

Harassment and Bullying at Work
Beyond Symptoms – Ethical Considerations

Christiane Kreitlow

Clinical psychologist-psychotherapist

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The reason why I take an active interest in ethical considerations regarding harassment and bullying comes from the victims.

Actually, the persons/victims, those I meet in therapy, provide specific reasons for it. They show a high focus on the other/others – centred more on others – privileging even curiosity for exploration of who or what is unknown.

Relationships, like friendship, but also cooperation at work and **sharing** in public and private life are most important for these persons, also representing a source of pleasure for them.

This peculiar disposition combines with fitting values, we may name altruism and benevolence, which unfortunately often entail to neglect self-attention.

Be that as it may, at last such disposition is the expression of a form of life, which runs through all areas of life.

Bullying and harassment, as we know, concretize nothing else than despise and destruction of living life, especially of such form of life.

What we notice then (in therapy), is that the victim, beyond suffering, spend a lot time reconsidering not only what happened to her or to him, but also what happened to her or his proper values and main dispositions. What the victim experienced, confronts and ruminates is disillusion.

Indeed those values, - values of altruism, ethical values we may say - supporting the form of life, the very way to be in relation with others and the environment, appear highly vulnerable. That is precisely because they **form** the relation on which they depend.

To sum up, we can say: in the core is relation. All indeed seems to refer to relationship: relationship to ones' own, to the others and to the world.

Harassment and bullying deny relationship and unfortunately succeed greatly to show the misunderstanding and invalidity of it.

There is no doubt about the fact that bullying and harassment taking place in a relationship, according to the victim, inevitably damage it. No doubt either that witnesses, mostly fail in their relationship with the victims, turning away from them. No less doubt about the fact that the organisation in its responsible relationship to the employees fails as well. Likely we could say there is no lively idea of relationship.

It is difficult to sum up the rich sphere of ethics.

Yet, we can limit its essence – draw a substantive meaning and affirm: all about ethics is relation: relation to ones' own, to the others, to the world. Ethics links and binds.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur gives a “simple” description with of course complex lively meanings. He raises the ethical perspective as aiming: ***a good life (also called good living) – with and for others – in fair institutions.***” (P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, University of Chicago Press, 1992)

The aiming as an ethical perspective applies to oneself. That is to say that it orientates oneself 's life, always as an aim, and participates in shaping it.

Ricoeur points out the importance of a complementary moral commitment needed.

Indeed while ethics recommends (perspective), moral consideration commands (action) – one cannot be achieved without the other. This implies to respect, to affirm, to regulate, to correct and to protect its very meaning/perspective whenever it is necessary, for oneself, for the others and for the world (e.g. ecology).

The American psychologist and professor of ethical research Jonathan Haidt sums up the general meaning: “moral thinking”, he says, “is for social doing.” (Haidt J. & Kesebir S. *Morality*, Handbook of Social Psychology, 5e edition, Hoboken, NY 2010.). Such a statement indeed appears obvious once taking in count that any relationship is an asymmetrical relationship.

Paul Ricoeur then could only agree when he emphasizes: in case there is harm and damage, it is the responsibility of each and everyone to bring rescue and to take care. Ricoeur calls this attitude the **practical wisdom**, when any moral respect in conjunction with the ethical perspective changes into the disposition to take care of the other (also principle of caring - solicitude).

Ethical understanding – its aiming and practical implementation – we can say, builds a “grammar” for the every-day life in relationship with the others and the environment. Moreover, I think, is it possible to stand that such understanding and practice roots oneself in oneself, in his/her life and in the world. Relationship in this perspective takes the sense of living life through a specific linkage, bond and bound.

Thereupon we can notice that the primary, originally meaning of ἦθος («ethos») is “usual residence”, “**home**”, from where derive the senses of habit, character and state of soul.

Some argue that there is violence, which particularly targets and charges the ethical sphere of being, at the worst leading to traumatism, named ethical traumatism. I think that harassment and bullying belong to these types of targeted violence and precisely do so.

How deep are the wounds of the victims, should we ask? What exactly is affected regarding their ethical being by the violence of bullying and harassment, we propose to examine it.

Referring to the French definition of harassment (formal and legal definition), also named **moral** harassment (by Marie-France Hirigoyen), we find the ethical component expressly in the attack of human’s dignity, respectively protection. Whether the notion of dignity embraces a same generally valid sense or not around the world, its very ethical meaning and content confirm universal understanding. Dignity stands for humanity.

The well-known figure of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant gives a clear description.

Dignity means the humanity in itself. The human being or being a human, says the philosopher, is above and beyond any price. For Kant this means that we have to respect humanity in each and every person as an end in itself. We have to treat, he emphasizes, human beings as **ends** and not as means.

For Kant, Dignity is inseparable from Autonomy. And such this describes the capacity “to give to oneself ones’ proper laws” as a reasonable being. In others words, in Kant’s understanding, being autonomous, commands to make reasonable choices. In doing so

the human being embraces the respect of humanity in each and every human being (in each and not of each). The choice this way should be universally meaningful. Kant explains, we respect ourselves and build self-respect.

Kant in a way bets on the sovereignty of reason and will. We have to decide reasonably, yet practically, if we adhere to dignity, so to say, to humanity-autonomy and respect as to values and virtues for free life in freedom. As such, respect, – to respect it – including mutual respect, forms for Kant an ethical measure.

Dignity, as we know, is in the core of the Declaration of Human Rights at the French revolution, as well as it takes a central place, right in the perspective of Immanuel Kant, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Kant all the same showed he was aware of the fragility of the ethical measure.

He established a surprising list, which regarding harassment, appears quite current. In his book “Metaphysics of Morals” (1797) we find expressly what constitutes main offenses to dignity (humanity - autonomy - respect).

Arrogance: treat others as having lesser value than themselves.

Defamation: the desire to blame others and expose them to blame - to gossip about others, to expose their faults to public censure, - in order to bring them into disrepute.

Ridicule: finding amusement in what makes them objects of mockery or derision.

Finally Kant added intentional lie and false promise in order to mislead. For him these ways to treat others, clearly fail the aim of humanity. These ways treat human beings as means – reducing or even taking off their autonomy/dignity.

What Kant did not say, but for sure knew, is, the harmful effect it has on the victim when what he or she defines as dignity is violated. It is precisely that part of the self-understanding as an equal human being amongst others, which suffers.

Now to respect human’s dignity does not only require reason and will, even if they are practical ones. More is needed. It requires a specific human ability. Indeed beyond will and reason, respect depends on the human’s ability to acknowledge or to recognize, concretely said, to perceive.

Recognition says the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor is a “vital human need”, “not just courtesy” (Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, 1992). Recognition, he pursues, is related to ethical understanding. The stakes are high.

The German contemporary philosopher Axel Honneth (School of Frankfurt and Columbia University) places recognition in the centre of his research and lecturing. In fact he points out the basic human need of it as also the disastrous social, psychological, human consequences when not fulfilled.

Honneth, likely to Charles Taylor, establishes three spheres of recognition, which all three together build an interdependent dynamics, as well as the conditions for respected life in community (Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Polity Press, 1995 [1992])

- love (emotional concern in the private spheres of care and personal relations – friendship)
- respect/justice (in the institutional spheres of the state and legal rights – treating people equally – the right to claim right)
- esteem/solidarity (achievements in the spheres of work-life and civil society).

In each sphere, recognition describes the process of a **fundamental experience, that is the one to be recognized as valid and meaningful in one’s own expressions**. Whether it is in the private sphere, as a child or an adult – or in the right’s sphere – or at work, to be recognized implies to be recognized in one’s expression, claim and contribution. As that, it raises a moral approval of one’s being – whether by words, mimes, gestures or formal confirmation. The process, because it is a reiterated process, requires of course mutuality: I respect your contributions (expressions and claims) as you respect mines.

Under this condition, and may be only under this, Honneth says, recognition allows to build and maintain self-consciousness (being a morally accountable subject = self respect = inner dialogue), self-understanding, and self-esteem/self-worth (awareness of having good and valuable capabilities).

According to Honneth, the moral violation is experienced more deeply the more elementary the self-relation is, that is violated or destroyed. Heavily violated it is indeed, says Honneth, when all three spheres experience denial and refusal. Then any own expression and contribution becomes worthless to the other and finally to oneself. What Honneth, likely to Charles Taylor, has the merit to point out through his researches, is the inescapable interdependence of recognition by which one reaches worthy feelings for himself or not. Therefore it is “vital”.

“How deep are the wounds”, which are the spheres that have been violated by harassment and bullying, we leave to decide (will not decide). Surely, situations may vary.

However we all agree that harassment and bullying are a persistent repeating process of misrecognition. I would say the refusal or denial of recognition is the core of this violence.

Or the fact that this happens in a relationship normally provided based on ethical expectation and mutuality, makes the attack surprising, powerful and painful. One is hurt, one’s expressions are denied, but what makes all this worst, is that one’s expectation to be recognized and the mutual disposition to recognize the other are deceived and cheated. The first doesn’t happen. The second is treated as irrelevant or insignificant.

Such situation, we know from our patients, raises deep doubts about one’s own value. Right like it causes feelings of confusion. But moreover, it underlines a beginning process of isolation – the one to be kept away from the fulfilment of a vital human need that is still shared in concrete manners by the others.

Let us follow again the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. For Ricoeur, humiliation (which matches the whole spectrum of harassment and bullying) is one of the worst harms one human can inflict on the other. Humiliation undermines the self-esteem, he says, “but at last, it is nothing else than the destruction of self-respect.” (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (1990, Eng. tr. 1992).

The Israeli contemporary philosopher Avishai Margalit can only agree. He checks a three items list of the misdeeds that all inflict humiliation:

- treating human beings **as if** they were not humans, but "as machines, or subhumans" – instrumentalization – discrimination.
- performing actions that manifest or lead to loss of basic control.
- rejecting a human being from the group one identifies with and finally from the "family of Man".

(Margalit, Avishai, *The decent society*, Cambridge University Press 1996.).

For Margalit humiliation means "mental cruelty. It implies all forms of behaviour and circumstances, which give the objective reason to a person to consider himself being injured in his self-respect.

Humiliation, Margalit pursued, is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations and when this state affects their self-respect.

What is exactly hurt, we can see by the overview of its intrinsic meaning realized by American philosopher John Rawls.

For Rawls self-respect supports " the person's sense of his own value" (near self-esteem), that is "his conviction that his concept of his good, his plan of life, is worthy carrying out". Self-respect means having "a confidence in one's own ability to fulfil one's intentions." Rawls suggests that the self-respect "is perhaps the most important primary good", so important, that" without it nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them." (Rawls, "*A Theory of Justice*", 1971) With John Rawls, we clearly distinguish here the important role of self-respect for the individual.

His description of its properties is not far away from Immanuel Kant's understanding.

What specifies (the) self-respect is autonomy. One respects oneself as a moral autonomous being in all its singularity and as that feels as respectable as respectful.

In fact self-respect, I argue, is less an image of myself (self-esteem) than the embodiment of a certain inner rule providing holding and feeling of continuity. It describes a bodily

dynamic state or standing, which involves gravity, seriousness and just fair limits one recognizes for oneself. Kant might simply say “humanity” (nothing abstract).

Avishai Margalit lights up a more Anglo-Saxon understanding: “Self-respect refers to an internal relation of a person to herself”. It sustains dignity as the external, “lived” embodiment of self-respect.” (Margalit, Avishai, *The decent society*, Cambridge University Press 1996.).

In any sense, the descriptions may help to understand what is damaged in the ethical sphere when humiliation takes place. The relationship to oneself suffers and declines. While this raises feelings of insecurity, it clearly weakens the holding in one self. Humiliation, we understand, uproots its victim to the detriment of inner depth.

Avishai Margalit again specifies: “humiliation...leads to loss of basic control. » (Margalit, 1996). And the loss of basic control, we pursue, is the consequence of lost relationship to one-self.

Unfortunately it seems not to be the only loss. Humiliation leads also to loss of power.

Once more Paul Ricoeur highlights the issue. When self-respect declines because of humiliation, the power to act or to do decreases, he says, not to say is lost. (Ricoeur, 1990).

Now if there is clearly one ethical dimension in human beings’ life, then it is the one of power, strength and will, which drives doing.

In the ethical understanding “the power to do” does not mean the power over people, nor does it mean behaviour, such as for example to stay at work (in the working environment), do the job and endure. What “power to do” means is to constitute oneself as the responsible moral actor of one’s action, and this through the assertion of one’s capabilities. These latter acquire the meaning of being able to initiate something new, to transform (change) something and to create events (story).

Ricoeur named four of them as key-capabilities: to be able to speak, to act, to tell (relate) and to be responsible (attributable), (Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition* 2004, Eng. tr. 2005, Harvard University Press). Each and all together simply said, as Ricoeur also says: “I can”.

It makes no doubt that harassment and bullying refuse any ability in these senses – progressively and one by one, bullying experiences close them down. For the purpose of clarity: to lose the ability does not want to mean that one no longer speaks. It rather says that she or he is n longer able to speak with her/his own voice, as a free subject or a performing responsible agent of her/his words.

Harassment/ bullying can leave speechless – troubles one’s saying – confuses it – switches it off and denies. What here happens is a progressive damage of the personal abilities, which consequently increases lack of self-defence capacity for the victim. At the same time, by refusing the recognition of their expressions, their seriousness and legitimacy, the bully denies the victim the standing as a moral capable being, with the right to assert it. No more no less, does it mean the denial of having the right to be given a justification for what is done to her/him. Andreas Maier, professor of the Centre of Ethics, University of Zurich, specifies its concrete manner. “The torturer”, likely the bully, “places his victim outside of the game of giving and asking for (moral) reasons.” (A. Maier, *Torture - How denying Moral Standing violates Human Dignity*, in [Violations of Human Dignity](#). Springer, 2010)

We know from the victims that there is never an authentic justification and in a certain manner, we can say from no official person (except in front of the penal court). The absence of plausible reasons (an error or professional faults makes no reason) gives rise to the source of the victim’s rumination.

At this stage, we are no more far away from a painful fate. The victim reaches loneliness. And loneliness, being stigmatised, marginalised and ostracised, means exclusion. Whether the exclusion is concrete or not, what happened made the victim lose the shared area of the working community in its concrete and symbolic living manners. But what this person really loses is belonging, the feeling of belonging to something shared with others. Belonging, we confirm means relation.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt writes: we can lose freedom, security and justice without being deprived of human dignity... But in the absence of belonging to a community, dignity disappears. Dignity requires, the philosopher stresses, to “have a place in the world, which renders opinions to be significant and actions to be

efficient.”(Arendt, Hannah. *Imperialism: Part Two Of The Origins Of Totalitarianism*. Mariner Books. March 20, 1968. Paperback). What Arendt argues here brings it close together to recognition and abilities.

The theme of the place in the world, indeed for many (but not for all) of the victims I saw and see, is a present recurring theme. There are doubts on their place in it – doubts on the sense of community, doubts on how to find the way back to it calmly, to relate to it again.

Hannah Arendt once more gives an insight. To lose belonging- to feel lonely in the very sense of isolation, sometimes leads to desolation. In French both words “isolation-desolation” include a common word “sol”, which means “soil or ground”. Feeling uprooted is the very signification.

Without necessarily reaching the extreme feeling of desolation, traumatized persons yet, we dare to say, lose their basis – psychical balance and bodily basis.

I find it difficult to determine when exactly, at what moment, the victim of harassment and bullying is affected by trauma. Still I am convinced that this type of violence generates trauma. Regarding the process of bullying and harassment, I prefer to talk of cumulative traumas, traumas, which happen at each of those stages of the ethical sphere and which may lead to PTSD. For me harassment and bullying, attack in direct and specific manners the ethical bond of oneself to oneself, to the others and to the environment.

The French psychiatrist Bernard Doray writes: “each major traumatism involves an ethical charge.” What he argues is that the damaging of the conditions (and meanings) of the ethical pact, as to understand, as the self-understanding of humanity in a mutual relation to others, “precipitates the subject into the strangeness of a world out of the rescue of the human world.” (Doray 2005) The trauma implies the injury of dignity because it leaves “vacant what normally in the experience of the person links her/him up in continuous manner with, her/his humanity.”

I would like to end with the words of the socio-philosopher Theodor Adorno: ***“We may not know what the absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity – but what the inhuman is we know very***

well indeed". And he pursues: ".. for suffering is objectivity that weights upon the subject." (Theodor Adorno *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 1963, Stanford University Press 2000)