). Due to this, downward mobbing, where superiors mob their subordinates, has the highest prevalence among all mobbing cases (see Namie, 2017; Zapf et al., 2003).

Considering the nature of downward mobbing, this process can also be treated as leadership behavior. The literature offers several leadership styles where leaders mob their subordinates such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), destructive leadership (Einarsen, Aasland & Skogstad, 2007) and tyrannical leadership (Ashforth, 1994). The authoritarian leadership style is also found to be associated with downward mobbing (Ertüreten et al., 2013). So, it seems useful to incorporate the research from both literature.

In essence, downward mobbing is humiliating and emotionally abusive (Duffy & Sperry, 2012). Those characteristics have the potential to threaten the self-worth of the subordinates and may lead them to re-evaluate their assumptions about the world namely, *the world is meaningful, the world (and people) are benevolent and the self is worthy* (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). According to the model that Maitlis (2020) proposed, individuals’ assumptive worlds are expected to be challenged after the traumatic event at work and this process is followed by dysregulated emotion and cognition. After experiencing a significant amount of psychological distress following exposure to mobbing (Duffy & Sperry, 2012), those fragmented beliefs may lead

individuals to meaning-making efforts to integrate their new realities with their self-concept and their worldview (Park, 2010). This process is also compatible with the Maitlis' model (2020) where individuals get into a recursive cycle between emotion regulation and sensemaking efforts. If the function of event characteristics, environment, and personal resources is adequate, this meaning-making effort may lead to growth (Schaefer & Moos, 1992). This can also be facilitated by supportive organizational culture in the work context which consists of occupational support and affective companionship (Maitlis, 2020).

Vogel and Bolino (2020) have suggested that the way individuals appraise and cope with the memories of their experience with abusive supervision may lead to growth following post-traumatic stress. They suggested that purposive re-experiencing the abuse helps employees to realize their strength, therefore helping them to continue their lives in a more positive way. Specifically, if individuals purposefully re-experience their prior abuse to restructure their memories, merge them with their self-concepts, and re-evaluate their experience as a challenge instead of a threat, this may help them to rebuild their identity and world (related to their work) and lead to growth (Vogel & Bolino, 2020). Maitlis (2020) also suggested that traumatic experiences at work may cause intrusive memories about the specific event which can be understood as an effort to integrate new realities with existing schema, and then lead to sensemaking where people try to understand the unexpected events that they experienced. In downward mobbing, it is highly expected that individuals may ruminate on the memories of humiliation, aggression, and emotional abuse that they are exposed to and suffer until they properly integrate those memories with their worldview.

Growth following mobbing experiences seems promising however it may only occur at the cost of causing significant damage and suffering to the organization and the individual. For

organizations, mobbing causes monetary loss which may come in the form of; the cost of sick leave, turnover costs, compensation costs for mobbing victims, decreased work productivity and damaged reputation followed by low-quality applicants (Szarek & Szarek, 2018). After this detrimental process, it is only the employees who have the possibility to grow, not the organizations.

2.3. Hitting rock bottom before growth: The role of burnout

Burnout is a syndrome resulting from chronic stress at work and consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion occurs as a result of depleting emotional resources after spending it with interpersonal efforts. Employees first become unable to give themselves to their work on a psychological level and it leads to emotional exhaustion. Depersonalization refers to cynicism toward people that an individual is working with and reduced personal accomplishment refers to the decrease in self-efficacy especially in the work domain (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

The relationship of mobbing – and destructive leadership – with burnout syndrome has been established in the literature (e.g., Carlson, Ferguson, Hunter, & Whitten, 2012; Raja, Javed, & Abbas, 2018). Building on the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and the process of growth from suffering, burnout is assumed to be an important mediator in the relationship between downward mobbing and stress-related growth for two reasons. First, Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that people experience stress when they: lose their resources, are threatened with resource loss, or fail to gain resources following resource investment. According to this theory, there are four categories of resources which individuals are motivated to obtain and protect: objects such as houses, conditions such as having a job, personal characteristics such as high self-esteem, and energies such as money (Hobfoll,

1989). In downward mobbing, employees may experience resource loss, which might take the form of reduced self-esteem, due to intense humiliation and emotional abuse, or their social environment at work due to ostracizing. They are threatened with resource loss, due to verbal or nonverbal threats or unjustified criticism of their work, which may cause job insecurity. Following resource investment, they may fail to gain resources which may take the form of promotion, development opportunities and other work-related benefits.

Secondly, it is assumed that to experience growth, the exposure to stressful or traumatic events – mobbing or destructive leadership – needs to have a significant impact (i.e. a breakdown) on the individual to lead to meaning-making efforts. Maitlis (2020, p. 10.4) suggested that “...considerable degree of distress and psychological disruption, is a prerequisite for posttraumatic growth, given that experiencing trauma is highly distressing and growth comes through struggle”. Because the effect of traumatic or stressful events does not merely depend on the objective evaluation of the situation and it is rather the function of individuals’ cognitive appraisals and coping processes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the effect of this exposure may be best understood with its explicit outcomes, namely burnout syndrome. That is why we assume that in order to grow, employees may need to experience severe breakdown associated with their mobbing exposure. In the workplace, burnout is one of the most prevalent forms of breakdown which is also strongly associated with profound interpersonal relationships (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

2.4. Hardiness as a personal resource for growth

Hardiness is a personality resource that helps individuals deal with stressful situations and turn them into growth opportunities (Kobasa 1979; Maddi, 2002). It consists of three different – but related – dispositions: challenge, control and commitment. Challenge refers to the belief that

change, instead of stability, is a normal part of life and they are opportunities for growth. Control refers to the idea that a person can affect the course of his/her life and can actively change events. Lastly, commitment indicates that no matter how difficult, it is important to stay involved and maintain a sincere curiosity and interest about the world (people, environment, experiences) (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi 2002). Hardiness is conceptualized as existential courage and motivation which helps individuals to look for meaning in stressful situations to turn them into advantages (Maddi, 2004). Maddi (2013) suggests that to identify people as “hardy individuals”, they must be strongly disposed to all three of these characteristics. For example, people who are high in commitment and control but low in challenge, would not appraise stressful situations as “hardy individuals” do, and they do not thrive from those experiences (Maddi, 2013).

It is also important to specify the differences between hardiness and resilience. Resilience is defined as the developable ability that helps individuals to bounce back in the face of adversity or negative events (Luthans, 2002) where hardiness is more of a personality trait which mainly develops during childhood and early adulthood (Maddi, 2004). Individuals develop resilience when they undergo adversities through the course of life (Seery, Holman & Silver, 2010) and Maddi (2004) suggested that hardiness is a pathway to resilience.

Several studies have revealed that hardiness may buffer the negative effects of mobbing in the workplace (i.e. Reknas, Harris & Einarsen, 2018; Srivastava & Dey, 2019). Since hardiness helps individuals handle stressful situations in a better way and appraise these situations as less threatening (Allred & Smith, 1989), it may alleviate the effects of mobbing exposure which may lead to burnout. Vogel and Bolino (2020) also suggest that growth is more likely to occur following abusive supervision if the individual perceives that event as a challenge instead of threat, which is highly consistent with the propositions of this trait. The reasons why

hardiness can be considered an important individual difference when dealing with mobbing exposure is twofold. First, as indicated in several studies, hardiness buffers the effect of stressful situations (Kobasa, Maddi & Puccetti, 1982) which may ultimately lead to psychological and physiological disturbances. Since exposure to mobbing is a highly stressful experience (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005), if individuals consider that they have a potential to change the course of events; if they stay involved instead of detached, and if they accept that stress and adversity is a part of life, they would be more likely to deal with the emotional demands of the exposure more effectively. Moreover, according to the revised Demands and Resources Model (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2007), hardiness can be considered as a personal resource which may help to alleviate the effect of mobbing exposure, namely burnout.

In the work context, however, sometimes demands may exceed the resources and individuals experience burnout although they can be considered as 'hardy individuals'. In those cases, it may be expected that those individuals will keep trying to turn this occupational breakdown into learning opportunities, as is mentioned in the commitment disposition (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi 2002). As such, hardy individuals also accept change and challenge, looking for ways to turn them into advantages, instead of merely victimizing themselves.

Secondly, since Maddi (2004) operationalized hardiness as existential courage to find meaning in life, people who are high in hardiness are expected to engage in meaning-making efforts to understand their adverse experience. Literature found that hardiness is a personality trait which helps to facilitate growth from suffering (e.g., Cole & Lynn, 2010; Salim, Wadey & Diss, 2015). According to the Meaning Making Model (Park & Ai, 2006) which explains the mechanism behind stress-related growth, we may expect that people who experience downward mobbing and are high in hardiness will be more likely to be involved in meaning-making efforts

and grow out of this adversity. In accordance with Figure 1, following hypotheses are referring to the various paths in a moderated mediation model.

Hypothesis 1: Hardiness will moderate the relationship between downward mobbing and burnout in such a way that individuals who are high in hardiness will experience less burnout as a result of mobbing experience, compared to those who are low in hardiness.

Hypothesis 2: Burnout will mediate the relationship between downward mobbing and stress-related growth in such a way that the strength of a mediating effect depends on the level of hardiness. More specifically, individuals high in hardiness will grow from mobbing experience through burnout more than individuals who are low in hardiness.

2.5. Co-worker support as a facilitator of growth

Another important factor that may facilitate growth can be social support. Social support is defined as “the help one gets by discussing problems or situations with other people” (Williams & Cooper, 1998, p. 317). Researchers distinguish support considering the functions of each type: emotional, instrumental, and informational (House & Kahn, 1985 cited in Helgeson & Lopez, 2010). *Emotional support* refers to giving or receiving love, care and concern, *instrumental support* refers to tangible actions which may decrease the recipient’s workload and *informational support* refers to guidance and advice regarding the situation at hand (Helgeson & Lopez, 2010). Researchers found the positive effects of social support especially in the work domain (e.g., Vermeulen & Mustard, 2000; Ray & Miller, 1994), where it buffers the negative effects of stressful situations in the workplace, increase the resilience of the employees and help them to cope with job demands (Halbesleben, 2006; Zacher, Jimmieson & Bordia, 2014).

Social support has also been found to be an important facilitator of growth from suffering (Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009). It has been suggested that individuals who have wider or stronger

social support mechanisms show greater stress-related growth following adversity (Park et al., 1996). In the work context, social support is found to be effective in enabling post-traumatic growth especially for employees who are working in occupations with high rates of traumatic experiences (e.g., Mark, Stevelink, Choi & Fear, 2018; Sattler, Boyd & Kirsch, 2014). Also, Schafer and Moos (1992), who are among the early theorists of growth from suffering, suggest that social support may help individuals to reevaluate the event and catalyze the integration of new information with their current belief system. Helgeson and Lopez (2010) have proposed five different mechanisms in which social support facilitates growth following adversity. First, self-disclosing the stressful or traumatic experience indirectly leads to personal reflection and cognitive processing. Second, when individuals receive support in times of adversity, this makes room for additional cognitive processing by alleviating the burden associated with the stress. Third, receiving support may demonstrate that people are benevolent and therefore may lead to growth especially in the “relationship” domain. Fourth, the provider of support may share specific suggestions on possible benefits which may lead the recipient to reflect upon the situation. Lastly, providers may share their observations regarding the path to growth and may guide recipients.

In the case of mobbing – and following burnout – social support can be assumed as crucial for facilitating growth. However, in the work context, support from co-workers can be considered as more effective than non-work social support and the reasons for this proposition are threefold. First, taking into account the intense experience of burnout associated with mobbing, constant negative experience sharing with non-work social environments may have a spillover effect and negatively affect the relationship between individuals and their (non-work) social environments due to the increased demand for emotional support (Lewis & Orford, 2004).

Second, since mobbing is a profound experience, it spreads among colleagues and, even if they are not the immediate target, the experience may affect them as well (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2018). Due to the intersection of experiences (similar organizational climate, work characteristics), co-workers may have more resources to sympathize with the individual than the non-work social environment. Lastly, in the work context, co-workers are the most proximal support resources who can be reached more easily in the case of immediate emotional need. Moreover, according to the model that Maitlis (2020) has proposed to explain post-traumatic growth at work, work relationships are considered to be an important facilitator for emotion regulation processes and sensemaking efforts which may lead to growth in the organizational context. For these reasons, support from co-workers is assumed to be an important environmental factor which helps to facilitate growth following adversity at the workplace.

Hypothesis 3: Burnout will mediate the relationship between downward mobbing and stress-related growth in such a way that the strength of a mediating effect depends on the level of co-worker support. More specifically, individuals with higher level of co-worker support will grow from mobbing experience through burnout more than individuals who have lower level of co-worker support.

3. Methods

3.1. First Phase

The main aim of the first phase was to understand the validity of the first research model which included the mediator role of burnout, the moderator role of organizational context (grievance mechanisms, perceived organizational support, organizational fairness), and personal resources (social support, emotion regulation strategies, problem solving abilities), and revise if necessary, to develop a more grounded model for the quantitative data gathering. Accordingly, this phase

adopted semi-structured field interviews using the convergent interview technique to discover the converging themes in the interviews. The convergent interview technique is mainly used for under-researched areas (Dick, 2016) which is compatible with our aim. Participants who were previously exposed to mobbing were recruited through snowball sampling (N = 21) where the first participant was recruited through a convenience sampling method by contacting individuals who were known to have a mobbing experience. Interview questions are provided in the Appendix A.

3.1.1. Procedure

Interviews were conducted in February 2020. Seven participants were interviewed face-to-face, 14 participants were interviewed through Skype. Face-to-face interviews were either conducted at Koç University, Istanbul or at the contacting person's house (Istanbul, Turkey). First, participants were provided a consent form and were told the main purpose of the study was to more deeply understand their mobbing experience and the effect of this experience on their lives. Interviews were recorded with a sound recorder after the participants signed the consent form. During interviews, in addition to sound recordings, detailed notes about the themes regarding their experience were taken. After all interviews were completed, interview notes and recordings were combined to identify converging themes.

3.1.2. Participants

A total of 21 participants were interviewed. One participant was not included because his experience did not contain any mobbing behavior. The remaining 20 participants were reviewed for converging themes. The age of participants ranged between 25 and 42 with a mean age of 31.7. Eighty-five percent of the participants were female (N=17) and 15% of the participants were male (N=3). Participants were working in a wide variety of sectors including FMCG (fast moving consumer goods), information technologies, publishing and electronics.

3.1.3. Converging Themes

Since the main aim of the study was to check the validity of the first research model, interview questions were developed mainly around those constructs, which are mobbing experience, burnout, support mechanisms, personal resources and strategies, organizational context, and growth. The summary of the interviews are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of interviews

<i>N = 20</i>	<i>Percentage of participants</i>
Reporting at least one burnout symptoms	<i>55</i>
Receiving social support*	<i>90</i>
- From colleagues	<i>45</i>
- From family	<i>10</i>
- From partners	<i>35</i>
- From friends	<i>20</i>
Reporting trustworthy organizational support mechanism	<i>10</i>
Reporting using at least one personal resource / strategy to deal with the exposure	<i>90</i>
Reporting at least one positive change (growth) as a result of their mobbing experience	<i>60</i>

*several participants reported receiving social support from more than one sources.

The first question was about the details of the mobbing experience. Participants' mobbing experiences were characterized by a wide variety of behaviors including micro-managing, humiliating, ostracizing and demands for overworking (see Table 2). The most frequent behaviors were humiliation and yelling / hostility.

Table 2

Types of mobbing behaviors that participants were exposed to

<i>N = 20</i>	<i>Percentage of participants</i>
Overworking	35
Impossible deadlines	20
Lying	35
Ignoring	15
Ostracizing	10
Humiliating	75
Micromanagement	30
Threatening	35
Making them feel inadequate	20
Labelling / Gossiping	25
Yelling / Hostility	50

The second question was on their experiences while they were exposed to mobbing. Majority of the participants reported intense demotivation, anxiety, decreased energy, and physical symptoms during their mobbing experiences.

At some point I let myself go. When I first started to work with a new manager, I was feeling like I could not do anything! I was overreacting to small mistakes that I made. (P4, FMCG sector, finance department)

The third and fourth questions was about social support and personal resources / strategies. The majority of participants reported at least one type of social support from family, friends or co-

workers. However, the most frequent social support was the support from co-workers (see Table 1). The most frequently emerging personal resources were perseverance and a constructive attitude toward experience such as ‘not giving up’, ‘facing their perpetrator’ (see Table 3).

Table 3

Types of personal resources/ strategies that participants used to deal with mobbing exposure organized into best fit categories

<i>N = 20</i>	<i>Percentage of participants</i>
Voice	15
Distracting oneself	10
Humorizing	5
Perseverance	20
Ignorance	15
Meaning-making effort	10
Cognitive reappraisal	10
Increasing knowledge	5
Expressive suppression	10
Resilience	10

The fourth question was on grievance mechanisms. A majority of participants reported lack of trust toward their organizations regardless of the existence of grievance mechanisms.

I was not trusting the company. They say, ‘We keep everything confidential’ but you know they would definitely tell.... Contrary to what the name implies (‘human resources’), they treat employees like materials. Accordingly, they are the defender of the company, not the

employee. ... I have never felt trust. They say that 'When you say something, they will protect you.' I never believe that. (P15, FMCG sector, procurement department)

The fifth question was about the outcome of the mobbing experience. A majority of the participants reported that they resigned following their mobbing experience (N=13). One of the most common themes that emerged from this question was about losing hope in the possibility of change, and resignations mostly came after this loss. The last question was about whether any growth had occurred because of this experience. Sixty percent of the participants reported signs of growth or positive change as a result of this experience (N = 11). Other common themes which emerged from those experiences were realizing one's strength, a change in priorities, and utilizing their voice. One participant reported that he took on an informal role of helping employees, which is a similar concept to prosocial leadership, as suggested by Vogel and Bolino (2020).

Now I am encouraging employees who I am mentoring to take action. I think it is a human duty. (P15, FMCG sector, procurement department)

I know what my priorities are now. I am not trying to get things done at the expense of sacrificing myself. I know what I want from my life. (P16, FMCG sector, marketing department)

The research model before conducting these interviews consisted of the mediator role of burnout, the moderator role of organizational context (grievance mechanisms, perceived organizational support, organizational fairness), and personal resources (social support, emotion regulation strategies, problem solving abilities). As a result of the themes which emerged from those interviews, the research model was revised with the mediator role of burnout and the

moderator role of co-worker support to represent organizational context and personality hardiness to represent personal resources and tested with quantitative data.

3.2. Second Phase

The purpose of the second phase of the study was to test the hypothesized relationships featured in the research model (see, Figure 1).

3.2.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited through Mturk, Amazon's online crowdsourcing service. Data was collected in March 2020 by providing a Qualtrics link to participants through Mturk. The prerequisite for participation in the study was to be exposed to mobbing in one of their previous work experiences. The reason for putting the criteria as "to be exposed to mobbing in one of [their] *previous* work experiences" was that there needed to be a timeframe after the exposure to observe growth. Participants were rewarded with \$ 0.30 through the unique IDs provided to them at the end of the survey.

A total of 794 participants completed the study. G*Power analysis suggested a minimum sample size of 89 to achieve 0.95 power with a medium effect size (0.15) and 0.05 error probability with nine predictors including the interaction effects. 327 participants were excluded on the basis of at least one of the following criteria: (1) they did not answer at least 2 of the 3 attention check items correctly, (2) they answered qualitative questions with copy/paste texts instead of writing their experience, (3) they completed the survey in extremely short period of time (less than five minutes) indicating inattentive responses, or (4) they occurred as an outlier in the assumption checks. Furthermore, ninety-nine participants were eliminated because of missing data . The final sample comprised of 367 participants (50.7% males, 48.2% females, 0.8% other and 0.3% prefer not to say). Twenty-seven percent were in the age range of 26-31, 20.4% were

in the age range of 20-25. 47.4% have bachelor's degrees and 24.8% have master's degrees. The participants' work experience when they were exposed to mobbing was in the range of one to ten years with an average of 2.51 years.

Since the questions about mobbing experience were retrospective, several strategies were adopted to increase the reliability of the responses. First, in the beginning of the survey, participants were informed about the importance of the accuracy of their mobbing memory, therefore their retrieval effort as suggested by Burton and Blair (1991). Secondly, following Larossi's recommendation (2006), before starting the survey, participants were asked open-ended prompting questions about their mobbing experience, and were required to write down the summary of their memories. Lastly, an "I do not remember" option was added to not force participants to choose an answer for a question that may not reflect the actual event.

3.2.2. *Measures*

The survey contained questions related to demographics, mobbing experience, burnout, co-worker support, hardiness, stress-related growth, organizational trust and losing hope (see Appendix B). The survey also included qualitative questions asking about mobbing episode (Can you describe your experiences when you were exposed to workplace mobbing? How was your supervisor's/ manager's behaviors?) and burnout experiences (Can you describe your feelings about work when you were experiencing mobbing? What were you thinking when you were going to work? What were you feeling during the day and when you think about work?) to help participants remember the event more accurately as suggested by Larossi (2006). The questions which followed were based on this episode.

Mobbing. Mobbing was measured with Quine's mobbing scale (1999). The scale consists of 20 items with "yes" and "no" response options. To measure downward mobbing,

instructions were given as follows: “Within the **mobbing experience by your supervisor/manager**, please indicate whether each statement is applicable for you. If you [were] exposed to mobbing multiple times, please consider the experience that had the strongest impact on you.” A sample item was “persistent attempts to humiliate you in front of colleagues”. Reliability of original scale was .81 (Quine, 2001) and .79 for the current study. The scale score ranged from 0 to 20; higher scores indicated more exposure to mobbing.

Moreover, the intensity of the mobbing exposure was asked with a single question “What was the intensity of your mobbing experience?” responded on a graphic slider ranging from 1 to 9. Higher scores indicated greater intensity.

Burnout. Burnout was measured with the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (Demerouti, 1999) with 16 items and with a 4-point Likert type response scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree. A sample item was “There were days when I [felt] tired before I [arrived] at work”. There were eight reverse coded items and a higher score indicated more severe burnout. Cronbach’s alpha of the original scale was .74 for the exhaustion subdimension and .79 for the disengagement subdimension. It was .82 for the current study.

Stress-related growth. Stress-related growth was measured with the “Revised Version of Stress-related Growth Scale” that was developed to reduce illusionary growth which is the possibility of stating positive effects of the stressful event as a coping mechanism and to keep their positive perspectives about the event (Boals & Schuler, 2018; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower & Gruenewald, 2000). The scale consists of 15 items with a 7-point bipolar scale ranging from -3 = a very negative change to +3 = a very positive change. A sample item was “I experienced a change in the extent to which I can be myself and not try to be what others want

me to be”. Higher scores indicated higher growth. Cronbach’s alpha of the original scale was .93, and for the current study, it is .95.

Hardiness. Hardiness was measured with the 15-item “Short Hardiness Scale” (Bartone, 1995). The scale measures three subdimensions of personality hardiness – challenge, commitment and control – with a 4-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 = Not at all true to 4 = Completely true. A sample item was “How things go in my life depends on my own actions”. There were six reverse coded items and higher scores indicated higher hardiness. Cronbach’s alpha of the original scale was .83 (Bartone, 1995) and it was .78 for the current study.

Co-worker Support. Co-worker support was measured with the Social Support Scale by using only the co-worker support subdimension (Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Harrison & Pinneau, 1975). The original scale consisted of 4 items and one item was added to measure satisfaction with the received support. A sample item was “How much could your colleagues be relied on when you were experiencing mobbing?” and higher scores indicated more support. The scale used a 5-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 0 = don’t have any such person to 4 = very much. Cronbach’s alpha of the original scale for the coworker support subdimension was .79 (Repeti & Cosmas, 1991) and .87 for the current study.

4. Results

4.1. Data analysis

To test the hypothesized relationships, Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS macro statistical software was used. We tested full moderated mediation model by using model 64. Following Hayes’ recommendation (2015), statistical significance was evaluated with 5000 boot-strapped samples to create bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs, 95%). The indirect effects were

evaluated at three levels of the moderators: one standard deviation from the mean, mean and one standard deviation above the mean.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, correlations among variables and reliability coefficients are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Descriptive statistics, alpha coefficients and correlations.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Gender	-	-	-									
2. Age	-	-	.11*								.83	-.04
3. Intensity of mobbing	6.74	1.64	-.01	.17**							-1.1	1.3
4. Downward Mobbing	11.56	4.03	.02	.15**	.41**	(.78)					-.28	-.37
5. Burnout	46.96	9.27	.21**	.13*	.19**	.26**	(.82)				-.28	-.05
6. SRG	5.76	18.43	-.001	-.6	-.06	-.05	-.32**	(.95)			-.36	-.02
7. Hardiness	41.58	6.81	.04	.12*	-.001	-.01	-.05	.34**	(.80)		.02	.89
8. Co-worker Support	13.37	4.94	-.08	.01	-.18**	-.19**	-.34**	.38**	.13*	(.89)	-.47	-.86
9. Time Passed	6.33	6.29	.11*	.52**	.07	.08	.05	.08	.10	.01	1.8	3.6

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

As seen in Table 4, both moderators (hardiness and co-worker support) are significantly correlated with stress-related growth in the expected direction. The strongest correlation with growth was co-worker support, ($r(367) = .38$, $p < .01$). Although the skewness and kurtosis values for time passed and intensity of the mobbing exposure was greater than the cut-off values (namely, 1 for skewness and 3 for kurtosis), we did not transform those variables based on two arguments. First, as indicated by Hayes (2018), only extreme normality violations may affect the

statistical results unless the sample size is relatively small. Second, since we ask retrospective questions about previous mobbing experience, we might expect that the majority of participants would have had their experience in a relatively recent past. Thus, we did not transform those variables.

Lastly, assumption check results indicated that the homoscedasticity assumption was violated; therefore, we log transformed stress-related growth scores as one of the two methods to address this violation (Fay, 2012).

4.3. Hypotheses Testing

We controlled, age, gender and how much time passed after the mobbing exposure on the basis of the arguments that explained in the previous sections.

To test our full moderated-mediation model, we ran PROCESS macro for model 64. Although there was a significant mediator role of burnout, results failed to support the first and second hypotheses, which suggested that hardiness would moderate the relationship between downward mobbing and burnout and individuals high in hardiness will grow from mobbing experience through burnout more than individuals who are low in hardiness ($b = .02, t = .97, p = .33$; $b = .00, t = -.41, p = .68$, respectively) (Table 5). On the other hand, co-worker support appeared as a significant moderator between burnout and stress-related growth where higher co-worker support alleviated the negative effects of burnout on employee's growth ($b = .001, t = 3.61, p < .001$). Since the direction of the relationship between burnout and stress-related growth is negative and co-worker support did not turn the relationship to positive in any of the levels of the moderator (Figure 2), the third hypothesis was not supported either. The overall model explained significant variance in the employee's stress-related growth ($R^2 = .29, F(9, 357) = 15.95, p < .001$).

Table 5

Moderation effect of hardiness and co-worker support on the association between downward mobbing and stress-related growth.

Predictors	Outcome Variable: Burnout				Outcome Variable: stress-related growth			
	b	t	SE	%95 CI	B	T	SE	%95 CI
Constant	45.67	4.97	9.17	27.63 ~ 63.70	1.97	5.08	.39	1.21~ 2.73
Gender	3.52	5.05	.87	1.81 ~ 5.23	.04	1.76	.02	-.00~ .08
Age	.54	1.68	.32	-.09~ 1.18	-.02	-2.79*	.01	-.04~ -.01
Mobbing	-.12	-.16	.70	-1.49~ 1.27	-.00	-.19	.00	-.01~ .01
Hardiness	-.28	-1.29	.22	-.71~ .15	.01	1.32	.01	-.01~ .03
Mobbing x Hardiness	.02	.97	.02	-.02~ .05	-	-	-	-
Burnout	-	-	-	-	-.02	-2.24*	.01	-.03~ .00
CS	-	-	-	-	-.04	-2.76*	.01	-.07~ -.01
Burnout x Hardiness	-	-	-	-	-.00	-.48	.00	-.00~ .00
Burnout x CS	-	-	-	-	.00	3.77**	.00	.00~ .00

Note. $N = 367$. Beta values are unstandardized coefficients as it is suggested by Hayes (2017).

CS = Co-worker support. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$



Figure 2. Moderation effect of co-worker support.

4.4. Post hoc Analysis

Given the negative direction of the relationship between burnout and stress-related growth, we suspected a curvilinear relationship between burnout and stress-related growth. Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the quadratic curvilinear relationship between burnout and stress-related growth. Firstly, burnout was added as a linear term and the squared value of burnout was added as a quadratic term to the model and the resulting R^2 change was significant ($F(5,361) = 9.78, p < .05$) implying a better model fit. The quadratic equation of the burnout accounted for an additional 2% of the variance in stress-related growth scores. Visual inspection of the quadratic regression lines plotted in Figure 3 indicated that after a certain point of burnout, the growth process might be inhibited and further, affected negatively. Implications will be addressed in the Discussion section.

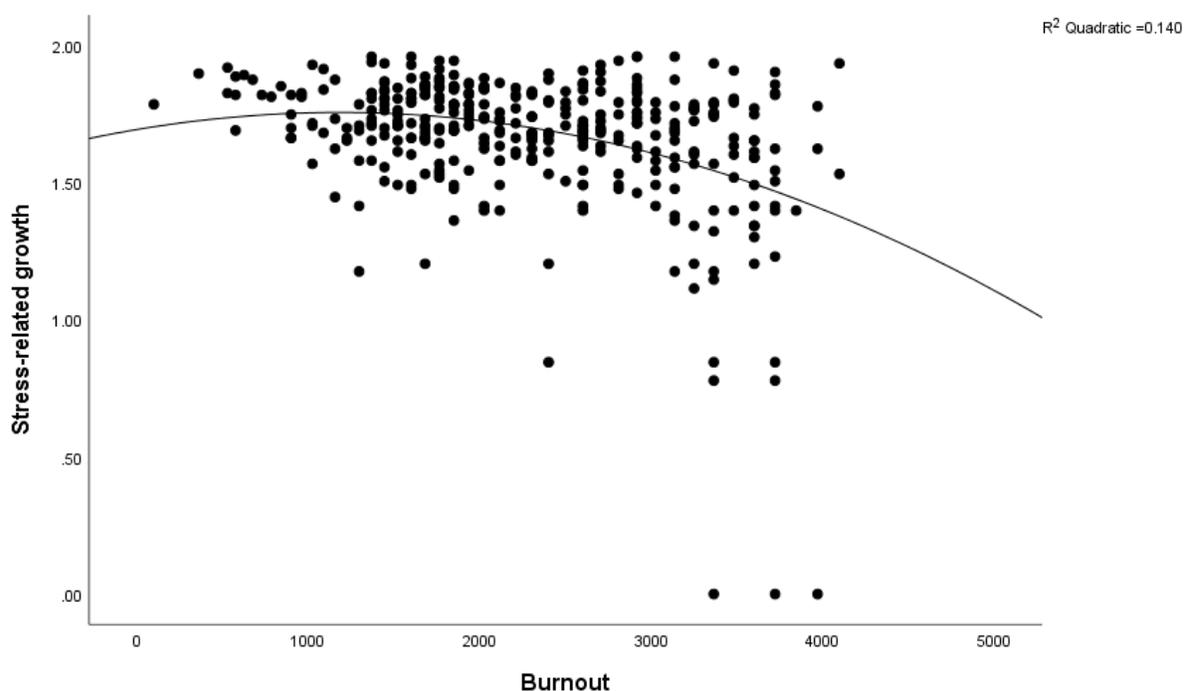


Figure 3. Stress-related growth scores plotted against quadratic burnout scores with the best fit quadratic curve.

As the main argument of this research is the effect of workplace adversity on employees' growth, we further examined the direct relationship between downward mobbing and stress-related growth, together with two moderators. We ran PROCESS macro for model 1 twice for each moderator and the results revealed the significant moderator role of hardiness in the direct relationship between downward mobbing and stress-related growth ($b = .001$, $t = 2.03$, $p < .05$). While individuals with lower hardiness scores were affected by downward mobbing negatively in terms of stress-related growth scores, higher hardiness scores appeared to have a marginal positive effect on stress-related growth scores, in such a way that hardy individuals appeared to grow marginally as a result of mobbing experience however the positive effect was not significant ($b = .0004$, $t = .08$, $p = .94$, 95% CI [-.01, .01]) (see Figure 4).

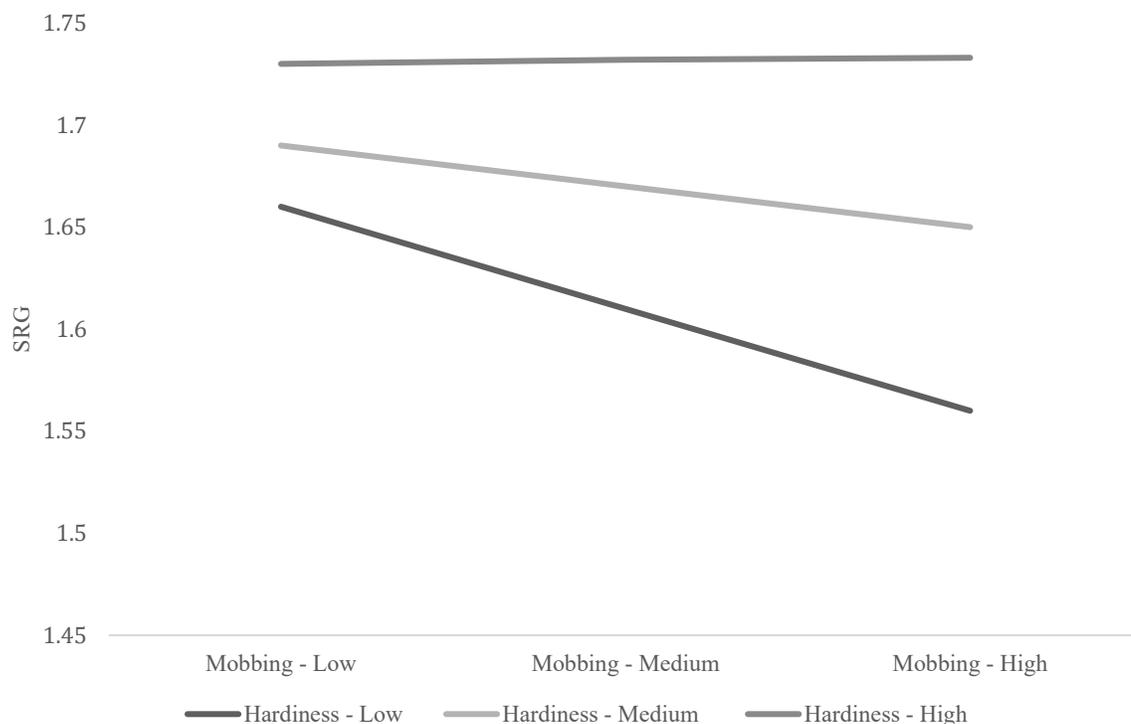


Figure 4. Moderation effect of hardiness.

5. Discussion

In the current study, we adopted a counterintuitive approach to mobbing experience and suggested that employees who were previously exposed to downward mobbing may grow depending on several social and personal resources, namely personality hardiness and co-worker support. We assert that growth is not an inevitable path and to be able to observe growth in the employees, they may first need to hit the, so-called, rock bottom (i.e., burnout) following mobbing exposure *which may facilitate the meaning-making process – then, if they have enough resources*, they may experience stress-related growth out of the adversity. Our results confirmed previous studies on the positive relationship between mobbing and burnout (e.g., Carlson et al., 2012; Raja et al., 2018); however, none of the moderators turned the negative effect of downward mobbing on stress-related growth through burnout positive. Our post hoc analysis revealed that there was a curvilinear relationship between burnout and growth, especially after a

certain degree of burnout, the growth process is affected negatively. Yet before the negative relationship has started, there is no positive linear relationship between burnout and growth; instead a flat trend was observed. Moreover, hardiness appeared as a significant moderator within the direct relationship between mobbing and growth with a marginal positive effect on stress-related growth for hardy individuals.

These results may imply four different explanations. Firstly, because individuals exposed to mobbing spend their emotional resources on fixing problematic interpersonal relations with their supervisor, their resources are depleted which might inhibit the resource requiring process; meaning-making effort. Since scarcity in resources might lead individuals to choose shortcuts as suggested in the Dual Process Models (Bargh, 1994, Kahneman, 2011), individuals might prefer to use shortcuts in the way that they make sense of their adverse experience. Thus, they continue with their old assumptions or may adopt a more cynical view to protect themselves from future adversities. As a result, they may not experience growth or might experience a change but in the negative direction as suggested in our results. This is also compatible with the depersonalization dimension of burnout where individuals adopt cynicism to deal with the emotional workload in work related social interactions (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Secondly, we did not examine the strength of the work identity of individuals which can be considered an important predictor of the strength of the (emotional) impact of mobbing exposure which, in turn, pushes meaning-making efforts forward to promote growth (Vogel & Bolino, 2020). Considering that we collected data from Mturk, an online crowdsourcing platform where ‘workers’ complete tasks for relatively small amount of money, one might argue that the majority of participants might not have a strong work identity and job involvement since identity in unstructured work is more volatile (Lehdonvirta & Mezier, 2013). Since shattering of the

assumptions about self and others might be more destructive if those assumptions are an important part of 'who they are', work identity might play an important role in the growth process, and therefore some of our participants might not be motivated towards meaning-making effort. Rather than depleting emotional resources, hitting rock bottom might be an identity crisis caused by mobbing experience, therefore individuals might experience identity-related outcomes (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelley, 2014) such as radical career changes which could also be considered as a growth outcome (Vogel & Bolino, 2020).

Thirdly, the negative relationship might be the result of the lack of other possible moderators which might change the direction of the relationship. We argued that growth is only possible for individuals who are equipped with personal and social resources, therefore the negative relationship between burnout and growth can be considered an expected result. However, we asserted that hardiness and co-worker support may change this relationship yet they were insufficient in promoting the growth process. Among other possible moderators, coping strategies might play a crucial role in facilitating growth, since resources may exert their impacts on stress-related growth through coping strategies (Park & Fenster, 2004). Therefore, although the individuals have several important resources, without examining the effect of coping strategies, only looking at our current moderators might fall short of explaining the process.

Moreover, there might be other mechanisms following mobbing exposure to promote meaning-making effort and facilitate growth. We argued that employees need to hit rock bottom following mobbing exposure; however we did not anticipate other possible mechanisms in which the resources are not fully depleted but provide a significant amount of psychological distress to lead growth. Meaning-making efforts, therefore growth, might be promoted by other mediators

such as the abovementioned identity loss process, post-traumatic stress disorder or milder psychological experiences than burnout.

Another important reason for these results might be the crucial effect of time on stress-related growth which we could not model methodologically. Since, growth takes time and the experience of stress-related growth may vary in accordance with the time passed after the exposure, participants' growth might not reflect the growth that they could possibly have experienced following mobbing exposure.

What we did not envisage before was *over-burnout* has a potential to inhibit the growth process, even leading negative changes in the growth dimensions. The reason for this might be after a certain point of burnout, employees might not find enough resources to make meaning out of their negative experience. Remembering Maitlis' (2019, p. 10.4) proposition "...[a] considerable degree of distress and psychological disruption, is a prerequisite for posttraumatic growth, given that experiencing trauma is highly distressing and growth comes through struggle", *a considerable degree of psychological disruption* might have an optimal point, above which the growth process might be inhibited. This is compatible with the research on post-traumatic growth about the September 11 attacks, where post-traumatic stress has a curvilinear relationship with post-traumatic growth (Butler et al., 2005). In the study, people who tended to score around 50, which is typically used as a cut-off score to diagnose post-traumatic stress disorders (Weathers et al., 1993), are the ones who reported the most growth and after that point the growth process was inhibited (Butler et al., 2005). However, for burnout, the cut-off scores were removed from several burnout inventories (e.g., Maslach Burnout Inventory) due to the lack of diagnostic validity (Mindgarden, 2018) which prevents us to examine the optimal point.

Related to that, burnout might not be the mechanism that explicates the growth process, but rather the level of cognitive attempts to comprehend the stressful situation can better explain whether a person will grow or not. Without putting effort into understanding and interpreting the adverse experience, burnout falls short in leading growth even if there are sufficient social and personal resources. Since “meaning-making” is a cornerstone of stress-related growth (Park & Ai, 2006), it can better illustrate the growth process in the case of downward mobbing. Our results on the moderating role of hardiness has failed to support both of our hypotheses. Although previous research revealed the facilitator role of hardiness in promoting stress-related growth (e.g., Cole & Lynn, 2010; Salim, Wadey & Diss, 2015), and the negative predictor role of hardiness in burnout, the explication of the insignificant results on the moderator role of hardiness might be twofold. Firstly, Maddi (2013) suggested that to consider an individual as “hardy”, they should score high in each dimension of hardiness: challenge, control and commitment. Since we investigated our variable as a uniform construct and test our hypotheses accordingly, it is not possible to suggest that those who scored high in hardiness scored high in each of the three dimensions. Secondly, personality has been suggested as the antecedents of being victims of mobbing behaviour (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). If this is the case, then hardy individuals might not be vulnerable to mobbing, therefore the following process might not apply. However, according to the reversed-causal mechanism, dispositions might be the outcomes of mobbing experiences, instead of being only the antecedents (Hamre et al., 2020). In this case, one can expect that hardiness might be a disposition which developed after being exposed to mobbing, therefore it did not exist while the individual was experiencing mobbing. This might also create a theoretical question about the difference between hardiness and resilience since hardiness has been suggested as dispositional resilience (Hystad et al., 2010). This suggestion

might also be supported by the explanation of Heinz Leymann, "...when a post-traumatic stress syndrome develops (as a result of mobbing experience), the individual can develop major personality changes..." (Leymann, 1996, p.179). Although in post hoc analysis, hardiness appeared to be a significant moderator in the relationship between downward mobbing and stress-related growth in such a way that hardy individuals do not experience the negative effect of mobbing on stress-related growth and they marginally grow, it might indicate that hardiness might be helpful but inadequate resource to experience growth.

As a final point, the results revealed the significant moderator role of co-worker support in the relationship between burnout and stress-related growth in a way that co-worker support alleviated the negative effect of burnout, but it did not turn the relationship into positive, thus our last hypothesis was not supported either. For this case, there might be one more explanatory mechanism to explain the effect of co-worker support in addition to the five mechanisms that Helgeson and Lopez (2010) has proposed. Since burnout is a state of depleted resources (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), support from co-workers might substitute the required emotional resources to alleviate the negative effect of burnout which inhibits the growth process following mobbing exposure. Since any level of co-worker support, did not turn the relationship between burnout and growth positive, co-worker support can be considered an effective but insufficient resource for promoting growth.

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research makes several important contributions to the positive organizational psychology literature. First, mobbing is an extremely impactful – if not traumatic – and prevalent hardship in workplaces. The research that has been done on mobbing was – unsurprisingly – focused on the negative effects of the exposure. However, as the positive psychology movement

focuses on the strengths of an individual, and positive states and traits (Cameron et al., 2003), this research is an initial attempt to show the relationship between growth and mobbing through burnout even though there is a negative association. To our knowledge, there is no empirical study which investigated the relationship between mobbing (or abusive supervision) with growth, besides Vogel and Bolino's (2020) theoretical paper on the relationship between abusive supervision, posttraumatic stress and post-traumatic growth which strengthen the propositions of this research.

This research also extends the growth following adversity literature especially on the 'ordinary work' by examining the effect of more prevalent adversity in ordinary work on employees' growth. In response to several scholars' calls (e.g., Maitlis, 2020; Vogel & Bolino, 2020) for further investigation of the possibility of growth following highly adverse events in the workplace, this study makes a significant contribution to the stress-related growth literature in the work context.

From a practical perspective, besides having significant negative effects of mobbing in the time of exposure (Niedl, 2008), results showed that the negative effect is not temporary, and it affects the employee long after the exposure. Along with other adverse outcomes, this might be problematic from a social/economical perspective as well. The long-term negative effect of mobbing exposure of the employees might be interpreted as decreased psychological well-being since the questions on stress-related growth was also asking about self-confidence, having better relationships, being able to work on the problems. Experiencing negative changes in those dimensions of life in the long run can be expected to affect social structure in a way that decreases the employability, resulting in decreased labor force participation which has negative

effects on social and economic improvements. Thus, these results may lead policy makers for the development of strategic interventions to prevent mobbing in workplaces.

We were extremely sensitive to not frame this study as ‘positive effects of mobbing’. With regard to that, we showed the effect of downward mobbing on burnout which is extremely costly due to performance loss (Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke, 2004), decreased relationship quality among co-workers (Deloitte, 2015), and increased turnover intentions (Ertüreten et al., 2013). This suggests (once more) HR professionals should focus on leadership practices in their organizations as this has been suggested to be one of the main predictors of subordinates’ success (Volmer, Koch & Göritz, 2016).

Lastly, this research also showed the importance of external resources (co-worker support), rather than internal resources (personality, e.g., hardiness) especially in the presence of burnout. Needless to say, the first and foremost effort should be on preventing mobbing, however in the case of occurrence, it is important to provide resources to employees which might help them to alleviate the negative effect and more importantly, to take the required actions to end the mobbing exposure.

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

Although having important strengths, such as being the first study which investigated stress-related growth following mobbing exposure in the organizational context, this study was not free from limitations. The first and foremost limitation was collecting retrospective data from the participants about their experiences. Although we adopted several strategies to increase the accuracy of the memories as suggested by Larossi (2006) such as qualitative prompting and adding “I do not remember” options, the real accuracy of the memories cannot be determined. However, it has been suggested that as the saliency of the event increases, there is a greater

chance to remember the event accurately (Beckett et al., 2001). To increase our confidence in our data, we collected mobbing data from the same individuals a month later and analyzed the results to see whether there was a significant difference in the responses. The results showed that the difference between the answers was marginally insignificant, suggesting accuracy in the data we collected. Moreover, Vogel and Bolino (2020) proposed in their theorization that instead of the actual event, the memory of abusive supervision plays a critical role in examining the later effect (growth) consistent with the memory-based model of post-traumatic stress disorder (Rubin, Berntsen & Bohni, 2008).

The second limitation was cross-sectional data which prevented us from claiming causality in the relationship between mobbing, burnout and stress-related growth. This, in turn, might help us to explain the negative direction of the relationship, yet stay insufficient. To address these two limitations, researchers might consider adopting a longitudinal design, in a way that starts data collection concurrently with the mobbing exposure, assess the symptoms of burnout syndrome after a while since there is no specific time suggested to observe burnout following mobbing exposure, and collect growth data in each points and in the following one and two years.

Third, the motivation to fill out this survey was a considerably small amount of money (\$ 0.30). Since motivation can be considered as an important factor in accurate reporting in survey designs, this might be problematic considering the required recalling efforts from participants. Another relevant concern is due to the self-report data from participants which is generally open to bias (Rosenman, Tennekoon & Hill, 2011). Although collecting data from participants' significant others who witnessed their experience of mobbing, burnout, and growth might be

beneficial, due to the nature of changes (mostly personal) in the growth process, this might also fall short of explaining the relationship and adjusting the bias.

Fourth, although we provided a description of mobbing in the beginning of the survey, we are not sure whether the participants followed the criteria when they were deciding to attend the survey. It is highly possible that some participants considered one-time conflict with their managers as mobbing, which might affect results in an important way since persistent exposure is the key to define the behaviour as mobbing (Cowie et al., 2002). To address this limitation, researchers might consider collecting quantitative data face-to-face with a screening procedure since this might give them an opportunity to accurately assess whether the participant's experience is congruent with the mobbing description.

Another crucial point was the cultural differences between the two samples in our qualitative and quantitative studies. We interviewed Turkish employees in the first phase of our study to use converging themes in revising our model, yet the empirical data came from the U.S. sample through Amazon MTurk. Consequently, the experiences of the Turkish sample might not reflect the reality of the participants in the second phase which might prevent us from finding a relationship in the U.S. context that might exist in the Turkish context. This cultural disparity can manifest itself in the form of social support which is closely tied to collectivistic cultures. Since collectivism refers to a high level of integration into one's social group (Hofstede, 2001), social support in an individualistic culture (i.e., U.S.) might not be strong enough to promote growth – as we witnessed in our results. Another domain that cultural difference might impact is the attitudes toward stressful experiences. Park (1998) suggested that cultural expectations and beliefs play an important role in shaping the responses to stressful or traumatic life events, yet the research on ethnic and cultural differences in growth process is still inchoate. Thus,

investigating the role of culture in the context of stress-related growth can be an interesting territory to delve into for future researchers.

The characteristics of the stressor might also play a substantial role in stress-related growth. Considering emotional abuse from a supervisor as a hindrance stressor – since it is a threat to an employee’s personal achievement (Wu et al., 2020) – we have not investigated the role of challenge stressors in the growth process. Because challenge stressors necessitate effort, they benefit individuals by promoting growth and achievement (Wu et al., 2020). Supporting this argument, a recent study found that challenge stressors aid employee’s thriving by promoting positive effects and self-efficacy (Yang & Li, 2021). Therefore, the role of challenge stressors (e.g., workload, time pressure, complexity of the job task) in promoting growth can provide further explanations for the development of adaptive responses to stressful situations.

We also have not examined the other possible moderators proposed in the literature, such as religiousness (Park et al., 1996), openness to experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), emotion regulation strategies (Zhou, Wu & Zhen; 2017), and coping (Armeli et al., 2001) which might have a better potential to promote growth instead of just alleviate the negative effect of burnout, as co-worker support did. Moreover, cognitive flexibility as another potential moderator can both mitigate the burnout following mobbing exposure and aid stress-related growth as it is related with how individuals adapt to changing situations by modifying their already existing knowledge and perceptions (Deak, 2003). Individuals who are high in cognitive flexibility can shape their strategies while dealing with stressful situations (i.e., downward mobbing) by adjusting the meaning of the event (Deak, 2003), hence it also includes meaning-making processes. Therefore, future researchers can consider examining cognitive flexibility’s effect as a moderator in the growth process.

Moreover, we did not know how participants' mobbing experiences affected them in ways which might lead to meaning-making effort because, as Vogel and Bolino suggested (2020), the strength of an employee's work identity can be considered an important factor in promoting growth. Future studies might consider assessing the strength of the work identity and job involvement as trauma literature does with *the centrality of the event* construct (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006).

Lastly, psychophysiological responses to stress have long been a point of discussion, however those reactions have not been investigated in the context of stress-related growth as yet. We have argued that the impact of the stressor (i.e., mobbing) can be best understood by its explicit outcomes (i.e., burnout), however physiological reactions could provide us a more objective evaluation of the level of stress and its impacts on employees' growth. Hence, investigating physiological responses (such as heart rate, blood pressure) to occupational stress and its association with the growth process might be another fruitful direction for future researchers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. You have indicated that you have exposed to mobbing. Can you tell about your experience?
2. How this experience affected you work life? How would you describe your work life at that time?
3. Were they any supporting mechanisms that help you to deal with these problems? If yes, what were they?
4. Were they any grievance mechanism in that company during your exposure?
5. How this (mobbing) process ended? What happened? What do you think about your impact on ending this process?
6. How would you describe your point of view toward your work life and your life in general?

Appendix B: Scales

Filtering Question

1. The concept of workplace mobbing refers to situations where an employee is **persistently** exposed to negative and aggressive behaviors at work. Mobbing can be experienced in a mild or severe intensity.

Considering the above definition, would you consider yourself having exposed to some degree of workplace mobbing **by your supervisor/manager in one of your previous work experience? (not the current one)**
 - No, I have never been exposed to workplace mobbing.
 - Yes, I have been exposed to workplace mobbing.

Demographics

In this part, we would like to know more about you.

1. Your age:
 - a) 20-25
 - b) 26-31
 - c) 32-37
 - d) 38-43
 - e) 44-49
 - f) 50-55
 - g) 56 or older
2. Your gender:
 - a) Male
 - b) Female
 - c) Other
 - d) Prefer not to answer
3. Your highest level of education:
 - a) Secondary school degree
 - b) High school degree
 - c) Associate degree
 - d) Bachelor's degree
 - e) Master's degree
 - f) Doctorate degree

Mobbing

1. What was the year that you have experienced workplace mobbing?

**if you had exposed to mobbing multiple times, please consider the experience that had the strongest impact on you.*

2. How many years of experience you had when you experienced mobbing?

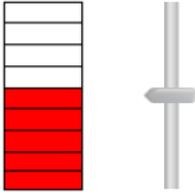
- a) 0-1 year
- b) 2-4 years
- c) 5-7 years
- d) 8-10 years
- e) 11-13 years
- f) 14-16 years
- g) 17-19 years
- h) 20-22 years
- i) 23-25 years
- j) 26 years or more

3. Can you describe your experiences when you were exposed to workplace mobbing? How was your supervisor's/ manager's behaviors?

**please take your time and try to remember as accurate as possible.*

**if you had exposed to mobbing multiple times, please consider the experience that had the strongest impact on you.*

4. What was the intensity of your mobbing experience?



5. Within your **mobbing experience by your supervisor/ manager**, please indicate whether each statement is applicable for you.

**please take your time and try to remember as accurate as possible.*

**if you had exposed to mobbing multiple times, please consider the experience that had the strongest impact on you.*

1=yes

2=no

3=I do not remember

- Persistent attempts to belittle and undermine your work
- Persistent and unjustified criticism and monitoring of your work
- Persistent attempts to humiliate you in front of colleagues
- Intimidatory use of discipline or competence procedures
- Undermining your personal integrity
- Destructive innuendo and sarcasm
- Verbal and non-verbal threats
- Making inappropriate jokes about you
- Persistent teasing
- Physical violence
- Violence to property
- Withholding necessary information from you

- Freezing out, ignoring, or excluding
- Unreasonable refusal of applications for leave, training, or promotion
- Undue pressure to produce work
- Setting of impossible deadlines
- Shifting of goal posts without telling you
- Constant undervaluing of your efforts
- Persistent attempts to demoralize you
- Removal of areas of responsibility without consultation

Burnout

1. Can you describe your feelings about work when you were experiencing mobbing? What were you thinking when you were going to work? What were you feeling during the day and when you think about work?

*please take your time and try to remember as accurate as possible.

2. Below you find a series of statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the scale, please indicate the degree of your agreement **by thinking about the time when you were working under the above-mentioned supervisor and experiencing mobbing.**

At that time...

1= Strongly disagree

2= Disagree

3= Agree

4= Strongly Agree

5= I do not remember

- I was able to find new and interesting aspects in my work.
- There were days when I feel tired before I arrive at work.
- It happened more and more often that I talk about my work in a negative way.
- After work, I tended to need more time than in the past in order to relax and feel better.
- I was able to tolerate the pressure of my work very well.
- I tended to think less at work and did my job almost mechanically.
- I was finding my work to be a positive challenge.
- During my work, I often felt emotionally drained.
- Over time, one can become disconnected from that type of work.
- After working, I had enough energy for my leisure activities.
- Sometimes I felt sickened by my work tasks.
- After my work, I usually felt worn out and weary.
- That was the only type of work that I can imagine myself doing.
- Usually, I was able to manage the amount of my work well.
- I felt more and more engaged in my work.
- When I was working, I usually felt energized.

Co-worker Support

1. Below, you will find statements about support from your colleagues when you were experiencing mobbing. Please read each statement and rate accordingly.

1=Not at all

2=Very little

3=Somewhat

4=Very much

5= Did not have any such person

- How much did your colleagues go out of their way to do things to make your work life easier for you?
 - How easy was it to talk with your colleagues about your problems?
 - How much could your colleagues be relied on when you were experiencing mobbing?
 - How much were your colleagues willing to listen to your problems?
2. How would you evaluate the support that you received from your colleagues when you were experiencing mobbing?

*with slider response option

Stress-Related Growth

1. For each of the following statements, indicate how much change you experienced, if any change at all, as a result of your mobbing experience that you described earlier. Because of this event (mobbing)...

-3= A very negative change

-2=A moderate negative change

-1=A somewhat negative change

0 =no change

+1= A somewhat positive change

+2=A moderate positive change

+3=A very positive change

- I experienced a change in how I treat others.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I feel free to make my own decisions.

- I experienced a change in my belief that I have something of value to teach others about life.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I can be myself and not try to be what others want me to be.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I work through problems and not just give up.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I find meaning in life.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I reach out and help others.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I am a confident person.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I listen when others talk to me.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I am open to new information and ideas.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I communicate honestly with others.
- I experienced a change in my desire to have some impact on the world.
- I experienced a change in my belief that it's OK to ask others for help.
- I experienced a change in the extent to which I stand up for my personal rights.
- I experienced a change in my belief about how many people care about me.

Hardiness

1. Please rate below statements to show how much you think each one is true for you. Give your own honest opinions. There are no right or wrong answers.

1= Not at all true

2=Not true

3=Somewhat true

4= Completely true

- Most of my life gets spent doing things that are meaningful.
- By working hard you can nearly always achieve your goals.
- I don't like to make changes in my regular activities.
- I feel that my life is somewhat empty of meaning.
- Changes in routine are interesting to me.
- How things go in my life depends on my own actions.
- I really look forward to my daily activities.
- I don't think there's much I can do to influence my own future.
- I enjoy the challenge when I have to do more than one thing at a time.
- Most days, life is really interesting and exciting for me.
- It bothers me when my daily routine gets interrupted.
- It is up to me to decide how the rest of my life will be.
- Life in general is boring for me.
- I like having a daily schedule that doesn't change very much.
- My choices make a real difference in how things turn out in the end.