

*Original research articles based on limited empirical data*

# Analysis of Moral Harassment at the Federal University of Minas Gerais

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### Abstract

Moral Harassment is a form of workplace violence. This research aimed to identify the occurrence of this issue among servants of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) and to analyze institutional actions for its prevention and mitigation. The results indicated the presence of cases of moral harassment at the university and revealed that, although some preventive initiatives have been implemented, challenges remain regarding their effectiveness. We conclude that it is essential for the university to recognize moral harassment as an institutional problem and to act continuously to prevent and address it, improving working conditions and management practices. The findings corroborate studies conducted in other public higher education institutions, demonstrating that moral harassment constitutes a structural problem in the sector.

**Keywords:** moral harassment, universities, institutional violence, public servants, document analysis

## ANÁLISE DO ASSÉDIO MORAL NO TRABALHO NA UFMG

### Assédio Moral no Trabalho na UFMG

#### Resumo

O assédio moral é uma das formas de violência no trabalho. Esta pesquisa objetivou identificar a ocorrência de assédio moral entre servidores da UFMG e analisar as ações institucionais de prevenção e combate no âmbito da instituição. Os resultados indicaram a existência de casos de assédio moral na universidade e revelaram que, embora tenham sido realizadas algumas ações preventivas, persistem desafios em termos de efetividade. Concluímos que é essencial que a universidade reconheça o assédio moral como um problema institucional e atue de forma contínua para preveni-lo e enfrentá-lo, tendo em vista aperfeiçoar as práticas de gestão. Os resultados corroboraram pesquisas realizadas em outras instituições públicas de ensino superior, evidenciando que o assédio moral constitui um problema estrutural no setor.

**Palavras-chave:** assédio moral, universidades, violência institucional, servidores públicos, análise documental

## ANÁLISIS DEL ACOSO LABORAL EN LA UFMG

### Prevención del Acoso Laboral en la UFMG

#### Resumen

El acoso laboral es una de las formas de violencia en el trabajo. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo identificar la ocurrencia de acoso laboral entre los empleados de la UFMG y analizar las acciones institucionales de prevención y combate en el ámbito de la institución. Los resultados indicaron la existencia de casos de acoso laboral en la universidad y revelaron que, aunque se han llevado a cabo algunas acciones preventivas, persisten desafíos en términos de efectividad. Concluimos que es esencial que la universidad reconozca el acoso laboral como un problema institucional y actúe de manera continua para prevenirlo y afrontarlo, con el fin de mejorar las condiciones laborales y las prácticas de gestión. Los hallazgos corroboran investigaciones realizadas en otras instituciones públicas de educación superior, evidenciando que el acoso laboral constituye un problema estructural en el sector.

**Palabras clave:** acoso laboral, universidades, violencia institucional, funcionarios públicos, análisis documental

The transformations that occurred in the Brazilian state with the transition from a bureaucratic model to managerial public administration – based on political and administrative decentralization, performance evaluation, and a focus on results – have directly affected the management of public universities (Castro & Pereira, 2014). Since the 1990s, these institutions have increasingly adopted managerial practices centered on productivity and institutional evaluation. The pursuit of efficiency began to guide internal policies that are not always compatible with university autonomy and with the public and democratic character of these institutions (Chauí, 2003; Castro & Pereira, 2014). Within this context, the university has been reconfigured as an organization oriented toward performance and competitiveness, compromising its critical and emancipatory role (Chauí, 2021) and intensifying the logic of the commodification of knowledge (Castro & Pereira, 2014).

Changes in management practices – with the adoption of productivity requirements that are often incompatible with academic activities and the allocation of research funding directly to faculty members according to merit-based criteria – have intensified and/or reinforced individualism and competitiveness among colleagues (Freitas et al., 2013; Soboll, 2017a). Such dynamics may generate a hostile work climate that, according to Einarsen and Ågotnes (2023), can allow or even encourage abusive behaviors.

Moral harassment at work is recognized as a form of violence characterized by repeated hostile acts that undermine human dignity (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Einarsen et al., 2020; Freitas et al., 2013; Leymann, 1990; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Soboll, 2017a). In order to distinguish it from other forms of workplace violence, these authors emphasize the criteria of the frequency and duration of hostile acts, since moral harassment constitutes a process rather than an isolated event.

More specifically, Soboll (2017a, p. 15) defined moral harassment “as a process manifested in working relations, characterized by a set of hostile acts that occur chronically, continuously, and repeatedly, which undermine dignity and offend or harm those targeted by such hostilities.” We adopt this definition because it is consistent with a relational, institutional, and processual understanding of the phenomenon, interpreting moral harassment as the result of interactions among individuals embedded within specific work contexts rather than as isolated conflicts. Thus, aligned with a psychosociological perspective, we understand moral harassment as a sociohistorical phenomenon that encompasses these dimensions while also recognizing the subjective aspects involved.

There are divergences in the literature regarding the nature of this phenomenon, which is sometimes conceptualized as an interpersonal process and at other times as an organizational, institutional, or broader social dynamic (Einarsen et al., 2020; Freitas et al., 2013; Hirigoyen, 2002; Soboll, 2017a). However, we consider that these divergences reflect the difficulty different authors and researchers face in approaching the phenomenon as multidimensional.

Organizational and cultural conditions that favor moral harassment include competitive environments, unmanaged conflicts, the absence of effective policies, inconsistencies between

formal rules and everyday practices, pressure for results, and authoritarian or neglectful leadership styles (Beltrame, 2020; Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Freitas et al., 2013; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Salin & Hoel, 2020; Tolfo et al., 2016). Although organizational and cultural conditions play a significant role in the emergence of moral harassment, the phenomenon is multifactorial and also involves subjective, relational, and sociopolitical dimensions.

The consequences of this phenomenon affect all parties involved. For workers who experience moral harassment, these consequences may include physical and mental health problems, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships both inside and outside the workplace (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Freitas et al., 2013; Leymann, 1990; Mikkelsen et al., 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Schwaab et al., 2022; Tolfo et al., 2016). For organizations, the impacts include: costs associated with turnover; absenteeism; presenteeism; legal proceedings; potential damage to the organization's reputation; worker dissatisfaction; deterioration of the organizational climate (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Freitas et al., 2013; Hoel et al., 2020; Leymann, 1990; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Tolfo et al., 2016); requests for internal transfers (Beltrame, 2020; F. F. F. Nunes, 2016; Fonseca, 2017; Gomes, 2018; Hirigoyen, 2002; T. S. Nunes, 2019); and intentions to leave the organization (Hoel et al., 2020; T. S. Nunes, 2016). Within families, increasing conflicts, incivility, distancing, and dissatisfaction in interpersonal relationships may occur (Boudrias et al., 2021; Schwaab et al., 2022). The consequences for society tend to remain less visible; however, they include social security costs associated with early retirement and medical leave due to illness, and increasing expenditures on public health and legal costs (Freitas et al., 2013; Leymann, 1990; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Tolfo et al., 2016).

To mitigate the aforementioned consequences, organizations can adopt strategies to prevent and combat moral harassment at work, since its impacts tend to worsen when intervention is delayed or absent (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020). In Brazil, combat to moral harassment have been incorporated into public policies related to occupational health and people management. Normative Ordinance No 3 (Ministry of Planning, Budget and Management, 2013) established principles of occupational health focused on prevention and participatory management. Regulatory Standard No 1, updated by Ordinance No 1,419 of the Ministry of Labor and Employment (2024), explicitly included psychosocial aspects in occupational risk management, including moral harassment. Decree No 12,122 (2024) established the Federal Program for the Prevention and Confrontation of Moral Harassment in the public administration, regulated by Ordinance No 6,719 of the Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services (2024), which details actions related to acceptance, training, and protection.

Recent federal regulations indicate that moral harassment has come to be treated as an institutional issue rather than merely an interpersonal one. The Brazilian state now requires organizations within the direct, autonomous, and foundational public administration to implement prevention policies, psychosocial support channels, active listening mechanisms, and accountability procedures. These regulations recognize moral harassment as an institutional

problem and guide public organizations in establishing permanent policies and reporting channels.

Given these changes and considering that the management model of public universities may favor the occurrence of moral harassment, this research aimed to identify moral harassment among servants of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) and to analyze institutional actions for prevention and mitigation. This research therefore contributed to the understanding of moral harassment in academic contexts. The preliminary characterization of the identified practices may assist the institution in planning and implementing effective interventions, and the results obtained may also contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge by fulfilling the proposed objectives.

### Method

This study was conducted as part of the first author's master's dissertation. The first author is a technical-administrative staff (TAS) member in Education at the institution under investigation. To mitigate potential effects arising from this relationship, the stages of data collection and analysis were supervised by the advisor (second author) and discussed within the research group, which contributed to methodological coherence and the reliability of the interpretations.

The field research was conducted in two phases: (1) administration of questionnaires to UFMG employees and (2) documentary research and interviews with key informants. These phases are described in the following subsections.

### Participants

In Phase 1, we invited servants of UFMG (Professors and TASSs) who had been working at the institution for at least six months. This population comprised 7,331 of the 7,418 servants at UFMG. We adopted this temporal criterion because moral harassment is understood as a process that requires frequency and duration, as proposed in the literature (Christ, 2011; Leymann, 1990; Maciel & Gonçalves, 2008) and reflected in the questionnaire used in this study, the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R). The sample was accidental (convenience-based), and questionnaires were completed between August and October 2021. When the administration closed when responses became scarce. Extending the data collection period further could have led participants to respond based on different historical contexts, and given the sensitive nature of the topic, a substantial increase in participation was unlikely.

A total of 419 servants participated in this phase. The mean age was 43.03 years ( $SD = 9.94$ ). The majority (68%) were female. Regarding sexual orientation, 87.4% identified as heterosexual. In terms of race/color, 59.2% identified as White, 28.9% as Mixed-race (*pardo*), 7.9% as Black, and 4% as other categories. Regarding marital status, 60.1% reported being married or in a stable union, 31.3% were single, and 8.6% reported another marital status. With respect to formal education, 52.25% held a graduate degree (*stricto sensu*), 34.1% had a

specialization certificate, 11.7% had an undergraduate degree, and 1.4% had completed secondary education. In terms of occupational groups, 71.6% were TAS staff members and 28.4% were faculty members.

In Phase 2 (conducted between November and December 2021), we interviewed one representative from the *Pró-Reitoria de Recursos Humanos* (PRORH, Office of Human Resources) at UFMG and one representative from the *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores nas Instituições Federais de Ensino* (SINDIFES, Union of Workers in Federal Educational Institutions). We choose these participants because of the strategic relevance of their institutional roles and their representative function in the dialogue between management and employees.

### **Instruments and Measures**

In the first phase of the research, we applied the following instruments:

#### ***Occupational and demographic questionnaire***

This instrument consisted of closed-ended questions about sex, sexual orientation, marital status, level of education, occupational group, length of service at the institution and in the current unit, and whether the respondent held a managerial position. We used the responses to characterize the participants and to support comparative analyses of perceptions of moral harassment.

#### ***Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R)***

According to Christ (2011), the instrument was developed by Einarsen and Raknes (2001), and assesses the frequency of hostile acts in the workplace. Its validity for use with the Brazilian population was examined by Christ (2011). The first section of the questionnaire contains 22 items. Christ (2011) conducted the factor analysis and he used the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test as a criterion for factorability, because it yielded a value of 0.93. He identified four factors: 1) Work-related Harassment (8 items,  $\alpha = .87$ ), including negative criticism, sabotage, and excessive pressure; 2) Personal Harassment (7 items,  $\alpha = .85$ ), referring to behaviors such as hostility and social exclusion; 3) Personal and Professional Devaluation (4 items,  $\alpha = .76$ ), encompassing acts that disregard the individual's opinions or work; and 4) Physical Intimidation (3 items,  $\alpha = .65$ ), involving threats, intimidation, and the enactment of physical violence. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (daily). Leymann (1990) and Maciel and Gonçalves (2008), considered that moral harassment is present when at least one negative act is reported as occurring weekly or daily during the previous six months. In addition to the factorial section, the NAQ-R asks participants whether they believe they have been harassed at work according to a given definition. We choose the NAQ-R by its national and international use, its psychometric robustness, and its capacity to identify both forms of interpersonal violence and the organizational conditions that sustain them.

### ***Semi-Structured Block on Actions for the Prevention and Mitigation of Moral Harassment (SBAPM)***

This instrument included closed and open-ended questions addressing knowledge of and participation in actions aimed at preventing and combating moral harassment within UFMG.

In the second phase of the research, in order to complement the identification of UFMG's actions to prevent and mitigate moral harassment, we analyzed documents (news items, resolutions, manuals, event announcements, etc.) available on the websites of the *Sindicato dos Professores de Universidades Federais de Belo Horizonte, Montes Claros e Ouro Branco* (APUBH, Association of University Professors of Belo Horizonte, Montes Claros, and Ouro Branco), SINDIFES, and UFMG. We also used semi-structured interview guides developed by the authors, in which we asked about: the understanding and presence of moral harassment; the adoption of preventive and mitigation actions; and the role of institutions in addressing this issue.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

We registered the study on the *Plataforma Brasil* under the *Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética* (CAAE, Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration) number 47616521.1.0000.5149. In both phases of field activities, we applied the Informed Consent Form (ICF) prior to the research procedures. For the questionnaires, the ICF was available online on the same platform as the questionnaires, and participants could access the survey only after indicating their consent. For the synchronous online interviews, the ICF was sent to participants by e-mail.

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by the absence of personal identifiers and using the Google Forms platform. The exported spreadsheets were accessed only by the researchers and stored in a password-protected institutional directory. Care was taken to prevent sensitive information from allowing the identification of individuals or institutional units. We minimized potential risks – such as exposure of personal perceptions or possible discomfort – through these procedures and through the anonymization and coding of data during the analysis stages.

In Phase 1, the UFMG Directorate of Information Technology disseminated the link to the questionnaires via institutional e-mail to all employees (professors and TAS) in August 2021. We collected the responses between August and October of the same year through the Google Forms platform. We exported the responses to a database in Microsoft Excel, and we conducted statistical analyses using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). We conducted statistical analyses to characterize the sample and explore the responses. Some variables (e.g., marital status and educational level) were dichotomized. We calculated scores for all factors of the NAQ-R, and regression analyses were conducted using sociodemographic variables as predictors. These variables had been previously tested and showed correlations or significant differences in t tests or ANOVA, depending on their level of measurement.

We analyzed the responses to the open-ended questions (SBAPM) using thematic content analysis (Bardin, 1977/2011), with the support of the QDA Miner software. First, we conducted an initial exploratory reading of the material, followed by the development of a coding scheme organized into themes and subthemes. Next, an in-depth reading was performed for systematic coding of the material. After coding, a spreadsheet was prepared containing excerpts organized by theme in order to validate and refine the categorization, considering the coherence and relevance of the proposed themes. Finally, the frequency of each identified theme was calculated and reported, and these findings were compared with the other results of the study.

In Phase 2, documents available on the websites of UFMG, APUBH, and SINDIFES were analyzed. These materials included news items, resolutions, manuals, event announcements, and other publications related to the topic. The search used the following descriptors: *assédio moral*; *assédio psicológico*; bullying in the workplace; harassment; and mobbing. Publications available up to April 2021 were considered.

In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with one representative from PRORH and one union leader from SINDIFES. The interview guide covered the same topics included in the BSPC. Interviews were scheduled by e-mail and conducted via Google Meet, with a mean duration of approximately 60 minutes. With the participants' authorization, the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Both the documents and the interview responses were analyzed using thematic content analysis following the same procedures applied to the SBAPM responses.

## Results

### Frequency and Characteristics of Moral Harassment

Table 1 summarizes participants' scores on the moral harassment factors of the NAQ-R and the results of the repeated-measures MANOVA. The highest scores were observed for Factor 1 (Work-Related Harassment) and Factor 3 (Personal and Professional Devaluation). The repeated-measures MANOVA indicated significant differences among participants' scores across the factors. In pairwise comparisons, participants showed higher mean scores on Factor 3 and lower scores on Factor 4 relative to the other factors. This indicates that experiences such as unjustified criticism and work overload were more common, whereas behaviors involving physical intimidation were less frequent.

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics by NAQ-R Moral Harassment Factors (N = 419)*

| Factors                                                            | Mean | Standard Deviation | Quartiles |             |             |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------|--------------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
|                                                                    |      |                    | 25%       | 50%         | 75%         |
| Factor 1: Work-Related Harassment                                  | 1.44 | 0.62               | 1.00      | <b>1.25</b> | <b>1.63</b> |
| Factor 2: Personal Harassment                                      | 1.42 | 0.64               | 1.00      | 1.14        | 1.57        |
| Factor 3: Personal and Professional Devaluation                    | 1.66 | 0.78               | 1.00      | <b>1.50</b> | <b>2.00</b> |
| Factor 4: Physical Intimidation                                    | 1.23 | 0.49               | 1.00      | 1.00        | 1.33        |
| Repeated-Measures MANOVA: F (Pillai's Trace) = 75.25, $p < .001$ . |      |                    |           |             |             |

Note. Responses were coded from 1 (never) to 5 (daily).

Regardless of the mean scores, in the NAQ-R analysis we adopted the criterion of experiencing at least one negative act weekly or daily over the previous six months to distinguish participants considered harassed from the others (Christ, 2011; Leymann, 1990; Maciel & Gonçalves, 2008). In the first section of the NAQ-R, 16% of participants ( $n = 67$ ) reported having experienced at least one of the 22 negative acts included in the instrument with this frequency. In the second section of the NAQ-R, 11.00% ( $n = 46$ ) stated that they felt harassed. Among the 67 individuals who reported frequent negative acts, 25.37% ( $n = 17$ ) stated that they felt harassed, whereas 74.63% ( $n = 50$ ) did not. The correlation between the two measures – objective frequency of negative acts and subjective perception of harassment – was positive and statistically significant ( $r = .536$ ;  $p < .01$ ), indicating partial consistency between experiential reports and self-identification as being harassed.

We also examined whether sociodemographic variables were associated with the scores in NAQ-R factors. Results from  $t$  tests indicated significant differences for marital status (single vs. not single) in three factors: Factor 1 ( $t(417) = -1.92$ ,  $p = .056$ ), Factor 2 ( $t(417) = -2.10$ ,  $p = .036$ ), Factor 3 ( $t(417) = -1.86$ ,  $p = .064$ ), and Factor 4 ( $t(417) = -2.91$ ,  $p = .004$ ), with single participants tending to present higher scores. Regarding whether participants held a *stricto sensu* graduate degree, a significant coefficient was found for Factor 1 ( $t(417) = 0.99$ ,  $p = .013$ ), indicating that individuals with this level of education tended to present higher scores. We also identified significant Pearson correlations ( $p \leq .05$ ) between three of the factors (all except Factor 3) and length of service in the current unit, with the associations being inversely proportional.

To examine the predictive power of these variables (being single, holding a graduate degree, and length of service in the current unit), we conducted multiple linear regression analyses for each NAQ-R factor as a criterion variable (Table 2). The results showed very low explanatory power, ranging from .01 to .02, but identified specific significant predictors. Marital status (being single or not) significantly predicted the variance in the scores of Factors 1, 2, and 4 of the NAQ-R. Length of service in the current unit and holding a *stricto sensu* graduate degree

significantly predicted Factor 3, with participants holding such a degree and with shorter tenure tending to show higher scores on this factor.

**Table 2**

*Regression Analysis of NAQ-R Scores by Sociodemographic Characteristics*

|                                                            | Standardized coefficients |        | Significance |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------|--------------|
|                                                            | Beta                      | t      |              |
| Factor 1: Work-Related Harassment (R² = .01)               |                           |        |              |
| (Constant)                                                 |                           | 38.129 | > 0.001      |
| Being single                                               | 0.106                     | 2.138  | 0.033        |
| Factor 2: Personal Harassment (R² = .01)                   |                           |        |              |
| (Constant)                                                 |                           | 35.908 | > 0.001      |
| Being single                                               | 0.113                     | 2.287  | 0.023        |
| Factor 3: Personal and Professional Devaluation (R² = .01) |                           |        |              |
| (Constant)                                                 |                           | 25.028 | > 0.001      |
| Length of service in the current unit                      | -0.131                    | -2.622 | 0.009        |
| Holding a stricto sensu graduate degree                    | 0.127                     | 2.529  | 0.012        |
| Factor 4: Physical Intimidation (R² = .02)                 |                           |        |              |
| (Constant)                                                 |                           | 40.572 | > 0.001      |
| Being single                                               | 0.146                     | 2.969  | 0.003        |

### **Integrated Thematic Analyses (interviews, documents, and semi-structured questionnaire)**

We integrated information obtained from different instruments: open and closed questions from the SBAPM, interviews, and documentary analysis. Interview excerpts quoted verbatim were identified by the letter “I,” and excerpts from institutional documents were identified by the letter “D.” We adopted a sequential numbering system following the letters to preserve the of participants’ anonymity.

On the institutional websites (UFMG, APUBH, and SINDIFES), we identified 63 documents related to the topic – 33 from SINDIFES, 19 from UFMG, and 11 from APUBH. The analysis of these documents and the interviews resulted in eight themes related to moral harassment (Table 3). The frequencies presented in Table 3 refer to the number of occurrences of these themes in the documents and interviews.

**Table 3**  
*Distribution of Themes Related to Moral Harassment in Interviews and Documents*

| Themes                                                                                         | Interviews (I) |             | Documents (D) |             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
|                                                                                                | f              | %           | f             | %           |
| 1. Prevention and mitigation actions (implemented by UFMG and unions)                          | 27             | 50.94%      | 116           | 37.06%      |
| 2. Understanding of the concept (recognition and definitions of moral harassment)              | 7              | 13.21%      | 63            | 20.13%      |
| 3. Factors contributing to moral harassment (situations requiring institutional attention)     | 6              | 11.32%      | –             | –           |
| 4. Situations confused with moral harassment (violent acts not classified as moral harassment) | 4              | 7.55%       | 47            | 15.02%      |
| 5. Consequences (individual, organizational, institutional, family, and societal)              | 3              | 5.66%       | 37            | 11.82%      |
| 6. Examples of moral harassment                                                                | 3              | 5.66%       | 27            | 8.63%       |
| 7. Identification criteria                                                                     | 2              | 3.77%       | 15            | 4.79%       |
| 8. Organizational harassment (situations that may characterize the phenomenon in this context) | 1              | 1.89%       | 8             | 2.56%       |
| <b>Total</b>                                                                                   | <b>53</b>      | <b>100%</b> | <b>313</b>    | <b>100%</b> |

Regarding prevention and mitigation actions (the most frequent theme in Table 3), interviews and documents revealed an institutional position on the issue, including dissemination of relevant legislation, recognition of the difficulties involved in filing complaints, and the importance of peer support in this process. One document stated: “Awareness is still necessary because there is considerable confusion about what constitutes moral harassment” (D26). We also identified references to shared responsibility: “The prevention of moral harassment should be an individual and an organizational concern” (D7). However, particular emphasis was placed on the role of leadership: “[...] those of us in leadership positions must send a very strong message to the entire institution that moral harassment is not acceptable here” (D62).

Institutional documents refer to the university’s normative instruments, particularly Resolution No 9/2016, which addresses violations of human rights and the eradication of discriminatory acts. This resolution establishes that when a complaint of moral harassment is registered, an administrative investigation may be initiated, with the possibility of disciplinary accountability for perpetrators: “In cases where it is necessary to initiate an administrative inquiry [...], the perpetrators will face disciplinary proceedings in accordance with institutional procedures and [...] if guilt is proven, they will be administratively sanctioned” (D42).

However, there is no consensus or clear conviction that such prescriptions correspond to reality, as illustrated by the following statements: “[...] another deficiency [...] is exactly that the university does not assimilate this discussion as being [...] a protagonist within the university” (I1); and

[...] Enlightening people is the role of PRORH. If we talk about labor relations [...] and include harassment as a topic, it is very interesting, because [...] we can work in an educational way on what constitutes good labor relations and what deteriorates them [...] (I2).

The adoption of isolated actions, such as the removal of the harassed individual, was identified as a practice that may contribute to the invisibility of the problem: “[...] the person may leave because they don’t get along with their boss [...] and a case of moral harassment may go unnoticed; instead of addressing it, the person simply asks for a removal” (I2). This invisibility is reinforced by obstacles to formal complaints. As noted in one document: “It is common for victims of moral harassment not to report their aggressors due to shame, lack of information, or fear of retaliation” (D42). Additionally, there are reports of cases being archived, reinforcing perceptions of impunity:

We reported it to the rector's office, we reported it to the ombudsman, and nothing happened [...] then we went to the Public Prosecutor's Office, and can you believe that they [...] managed to have our case archived there? So now our only option is to take it to court [...] (I1).

Responses to the SBAPM indicated limited institutional awareness of prevention and mitigation actions. Specifically, 84% of participants reported not knowing about such initiatives; 91.2% of them did not participate in actions promoted by UFMG; 81.4% reported being unaware of union initiatives; and 91.6% had not participated in them. In contrast, 89.5% expressed a desire for such initiatives to be implemented.

Participants who reported knowing about or participating in UFMG initiatives mentioned actions carried out by the Ethics Committee, campaigns, informational manuals, mediation processes within units, disciplinary actions, initiatives from the Mental Health Network, the use of the Ombudsman’s Office as a reporting channel, training courses, and support from the Functional Monitoring Division. Working groups and specific reporting channels were also mentioned. Regarding union initiatives, participants highlighted support provided through the Ethics Committee, dissemination of manuals, campaigns and seminars, and legal and psychological assistance for those involved. Participants also suggested greater dissemination and educational initiatives.

Regarding understanding of the concept of Work-Related Harassment (Theme 2 in Table 3), interviews and documents indicated recognition of moral harassment as a specific form of workplace violence, distinct from interpersonal and managerial conflicts: “[...] we started to examine the cases of persecution that were reported here – the way people described them – and then we realized that there was a name for it: moral harassment” (I1); and

[...] we often confuse moral harassment with conflict [...] moral harassment is a process; it does not occur only once or overnight. It develops in stages that escalate and become chronic [...] it is a serious and extreme form of psychological violence [...] continuous, repetitive, and directed (D62).

However, these excerpts also suggest that difficulties persist in defining and identifying the phenomenon, which connects this theme to Theme 4, discussed below. Documentary records further indicated recognition that some groups of employees may be more vulnerable: “Anyone can suffer moral harassment, but some individuals are more vulnerable to these practices. The most common targets are people [...] from socially marginalized groups or those who provoke insecurity or rivalry due to their professional merits” (D42).

There is also recognition that moral harassment may occur at any hierarchical level: “It’s not only supervisors, you know? We’ve also seen cases [...] where the team harasses the boss [...]” (I1); and “[...] moral harassment can occur not only between supervisors and subordinates but also among colleagues” (D22).

Regarding factors contributing to moral harassment (Theme 3 in Table 3), interviewees mentioned unprepared managers, distorted power relations, excessive bureaucracy, lack of institutional positioning or response, and a perception of impunity: “[...] our managers are unprepared [...] we still see this a lot within the university – people giving orders and others simply having to obey” (I1).

We identified situations frequently confused with moral harassment (Theme 4 in Table 3), such as isolated acts of aggression, occasional conflicts, abuse of authority, and other workplace issues. Examples include: “[...] a rude manner does not necessarily constitute moral harassment” (D24); “[...] isolated acts of psychological aggression [...] in the workplace are not characterized as moral harassment, although they may lead to administrative, civil, labor, or even criminal proceedings against the perpetrator” (D42); and “Conflicts will always exist [...] and conflict management is a tool [...] for preventing moral harassment. When conflicts are poorly managed [...] they can escalate into moral harassment” (D62).

Regarding the consequences of moral harassment (Theme 5 in Table 3), statements frequently generalized its impacts across all social actors: “Serious consequences for workers, the work environment, and society” (D2). Individual consequences described included psychological distress, psychosomatic symptoms, and behavioral changes: “The situation generates exhaustion. Sometimes the person won’t act because they do not want to give more testimony – their psychological state is already fragile” (I2). “Palpitations, trembling, throat pain – sometimes I cannot even say what I need to say. Decreased libido, which affects family life. Depression, anxiety” (D62). “moral harassment [...] affects not only the individual but often their family members as well” (D22).

Organizational repercussions included absenteeism, turnover, and deterioration of the organizational climate, such as: “The institution suffers from a deteriorated work climate, frequent conflicts, and loss of work quality” (D62); and “[...] the risks of illness and workplace

accidents increase. There are more absences, higher turnover, loss of equipment, and reduced productivity” (D7).

Societal impacts included increased costs related to public health care and legal proceedings: “And for society, there are costs related to treatment, medical leave, benefits [...] administrative and judicial proceedings” (D62).

Interviews and documents also provided examples of moral harassment (Theme 6 in Table 3) corresponding to the NAQ-R factors (Christ, 2011):

- **Work-related harassment:** frequent negative criticism, excessive pressure, or sabotage. “I won’t approve your vacation; I’ll make you stay working late [...] you can’t go out for lunch because I need this finished [...]” (I2).
- **Personal harassment:** hostile or exclusionary behaviors that cause suffering. “[...] when someone frequently feels humiliated, belittled, treated with indifference, or verbally or physically attacked. For example, recurring smirks, sighs, or sarcastic comments from supervisors or colleagues [...]” (D5).
- **Personal and professional devaluation:** actions that discredit the worker and disregard their opinions or work. “A comment that threatens a woman’s professional reputation [...] it may be framed as a joke, but when the person reflects on it, they recognize it as harassment” (D22).
- **Physical intimidation:** threats or acts of intimidation. “[...] she installed [...] a camera in the corridor near the restroom. She knew when people went in and out [...] and then she would call them and ask what they had been doing in the restroom for so long” (I1).

Regarding the criteria for identifying moral harassment (Theme 7 in Table 3), we identified in the documents considerations emphasizing the frequency and duration of persistent, targeted hostile acts as fundamental: “Temporality (during the workday, over days and months), deliberate degradation of working conditions” (D23); and “The aggression must be repeatedly directed at a specific person or group” (D42).

Finally, regarding moral harassment as organizational (Theme 8 in Table 3), reflecting a structural understanding of the phenomenon, one document stated: “The problem occurs within the institutional relationships of organizations and goes beyond the individual and workplace dimensions. In other words, moral harassment does not target a specific worker but manifests as a systematic devaluation of all work performed by public servants” (D51).

## Discussion

The analysis of the results evidenced the occurrence of moral harassment practices affecting servants at UFMG. These findings corroborate results from studies conducted in other public higher education institutions, indicating that moral harassment is a common problem in this sector (e.g., Gomes, 2018; Hodgins et al., 2024; Ignácio, 2018; Lima Júnior, 2020; Monteiro, 2019; F. F. F. Nunes, 2019; Silva, 2016; T. S. Nunes, 2016; Ventura, 2015; Vieira, 2019). The forms of moral harassment most frequently experienced by employees classified as harassed in the

NAQ-R – Personal and Professional Devaluation and Work-Related Harassment – and those identified in interviews and documents, may impair workers' performance and contribute to suffering, dissatisfaction, and frustration at work, as reported in the literature (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Freitas et al., 2013; Hirigoyen, 2002; Leymann, 1990; Mikkelsen et al., 2020; Tolfo et al., 2016).

The significant correlation between the frequency of negative acts and the self-perception of moral harassment corroborated Maciel and Gonçalves's (2008) observation that the more negative acts individuals experience, the more likely they are to recognize themselves as being harassed. However, this coefficient was moderate, because not all individuals who experienced a high frequency of negative acts identified themselves as targets of moral harassment, whereas others who reported fewer acts still considered themselves harassed. Differences in interpretation of hostile acts may be related to personal trajectories, institutional climate, and cultural norms that naturalize subtle forms of violence (Ansoleaga et al., 2021; Duarte, 2019; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Salin & Hoel, 2020). We also asked whether these differences may occur because participants do not identify the acts listed in the NAQ-R as hostile behaviors that characterize moral harassment (Freitas et al., 2013; Maciel & Gonçalves, 2008; Tolfo et al., 2016), or because they perceive themselves as harassed due to other violent acts not covered by the NAQ-R. As previously noted, certain features of universities may foster moral harassment (Borges et al., 2023; Chauí, 2003; Castro & Pereira, 2014; Hodgins et al., 2024) and, as these are common characteristics of the sector, they may also mask violence.

The exploration of the predictive capacity of sociodemographic aspects in relation to scores on the NAQ-R factors revealed low explanatory power; however, marital status showed to be more sensitive for differentiating scores in NAQ-R factors. Single servants tended to show higher scores on three NAQ-R factors, suggesting that it may represent a condition of greater psychosocial vulnerability within the institutional environment. Reduced social or affective support, combined with possible stigmatization or isolation, may contribute to greater exposure to and perception of abusive practices in daily work life.

We found a negative correlation between length of service in the unit and perceptions of moral harassment in Factors 1, 2, and 4. Servants who are less embedded in the institutional culture may be more likely to perceive problems or less likely to normalize forms of violence. In contrast, long-tenured servants may have adjusted themselves to institutional functioning by developing coping strategies or by naturalizing moral harassment as part of the organization's routine.

We identified that participants with higher levels of education (graduates) reported greater perception of Personal and Professional Devaluation (Table 3), which aligns with the literature indicating that higher educational attainment is associated with greater critical awareness of what is or is not acceptable at work (Maciel & Gonçalves, 2008). We observed these tendencies through regression analyses; however, the explained variance for each regression

was very low. Thus, these are weak trends. We interpret this pattern as suggesting that sociodemographic characteristics alone do not explain experiences of moral harassment, making it more appropriate to consider organizational, cultural, and relational aspects (Soboll, 2017a) when developing prevention strategies.

With respect to the objective of identifying institutional policies for the prevention and mitigation of moral harassment at UFMG, the results indicate that actions addressing these issues have been undertaken at the university. However, the topic remains insufficiently addressed in the institution, with fragmented initiatives implemented over the years (most of them led by unions), not being widely known among employees, and with restricted reach. If the institution promotes initiatives that are not recognized by servants, institutional self-assessment becomes necessary, seeking answers to questions such as: Do the implemented actions address the forms of moral harassment experienced at the university? Are they aligned with the characteristics of the workforce and the institution? Which aspects of institutional policies should be considered in the design and implementation of these actions?

As a federal institution, UFMG has a decentralized, collegial, and complex governance. Therefore, it is also pertinent to ask whether professors and TAS staff, through their participation in collegial decision-making processes, contribute to sustaining contradictions between formal prevention/mitigation prescriptions and the realities of workplace relationships. Do the university's internal communication processes require changes, particularly, considering new virtual possibilities? The institution also manages complex policies related to its core missions (teaching, research, and extension). It is therefore important to ask whether the ineffectiveness of prevention and mitigation actions has, in some way, served these policies. Might the specific features of such policies contribute to the naturalization of moral harassment or to institutional leniency toward perpetrators?

For prevention and mitigation actions to be effective, they must be integrated into the university's everyday management rather than limited to isolated initiatives (Hodgins et al., 2024; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Soboll, 2017b). We observed similarities between our findings and results from studies conducted in other public higher education institutions (Gomes, 2018; Hodgins et al., 2024; Ignácio, 2018; Lima Júnior, 2020; Monteiro, 2019; Nunes, 2016; Nunes, 2019; Silva, 2016; Ventura, 2015; Vieira, 2019), suggesting that these patterns are associated with institutional policies and practices across universities.

Seminars and the distribution of manuals and informational booklets were the actions that reached the largest number of participants, likely because they emphasize awareness and information dissemination (Soboll, 2017b; Tolfo et al., 2016). Actions aimed at regulation and case management require clearer establishment and broader dissemination, with transparent procedures and information to facilitate employees' understanding. A key concern in prevention and mitigation actions involves fear of formally reporting moral harassment and, consequently, seeking alternative strategies to cope with the problem, such as requesting removal to another

workplace unit, as reported in interviews and described in the literature (Beltrame, 2020; Fonseca, 2017; Gomes, 2018; Hirigoyen, 2002; Nunes, 2016; Nunes, 2019).

The actions undertaken at UFMG are consistent with what has been proposed in the literature (Freitas et al., 2013; Soboll, 2017b; Tolfo et al., 2016) and with what has been implemented in other public higher education institutions (Beltrame, 2020; Duarte, 2019; Fonseca, 2017; Gomes, 2018; Nunes, 2019; Oliveira, 2020; Vieira, 2019). However, the literature also recommends initiatives that have not yet been implemented at UFMG, such as training managers and staff responsible for handling moral harassment cases, conducting organizational diagnostics, managing information, and publicly communicating the organization's position and how cases are handled (Beltrame, 2020; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Soboll, 2017b; Tolfo et al., 2016). What situations have prevented the adoption of these recommendations?

Most participants expressed a desire for UFMG to promote prevention and mitigation actions. These initiatives were included in UFMG's Institutional Development Plan (IDP) for 2018–2023; thus, we argue that unions and servants should question the institution regarding the non-implementation of these actions and mobilize to ensure their execution. Regarding participants' suggested actions, most focused on increasing institutional awareness of the topic, such as informational campaigns, development and distribution of booklets, and training on related topics that may prevent moral harassment and its consequences and improve workplace climate, suggestions that align with the literature (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Soboll, 2017b; Tolfo et al., 2016). Participants also suggested mitigation actions primarily aimed at regulation and management of the problem. Normative documents are important because, in addition to specifying sanctions, their enforcement may help prevent new cases (Freitas et al., 2013; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Soboll, 2017b). We were particularly struck by participants' demand for transparency regarding the organization's stance and how cases are handled. We contend that a clear institutional position is essential to align discourse, rules, and practice, and to foster servants' confidence that similar experiences will be handled appropriately (Freitas et al., 2013; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Soboll, 2017b). We also note that interviewees reported complaints about cases being “shelved,” reflecting perceptions that complaints are not meaningfully investigated. At the same time, disclosure of case handling requires careful safeguards to avoid exposing the servants involved.

Although participants recognized that moral harassment has multiple contributing factors, their suggested coping strategies reveal a contradiction: isolated and individual-level actions (e.g., campaigns and mediation) predominate, to the detriment of structural change. This tension between institutional causes and individualized responses, previously highlighted in the literature (Freitas et al., 2013; Soboll, 2017b), underscores the challenge of articulating broad prevention and accountability policies with support and awareness practices that simultaneously address the phenomenon's subjective and organizational dimensions.

The inclusion of moral harassment in the resolution addressing human rights violations and the eradication of discriminatory acts of any nature within UFMG (University Council

Resolution No. 9/2016), and the inclusion of prevention actions in the IDP (2018–2023) constitute relevant instruments for preventing and addressing moral harassment. However, they require effective implementation by the institution – particularly given that, through 2023, the actions included in the IDP had not been executed – and the servant mobilization to participate in these initiatives, so that the resolution and the learning derived from prevention and mitigation actions translate into real change. With respect to the difficulties for improving UFMG's response to moral harassment mentioned in interviews and publications, we ask: to what extent is the institution genuinely engaged with the issue and attentive to this problem, especially given that there were institutional plans for prevention and mitigation actions that were not implemented? In October 2023, UFMG established a committee to propose a policy for addressing moral harassment. However, to date, the policy has not been presented to the academic community. Insufficient prevention and mitigation actions and the absence of a clear institutional stance become problematic because omissions also constitute a form of positioning (e.g., Borges & Barros, 2021; Freitas et al., 2013; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020).

Regarding complaints, it is essential to establish clear procedures and ensure that those responsible for investigating cases are trained and recognized by servants as trustworthy (Freitas et al., 2013; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020). Dissemination of reporting procedures and servant sensitization are necessary because filing a formal complaint remains challenging for reasons highlighted in the literature (Duarte, 2019; F. F. F. Nunes, 2019; Freitas et al., 2013; Hodgins et al., 2024; ILO, 2022; Lima Junior, 2020; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020), such as lack of knowledge about reporting processes, fear of retaliation, insufficient peer support, fear of exposure, and lack of trust in leaders. Nevertheless, we emphasize the importance of complaints for enabling institutions to adequately map the problem and develop effective strategies (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Soboll, 2017b).

Interviews and documents reflected an understanding of moral harassment and its distinction from other forms of violence (e.g., isolated aggressive acts, occasional conflicts, abuse of authority, and professional demands), corroborating the literature (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Einarsen et al., 2020; Freitas et al., 2013; Hirigoyen, 2002; Leymann, 1990; Soboll, 2017a). This suggests a strong informational base, consistent with participants' educational profile. However, once again, a contradiction emerges between having information and engaging in prevention initiatives. In addition, we highlight the need to improve how cases are handled and to avoid trivializing the phenomenon (Freitas et al., 2013; Soboll, 2017b). At the same time, addressing occasional conflicts, poor structural and managerial working conditions, and other issues is essential to prevent isolated problems from escalating into cases of moral harassment (Freitas et al., 2013; Hodgins et al., 2024; Mikkelsen et al., 2020; Plimmer et al., 2022; Tolfo et al., 2016).

The aspects and situations mentioned by participants as contributing to moral harassment at UFMG are supported by the literature (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Freitas et al., 2013; Gomes, 2018; Hodgins et al., 2024; Salin & Hoel, 2020; Tolfo et al., 2016; Vieira, 2019),

given that work organization and organizational structure characteristics may contribute to moral harassment (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Einarsen et al., 2020; Freitas et al., 2013; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Plimmer et al., 2022; Soboll, 2017a). The bureaucratization of public service rigidifies processes that require flexibility. The growing informatization and automation of processes add flexibility regarding where work can be performed but also introduces rigidity in how tasks must be executed, including procedural steps that are not always consistent with the work goals (Borges et al., 2023; Vieira, 2019) or with the mission of universities (Castro & Pereira, 2014). In addition, managers' lack of preparation to handle people and relational conflicts may result in inappropriate use of power or omission due to lack of knowledge in concrete situations (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Vieira, 2019).

Institutional silence or ambiguity aggravates the problem because moral harassment tends to be more prevalent in institutions that tolerate it – explicitly or implicitly (Hodgins et al., 2024). This communication gap contributes to the perception that the issue is not a priority or is not treated seriously, fostering distrust in formal channels and discouraging victims from coming forward (Freitas et al., 2013; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Plimmer et al., 2022). A sense of impunity reinforces the harassing cycle. Reports of archived complaints and lack of institutional feedback sustain the understanding that abusive behaviors have no consequences and, therefore, affect servants' trust in the institution and discourages new complaints (Duarte, 2019; Plimmer et al., 2022).

The consequences of moral harassment mentioned in interviews and documents align with the literature (Boudrias et al., 2021; Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Freitas et al., 2013; Hodgins et al., 2024; ILO, 2022; Leymann, 1990; Mikkelsen et al., 2020; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Schwaab et al., 2022; Tolfo et al., 2016), both in the understanding that the consequences affect multiple stakeholders and in the types of impacts described. Some studies (Fanes, 2015; Gomes, 2018; Ignácio, 2018; Lima Júnior, 2020; Monteiro, 2019; Nunes, 2016, 2019; Silva, 2016; Ventura, 2015; Vieira, 2019) identified anxiety and depressive disorders, difficulties in family relationships, and bodily pain among workers as outcomes. Regarding organizational consequences observed in interviews and documents, we found similarities with other studies, such as absenteeism (Nunes, 2016; Gomes, 2018; Ignácio, 2018; Vieira, 2019), reduced productivity (Ventura, 2015; Fonseca, 2017; Nunes, 2019; Vieira, 2019), and deterioration of organizational climate (Nunes, 2016; Nunes, 2019). Consequences not mentioned in interviews and documents but that should be considered include negative public exposure of the institution's image (Freitas et al., 2013; Hoel et al., 2020; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Tolfo et al., 2016) and the financial and time costs associated with replacing employees in cases of medical leave or resignation requests (Duarte, 2019; Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Hoel et al., 2020; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020).

Organizational harassment was the least frequent theme in publications and interviews. Given the absence of institutional action, we infer that UFMG may lack recognition of organizational causes embedded in the university structure that facilitate the development of

phenomenon, such as an excessively competitive climate, unmanaged conflicts, absence of clear and effective prevention and mitigation policies, increasing pressure, role conflict, and leadership styles. These causes have also been identified in the literature (Einarsen & Ågotnes, 2023; Fanes, 2015; Gomes, 2018; Freitas et al., 2013; Leymann, 1990; Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020; Salin & Hoel, 2020; Silva, 2016; Soboll, 2017a; Tolfo et al., 2016; T. S. Nunes, 2016; Vieira, 2019). We argue that the institution must recognize the issue as an existing organizational problem and that institutional leadership must be more actively engaged so that cases are handled appropriately and in accordance with current regulations (e.g., Decree No. 12,122/2024 and Ordinance No. 6,719/2024 of the Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services).

Overall, the analysis suggests that the effectiveness of prevention and mitigation actions depends on the institution's capacity to recognize moral harassment as a product of management conditions and practices, rather than solely interpersonal interactions. Isolated strategies, even when well-intentioned, risk reinforcing individual blame on victims and normalizing the institutional roots of the problem. Effective prevention and mitigation therefore require an approach that integrates prevention, accountability, and transformation of management practices and organizational culture.

### Final Considerations

Among the study's limitations, the low response rate in the first phase of field activities should be considered, as it restricts the generalizability of the findings. The interpretation and application of the results must take into account the accidental nature of the sample and the specific characteristics of the participants. The limited number of interviews also restricted the diversity of institutional perspectives represented in the study.

The research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified the challenges associated with investigating this topic in the context of the severe economic and institutional crisis that worsened in the country during that period. As discussed in the introduction, moral harassment represents a form of organizational violence associated with contemporary transformations in work and with management models that increase control and competitiveness. In this sense, the phenomenon extends beyond interpersonal interactions and reflects structural and cultural contradictions within public institutions.

Despite these limitations, the findings highlight the relevance of organizational conditions in both the emergence and the mitigation of moral harassment. The results are consistent with the theoretical frameworks adopted in this research and reinforce the need for an approach that integrates prevention, accountability, and transformation of management practices.

Finally, this research contributed to documenting the occurrence of moral harassment at UFMG and underscores the need to adopt actions to prevent and mitigate it. The university must recognize moral harassment as an institutional problem in order to advance in addressing this issue. It is essential that the institution commits to prevention and mitigation by adopting

educational initiatives, structured policies, and ethical and transparent procedures for handling cases, thereby improving management practices.

It is also necessary to continue exposing and discussing this topic – one that often remains silenced and normalized in society – to promote changes in institutional policies and management practices. The questions raised in the discussion section may also serve as directions for future research. We recommend further studies exploring the consequences of moral harassment for servants, as well as investigations into the impacts of recent federal regulations on institutional policies for prevention and mitigation.

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