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Harassment, System, Organization By Ariane Bilheran¹, 2008.

Introduction

Harassment is a familiar notion that characterizes attitudes which are fairly common today in society, and hence in the enterprise.

The expansion of this phenomenon is explained in part by the disintegration of social bonds and the establishment of social structures of a perverse nature - i.e. diverted from their object.

Thus the enterprise, which is the site of undertakings, is becoming an agency of control where the spirit of entrepreneurship, the autonomy of executives, and collective solidarity are being endangered.

This article aims to grasp the links between harassment and the organization. Specifically, it explores how harassment is always the symptom of a malfunction in a given organization, even as it appears to be a strictly interpersonal phenomenon. How can harassment be the symptom of an organization?

Definitions

“Harassment is the generic term that encompasses all other forms of harassment (physical, sexual, moral).” It “*refers to the progressive destruction of an individual or group of people by another individual or group, through repeated pressures intended to obtain something by force from the individual against his or her will, and thus to induce and maintain a state of terror in him or her*” (Bilheran, 2006, p.7).

Harassment always implies the criteria of duration and repetition. As for “moral” harassment, it must be understood as strictly moral in that it excludes any physical or sexual “*passage à l’acte*”², whereas it is otherwise necessarily present in sexual or physical harassment.

¹ Article translated by Arianne Dorval

² Act of physical or sexual aggression

Actions or Process

Harassment is often viewed as the perpetration of harmful actions on a harassed individual by a harasser. The psychological dimension characterizes perverse relational processes rather than particular actions. This is why, in order to speak of harassment, there must also be an “intent” to harm, that is, an ill will at the root of the harassment process. Specific actions would help us determine with greater facility that we are dealing with moral harassment, but the reality of harassment lies in the realm of the insidious, the non-factual, the unspoken. Clinical practice shows moreover that non-actions are just as important, if not more frequent, than actions, and that they are fraught with malevolence. These might entail ignoring the harassed person, no longer giving him or her work, not copying him or her on emails, etc.

The harassment process aims at the psychic destruction of the harassed person. The destruction is attained when this person lets him or herself be destroyed, and even ends up aiding in this destruction (suicidal thoughts and/or behavior). The latter is sure to happen at some point depending on the intensity, violence and duration of harassment.

At the psychological level, the malevolent process feeds on the reactions of the harassed person. The harasser often knows how to correctly identify another’s weaknesses (which we all have) in order to drive his or her victim to self-destruct, and this until he or she “breaks down.” Every defense reaction on the part of the victim backfires on him or her. Thus, people will say that the victim “threw a fit” when he or she got angry, that the victim is “hysterical” when he or she cries, etc. If, for instance, the harasser is able to identify a flaw in the victim’s self-esteem, he or she will attack by failing to give the victim the professional recognition he or she expects. If the victim reacts affectively, then the harasser will know he or she needs to play up this aspect. There can also be an attack on professional integrity, if the victim is keen on doing his or her work scrupulously and finds self-fulfillment at work through such conscientiousness.

Individual or Collective

The phenomenon is often construed as an attack by one individual on another. This misses in my opinion the intrinsically collective dimension of the process. Indeed, moral harassment always implies a group, be it a passive witness, an abettor or an “opponent”. The contextual dimension is crucial in moral harassment. For even when it actively involves only two people, harassment always takes place within a collectivity, a group: the workplace, friends, the set of reactions from colleagues or associative members, etc. The social dimension of moral harassment is key to understanding the specificity of the phenomenon. This dimension is all the more crucial since the harasser feels intuitively that the group’s reactions are decisive, as indeed they are. For only they have the power to socially condemn or rehabilitate the victim – with the peculiarity that a silence condemns, insofar as the victim will feel deeply wounded by what might be qualified as the failure to provide assistance” (Bilheran, 2006, p.89).

It is illusory to think that, in a group where harassment is wreaking havoc, one can remain neutral by virtue of belonging to this group. Harassment calls for either one of two stances: either one favors autonomy, or one accepts subjection. The position of distanced analysis is usually that of an external party (mediator, psychologist, etc.), and it is from this position - called third party in psychology – that the deadlock will be eased.

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The nature of the group in question enables harassment to exist. Harassment occurs indeed because the group has let it establish itself. "It must first be stressed that, if moral harassment is able to appear and progressively take hold in a particular environment, it is because the latter is corrupt, and this for a variety of reasons: other people have a vested interest in eliminating the victim; they are particularly lax; or the harasser has won the favors of various people by bestowing gifts upon them, etc." (Bilheran, 2006, p.89).

Similarly, group members all suffer the presence of this harassment situation they have allowed to take hold. Passive individuals can develop symptoms specific to victims, such as anxiety and insomnia. Those who abet can do so intentionally (complicity through latent sadism), or else in spite of themselves when they become puppets in the harasser's manipulation.

Logics of Group Alienation

There exist psychological logics of group alienation. Four such logics, which are often intertwined, can be essentially identified:

1) Terror

One of the most effective logics of alienation is terror. The latter can be obtained through "exemplary sanctions" or public humiliations, which generate among people the desire not to be he or she who will be subjected to this process. Silence is required for the sake of tranquility and non-exposure to danger, as indeed any confrontation would expose one to retaliation. This logic of alienation through terror is found in totalitarian regimes, but can also be found in the enterprise: "as soon as a man is accused, his former friends are transformed immediately into his bitterest enemies; in order to save their own skins, they volunteer information and rush in with denunciations to corroborate the nonexistent evidence against him; this obviously is the only way to prove their own trustworthiness" (Arendt, 1951/1985, p. 323). Such "survival" in the organization can result in false testimonies against the harassed (and frequently accused) person, and even in petitions or acts of collective accusation in the presence of the harassers.

"To Be or Not to Be"

Human Resources Management, in a nonetheless flourishing company, has put in place a terror process intended to deflect any protest by unions or others in the enterprise. Protest is particularly frightening to the managers, who appear to be siphoning off a portion of the company funds for their personal use. Hence Management's fear of unions is immense, and it seeks to protect itself *at all costs*, and in a defensive manner, against any possibility of attack.

Terror is established as follows: the Human Resources Manager frequently calls employees into his office and gathers information on people's private lives during these meetings. Then, he uses the information publically against the people in question, so long as they have shown a vague inclination to protest. Union delegates are particularly targeted via episodes of public humiliation in which the Human Resource Manager indicates that his method is "sidelining," and this as a warning to those who might have wished to follow the example of the delegates. The latter are also targeted via a vilification campaign, whereby accusations against incriminated persons are displayed on the Management bulletin board. The logic is as follows: you are "for" or you are "against." The neutral position is likened to the "against" position, and one must suffer the consequences for it (sidelining,

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lack of pay raise, decrease in number of gratifying tasks, or, on the contrary, massive rise in workload, collective ostracism demanded by HRM, etc.).

This system of terror is particularly effective given that employees, who fear losing their jobs in a region with high unemployment, prefer for the most part to keep quiet than to defend targeted people and their unions.

2) Common Guilt

Another logic of alienation consists in ensnaring people in a common guilt, in a collective fault. This alienation system helps keep silent those who feel guilty about a common fault that occurred earlier. The latter may be an embezzlement scheme, an illegal recruitment practice, a false collective testimony given under fear against another employee, etc.

Kitten-Training

In the 1990s, there appeared, first in the US and then later in France, what came to be called “kitten-trainings”: professional training sessions for alleged managerial purposes (Muller, 2002, p.653). In France, the session required the group, in managerial training for a week, to adopt a cat. At the end of the week, trainees were asked to participate collectively in the strangulation of the kitten. Knowledge of these training sessions was revealed in psychiatric hospitals, following the severe decompensation of some of the trainees. The collective strangulation of the adopted kitten not only helped teach cruelty and resistance to the pain experienced by the being/person one had become fond of. It also helped bind the group together in a macabre sort of solidarity, in a common guilt that is no longer the guilt of anyone in particular. These techniques of alienation via common guilt are not always this severe, but they do help destroy individuality by getting the individual to compromise him or herself in a transgressive group action. This transgression destroys all identity bearings, and then makes room for the reconstruction of a new identity by affiliation with the group to which each person is connected through his or her own guilt.

3) Corruption

Corruption also constitutes a technique of group alienation. It appeals to everyone’ self-interest and greed for gain in the enterprise (a promotion, a pay raise, etc.). “Even before individuals can become aware of the presence of moral harassment in this environment, the harasser drags them into various corruption schemes so as to buy their subsequent silence. In effect, it is in the best interest of he or she who has participated in more or less shady deals, even when these do not compare in any way with the harasser’s own exactions, to protect the system in which he or she has been implicated, chained, and welded. Thus it may happen that a harasser will offer small benefits in kind, opportunities or deals that are more or less illegal in order to implicate eventual witnesses in his or her corruption system, and this to the point of turning them into the bastion of this system. For if the latter were to collapse, the corruption schemes of this or that person, as well as their small and very personal interpretations of the law, would then be uncovered. These corruption schemes are the best bulwark the harasser can erect around his harassment. [...] Hence in a number of harassment cases, we see very obvious links between harassment, embezzlement, corruption in general, and all sorts of liberties taken with Republican law. This is the principle of the service rendered, “gesture” or kickback, which not only drives someone to corruption, but also makes him or her a debtor” (A. Bilheran, 2006, p.93). There might be a hiring promise, a promotion, a pay raise, or professional recognition, if the

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person keeps silent about this or that fact, or promises to take an active part in the harassment process.

4) Manipulation

Manipulation is also an alienation technique. There can be manipulation by victimization, guilt, seduction, or “divide and conquer” tactics.

Manipulation by victimization: the harasser presents him or herself as the victim of the harassed person and instills compassion in other people. Thus the harasser interprets facts and omits others, in such a way as to present a picture in line with this victimization.

Manipulation by guilt and emotional blackmail: the harasser turns group members into debtors and plays on their guilt feelings.

Manipulation by seduction: the harasser flatters in order to gain advantages, thus utilizing the narcissistic flaws of group members (bad self-image/self-esteem, need for recognition, etc.).

Manipulation by “divide and conquer” tactics: the harasser turns people against one another by means of rumors and malevolent insinuations, so that they will refrain at all costs from speaking to the person the harasser has told them to watch out for.

Receptivity to manipulation differs from one individual to the next: it depends on the distance, history, moment, context and vulnerability of each one.

Thought as System

An enterprise is a complex organization that constitutes a system. What does this mean? A system is a coherent totality whose every interacting part modifies the whole and the productions of this whole. An enterprise is a relational system, a sort of psyche all by itself, traversed by processes and drives that can be vital and lethal, and often contradictory.

This system is traversed by sub-systems. If, for instance, a person leaves a department, disequilibrium ensues not only in the department’s workload, but also in its relational dimension. This indirectly impacts the entire organization.

A system is also constituted by repetitions, namely by the fact that processes, habits, and behaviors, etc., remain even after departures. In short, what we call the “enterprise culture”: the practices, languages, values and all that makes sense or not for everyone. An enterprise is a community – i.e. a site where the desire to do something as a group binds people together, thus creating phenomena of mutual identification and adhesion to prescribed values and norms. In this sense, it is a culture; and every culture generates anxiety, but also prohibitions, taboos and defenses to counter these anxieties. Such defenses can be pertinent in relation to an enterprise’s goal of economic growth (its life and survival), or else non-pertinent (e.g. efficient in the short run, but lethal in the long run).

Anxiety and Organization

The presence of harassment in the organization indicates things about the latter’s complex system. The organization carries a psychic dynamism that affects the relational modalities existing between people, groups, departments, etc.

In organizations where anxiety is strong, defense strategies are put in place. These can include for instance a perverse mode of relatedness, either within management, interdepartmental relations,

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or between employees. Henceforth modes of terror and control, which are the exact contrary of the spirit of entrepreneurship, take hold. These modes have a powerful symptomatic impact, and can massively generate sabotage behavior at work, but also stress, anxiety, psychosomatic problems, suicidal conduct, etc., at the psychological level. Nowadays, psychosocial disorders express not only this organizational malaise, but also the weakness of collective solidarities that might act as a counter-power to this malaise, and thereby transform the suffering passivity of the individual into collective demands.

Nowadays, the dominant ideology is that of “performance,” a notion that has no clear definition. Indeed, if one asks the question in training sessions, almost everybody answers with a different definition, thus confusing performance and profitability, performance and productivity, performance and recognition, etc... Yet perversion consists notably in playing on semantic opacities. As sociologist Eugene Enriquez (1993) reminds us, this ideology enables the enterprise to legitimize affective management: “If the technocrat is caught in the imaginary of mastery through his passion for reason, the strategist, by contrast, will be entirely seized by the imaginary of performance and excellence via his affectivity, unconscious drives and reflection. Affective management [...] will find room to deploy itself within the strategic enterprise” (p.8).

The ideology of performance emerges from the organization’s defense against its own anxiety (the anxiety of economic survival in a competitive market, which, for the enterprise, is death anxiety). If the enterprise sets such high performance standards, “it is because it knows it must fight [...] against fundamental anxieties, non only those of individuals, but also those specific to the organization” (Enriquez, 1993, p. 9).

Henceforth, in the current societal context – fraught with anxieties about the future, regressive desires (nurturing protection of childhood) and basic insecurity on both the individual and collective levels – it is very difficult for authority to prevail. Here, authority must be properly understood, not as authoritarianism, but as a function characterized by its framing dimension, between people, between institutions, and between past and present (insofar as authority enables transmission). Authority ensures that “each one knows his or her place”. Within the organization, authority is essential and must be embodied by management and executives. Embodied, that is, carried by individuals who are not merely functions. Yet in the present context of hypermobility, everyone becomes replaceable, interchangeable, exploitable, and malleable. The executive³ (who is supposed to embody the frame, and hence to remind people of the existence of the structure, the organizational law and the State law, the temporal frame for actions, etc.) is no longer entrusted with the autonomy needed to embody and bear responsibility for this frame. Responsibility (i.e. being able to answer for one’s actions) is swallowed up in a collective that is no longer identified, and each one finds him or herself the victim of a system he or she was thrown into.

Harassment and Organization

One form of expression of individual, group, organizational, and societal anxiety translates into harassment. Organizational anxiety gives rise to defense strategies, amongst which is harassment. Individual defenses against anxiety are declined differently among individuals, depending on their affectivity, fragilities and history. For some individuals (and not necessarily those with the

³ TN: Note that “executive” and “frame” are both expressed by the same word – “cadre” - in French.

psychological structure of a “narcissistic pervert”), the defense strategy will consist in harassing he or she who is deemed to pose a threat (to one’s job, promotion, etc.).

In other cases, for instance in harassment situations caused by envy or identifications of a personal nature (e.g.: the harassed person is what the harasser would like to be but is unable to become), the organization also plays a role in that harassment occurs only when the organization allows it. The organization thus fully or partly “endorses” harassment situations, and even promotes them in some cases. For harassment logics lead to group alienation and help counter the enterprise’s death anxiety (I control therefore I live, and I control in order not to lose).

In some organizations, for instance (but not only) in sectors that are notably competitive and generative of massive anxiety, harassment is instilled by Management itself. And this, either because Management is seeking control so as to stop employees from noticing certain financial malpractices (e.g. embezzlement), because it wants to prevent the hiring of its employees by the competition, or because it is letting the short-term demands of shareholders (on which the survival of the enterprise also depends) dictate this logic. These factors (and others of course, as this list is not exhaustive) can cumulate. Henceforth Management and Top Management can go as far as inducing harassing practices and finding “loyal and obedient subjects” in individuals who display perverse tendencies.

Be that as it may, an organization that makes room for harassment practices - whether it induces, tolerates or fails to sanction them - finds itself caught in a system it can no longer control. It is a system in which the frame is no longer effective since “anything goes”, and in which manifestations of such “relational anarchy” can have severe implications not only for workers, but also for the organization which suddenly gets caught at its own game. Indeed, the capacity to undertake is inversely proportional to authoritarian or lax logics. It presupposes a frame, authorities, guarantors, project coherence in the long term as well as coherence of projects with each other, be these one-off projects or broader organizational ones.

By way of conclusion

To conclude, in the world of the enterprise, where the individual is often caught in the trap of abnegation out of a desire for recognition, the presence of harassment is the symptom of an organizational malfunction. It points to an organization that allows or encourages practices of humiliation, sidelining, designation and stigmatization. This tolerance or support testifies to the enterprise’s desire for mastery over the world and all living things, to the point of using its own employees as mere performing tools and not seeing them as differentiated human beings. In organizations where harassment is wreaking havoc, one will frequently find affective management or its opposite: management through instrumental rationality. Authority is an endangered societal function, including inside the enterprise. Nonetheless, it is the only protection against instinctual aggressions. In a world where former identificatory poles are disappearing (State, family, social class, etc.), the enterprise is becoming more than anything a referent, one of the key actors in society. It is one of the essential sites where anxieties pertaining to the social bond, but also society’s realm of drives and passions, are playing themselves out.

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