

## Servility As an Example of Organizational Pathology\*

Katarzyna WOJTASZCZYK, Marzena SYPER-JĘDRZEJAK  
and Izabela ROŻAŃSKA-BIŃCZYK

University of Lodz, Lodz, Poland

Correspondence should be addressed to: Katarzyna WOJTASZCZYK; [katarzyna.wojtaszczyk@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:katarzyna.wojtaszczyk@uni.lodz.pl)

\*Presented at the 42nd IBIMA International Conference, 22-23 November 2023, Seville, Spain

### Abstract

Among the various management pathologies described in the literature (eg. Berti & Simpson, 2021; Gupta et al., 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), some are rarely of interest to researchers in the field of human resource management (HRM). One of these is servility. Our article aims to show that servility (servilism) is one of the organisational pathologies that negatively affects not only the servilist but also the team and the company as a whole. In our text, we briefly present the essence of organisational pathology and the nature of servility (including the tactics used by servile people). We also point out the most important consequences of servilism and ways to prevent and eliminate servility in the workplace.

**Keywords:** Servility, Human Resources Management, Organizational Pathologies.

### Introduction: Organizational pathology and servility

The term pathology comes from Greek. It is a combination of two words: páthos (which means illness or suffering) and lógos (word, learning). In dictionary terms, pathology is the study of human, animal, or plant diseases, their causes, mechanisms of development and course, symptoms, and effects, as well as the phenomenon of social behaviour of individuals and social groups that are contrary to the values of a given culture. This broad understanding of pathology makes it the subject of research in many disciplines of the medical, health, and social sciences. Pathology is a term also used about organisations, i.e. it is the subject of analyses of management sciences.

Pathology may appear in any of the organisation's subsystems, which means that it may concern the organization's goals, the technology used, the structure, and the people (participants). According to the law of entropy, an organisation can die, but it is quite likely that most of those that do reach their demise do so 'unnaturally', due to incurable conditions. Any organisational pathology significantly weakens the organisation. Borrowing from the medical language, such a condition is called organisational pathology. As Samuel (2010) argues, the host organisation is afflicted by a 'organisational disease' that hinders organisational performance in such a way that it is potentially lethal. Organisational pathology wastes the resources or energy of its host, ultimately making it unviable as an 'organism' if the pathology goes unaddressed.

The symptoms of pathologies occurring in the organisation include weakening of social relations, problems with the implementation of values and needs, violation of the generally accepted system of norms, struggle of organisation members for position and influence. The list of organisational pathologies is not closed, and researchers point out various pathological phenomena. The most frequently described in the literature (and researched) include pathologies that affect employees (or candidates), such as discrimination, mobbing, and sexual harassment. But organisational pathologies also include lies, actions to the detriment of the organisation, theft, and servility.

## **The nature of servility**

The adjective servile comes from the Latin servilis or servus. The word has been used since the end of the 14th century. It originally meant subordinate and was appropriate to a servant or to the class of slaves. The earliest sense in English was church-legal, servile work being forbidden on the Sabbath (Online Etymology Dictionary). This word first entered political terminology in Spain in 1814, when the contemptuous name servile was used to describe supporters of the bloody and unconstitutional rule of Ferdinand VII.

The Cambridge Dictionary states the adjective servile describes a person too eager to serve and please someone else in a way that shows that they do not have much respect for themselves. Today, servility means submission to someone with power or influence. To be servile means not recognising oneself as a person who is equal to others in which one assumes a lower moral position (Hojlund, 2022).

The servilist's goal is to obtain specific, short-term benefits for themselves (e.g. bonuses, rewards, promotions, recognition, help in achieving their own particular goals). This means that servility has an instrumental function. Firstly, the behaviour of the servilist to satisfy the person in power is 'for show'; the servility only apparently yields to orders or prohibitions and only apparently internalises someone else's norms and values. In fact, the servilist is internally opposed to being submissive and, in the absence of external control, acts by their own beliefs and preferences (Sullivan et al., 1957).

Servilism characterises socially maladjusted individuals. It is one of the deviant conformist behaviours, which may be misleading because conformism means adapting to the requirements of the environment and other people's behaviour. In this case, however, the conformist, to the frustration caused by not meeting his own needs, reacts with excessive servility toward significant people (Sullivan et al., 1957). Servility, which is often the result of suffering humiliation, is a form of damaged self-esteem. According to Tenesini (2018), servility is characterised by the feeling that one is a failure and less capable than other people. It could also be that the servility of an individual is their reaction to deviant environmental norms. Merton (1968) noted that there are communities (e.g. corporations) that create their own systems of values, norms, and patterns of behaviour that must be rigorously followed. If these norms are contrary to generally accepted social norms, the behaviour of a given community is a deviation from the point of view of the norms of the wider society.

## **Servility in organisational practice: examples of actions, consequences, prevention**

Servilism may (but does not have to) be a consequence of the culture of servility prevailing in the organisation (Gooptu, 2013); it may also reflect national culture (Králíková & Králik, 2021). When organisational servility is not a manifestation of organisational or national culture, in a company / team, there is usually one servile employee, and the others observe his actions with disapproval. It can be said that servility is a manipulative (and therefore dysfunctional) way of managing the boss (Gabarro & Kotter, 2008). Servility, unlike boss management, benefits only the seemingly submissive person, but serves neither the superior nor the company. Moreover, according to business consultants, servility is considered a basic mistake in the process of managing a boss.

Servilists use a variety of tactics in the workplace. One of them is perfectionism in action. A perfectionist is a person capable of making any sacrifices for the company and / or the boss. Perfectionists will do everything they can to fulfil their promise to their superior. They often work beyond the norm, give up breaks, and stay after hours. Another tactic of organisational servility involves creativity. Creative servilists have many ideas, are energetic, and at the same time are convinced of their superiority. A humble servilist is a person who never says 'no' to the boss. The manipulators try to gain the boss's trust, but their goal is to learn about the superior's weaknesses in order to take over the boss's position. In turn, the kiss-ass willingly gives his boss (often insincere and tasteless) compliments and showers him with (often expensive) gifts; he is always on standby in case his boss needs him. Another servile tactic is taking credit for the achievements of other employees or exaggerating their own achievements, or reporting on the mistakes of their co-workers.

Servilism has a number of negative effects on the servile person, the team, and / or the entire company. A servile employee is usually an outsider, a person whose behaviour arouses reluctance or even hostility. No one likes such a person, no one respects him, no one wants to cooperate with him. The servilist is called a flutterer, a back-scratcher, or even a kiss-ass. The persons presenting behaviour typical of servility therefore weaken their personal brands. Moreover, servility can result in workaholicism or burnout, which especially applies to perfectionists and humble servilists. As a result, servility negatively affects the atmosphere in the team and causes conflicts that sooner or later affect the results of work. Servilism hinders the company's development and, in extreme situations, threatens the

organisation's security. A typical result of this phenomenon is the lack of creativity of employees and the loss of talented employees. The most dangerous consequences are concealing mismanagement and corruption. Promoting or allowing servility in a company is therefore risky from the point of view of the need to ensure the continuity of the organisation's operations.

Servilism, understood as a dysfunctional (or even pathological) relationship between a subordinate and his boss, is harmful to the organisation. Preventing servility should, therefore, be one of the basic duties of managers at all levels. Every manager, through his daily behaviour (and categorical statements), should clearly show that servility is not accepted in the company, and the ability to please the boss is not a criterion for employee assessment. Furthermore, as indicated by Hojlund (2022), a paternalistic management style may be a tool helpful in removing servility. Human resource management also plays an important role in combating servility. Although, especially in the public sector, HRM is still used to strengthen servilism (Othman et al., 2017), many companies implement procedures aimed at eliminating this pathology. Such companies have clear recruitment procedures, use substantive assessment criteria, and reward results and competencies. In organisations fighting against servility, corruption, clientelism, and other organisational pathologies are also fought. Eliminating servility therefore requires a systemic approach to eliminating organisational pathology, and actions in this direction must be taken not only at the individual and team level but also (or perhaps primarily) at the top management level.

### **Servility prevention as an action needs to be explored**

Although the literature on servility is rich, there is a lack of research in this field written by representatives of management sciences. Therefore, we believe that not only the essence of servility is worth exploring. We are sure that organisational practices aimed at counteracting and combating servility should be investigated. Research should be conducted to identify the 'faces' of organisational servility and the negative consequences of this pathology. It is necessary to popularise the best practices for preventing servilism, which can constitute a benchmark for other organisations.

At the same time, we cannot forget that servility should be prevented already in the stage of a person's adolescence. Young people who doubt their intellectual strengths (their knowledge, abilities, and skills) are on their way to developing a form of intellectual servility. Therefore, the education system plays a crucial role in preventing servility (also at work). Teachers should be the ones who help students discover their intellectual strengths and ensure that they are not deficient in the virtue of intellectual pride from an early age (Battaly, 2023). And there is also space for empirical research here. Researchers can explore educational practices that aim (directly or indirectly) to prevent servility.

Managers use methods, techniques, and management tools. However, managers are influenced by various emotions. Each manager should be able to competently use his or her and subordinates' emotions. Emotional intelligence is about self-control, the ability to motivate, perseverance in actions, empathy, and actions that eliminate servility. All these activities should be mainly the result of the moral imperative of the manager (Kotowska & Stelmach, 2019). Therefore, it is worth exploring the attitudes of managers. It seems important to diagnose the managers' views on servility. It is also necessary to monitor what managers do (in their daily work) to eliminate behaviours typical of servility.

According to Durkheim (1982), social deviance is not only dysfunctional but also serves specific functions and can work to strengthen the social system. However, just because something has certain positive effects does not mean that we consider that thing itself to be good. Moreover, as Durkheim also points out (and argues for the elimination of organisational servility), every type of social conformity carries with it a whole gamut of individual variations. It is, nevertheless, true that the sphere of permitted variations is limited. It is more extensive for all matters related to economic life. But sooner or later, one encounters a limit that must not be overstepped.

### **Acknowledgment**

All authors contributed to the conception of the paper. All authors approved the manuscript. Declarations of interest: none

### **References**

- Battaly, H. (2023), 'Educating for intellectual pride and ameliorating servility in contexts of epistemic injustice' *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 55(3), 301-314.
- Berti, M., and Simpson, A.V. (2021), 'The dark side of organizational paradoxes: The dynamics of disempowerment', *Academy of Management Review*, 46(2), 252-274.

- *Cambridge Dictionary*, [Online], [Retrieved October 22, 2023], <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pl/dictionary/english/servile>.
- Durkheim, E. (1982), *The Rules of Sociological Method*, The Free Press.
- Gabarro, J.J., and Kotter, J.P. (2008), *Managing Your Boss*, Harvard Business Review Press.
- Gooptu, N. (2013), 'Servile sentinels of the city: Private security guards, organized informality, and labour in interactive services in globalized India', *International Review of Social History*, 58(1), 9-38.
- Gupta, P., Gupta, U., and Wadhwa, S. (2020), 'Known and unknown aspects of workplace bullying: A systematic review of recent literature and future research agenda', *Human Resource Development Review*, 19(3), 263-308.
- Hojlund, A-S.G. (2022), 'Mitigating servility: Policies of egalitarian self-relations', *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(2), 908-920.
- Kotowska, E., and Stelmach, W. (2019), 'Economic, psychological and social aspects of business management', *Postępy Techniki Przetwórstwa Spożywczego*, 2 (2019), 148-154.
- Králiková, K., and Králik, J. (2021), 'Atmosphere in workplace mirror of society', *Sociálno-Ekonomická Revue*, 1, 25-37.
- Merton, R.K. (1968), *Social Theory and Social Structure*, The Free Press.
- Nielsen, M. B., and Einarsen, S. (2012), 'Outcomes of exposure to workplace bullying: A meta-analytic review', *Work & Stress*, 26(4), 309-332.
- *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [Online], [Retrieved October 22, 2023], <https://www.etymonline.com/word/servility>.
- Othman, G., Khalif, A.A., and Alammari, A. (2017), *Human resource management: Tools and strategies*, In: M. Daróczy, E. Robak, and S. Vinogradov (ed), *Management, Organizations and Society* (pp. 121-134), Agroinform Publishing House.
- Samuel, Y. (2010), *Organizational Pathology: Life and Death of Organizations*, Transaction Publishers.
- Sullivan, C.E., Grant, M.Q., and Grant J.D. (1957), 'The development of interpersonal maturity: Applications to delinquency', *Psychiatry*, 20, 373-385.
- Tanesini, A. (2018), 'Intellectual servility and timidity', *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 43, 21-41.