

From Workplace Conflict to Crime: An Organizational Mediation Framework on Harm, Victimization and Criminalization

Valentina Moncada

Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of Enna "Kore" – Sicily, Italy
Corresponding Author Email: valentina.moncada@unikorestudent.it

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Abstract

Workplace harm is examined across distinct bodies of literature addressing conflict, bullying, organizational power, victimization, workplace violence, and criminalization. Although these perspectives have generated substantial insights, the organizational processes connecting harmful conduct to its institutional recognition, classification, and potential penal significance remain insufficiently integrated. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by proposing the Organizational Mediation of Workplace Criminalization Framework (OMWCF). Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in organizational sociology, organizational behavior, victimology, and criminology, the framework conceptualizes organizations as active mediating contexts in which workplace harm is interpreted, reported, investigated, normalized, or left unaddressed. It distinguishes analytically between harmful workplace conduct, the experience and articulation of victimization, organizational mediation, and institutional classification, including possible criminalization. Five conceptual propositions examine how organizational power relations and institutional responses may shape divergent, non-linear trajectories of workplace harm. Particular attention is given to reporting practices, credibility assessments, normalization, silence, denial, and organizational inaction as processes that may influence institutional visibility and the attribution of responsibility. The OMWCF contributes a meso-level, process-oriented framework for examining the relationship between workplace harm, organizational responses, and broader legal and penal institutions. It also identifies implications for organizational governance, compliance, and victim support, while outlining directions for future empirical research.

Keywords: Organizational Mediation, Workplace Criminalization, Workplace Harm, Workplace Victimization, Organizational Misconduct

Introduction

Workplaces are not merely sites of economic production and professional interaction; they are also institutional settings in which relations of authority, dependency, cooperation, and conflict are continuously negotiated. Within these contexts, interpersonal disagreements may

be constructively resolved or develop into more persistent forms of harmful conduct, including workplace bullying, harassment, intimidation, and violence. Although these phenomena have received extensive scholarly attention, they have often been examined through partially separate analytical perspectives. Research on workplace bullying has primarily investigated its antecedents, organizational conditions, and individual and organizational consequences, while organizational studies have emphasized the role of power relations, leadership, human resource practices, and institutional responses. Criminological scholarship has increasingly recognized workplace violence and related forms of harm as legitimate objects of inquiry, while socio-legal research has examined the possibilities and limitations of criminalizing workplace harassment and abuse. Together, these bodies of literature have significantly advanced the understanding of harmful workplace behavior.

Research on workplace bullying, for example, has shown that such conduct cannot be adequately explained solely by individual characteristics or interpersonal incompatibility (Einarsen et al., 2020). Organizational structures, power asymmetries, competitive environments, leadership practices, and processes of organizational change may create conditions that enable or sustain bullying and related forms of harm (Salin, 2021). Critical organizational perspectives further emphasize that power operates through both formal hierarchies and informal practices and organizational cultures, challenging explanations that attribute responsibility exclusively to individual perpetrators. A substantial body of research has also documented the consequences of exposure to harmful workplace behavior. Meta-analytic evidence has associated workplace bullying with adverse employee outcomes, including impaired psychological well-being, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Other research has drawn attention to the organizational processes that shape whether harmful conduct becomes visible and is addressed. Trivialization and normalization may discourage complaints, while organizational silence can inhibit the reporting of problematic behavior. These perspectives suggest that the institutional treatment of workplace harm cannot be inferred from the occurrence of harmful conduct alone. The experience and articulation of victimization must be distinguished from its formal recognition, and both may be shaped by the organizational environments in which harm is interpreted, contested, or addressed.

Organizational responses therefore constitute a theoretically significant dimension of workplace harm. Through policies, grievance procedures, internal investigations, managerial discretion, and informal practices, organizations participate in defining what is treated as acceptable behavior, interpersonal conflict, misconduct, or recognized victimization. Organizational inaction may leave harmful practices unchallenged and contribute to the reproduction of existing power relations. Similarly, organizational justice scholarship highlights the importance of procedural, interpersonal, and informational fairness in employees' experiences of institutional processes. These dynamics become particularly relevant when workplace harm raises questions of legal or penal significance. Criminological research has challenged the tendency to locate crime primarily outside productive and corporate settings, while socio-legal scholarship has questioned whether individualized criminalization provides an adequate response to systemic workplace abuse. Bogg and Freedland (2020), for example, examine the risk that an overly individualized conception of criminal liability may obscure the wider organizational and structural contexts in which workplace harm is produced and perpetuated. Taken together, these perspectives point to

the need to examine not only the conditions associated with harmful conduct, but also the processes through which organizations interpret, classify, and respond to it.

Despite these advances, the relationship between the production of workplace harm and its subsequent institutional treatment remains insufficiently integrated across these bodies of scholarship. What requires further theoretical development is an account of the meso-level organizational processes connecting harmful conduct and the experience of victimization with institutional recognition, organizational classification, and possible engagement with legal or penal institutions. This article addresses this gap by proposing the Organizational Mediation of Workplace Criminalization Framework (OMWCF). The framework conceptualizes organizational mediation as a set of formal and informal processes through which harmful conduct may be recognized, reported, investigated, normalized, silenced, denied, or referred to other institutional arenas. It does not assume that these processes follow a fixed sequence or that they determine a uniform outcome. Instead, it examines how organizational power relations and institutional responses may shape divergent trajectories, including the treatment of harm as interpersonal conflict, its classification as organizational wrongdoing, or the identification of potential penal significance. Criminalization is thus treated as a possible, contingent trajectory rather than an inevitable consequence of workplace conflict or victimization.

The article develops this argument through a conceptual and interdisciplinary synthesis of international scholarship published primarily between 2000 and 2026, drawing on the sociology of work, organizational behavior, workplace bullying research, victimology, criminology, and socio-legal studies. It addresses the following research question: How do organizational power relations and institutional responses shape the recognition, classification, and possible criminalization of harmful workplace conduct? The article makes three interconnected theoretical contributions. First, it brings together research traditions that have generally examined workplace harm from distinct analytical perspectives. Second, it conceptualizes organizational mediation as a meso-level process connecting harmful conduct and experiences of victimization with their institutional interpretation and treatment. Third, it frames the relationship between workplace harm and criminalization as contingent and potentially recursive, accounting for divergent institutional trajectories without assuming that victimization necessarily results in formal recognition or that organizational wrongdoing inevitably leads to criminal proceedings. In this way, the OMWCF provides a process-oriented conceptual basis for examining why similar forms of harmful conduct may receive different institutional responses across organizational and institutional contexts.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical foundations by examining research on workplace bullying, organizational power relations, victimization, and institutional responses. Section 3 introduces the OMWCF and presents its five conceptual propositions. Section 4 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the framework for organizational governance, compliance, and victim support. Section 5 addresses the framework's limitations and identifies directions for future empirical research.

From Workplace Conflict to Harmful Behavior

Workplace conflict represents a common and potentially inevitable dimension of organizational life. Differences in professional interests, expectations, interpretations, and priorities can generate disagreements among colleagues, between employees and supervisors, or across organizational actors situated at different hierarchical levels. Conflict, therefore, should not be automatically equated with harmful behavior. From an organizational perspective, disagreement can serve constructive functions by surfacing competing interests, encouraging negotiation, and making organizational tensions visible. The analytical problem emerges when conflict becomes persistent, asymmetrical, or entrenched in relationships characterized by unequal access to authority, resources, and organizational legitimacy. An important early contribution to this debate was provided by Hoel and Cooper (2000), who examined the relationship between destructive conflict and workplace bullying.

Their work helped frame workplace bullying in relation to broader patterns of destructive workplace interaction, rather than treating it exclusively as an isolated interpersonal phenomenon. This perspective highlights the importance of distinguishing ordinary organizational conflict from interactions that become persistently harmful to one or more participants. The existence of conflict per se does not constitute victimization or misconduct; rather, its configuration and progression within the organization are critical to understanding when a disagreement assumes more damaging characteristics. Salin's (2003) influential analysis further developed this organizational perspective by identifying distinct categories of organizational structures and processes that can enable, motivate, or precipitate workplace bullying. Enabling structures include power imbalances and circumstances in which the perceived costs of bullying are low. Motivating structures may stem from internal competition, reward systems, or other organizational arrangements that incentivize aggressive conduct, whereas precipitating processes typically encompass organizational change, restructuring, and downsizing. This framework is particularly salient because it demonstrates that harmful workplace conduct cannot be adequately explained solely through the traits or intentions of individual perpetrators. Rather, organizational conditions facilitate the emergence and persistence of behaviors that are subsequently experienced as harmful by the targeted individual. The distinction between conflict and bullying is therefore analytically crucial. Conflict may involve reciprocal disagreement between actors whose positions remain relatively symmetrical, whereas bullying typically entails persistence and a power imbalance that leaves the targeted individual less capable of defending themselves or halting the harmful interaction (Einarsen et al., 2020). This does not imply that every conflict involving an unequal power relation constitutes bullying. Rather, power asymmetry should be understood as one of the organizational conditions through which an ordinary disagreement can escalate into a form of harmful conduct with more severe structural repercussions. This perspective has been further reinforced by critical organizational scholarship. Hutchinson and colleagues (2006, 2010), for example, challenged individualistic accounts of workplace bullying by highlighting the production and circulation of power at the organizational level. Their analysis of bullying within the nursing sector illustrated how workplace hierarchies, organizational cultures, and institutional power relations contribute to the emergence and entrenchment of bullying practices. The significance of their contribution extends beyond the specific occupational setting examined: it indicates that the meaning and persistence of harmful conduct depend fundamentally on the organizational environment in which interactions occur. A systems perspective similarly complicates

explanations centered exclusively on individual perpetrators and victims. Bentley and colleagues (2014) demonstrated the importance of examining workplace violence through the interaction of interpersonal and organizational factors, highlighting the contribution of broader organizational conditions to the production of violence. This approach aligns with the wider shift from individualized explanations toward a multi-level understanding of workplace harm, in which individual behavior is situated within organizational structures and processes. Systematic evidence further corroborates this conclusion. Feijó and colleagues' (2019) systematic review of risk factors for workplace bullying identified a wide array of organizational conditions associated with bullying, including leadership styles, workload, role conflict, role ambiguity, stress, and organizational pressures. Such findings suggest that harmful workplace conduct should be examined not merely as a behavioral aberration occurring within an otherwise neutral organization, but as a phenomenon potentially embedded in how work is organized and managed. The organizational dimension is particularly decisive because the same interpersonal conduct can carry vastly different meanings depending on the institutional context in cui it unfolds. A dispute between peers may remain ordinary workplace conflict when parties command relatively equivalent organizational resources and when effective negotiation mechanisms are available.

Conversely, an identical behavior can become significantly more harmful when situated within a context of hierarchical dependency, repeated exposure, managerial favoritism, organizational precarity, or an environment where challenging dominant actors incurs prohibitive costs. This observation introduces a central analytical distinction for the present framework: harmful conduct cannot be defined exclusively by the perpetrator's subjective intent or by the mere presence of conflict. Its institutional meaning is partly produced through the interaction of behavior, power dynamics, and the organizational context. The very organizational environment that enables harmful behavior can subsequently shape how such behavior is recognized, contested, or normalized. Consequently, the transition from conflict to harmful conduct should not be conceived as a linear or deterministic progression. Rather, it can be understood as a process in which organizational conditions alter the probability, intensity, and persistence of harmful interactions. Conflict may be de-escalated or resolved through negotiation, managerial intervention, or institutional support; alternatively, it may become increasingly asymmetrical and persistent, generating behaviors experienced as bullying, harassment, intimidation, or violence. This distinction is essential for comprehending the subsequent institutional trajectory of workplace harm. Once harmful conduct emerges, the organization becomes far more than a passive arena in which interaction takes place. It operates as an active institutional environment within which such conduct is interpreted, classified, and addressed. Whether an act is treated as ordinary interpersonal friction, unacceptable misconduct, organizational wrongdoing, or actionable victimization depends not solely on what occurred, but on how organizational actors interpret and process those events. The scholarship reviewed in this section thus forms the first cornerstone of the argument advanced in this article: workplace harm cannot be reduced to interpersonal conflict, nor can it be explained solely through individual-level characteristics. Power asymmetries, organizational structures, and working conditions critically shape the emergence and persistence of harmful conduct. However, identifying these antecedents does not explain what occurs once harm enters the institutional arena. The next analytical step, therefore, is to examine how organizations exercise power not only in generating the

conditions from which harm arises, but in determining how such conduct is subsequently managed, normalized, or contested.

Organizational Power and the Production and Normalization of Harm

Understanding harmful workplace behavior requires moving beyond an exclusively interpersonal interpretation of conflict to examine the organizational structures within which working relations are embedded. Organizations are not neutral environments where individual interactions merely take place. They are structured systems of authority, dependence, resource allocation, and normative regulation that shape the opportunities available to diverse actors and determine the consequences associated with particular behaviors. From this perspective, organizational power constitutes a central mechanism through which workplace harm can emerge, persist, and acquire institutional meaning.

Early research on workplace bullying had already challenged explanations centered solely on individual characteristics, demonstrating the significance of organizational conditions. Salin's (2003) theoretical framework, for example, identified power imbalances, competitive organizational structures, reward systems, and organizational change as conditions that can enable, motivate, or precipitate bullying. Such an approach does not imply that organizational structures directly cause harmful behavior. Rather, they alter the distribution of opportunities, incentives, and constraints within which workplace interactions take place. Power therefore operates not only through explicit managerial commands, but also through organizational conditions that dictate which behaviors are viable, tolerated, or costly. Critical organizational scholarship has further developed this insight. Hutchinson and colleagues' (2006, 2010) analysis of workplace bullying in the nursing sector questioned individualistic interpretations that locate the problem primarily in dysfunctional personalities or flawed interpersonal dynamics. Drawing on critical perspectives on power, their work emphasized the organizational production and circulation of power and the role of workplace structures in sustaining bullying practices. The significance of this perspective lies in demonstrating how harmful conduct can become an integral facet of routine organizational relations rather than appearing as an exceptional deviation from them. Similarly, a systems perspective emphasizes the interplay among individual, interpersonal, and organizational dimensions. Research on workplace violence has demonstrated that organizational characteristics and interpersonal dynamics interact in determining exposure to violence (Bentley et al., 2014). This suggests that analyzing workplace harm benefits from conceptualizing organizations as multi-level environments where individual behavior is conditioned by structural arrangements, occupational expectations, and institutional practices. Systematic evidence on workplace bullying corroborates this multi-level interpretation. Feijó and colleagues (2019) identified organizational factors such as leadership, workload, role conflict, role ambiguity, stress, and organizational pressures among the conditions associated with workplace bullying. The significance of these findings extends beyond the mere identification of risk factors: they demonstrate that workplace harms can be inextricably linked to the ordinary organization of work itself, including the distribution of responsibilities, expectations, and authority. However, organizational power assumes heightened relevance once harmful conduct is recognized—or poised to be recognized—by the organization. At this stage, power operates not merely through the conditions that foster harmful behaviors, but through the processes by which such behaviors are interpreted and addressed. Organizations possess formal and informal capacities to define situations, delineate categories of acceptable and unacceptable

conduct, evaluate the credibility of conflicting accounts, and determine which behaviors warrant intervention. This dimension is especially evident in organizational responses to workplace harassment. Salin's (2008) research on organizational responses showed that organizations deploy diverse strategies when addressing harassment, encompassing both conciliatory and corrective measures. Such responses are not institutionally neutral. The choice between informal resolution, managerial intervention, formal investigation, disciplinary action, or non-intervention actively shapes how the underlying incident is subsequently interpreted by the actors involved.

This dynamic becomes most pronounced in instances of organizational inaction. Hodgins, MacCurtain, and Mannix-McNamara (2020) argue that an organization's failure to address workplace bullying should not necessarily be interpreted as a mere absence of power. Rather, inaction can itself function as a form of organizational power, as it protects established hierarchies, deters resistance, and reproduces the conditions under which harmful behavior persists. This insight is pivotal to the present argument because it challenges the assumption that organizational mediation occurs only through active institutional intervention. A failure to respond is itself a consequential response when it governs the institutional visibility and repercussions of harmful conduct. The concept of organizational mediation developed in this article thus encompasses both action and inaction. Formal recognition, reporting procedures, investigations, and disciplinary interventions constitute explicit forms of mediation, whereas normalization, minimization, silence, and denial represent implicit forms. These mechanisms often operate concurrently, yielding contradictory outcomes: an organization may formally prohibit bullying while informally discouraging complaints; it may institute reporting mechanisms while fostering a climate in which employees fear retaliation; or it may investigate an allegation while framing the underlying conduct as an interpersonal disagreement rather than organizational wrongdoing.

This divergence between formal rules and organizational practices is especially critical to the problem of normalization. Harmful conduct can become entrenched in daily work routines when employees and managers come to view it as an ordinary, inevitable, or context-specific feature of work. Research on the trivialization of workplace violence demonstrates that minimizing harmful experiences fundamentally shapes how victims perceive and respond to them (Geoffrion et al., 2015, 2017). Normalization, therefore, does not necessarily imply that actors explicitly condone harmful conduct; rather, it entails a gradual erosion of the perceived legitimacy of contesting it. Consequently, normalization influences the institutional trajectory of harm in at least two ways: first, it dampens the likelihood of harmful behaviors being reported; second, it alters how organizational actors interpret complaints that are nevertheless filed. When a specific behavior is culturally embedded as "part of the job", the threshold for categorizing it as unacceptable is substantially raised. The result is not an absence of harm, but its diminished institutional visibility. This mechanism directly links organizational power to victimization: the experience of being harmed is defined not merely by exposure to a discrete act, but by the availability of organizational resources through which that experience can be articulated, reported, and validated. Subordinate employees face prohibitive costs when opposing superiors or dominant peers, particularly in the absence of robust institutional support mechanisms. Hence, power asymmetries endure well beyond the initial harmful interaction, dictating the target's capacity to secure institutional recognition.

The production and normalization of harm within organizations must therefore be understood as mutually reinforcing processes: organizational structures facilitate harmful behavior, organizational cultures normalize it, and organizational procedures may either illuminate or obscure it. Crucially, these mechanisms do not yield a single predetermined outcome. The same organization may offer pathways for resistance and recognition while simultaneously perpetuating practices of silence and minimization. Organizational mediation must therefore be conceptualized as a contingent process rather than a fixed institutional trajectory. This perspective allows this article to move beyond the conventional dichotomy between perpetrator and victim. Although individual agency remains essential, the institutional environment conditions how such agency is distributed, constrained, and interpreted. While an employee may formally possess the right to seek redress, they may lack the practical resources or organizational security needed to exercise that right effectively. In contrast, managerial actors possess the institutional authority to define a situation as misconduct, interpersonal conflict, or inconsequential friction. The organizational distribution of interpretive power thus becomes just as decisive as the distribution of behavioral power. The literature reviewed in this section articulates the second cornerstone of the proposed framework: organizational power operates both upstream and downstream of harmful workplace behavior. It generates the conditions from which harm arises, but it also determines whether that harm becomes institutionally visible, contested, normalized, or sanctioned. This dual role of organizational power provides the conceptual foundation for examining the subsequent stage of the process: how harmful conduct is experienced and interpreted as victimization, and how mechanisms of silence, reporting, and institutional recognition govern its broader trajectory.

Victimization, Silence, and Institutional Recognition

The emergence of harmful conduct in the workplace does not automatically entail the institutional recognition of victimization. While exposure to bullying, harassment, or workplace violence can generate profound psychological, professional, and relational repercussions, an individual's status as a recognized victim depends in part on organizational processes through which that experience is interpreted, communicated, and addressed. This distinction is particularly critical for understanding the institutional trajectory of workplace harm: experiencing harmful conduct and being recognized as a victim are correlated yet analytically distinct processes. Research on the consequences of workplace bullying has yielded extensive evidence regarding the individual-level effects of exposure to harmful behaviors. Nielsen and Einarsen's (2012) meta-analytic review, drawing on 137 cross-sectional effect sizes across 66 independent samples comprising 77,721 participants, demonstrated significant associations between workplace bullying and an array of adverse individual outcomes. Their contribution is pivotal not only because it establishes the severity of workplace bullying, but also because it demonstrates that victimization entails consequences extending far beyond the immediate interaction in which harmful conduct occurs. However, an outcome-oriented conceptualization of victimization is insufficient to account for the institutional trajectory of workplace harm. The presence of psychological or occupational detriment does not necessarily mean that the organization will acknowledge the underlying experience as bullying, harassment, violence, or illicit conduct.

An employee may perceive a given behavior as harmful, whereas the organization may frame it as an ordinary disagreement, managerial prerogative, interpersonal incompatibility, or an

isolated incident. Consequently, the analytical category of victimization cannot be reduced merely to the objective or subjective experience of harm; it fundamentally involves processes of social and institutional recognition. This distinction becomes especially salient in research examining the trivialization and normalization of workplace violence. Geoffrion and colleagues (2015, 2017) investigated healthcare and law enforcement workers, documenting a prevalent tendency within these occupational settings to normalize or minimize experiences of workplace violence. Their findings demonstrate that trivialization is not merely a matter of individual perception: it alters the psychological repercussions associated with victimization and is systematically linked to broader occupational and organizational environments. Normalization can thus operate as a mechanism through which harmful conduct loses institutional visibility. When particular forms of aggression, intimidation, humiliation, or violence come to be interpreted as inevitable hazards of an occupation or workplace, the threshold for acknowledging them as unacceptable rises considerably. Such dynamics do not necessarily require explicit institutional endorsement. Rather, harmful conduct can become so embedded within everyday expectations that challenging it appears excessive, disruptive, or unrealistic.

The relationship between harm and silence provides an additional dimension of this process. Liu, Yang, and Yao (2020) examined the link between workplace bullying and employee silence using two-wave data collected from 322 employees across three Chinese enterprises. They found that workplace bullying was positively associated with employee silence, with psychological safety and affective commitment mediating this relationship. Their findings are particularly relevant to the present framework as they demonstrate that harmful workplace experiences generate not only direct consequences for victims, but also behavioral responses that actively reduce the visibility of the underlying problem. Silence should not, therefore, be construed merely as the absence of a complaint. It often represents an organizationally conditioned response to perceived risk, psychological insecurity, or a lack of institutional support. Employees may remain silent because they fear retaliation, doubt that reporting will lead to meaningful change, worry about jeopardizing professional relationships, or have internalized the belief that such conduct is simply an unavoidable facet of organizational life. In this sense, silence functions as a mechanism through which harmful conduct remains cordoned off from formal organizational scrutiny. The relationship between silence and recognition is consequently recursive. When harmful behaviors go unreported, organizational actors have fewer opportunities to identify and formally investigate them. Concurrently, when employees perceive organizational mechanisms to be ineffective or unsafe, the likelihood of reporting declines. The absence of grievances can therefore be profoundly misleading if interpreted as evidence of the absence of workplace harm. Instead, silence often reflects the outcome of an antecedent process of organizational learning in which employees have calculated the probable costs and benefits of speaking up.

The institutional recognition of harm also involves attributional processes. Organizational actors do not merely establish whether an event occurred; they interpret the behavior of the parties involved and allocate responsibility. Kluemper and colleagues (2019) provide particularly compelling evidence in this regard. Across four studies, they found that employees who were targets of workplace incivility were themselves prone to being perceived by supervisors as interpersonally deviant, whereas perpetrators of incivility frequently received more favorable evaluations when they maintained high-quality

relationships with supervisors or were perceived as high performers. This finding introduces a critical dimension into the analysis of institutional recognition: the recognition of victimization is contingent upon the distribution of organizational credibility. Individuals do not enter grievance or conflict resolution processes with equal endowments of status, authority, and legitimacy. Organizational relationships can therefore dictate not only whether harmful conduct is acknowledged, but also who is deemed credible and who is cast as problematic. This is especially consequential because organizational responses can inadvertently transmute the victim's identity into that of a "troublesome employee." A grievance may be reframed as an interpersonal clash; resistance to mistreatment may be construed as insubordination; or an employee's emotional reaction to prolonged hostility may be weaponized against them. The boundary between victim and perpetrator is thus not always institutionally fixed; it can be actively constructed through organizational processes of attribution and sensemaking. Grievance and investigative procedures represent a subsequent institutional stage. Neall, Li, and Tuckey's (2021) analysis of externally reported workplace bullying complaints demonstrates the importance of organizational justice in how bullying cases are documented, contextualized, and investigated. Their study underscores that internal complaint and investigative procedures constitute pivotal organizational mechanisms for addressing workplace bullying, and that the dimensions of organizational justice govern the experiences of the parties involved. The significance of these procedures extends well beyond their immediate administrative utility. An investigation represents a process whereby an organization constructs an official, institutionalized narrative of what transpired. It defines which events are relevant, which actors are held accountable, what forms of evidence are admissible, and which interpretations of the situation attain organizational legitimacy. Consequently, an investigation can be conceptualized as a mechanism of institutional classification.

This process is central to the theoretical framework proposed in this article. A harmful interaction may be classified as an interpersonal clash, inappropriate conduct, bullying, harassment, an occupational hazard, organizational wrongdoing, or actionable victimization. These categories are not interchangeable; each carries distinct expectations regarding accountability, intervention, and institutional recourse. The classification ascribed to an event thus determines its subsequent trajectory. The distinction between experience and recognition is especially crucial when considering the nexus between organizational and legal responses. If harmful conduct is never formally recognized within the organization, it is far less likely to generate disciplinary, regulatory, or legal consequences. Conversely, formal recognition can provide the institutional footing from which further forms of accountability become viable. Organizational recognition should therefore not be viewed as equivalent to criminalization, but as a potential mediating phase through which harmful conduct gains ascending institutional significance. This does not mean that organizational recognition is an absolute prerequisite for criminalization, nor that recognition inevitably precipitates legal intervention. Rather, organizational processes constitute one of multiple institutional arenas in which the meaning and consequences of workplace harms are contested. Criminal law may operate independently of organizational classifications, just as organizational processes may resolve or encapsulate harmful behavior without ever engaging the criminal justice system. The concept of institutional recognition developed here thus denotes a process far broader than the mere acknowledgment that an employee suffered harm. It encompasses the organizational production of an authoritative narrative: whether the conduct is deemed to

have occurred, whether it is judged unacceptable, whether the targeted employee is validated as a victim, whether culpability is assigned to another actor, and whether institutional intervention is deemed necessary. This perspective also illuminates why silence, normalization, and attribution are analytically intertwined: normalization dampens reporting; reduced reporting restricts institutional visibility; limited visibility impedes formal investigation; and organizational attribution dictates which version of events attains institutional credibility. These processes can mutually reinforce one another, cementing either the recognition or the invisibility of workplace harm.

At the same time, this trajectory is not inexorable. Reporting, supportive leadership, robust investigative procedures, and organizational justice can disrupt cycles of silence and normalization. The very organizational environment that can suppress recognition is equally capable of facilitating it. Organizational mediation must therefore be understood as an open, contested process rather than a deterministic mechanism yielding either inevitable recognition or outright denial. The scholarship reviewed in this section establishes the third pillar of the proposed framework: victimization is not merely a subjective experience of harm, but an institutional process of recognition, attribution, and validation. Harm can be endured without being reported, reported without being believed, investigated without being classified as wrongdoing, or recognized organizationally without attaining legal relevance. The institutional trajectory of workplace harm is thus mediated by sequential processes of interpretation and classification. This distinction builds the necessary conceptual bridge to the criminological dimension of the argument: once workplace harm is understood as a phenomenon that can be institutionally recognized, categorized, and attributed in disparate ways, the question is no longer simply whether conduct in the workplace is harmful, but when and under what institutional conditions it is framed as wrongdoing of potential penal significance.

From Organizational Wrongdoing to Criminalization

The recognition of workplace harm as a form of victimization does not inevitably entail its classification as organizational wrongdoing, nor does either form of recognition lead automatically to criminalization. The institutional trajectory of harmful workplace conduct thus requires distinguishing among distinct tiers of normative and institutional classification. A behavior may be experienced as harmful by an employee, recognized internally as inappropriate conduct, addressed via organizational procedures, or conceptualized as workplace violence without necessarily acquiring criminal legal relevance. Criminalization represents a further, qualitatively distinct institutional process through which specific forms of conduct become subject to criminal legal standards and penal sanctions. This distinction is critical because workplace harm occupies an ambiguous position at the intersection of internal organizational regulation, employment relations, occupational health and safety, civil liability, and criminal law. Many forms of damaging workplace behavior may breach organizational policies or professional codes of conduct without constituting criminal offenses. Conversely, conduct occurring within an employment relationship may satisfy the constituent elements of a criminal offense even when the organization itself fails to acknowledge it as illicit conduct. Criminalization should not, therefore, be conceptualized as the inevitable endpoint of a process originating in workplace conflict. Rather, it represents one possible outcome within a complex interplay of organizational, legal, and social processes. The emergence of workplace violence as a legitimate domain of criminological

inquiry constitutes a significant step in developing this perspective. Piquero and colleagues' (2013) review of scholarship published between 2000 and 2012 showed that workplace violence had increasingly become the subject of systematic empirical investigation, while observing that much of the extant research originated within the fields of management and business studies rather than mainstream criminology. Their contribution is pivotal because it identified workplace violence as an area where criminological approaches remained comparatively underdeveloped, despite the obvious relevance of aggression, victimization, and harm to the discipline. Schindeler (2014) subsequently made this criminological dimension more explicit by arguing that workplace violence should be incorporated within the boundaries of criminological inquiry. Drawing on constitutive criminology and normalization theory, he conceptualized interpersonal workplace violence as a source of psychosocial harm, victimization, and justice concerns. Importantly, this approach does not merely advocate for expanded recourse to criminal law; rather, it destabilizes the assumption that workplace violence is primarily a matter of business administration or occupational health, drawing attention to its fundamental character as an issue of victimization and injustice.

This distinction is especially pertinent to the present argument. Acknowledging workplace harms as criminologically salient is not synonymous with arguing that they must inevitably be criminalized. Criminological recognition and legal criminalization are analytically distinct: the former concerns the theoretical classification of a phenomenon as relevant to crime, victimization, and justice; the latter involves the institutional decision to demarcate and sanction specific conduct through criminal law. Maintaining this distinction prevents the proposed theoretical framework from lapsing into an overly expansive or deterministic view of criminalization. Recent scholarship demonstrates that criminological theories can be fruitfully applied to specific manifestations of workplace harm. Zhang and colleagues (2022), for instance, examined workplace cyberbullying through the lenses of the General Theory of Crime and Routine Activity Theory. Utilizing data from 2,025 employees across the United States, they analyzed how low self-control and work-related routine activities contribute to the perpetration of cyberbullying. Their findings illustrate the explanatory utility of criminological models in elucidating harmful conduct occurring within organizational environments. Concurrently, this literature exposes a critical boundary condition for the present framework: while criminological theories help explain why particular forms of harmful conduct occur, explaining an act's occurrence is not equivalent to explaining how an organization or the broader legal apparatus subsequently categorizes it. A theory centering on individual propensity, routine activities, or situational opportunity can clarify the etiology of harmful conduct without necessarily accounting for the organizational processes through which that conduct is reported, investigated, normalized, denied, or transmuted into actionable wrongdoing. This distinction becomes especially paramount when shifting the analytical focus from criminological relevance to formal criminalization. Criminalization entails far more than the mere existence of harmful conduct; it involves a process of normative selection whereby certain behaviors are demarcated as sufficiently grave to warrant state intervention through penal sanctions. Within the workplace, this process is compounded by the coexistence of multiple, overlapping regulatory regimes. Employment law, internal organizational policies, disciplinary codes, occupational health and safety regulations, civil remedies, and criminal law all offer divergent frameworks for defining and responding to the same underlying conduct. Consequently, a single incident may be

simultaneously interpreted through competing institutional lenses: an act may be experienced by an employee as harassment, framed by a manager as a performance-related dispute, treated by a human resource department as an internal disciplinary issue, identified by an occupational health professional as a psychosocial hazard, and classified under criminal law as a potentially actionable offense. These classifications are not mutually exclusive, yet they generate vastly divergent institutional trajectories and allocate culpability in profoundly different ways. The concept of organizational wrongdoing is therefore invaluable as an intermediate analytical category. It captures forms of conduct that become institutionally problematic within the workplace without presupposing that they constitute crimes. This category enables the framework to distinguish between the internal organizational recognition of harm and the formal escalation of that harm into the criminal realm, while creating conceptual space to analyze scenarios where organizations acknowledge misconduct yet contain and resolve it internally, bypassing the criminal justice system entirely. Socio-legal scholarship on the criminalization of workplace harassment and abuse makes this distinction especially salient.

Bogg and Freedland (2020) directly examine the criminalization of workplace harassment and abuse, questioning whether an overly individualized conception of criminal offenses can adequately capture the institutional character of workplace harm. Their critique highlights the risk that criminal law may hyper-individualize liability for conduct whose root causes and structural consequences are deeply entrenched in broader organizational systems. This perspective introduces an essential qualification to the notion of criminalization as an unambiguously positive or inevitable institutional endpoint. While criminalization may confer formal recognition, legal accountability, and access to state-backed sanctions, it can also constrict analytical focus strictly to individual wrongdoers. Where harmful conduct is sustained by toxic corporate cultures, hierarchical dependency, incentive structures, or institutional inaction, focusing exclusively on personal criminal liability risks obscuring the systemic conditions that enabled such conduct to emerge and persist. The problem can thus be formulated as a structural tension between individualized attribution and organizational context. Criminal law traditionally requires culpability to be pinned to identifiable acts and discrete actors. Organizations, conversely, create environments where responsibility is dispersed across institutional policies, routine practices, managerial hierarchies, and collective omissions. This does not absolve individual perpetrators, nor does it imply that corporate entities should invariably bear criminal liability; rather, it demonstrates that criminalizing workplace harm cannot be adequately theorized without interrogating the organizational processes that precede, shape, and accompany legal categorization. It is precisely in this regard that the organizational mediation perspective proves invaluable. The organization contributes to creating the conditions under which harmful behavior occurs, governs whether that conduct is reported, dictates how grievances are investigated, calibrates the credibility accorded to the actors involved, and decides whether the matter is treated as an interpersonal grievance, an internal disciplinary breach, or a severe form of organizational wrongdoing. While these processes do not unilaterally determine whether criminal law will ultimately apply, they fundamentally govern the institutional visibility, interpretation, and trajectory of the underlying harm. Criminalization should therefore be understood in this article as a contingent institutional outcome rather than the predetermined terminal phase of a linear continuum. The critical question is not whether workplace conflict inexorably "becomes" a crime, but under what organizational and

institutional conditions particular forms of harmful conduct acquire penal significance. This distinction likewise clarifies the non-equivalence between workplace victimization and criminalization: an individual may experience profound victimization without the perpetrating conduct ever being criminalized; conversely, conduct may legally satisfy the definition of a crime even when organizational gatekeepers refuse to validate the targeted worker as a victim. The two processes may overlap, yet neither is reducible to the other. The same logic applies to organizational wrongdoing. Certain infractions are acknowledged and resolved internally without engaging the penal apparatus. Other instances are minimized, normalized, or suppressed, preventing them from achieving visibility even as internal wrongdoing. Still others breach organizational boundaries to become the subject of external regulatory investigations or criminal prosecutions. The institutional pathway is thus contingent, multidirectional, and potentially reversible. This non-linearity lies at the core of the argument advanced here: the trajectory from harmful conduct to legal sanction encompasses multiple branching pathways rather than a singular sequence. Organizational mediation can facilitate formal recognition and institutional escalation, but it can just as effectively produce containment, normalization, or complete institutional invisibility. The scholarship reviewed in this section delineates the fourth pillar of the proposed theoretical framework. Criminological research has established that workplace violence and related harms represent legitimate subjects of criminological inquiry, while socio-legal scholarship has illuminated the conceptual and normative dilemmas surrounding the criminalization of workplace harassment and abuse. What remains insufficiently theorized is the meso-level organizational process linking these two domains: how routine organizational practices govern whether harmful conduct acquires, loses, or remains insulated from penal significance. The subsequent section synthesizes these disparate theoretical strands. Rather than treating workplace conflict, victimization, organizational wrongdoing, and criminalization as isolated analytical silos, it articulates an integrated framework centered on the organizational mechanisms through which harmful conduct is interpreted, categorized, and institutionally mediated.

From a Fragmented Literature to an Integrated Framework

The scholarship reviewed in the preceding sections provides compelling evidence that harmful workplace behaviors cannot be adequately understood as the exclusive byproduct of individual conduct. Research on workplace conflict and bullying has demonstrated the critical role of organizational structures, power asymmetries, and contextual conditions in shaping the emergence and persistence of harmful behaviors (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Salin, 2003; Hutchinson et al., 2006). Studies on organizational responses have further established that organizations are not merely passive backdrops against which such conduct unfolds, but institutional actors capable of intervening, failing to intervene, investigating, categorizing, or normalizing problematic behaviors (Salin, 2008; Hodgins et al., 2020). Concurrently, victimization research has documented the severe individual fallout of exposure to harmful behaviors, while criminological and socio-legal scholarship has increasingly interrogated workplace violence and the criminalization of harassment and abuse (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Piquero et al., 2013; Schindeler, 2014; Bogg & Freedland, 2020). Collectively, however, these distinct research traditions remain only loosely coupled, as they tend to address disparate phases, dimensions, or analytical tiers of the same overarching phenomenon. Organizational scholarship has excelled at unpacking the conditions under which harmful behaviors emerge and endure, while victimization studies have focused predominantly on individual-level harm. Criminological research has elucidated dynamics of workplace violence

and deviance, whereas socio-legal studies have probed the normative implications and systemic limitations of criminalizing workplace abuse. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is an integrated theoretical account of the meso-level organizational processes linking these dimensions. The core problem, therefore, is not a lack of empirical research on workplace harm, nor a deficiency of attention to organizational power or criminalization; rather, the theoretical impasse stems from the fragmentation of analytical perspectives. Extant literature provides sophisticated insights into how harms are produced, how individuals experience them, how organizations respond, and how specific behaviors acquire penal significance. Yet these processes are frequently investigated in isolation rather than as interconnected dimensions of an unfolding institutional trajectory.

Four analytical fractures are particularly consequential. First, a persistent divide separates interpersonal and structural explanations of workplace harm. While some approaches frame negative workplace behaviors primarily in terms of interpersonal deviance, personality clashes, or dysfunctional communication, critical organizational scholarship highlights how organizational designs, hierarchies, and incentive systems may enable or reproduce harmful conduct (Salin, 2003; Hutchinson et al., 2010). When these perspectives remain disconnected, interventions risk focusing on individual behavior without adequately addressing the organizational conditions in which harm develops.

Second, a distinction remains insufficiently explored between the individual experience of harm and its institutional recognition as victimization. Research on occupational health and psychological well-being has documented the multifaceted consequences of bullying and harassment (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). However, the experience of harm does not necessarily translate into formal recognition. Organizational silence, limited psychological safety, trivialization, and biased managerial attributions may constrain the reporting and validation of employees' experiences (Geoffrion et al., 2015; Kluemper et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020). The analytical challenge is therefore to explain not only how harm is experienced, but also how it becomes visible—or remains unrecognized—within organizational processes.

Third, a theoretical disconnect persists between internal organizational wrongdoing and external legal or penal classifications. Criminological and socio-legal scholarship has examined whether and how workplace harassment, bullying, and violence should fall within the scope of criminal law (Schindeler, 2014; Bogg & Freedland, 2020). Yet the organizational processes through which incidents are initially interpreted, documented, contained, or referred to external institutions require further integration into this debate. Workplace conduct may be framed as an interpersonal disagreement, an occupational health and safety concern, a disciplinary matter, or organizational wrongdoing. These classifications may influence subsequent responses and opportunities for external scrutiny, although they do not determine whether legal or criminal proceedings will follow.

Fourth, workplace harm is sometimes represented through models that imply a relatively linear progression from conflict to overt hostility, formal grievance, and eventual resolution or legal adjudication. Such representations may understate the contingent, contested, and potentially reversible character of institutional responses. Organizational actors may investigate or address harmful conduct, but they may also minimize allegations, delay intervention, or normalize problematic behavior (Hodgins et al., 2020; Neall et al., 2021).

Cases may therefore follow different trajectories, remain unresolved, or move between informal and formal processes rather than progressing through a fixed sequence.

To address these analytical fractures, this article proposes an integrated conceptual framework centered on organizational mediation. Rather than treating the organization as a neutral setting in which harmful conduct occurs, the framework examines how organizational structures and responses shape the interpretation, visibility, and institutional handling of workplace harm. Four analytical dimensions inform this approach:

1. **Structural emergence and facilitation.** Organizational conditions—including power asymmetries, performance pressures, leadership practices, and dependencies—shape the opportunities and constraints within which harmful behaviors may emerge and persist (Bentley et al., 2014; Feijó et al., 2019). Power may operate through overt coercion, but also through organizational arrangements that influence which behaviors are tolerated, challenged, or held accountable.
2. **Organizational filtering and gatekeeping.** Once harmful interactions occur, organizational norms and informal practices may influence whether they are reported, acknowledged, or normalized. Trivialization, perceived psychological insecurity, and anticipated costs of reporting may discourage employees from articulating their experiences (Geoffrion et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020). Credibility assessments and leader–member exchange dynamics may also influence how complaints are interpreted, including whether distress is attributed to misconduct or reframed as interpersonal incompatibility (Kluemper et al., 2019).
3. **Institutional processing and classification.** Internal procedures, including documentation, grievance handling, and formal investigations, provide settings in which reported conduct is interpreted and classified (Neall et al., 2021). Organizational actors may frame an incident as an interpersonal dispute, a disciplinary matter, an occupational hazard, or organizational wrongdoing. These classifications may influence the handling of a complaint, the attribution of responsibility, and the remedies considered appropriate, while remaining open to challenge or revision.
4. **Jurisdictional negotiation and possible legal escalation.** Workplace harm may be addressed informally, handled through internal procedures, or brought before external regulatory, civil, labour, or criminal justice institutions. Movement between these arenas is neither automatic nor necessarily unidirectional. The implications of criminalization also require critical consideration, particularly where legal responsibility is individualized in ways that leave organizational conditions and institutional omissions insufficiently examined (Bogg & Freedland, 2020).

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that the relationship between workplace conflict and criminalization cannot be adequately understood as a direct or inevitable progression. Rather, it is a contingent process shaped by organizational power, interpretive practices, and interactions between internal procedures and external institutions. The contribution of the proposed framework is to integrate these dimensions into a common analytical architecture through which different trajectories of workplace harm can be examined.

The Theoretical Gap: Organizational Mediation

These analytical fractures point to a shared theoretical problem. Existing scholarship has generated substantial knowledge about the conditions under which workplace harm arises,

the consequences of victimization, organizational responses, and the possible relevance of criminal law. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is an integrated account of the organizational processes connecting these dimensions.

This article addresses this gap through the concept of **organizational mediation**, defined as the set of formal and informal organizational processes through which harmful workplace conduct is recognized, reported, investigated, interpreted, normalized, silenced, denied, or referred to other institutional arenas. Organizational mediation shapes the conditions under which workplace harm acquires institutional visibility and meaning, without necessarily determining its eventual trajectory.

A central feature of this conceptualization is that mediation encompasses both organizational action and inaction. Reporting mechanisms, investigations, managerial interventions, and disciplinary measures represent active forms of institutional processing. Conversely, minimization, silence, denial, procedural delay, and failure to investigate may constrain recognition or allow harmful practices to persist. Inaction is therefore considered analytically relevant insofar as it forms part of the organizational response to reported or observable harm.

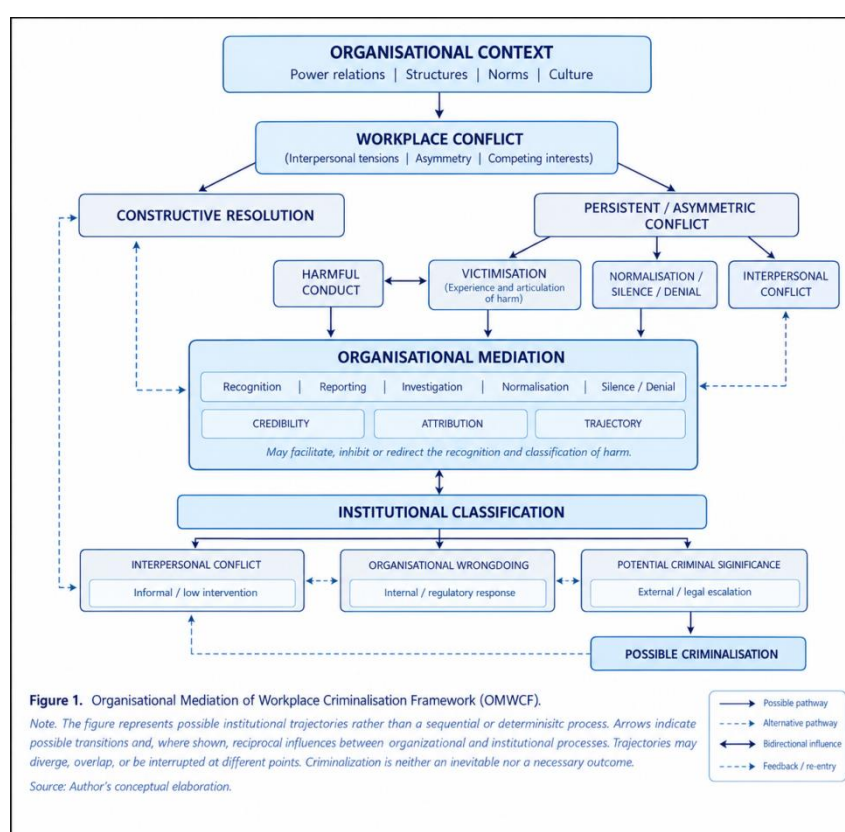
Organizational mediation should not be understood as a linear sequence of stages. Workplace conflict may remain an interpersonal disagreement, develop into persistent harmful conduct, be normalized within organizational culture, receive formal recognition, be classified as organizational wrongdoing, or acquire potential penal significance. These possibilities may diverge, overlap, or be interrupted, and movement between them is neither inevitable nor necessarily irreversible. The theoretical contribution of the framework is threefold. First, it connects organizational power and structural conditions with the emergence and persistence of harmful workplace conduct. Second, it distinguishes the experience and articulation of victimization from the organizational processes through which harm is recognized, interpreted, and handled. Third, it situates possible criminalization within a broader institutional trajectory, distinguishing organizational classification and potential penal significance from criminal liability and the operation of criminal justice institutions. The contribution therefore lies not in proposing another typology of workplace bullying or violence, but in integrating organizational conditions, harmful conduct, victimization, organizational mediation, institutional classification, and possible criminalization within a unified analytical framework. The following section formalizes this contribution through the Organizational Mediation of Workplace Criminalization Framework (OMWCF) and develops five conceptual propositions intended to guide future empirical inquiry.

The Organizational Mediation of Workplace Criminalization Framework

Building on the theoretical integration developed above, this article proposes the Organizational Mediation of Workplace Criminalization Framework (OMWCF). The framework examines how workplace conduct may acquire different institutional meanings without assuming that these processes are linear, inevitable, or determined exclusively by the characteristics of the conduct itself. Its central premise is that the institutional meaning of harmful workplace conduct is shaped by organizational interpretation, classification, and response, as well as by interactions with external institutions.

The same conduct may be framed as an interpersonal disagreement, recognized as bullying or harassment, classified as organizational wrongdoing, acknowledged as an experience of victimization, or considered potentially relevant to criminal law. These possibilities are analytically distinct: experiencing harm does not automatically entail institutional recognition; organizational recognition does not necessarily produce corrective action; and the classification of conduct as organizational wrongdoing does not, in itself, establish criminal liability.

For analytical purposes, the framework distinguishes four interconnected domains: (1) the occurrence of harmful workplace conduct; (2) the experience and articulation of victimization; (3) organizational mediation; and (4) institutional classification, including possible criminalization. These domains are analytically distinct but interrelated. Their relationships may be contingent, recursive, and reversible rather than sequential. Figure 1 represents the main components of the framework and the possible trajectories linking them. Table 1 clarifies the five interrelated but non-equivalent concepts underpinning the OMWCF.



Conceptual Distinctions within the OMWCF

The five concepts summarized in Table 1 identify different analytical dimensions of workplace harm. Their purpose is to prevent the experience of harm, organizational processing, institutional classification, and criminalization from being treated as interchangeable phenomena. These distinctions also establish the conceptual basis for the propositions developed below.

Table 1

Conceptual distinctions within the OMWCF

Concept	Key analytical distinction
Harmful workplace conduct	The occurrence of harmful conduct does not automatically entail institutional recognition as misconduct or establish its legal significance.
Victimization	The experience and articulation of harm are distinct from its formal institutional recognition or legal validation.
Organizational mediation	Organizational processes shape the recognition, interpretation, and handling of harm but do not fully determine its institutional trajectory.
Institutional classification	Institutional classifications influence procedures and responsibility attribution but remain contestable and do not determine legal outcomes.
Criminalization	Criminalization involves engagement with criminal-law institutions and must be distinguished from harmful conduct, organizational wrongdoing, and potential penal significance. It is neither automatic nor inevitable.

Organizational Context and the Genesis of Harmful Conduct

The first dimension concerns the organizational conditions under which workplace interactions take place. Organizations distribute authority, resources, status, and opportunities unevenly, thereby shaping the relative capacity of organizational actors to initiate, resist, report, or contest problematic behaviors. Research on workplace bullying has highlighted the role of organizational structures and power relations in creating conditions that may enable harmful conduct (Salin, 2003; Hutchinson et al., 2006, 2010). A systems perspective similarly emphasizes that workplace violence cannot be reduced to individual characteristics alone, because interpersonal conduct is embedded in broader organizational environments (Bentley et al., 2014). Evidence synthesized by Feijó et al. (2019) also identifies leadership, organizational climate, job demands, role ambiguity, and organizational stressors as relevant risk factors.

The OMWCF therefore conceptualizes organizational context as an enabling or constraining environment rather than as a direct or sufficient cause of individual misconduct. Organizational arrangements may shape opportunities for harmful behavior, the perceived costs of reporting it, and the likelihood that it will be tolerated or challenged, while leaving room for individual agency and contextual variation. This leads to the first proposition:

Proposition 1. Organizational power relations and structural conditions shape the emergence and persistence of harmful workplace behaviors by conditioning the opportunities, constraints, perceived costs, and institutional legitimacy associated with particular conduct. This proposition does not assume a deterministic relationship between organizational conditions and harmful behavior. Instead, it identifies structural conditions as factors that may facilitate or constrain particular actions and responses.

Victimization and Institutional Recognition

The second dimension distinguishes exposure to harmful conduct and the experience of victimization from the institutional recognition of that experience. An individual may experience repeated humiliation, exclusion, intimidation, or harassment without the experience being formally acknowledged as harm. Although the adverse consequences of workplace bullying and related forms of mistreatment are well documented (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), the organizational processes through which such experiences receive recognition require separate analytical consideration. Research on trivialization shows how

workplace violence may be normalized or silenced within organizational cultures, while studies of employee silence indicate that workers may be reluctant to report harmful experiences (Geoffrion et al., 2015, 2017; Liu et al., 2020). Victimization is therefore analytically distinguished from the institutional recognition of harm. The former concerns individuals' experiences and articulation of harm, whereas the latter concerns the organizational processes through which those experiences are acknowledged, validated, or dismissed. This distinction generates the second proposition:

Proposition 2. The institutional recognition of workplace victimization is not an automatic consequence of exposure to harmful conduct, but is shaped by reporting opportunities, credibility assessments, organizational interpretation, and processes of formal validation.

This proposition also indicates why organizational statistics, grievance logs, and investigation records should not be treated as complete representations of the prevalence of workplace harm. Such records capture cases that become institutionally visible, and their content may be influenced by the accessibility of reporting channels, the willingness to report, and organizational responses to complaints.

Organizational Mediation as a Process of Activation and Inhibition

Organizational mediation constitutes the central analytical mechanism of the OMWCF. It refers to the processes through which organizations handle allegations and instances of workplace harm. Recognition, reporting, investigation, and institutional response are important mechanisms, but they should not be understood as a fixed sequence. A report may prompt an investigation; an investigation may produce recognition; recognition may occur without effective intervention; and organizational practices may discourage reporting before formal procedures are activated.

Organizational mediation also includes normalization, silence, denial, and inaction. These responses may limit the visibility of harmful conduct or allow problematic practices to persist. Hodgins et al. (2020), for example, highlight the significance of organizational responses and inaction in the management of workplace bullying. Research on trivialization similarly shows how workplace violence may be represented as routine or inevitable, reducing the likelihood that it will be treated as a matter requiring intervention (Geoffrion et al., 2015, 2017).

Organizational mediation can thus operate through both the activation and inhibition of institutional processes. Reporting, investigation, and corrective intervention may increase the visibility of harm, whereas normalization, silence, denial, and inaction may constrain it. This leads to the third proposition:

Proposition 3. Organizational responses shape the institutional visibility of workplace harm: recognition, reporting, and investigation may increase visibility, whereas normalization, silence, denial, and inaction may inhibit it.

This proposition places organizational responses at the theoretical core of the framework, rather than treating them as merely administrative consequences of workplace conflict.

Institutional Classification and the Attribution of Responsibility

The fourth dimension concerns the classificatory function of organizational processes. When an allegation or report enters an institutional arena, it is interpreted and categorized. Conduct

may be framed as a misunderstanding, a personality clash, a performance problem, inappropriate behavior, bullying, harassment, discrimination, an occupational hazard, or organizational wrongdoing. Such classifications may influence which procedures are activated, whose account is considered credible, how responsibility is attributed, and which remedies are considered appropriate.

Research on organizational responses to harassment and grievances underscores the significance of this process. Salin (2008) examines organizational responses as a central dimension of harassment management, while Neall et al. (2021) address the importance of organizational justice in workplace grievance and investigative procedures. Attributional processes may also influence how responsibility for interpersonal misconduct is assigned (Kluemper et al., 2019).

Within the OMWCF, institutional classification is understood as an exercise of organizational interpretive authority. Organizations do not simply respond to meanings that are already settled; their procedures and decisions contribute to the construction of an official account of an incident. However, this authority is neither unlimited nor final: classifications may be challenged by employees, trade unions, regulatory bodies, courts, or other external actors.

This leads to the fourth proposition:

Proposition 4. Organizational classification shapes the institutional trajectory of workplace harm by influencing whether conduct is framed as interpersonal conflict, individual deviance, organizational wrongdoing, recognized victimization, or conduct of potential penal significance.

The proposition identifies a possible influence rather than an exclusive power of determination. Internal classifications may anchor subsequent interpretations, but they do not necessarily settle the case or dictate its eventual legal outcome.

The Contingent Relationship between Workplace Harm and Criminalization

The final dimension concerns the relationship between institutional classification and criminalization. The OMWCF does not treat criminalization as the inevitable culmination of workplace harm. Criminological research has examined workplace violence in relation to victimization, deviance, and crime (Piquero et al., 2013; Schindeler, 2014), while socio-legal scholarship has critically considered the implications of criminalizing workplace harassment and abuse. Bogg and Freedland (2020), in particular, raise questions about approaches that individualize culpability while leaving organizational and structural conditions insufficiently examined. The OMWCF places possible criminalization within a broader institutional process. Conduct may be brought to the attention of external regulatory or criminal justice institutions, but this transition depends on a range of circumstances and does not follow automatically from organizational recognition or classification. Three concepts must therefore remain distinct: potential penal significance, which concerns the possible relevance of conduct to criminal law; criminal liability, which depends on the applicable legal requirements and competent legal processes; and criminalization, which concerns the broader process through which conduct becomes subject to criminal-law institutions and procedures.

Consequently, the fifth proposition is:

Proposition 5. The relationship between workplace harm and criminalization is contingent and non-linear, shaped by interactions among organizational classification, reporting and investigative procedures, responsibility attribution, and broader socio-legal and regulatory institutions.

This proposition does not imply that organizational recognition is a necessary condition for criminal liability, nor that organizational wrongdoing will necessarily result in criminal proceedings. Conduct may meet the legal requirements of an offence regardless of whether an organization acknowledges it. Conversely, serious organizational wrongdoing may never result in criminal proceedings. The framework therefore treats criminalization as one possible institutional trajectory, rather than as a necessary endpoint of workplace harm.

Operationalizing the Conceptual Propositions

The five propositions can guide future empirical investigations of workplace harm and its institutional trajectories. Table 2 identifies illustrative indicators that may help researchers examine the dimensions specified by each proposition. These indicators are not intended as exhaustive or standardized measures; rather, they provide possible empirical points of reference for investigating the framework across different organizational and institutional settings.

Table 2

Operationalization of the conceptual propositions

Proposition	Analytical dimension	Possible empirical indicators
P1	Organizational conditions and power	Hierarchical arrangements; authority and dependency relationships; distribution of resources; performance incentives; leadership practices; perceived costs and risks of reporting.
P2	Recognition of victimization	Accessibility of reporting channels; number and type of complaints; reported barriers to disclosure; credibility assessments; formal acknowledgment or dismissal of reported experiences.
P3	Organizational mediation	Whether and when investigations are initiated; responses to complaints; corrective interventions; procedural delays; case closure; evidence of minimization, denial, normalization, or inaction.
P4	Institutional classification	Categories used in internal records; framing of reported conduct; attribution of responsibility; decisions and outcomes of internal procedures; revisions or challenges to initial classifications.
P5	Trajectories toward criminalization	Referral to external authorities; engagement with regulatory or criminal justice institutions; movement between internal and external procedures; procedural outcomes; discrepancies between organizational classifications and subsequent legal assessments.

Note. The indicators are illustrative and should be selected according to the research question, institutional setting, and availability of data.

The proposed indicators serve different analytical purposes and should not be treated as interchangeable measures of the underlying concepts. P1 may be examined through organizational documents, interviews, and evidence concerning hierarchies, incentives, and reporting conditions. P2 and P3 may be explored by comparing workers' accounts with complaint records and documented organizational responses. P4 requires attention to the categories used in internal documentation and to the procedures through which classifications are produced, challenged, or revised. P5 may be investigated by tracing whether and how cases move beyond internal organizational processes and by examining the relationship between organizational assessments and subsequent external proceedings. These operational indications make the propositions more empirically approachable while preserving the framework's central premise: the relationships among organizational conditions, experiences of harm, institutional responses, classification, and criminalization are contingent rather than deterministic. Empirical research may examine these relationships through interviews, organizational documents, case studies, complaint records, or comparative designs, depending on the specific research objectives and access to data.

The Conceptual Framework as a Multi-Level Model

Taken together, the five propositions establish the OMWCF as a multi-level conceptual model that links micro-level interactions, meso-level organizational processes, and macro-level legal and institutional structures. At the micro level, employees experience, perpetrate, resist, or report harmful behaviors. At the meso level, organizations structure power relations, establish norms, interpret grievances, allocate credibility, investigate allegations, and determine whether and how to intervene. At the macro level, labor and employment law, workplace regulations, equality frameworks, and criminal law delineate the broader institutional boundaries within which organizational classifications acquire legal significance. The analytical value of the framework lies precisely in bridging these tiers without reducing one to another. Workplace harm is neither an exclusively interpersonal phenomenon nor a purely organizational one. Similarly, criminalization cannot be explained solely through individual wrongdoing, nor exclusively through formal legal statutes. Rather, it emerges from the dynamic interplay among individual conduct, organizational mediation, and wider institutional processes.

The framework therefore proposes shifting the analytical inquiry from the simplistic question "What happened in the workplace?" to a series of interconnected questions:

1. What organizational conditions shaped the interaction?
2. How was the harmful conduct experienced and articulated?
3. Was the harm institutionally recognized?
4. How did organizational actors classify and process it?
5. What forms of organizational response—or inaction—ensued?
6. Did the conduct remain confined to internal organizational regulation, was it acknowledged as organizational wrongdoing, or did it acquire broader legal or penal significance?

These questions construct a conceptual bridge linking organizational sociology, organizational behavior, victimology, and criminology. Furthermore, they allow scholars and practitioners to interrogate workplace harm without presupposing that criminalization is inevitable or necessarily the most appropriate institutional remedy. Ultimately, the OMWCF

conceptualizes workplace criminalization not as a linear progression from conflict to crime, but as a contingent institutional process mediated by organizational power, recognition, classification, and response. Its principal contribution lies in positioning the organization itself at the analytical crossroads between the production of workplace harm and its potential recognition within broader legal and criminal justice systems.

Implications for Sociology, Organizational Behavior, and Criminology

The Organizational Mediation of Workplace Criminalization Framework (OMWCF) makes a distinct conceptual contribution to the study of workplace harm by connecting analytical dimensions that have frequently been investigated in isolation. Its central implication is that workplace conflict, victimization, organizational wrongdoing, and criminalization should not be treated as discrete phenomena or as sequential stages of a predetermined trajectory. Instead, they should be understood as potentially interconnected outcomes of organizational and institutional processes through which harmful behaviors are interpreted, categorized, and addressed. The theoretical framework thus carries implications for three overlapping fields: sociology, organizational behavior, and criminology. While its contribution to each discipline is distinct, the primary analytical value of the framework lies precisely in bringing these perspectives into dialogue.

Implications for Sociology: From Individual Experiences to Institutional Processes

From a sociological perspective, the framework advances the analysis of workplace harm by shifting analytical attention away from discrete interpersonal interactions toward the institutional conditions through which those interactions acquire social and organizational meaning. Workplace conflict and bullying have frequently been examined through dyadic relationships between individuals, namely perpetrators and targets. While organizational perspectives have significantly challenged this individualistic orientation, the OMWCF further emphasizes that the organization is not merely the container or backdrop against which interaction unfolds. It is an institutional arena that establishes normative expectations, distributes credibility, defines acceptable conduct, and governs which forms of harm achieve institutional visibility. This perspective places organizational power at the core of the analysis. Power operates not only through formal authority, but also through the capacity to shape what can be voiced, what is formally reported, which narrative is deemed credible, and which issues are treated as legitimate targets of institutional intervention. Hodgins, MacCurtain, and Mannix-McNamara's (2020) analysis is especially pertinent in this regard, demonstrating that organizational responses to bullying can themselves reproduce prevailing power structures. The conceptual framework thus advances the sociological understanding of workplace harm in two distinct ways: first, it conceptualizes recognition as an institutional process rather than treating victimization as a self-evident category; second, it conceptualizes inaction as analytically substantive. Silence, the failure to investigate, minimization, and procedural delays can all sustain particular, dominant interpretations of workplace events. The sociological contribution of the framework thus resides in the pivot from a sociology of workplace harm to a sociology of the institutional processing of harm.

Implications for Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management

Regarding organizational behavior and human resource management (HRM), the conceptual framework challenges managerial approaches that view organizational responses primarily as neutral instruments of prevention, compliance, or employee well-being. Anti-bullying and

anti-harassment policies are undeniably important, yet the formal existence of a policy does not guarantee effective institutional recognition or substantive intervention. The decoupling of formal organizational procedures from their practical implementation is particularly critical because organizational responses are themselves embedded within institutional power relations. The OMWCF therefore shifts analytical attention from whether an organization maintains formal policies to how those procedures actually function in practice. Reporting systems, investigations, managerial decisions, and disciplinary processes can enhance the visibility of harmful conduct; however, they can just as readily reproduce existing inequalities when grievances are trivialized, credibility is unequally distributed, or organizational interests take precedence over employee protection. This perspective aligns with scholarship demonstrating that organizational responses to workplace bullying can themselves operate as exercises of power (Hodgins et al., 2020). It further integrates research on organizational justice and externally escalated complaints, which underscores the paramount importance of fairness throughout grievance and investigative procedures (Neall et al., 2021). The framework thus indicates that effective organizational responses should not be evaluated solely by the presence of written policies or the raw volume of reported cases. Instead, systematic attention must be directed toward institutional accessibility, credibility attribution, procedural fairness, investigative independence, and the organization's capacity to recognize structurally embedded forms of harm. This carries profound implications for human resource management: organizational intervention must not be conceived merely as the containment of "difficult employees" or interpersonal friction. Where harmful behaviors are enabled by organizational designs, workplace cultures, or power imbalances, genuine intervention requires transforming the institutional environment itself.

Implications for Criminology: Workplace Harm Beyond the Individual Offender

The contribution to criminology is particularly salient because the conceptual framework situates workplace harm within the broader inquiry of how human behavior acquires penal significance. Workplace violence and related forms of harmful conduct have increasingly gained traction within criminological scholarship. Piquero and colleagues (2013), for example, identified workplace violence as an established yet comparatively underdeveloped domain within criminology, while Schindeler (2014) advocated expanding criminological inquiry into workplace violence without presuming that the solution inevitably resides in the expansion of criminal law. The OMWCF builds upon this trajectory while introducing a distinct analytical shift: rather than asking solely why workplace violence occurs or which individual traits predict offending behavior, it interrogates how organizational processes govern the institutional visibility and classification of harmful conduct. This analytical shift is especially crucial in light of ongoing debates surrounding the criminalization of workplace harassment and abuse. Bogg and Freedland (2020) argue that criminal liability risks becoming hyper-individualized, thereby obscuring the structural and organizational environments in which harassment and abuse are generated and sustained. Their critique highlights the imperative of examining the interplay between individual accountability and organizational context, rather than treating them as mutually exclusive explanatory paradigms. The OMWCF extends this insight by positioning organizational mediation as a critical hinge between workplace conduct and its potential penal significance. The organization can facilitate visibility and legal escalation, but it can just as effectively inhibit, dilute, or suppress them. Consequently, criminalization must be conceptualized as one contingent institutional outcome among many, rather than the inexorable endpoint of workplace harm. This perspective opens up conceptual

space for a more nuanced theorization of criminalization itself. The critical question is not simply whether criminal law should be applied to workplace misconduct, but how such conduct navigates across competing normative and institutional regimes: interpersonal norms, internal organizational discipline, labor and employment regulation, occupational health and safety standards, civil liability, and criminal law.

Bridging the Divide Across Individual, Organizational, and Institutional Levels

A broader contribution of the theoretical framework lies in its capacity to bridge three analytical tiers that are often examined in isolation. At the individual level, employees experience, perpetrate, resist, report, or remain silent regarding harmful conduct. At the organizational level, power relations, institutional norms, managerial practices, and formal procedures determine how such experiences are interpreted and processed. At the institutional level, legal and regulatory regimes establish the broader boundaries within which organizational classifications can acquire formal legal or penal significance. The OMWCF does not privilege any single tier at the expense of the others; rather, it conceptualizes them as mutually interconnected yet analytically distinct. This analytical posture circumvents two opposing forms of reductionism: reducing workplace harm to an individualized interpersonal pathology, and subsuming individual accountability entirely under structural organizational determinants. The theoretical framework is therefore compatible with a relational conception of responsibility. Individuals remain accountable for their harmful conduct, while organizations are simultaneously interrogated regarding the structural conditions, everyday practices, and institutional responses that enable, constrain, or obscure such behavior.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The theoretical implications of the proposed framework extend well beyond the specific phenomenon of workplace harassment. The concept of organizational mediation is broadly applicable to other forms of institutional harm where the recognition, processing, and classification of problematic conduct depend fundamentally on organizational mechanisms. For instance, the framework offers a robust conceptual foundation for investigating systemic discrimination, retaliation, sexual harassment, occupational violence, whistleblower victimization, or digitally mediated workplace abuse. In each of these domains, the pertinent analytical inquiry shifts from merely establishing whether harmful conduct occurred to interrogating the institutional processes through which organizations determine whether such conduct is recognized, contested, investigated, or normalized. At the practical level, the framework suggests that organizational policies must be evaluated not merely in terms of formal symbolic compliance, but in terms of their substantive capacity to prevent and dismantle institutional invisibility. A reporting mechanism that exists on paper but tacitly disincentivizes disclosure, an investigative procedure that systematically delays findings, or an organizational culture that treats grievances as evidence of employee disloyalty will actively reproduce the very conditions that formal policies nominally seek to eradicate. The framework thus points toward an expanded conception of organizational accountability. True accountability cannot be confined strictly to identifying and disciplining individual perpetrators; it fundamentally entails scrutinizing how an organization's internal procedures, cultural norms, and power relations govern the institutional trajectory of harmful conduct.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a conceptual framework, the OMWCF does not purport to establish empirical causal laws linking organizational conditions directly to criminalization. Rather, its propositions identify theoretically informed relationships that can be examined and refined through subsequent empirical research. Future studies should investigate whether, how, and under what conditions the proposed mechanisms operate in practice. Qualitative research could explore how employees, managers, human resource professionals, and workplace investigators interpret and navigate grievances through organizational processes of recognition, reporting, investigation, classification, and response. Comparative studies could examine how these processes vary across industrial sectors, organizational settings, and national legal jurisdictions, while quantitative research could operationalize dimensions such as access to reporting channels, institutional recognition of victimization, procedural fairness, organizational inaction, and referral to external authorities.

A central priority for empirical investigation is to distinguish between the formal existence of organizational procedures and their actual implementation, as well as between reported harm, institutionally recognized victimization, organizationally classified wrongdoing, and cases referred to external legal or criminal justice institutions. Longitudinal and comparative case-study designs would be particularly valuable for tracing feedback processes, identifying points at which institutional trajectories are interrupted or redirected, and examining why similar forms of harmful conduct may result in different outcomes under different organizational conditions. Such designs could help assess the explanatory scope of the OMWCF and identify the contextual factors that condition the operation and significance of its proposed mechanisms.

Particular attention should be devoted to the relationship between internal organizational mediation and external institutional intervention. Regulatory agencies, labor inspectorates, trade unions, civil courts, professional associations, and criminal justice authorities may challenge, revise, or reinforce internal organizational classifications, thereby redirecting the institutional trajectory of workplace harm. Examining how cases move between organizational procedures and external institutional arenas would therefore provide an important empirical extension of the framework. Such research should also distinguish potential penal significance from formal criminal justice involvement and from any legally established criminal liability, since these represent analytically different stages or outcomes rather than interchangeable categories.

The OMWCF should therefore be understood as a meso-level theoretical framework connecting individual experiences and articulations of workplace harm with organizational power relations, institutional responses, and broader processes of legal and penal regulation. Its contribution lies in directing analytical attention not only to the organizational conditions under which harmful conduct emerges or persists, but also to the processes through which that conduct is interpreted, classified, addressed, or left unaddressed. By conceptualizing these processes as contingent and potentially recursive rather than linear or deterministic, the framework provides a basis for investigating how organizational mediation may shape divergent institutional trajectories without presuming that criminalization is either an inevitable or a necessary outcome.

Conclusion

Workplace harm cannot be adequately understood by focusing exclusively on the actions of individual actors or on the organizational conditions that precede harmful conduct. Equal analytical attention must also be directed toward what happens after such conduct occurs: how it is interpreted, reported, investigated, normalized, denied, or otherwise addressed within the organization.

The Organizational Mediation of Workplace Criminalization Framework (OMWCF) was developed to address this theoretical gap. Integrating insights from workplace conflict and bullying research, organizational power theory, victimology, organizational behavior, and criminology, the framework conceptualizes the organization as an active mediator between harmful conduct and its potential institutional, legal, or penal significance. Its central argument is that workplace criminalization should not be understood as a linear progression from conflict to crime. Workplace conflict may be constructively resolved, remain framed as an interpersonal matter, develop into persistent harmful conduct, or enter different processes of organizational recognition, classification, and response. Depending on the circumstances, such processes may result in the recognition of organizational wrongdoing, the identification of potential penal significance, or referral to external institutions. These trajectories are contingent and may be interrupted, redirected, or reshaped at different stages. Organizational responses, including strategic inaction, may influence whether workplace harm becomes institutionally visible, how responsibility is attributed, and which forms of intervention are pursued.

The framework makes three principal theoretical contributions. First, it connects the organizational conditions associated with the emergence and persistence of workplace harm to the institutional processes through which that harm is subsequently interpreted and addressed, extending organizational scholarship beyond the identification of antecedents and risk factors. Second, it distinguishes the experience and articulation of victimization from its formal institutional recognition, highlighting the potential influence of credibility assessments, reporting barriers, investigative procedures, and organizational classifications on the institutional treatment of harm. Third, it situates criminalization within a broader, organizationally mediated process while retaining the analytical relevance of individual accountability and drawing attention to the organizational conditions that may shape the attribution of responsibility. In doing so, the OMWCF provides a conceptual bridge between micro-level experiences of workplace harm, meso-level dynamics of organizational power and mediation, and macro-level legal and penal institutions. Its analytical value lies not in predicting a uniform outcome, but in providing a structured framework for examining how different institutional trajectories emerge and diverge.

Although developed in relation to workplace conflict, bullying, and harassment, the framework may also inform the analysis of other forms of organizational harm in which recognition, silence, institutional classification, and external escalation shape subsequent responses. Systemic discrimination, retaliation, sexual harassment, occupational violence, whistleblower victimization, and digitally mediated abuse represent potentially relevant areas for further conceptual development and empirical investigation. Future research should examine how organizational environments and institutional contexts shape divergent trajectories of recognition, response, and external intervention. Comparative case studies,

interviews with employees and institutional gatekeepers, analyses of grievance and investigation records, and cross-national research could help assess the framework's explanatory scope and identify the conditions under which organizational mediation facilitates accountability or instead contributes to the persistence and institutional invisibility of harm.

Ultimately, the OMWCF advances the proposition that understanding workplace harm requires attention not only to what occurs, but also to how organizations respond—or fail to respond—to it. By foregrounding these mediating processes, the framework contributes to dialogue between organizational sociology, victimology, and criminology, offering a basis for investigating how workplace harm acquires institutional meaning and how organizational responses may shape its subsequent treatment within legal and penal systems.

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