

A Psychoanalytic Dialectical Model for Sexual and Other Forms of Workplace Harassment¹

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Beginning with a brief literature review, the present paper outlines a dialectical model for sexual and other forms of workplace harassment in which the role dependent models of bully, victim and bystander are seen to complexly interact and facilitate each other. An organization which has a bully always has the other two roles represented according to the model. It is suggested that for a workplace to function harmoniously all three roles must be addressed, and the power struggle resolved. The theory is illustrated with a series of case studies drawn from a forensic psychiatry practice. These include some more unusual forms of harassment such as the harassment of a Mexican American woman by an African American woman, the harassment of a middle-aged conservative man by two young women, the harassment of a man by several male employees together with traditional patterns of an older male employer harassing a younger female employee. Psychoanalytic processes which explain the pathological patterns are illustrated with material drawn from a psychoanalysis of a harassed woman. The paper concludes with some brief suggestions for a plan for workplace intervention.

KEY WORDS: workplace; harassment; bully; victim; bystander.

INTRODUCTION

Many, often subtle, psychological work place harassment factors have a significant effect on an employee's fitness for duty, particularly evident in sick leave usage, leave of absence and termination patterns. Psychoanalysts who

¹Based on a presentation to the 20th Annual Carroll F. Hingate Post Graduate Seminar On Occupational and Environmental Health, Overland Park, Kansas, March 8, 1997.

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are consultants in the work place potentially have a valuable role in monitoring the work place climate for evidence of these often more subtle phenomena. This paper addresses this role with a conceptual model and illustrative cases from forensic psychiatric evaluations, and from psychoanalysis.

In this model the treater's role is that of an observer or consultant to group process. We have to be aware that in many ways the world *is* a stage, as the great bard Shakespeare once commented, and all the men and women are merely players who have their entrances and their exits. On this stage the actors are the antagonists and victims in the harassing incident, with the "bystander" audience consisting of all others in the collective workplace who observe the drama unfolding. A dialectical perspective emphasizes how important the facilitating role of the bystander is, and equally how important it is for the psychoanalytic consultant to intervene early.

A SELECTED LITERATURE REVIEW OF WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

Perhaps the best known form of harassment is sexual. Writings on sexual harassment are extensive now. Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the definition of sexual harassment given by the U.S. Equal Employment Commission in 1980, the literature on sexual harassment has blazed a trail, suggesting the importance of attending to other forms of bullying present in the workplace that are less prominent, but equally disruptive to work and to employees' health. Fitzgerald (1993) estimates that as many as one out of every two women will be subject to some form of harassment during their academic or working life resulting in significant job loss, decreased morale, absenteeism and damage to relationships at work, with psychiatric and physical sequelae at home.

However both men *and* women are subject to sexual harassment. The first large well- designed study of the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace included 20,314 federal employees, 10,648 women and 9,666 men (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981). 42% of the women and 15% of the men reported having experienced overt narrowly defined sexual harassment within the past two years. One in ten of the female workers left their jobs because of the sexual harassment and many of them had reported the incidents with no action from the employers. Such harassment is also present in academia; for example, Komaromy, Bindman, Haber, et al (1993) surveyed 133 male and female internal medicine residents. 73% of the women and 22% of the men reported having experienced sexual harassment at least once during their medical school residency training, with women being more likely to be physically harassed than men. Interestingly, men tended to be harassed by nurses who did not directly influence

their careers, but women were harassed by more senior attending physicians and others who *could* affect their futures. Schneider (1982) studied 237 lesbian and 144 heterosexual working women, examining the ways in which the women's sexual identity affected their experiences and interpretations of interactions at work as sexual harassment. The study found widespread sexual harassment in both groups, with lesbians using the term sexual harassment more often and being more aggressive in confronting it. Littler-Bishop, Sedler-Feller and Opaluch (1982) showed that in female airline personnel the lower the status of the harassing individual, the more negative was the recipient's feelings about the harassment. This finding seems to indicate that sexual harassment by those who have more power and control over their victims is more likely to go unreported.

What are the causes of male and female sexual harassment? The literature suggests that the basic issue is a male dominated power dynamic and that racism and sexism are secondary sequelae (Ford, 1992). Data to support this opinion derives from several innovative studies: Berdahl, Magley and Waldo (1996) administered questionnaires to assess male/female harassment with the prediction that behaviors identified as harassing by men stem from gender issues in the workplace that challenge male dominance whereas behaviors experienced by women as sexually harassing would reinforce female subordination. Results generally supported this hypothesis and showed that men will tend to lash back against organizational measures that address sexual harassment and discrimination against women. In another study by Bargh, Raymond, Prior and Strack (1995) the authors used a subliminal priming paradigm to investigate a finding that men who sexually harass are not aware that their actions are inappropriate or are a misuse of their power, with the hypothesis that there would be an automatic link between power and sex in men who are highly likely to harass. This finding was supported. Saal (1996) reviewed studies designed to investigate the hypothesis that men who tend to misperceive women's friendly outgoing behavior as a sign of sexual interest or availability are also more likely to harass women. None of the studies supported that hypothesis. Saal concluded that sexual harassment of women occurs usually in organizations where there are more men working than women. He feels that men do so, not because they see women as more sexy or available sexually, but because they perceive women in either male or female dominated occupations to be less powerful.

Literature on nonsexual harassment is far less systematic. In a recent book on vulnerable workers by Davidson and Earnshaw (1991), general descriptive indicators are given for individuals who may be suffering harassment within the workplace due to a variety of factors including disease, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and race. Although mainly anecdotal,

total, these articles generally conclude that any form of minority status produces a power struggle wherein the superiority of the majority over the minority is asserted forcefully, however that minority status is characterized. Harassment of especially vulnerable populations are complicated by characteristics relating to reporting, morale strength and the influence of the minority status and minority group on the individual harassed. For example, a gay man who is harassed by another gay man may have trouble in view of the shared minority status in reporting that harassment and may be criticized by the social community for filing a complaint, as suggested in the thoughtful writings of Shrier (1996). Such an argument may also be applied to ethnic minorities when harasser and victim are in the same racial group and harassing experiences may be difficult to identify in racial, sexual, religious, age related or any other minorities. Cultural values relating to sexuality and promiscuity may also vastly effect how a victim reports and is accepted by his or her own peers. For example, Hispanics that have traditional polarized sexual roles may view victims as somehow disfigured by harassment. Shrier (1996) points out that illegal aliens may fear reporting due to their immigration status and homosexual men and women may fear that a complaint will expose their sexual orientation. In addition, heterosexual men may feel that exposing harassment reflects on their masculinity.

In extensive Scandinavian studies of what he calls **mobbing**, Leymann (1990) reports research in Sweden on a form of harassment in which workers gang up on each other. He points out that this situation can start off as a mutual back and forth teasing, which gradually escalates. He characterizes mobbing as usually systematic, involving a number of persons, directed at one victim, and taking place frequently over at least six months and resulting in "psychic, psychosomatic and social misery." (P. 120)

The contemporary literature clearly indicates that power struggles in the workplace, involve many complex factors, and that sexual harassment is only one such instance with several other common workplace harassment patterns, becoming a focus of investigation.

AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF HARASSMENT

"Sexual harassment is rarely about sex, but about power."
Male employee of a public utility company, August 1993.⁴

⁴As quoted in Berdahl, J. L., Magley, V. J. and Waldo, C. R. (1996). Sexual harassment of men? *The Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 20, 527-547.

"Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac" attributed to Henry Kissinger.¹

"Who can one hit, if not one's friends?"

Sir Ralph Richardson to Sir Alec Guinness before punching him in the jaw.²

Harassment, in general, is basically a power struggle, as the sensitive utility company employee remarked. Power is, as Henry Kissinger suggests, sometimes sexually exciting, or it may not be. The assumptions about whom one can and cannot speak to sexually requires empathy. For example, a sexual joke can be just a joke, or a punch can be seen as friendly, as Sir Ralph Richardson hoped! It is my idea that power issues or more exactly the dialectical balance of power, in fact, underpins many of the responses of vulnerable workers. The concept of vulnerability is a complicated one. Worker vulnerability is a very general term which probably applies to all workers at one time or another, who may be vulnerable regarding job security, risk of accident, job stress, or exploitation. What is important is that the same workers who may be victims of a variety of job situations can also become victimizers in a different work climate. Harassed populations include:

1. Sexual harassment of both men and women including gender harassment, seductive behavior, sexual bribery, sexual coercion, and sexual imposition.
2. Variations of mobbing (Leymann 1990), and bullying (Twemlow, Sacco and Williams 1996) of workers who are vulnerable in complex ways, including their own psychiatric problems, shyness, and response to group pressures.
3. Harassment of minority groups centered on: culture, sexual orientation, religion, physical disabilities and age.

THE HARASSING BULLY-VICTIM-BYSTANDER INTERACTION

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Edmund Burke

Workplace harassment is a special case of the more general concept of bullying. Most of us met our first bullies at school and most research into bullying has been done in a school setting; for example, the work of Olweus (1978 and 1992), and our own work with bullying in the school system (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, Gies, & Ewbank 1998). I define

¹As quoted in Bazgh, J. A., Raymond, P., Pryor, J. B. (1995). Attractiveness of the Underling: An Automatic Power Sex Association and its consequences for Sexual Harassment and aggression. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 68, (5), 768-781.

²As quoted in *Peacemaking Among Primates* by Frans DeWaal, (1989). Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

workplace harassment in a very similar way to how we previously defined bullying; i.e. the exposure of a worker, over and over again, to negative interactions on the part of one or more dominant persons, who gain in some way from the discomfort of the victim. These negative actions are intentional inflictions of injury or discomfort and may involve physical contact, words or insulting gestures, forms of sexual bribery and coercion including the quid pro quo manipulation characteristic of some forms of sexual harassment. Essential to this definition of workplace bullying or harassment is that there is an imbalance of power, an asymmetrical coercive power relationship, and that the victims have problems defending themselves.

Although the main actors in this drama are the bullies and the victims, a great degree of pain comes from the passive and facilitating role of the bystanders. In other research we have found that the bystander audience gives a supportive context or foundation for the bully-victim interaction. There are at least four types of bystander: The bully-bystander typically enjoys seeing the victimization, but does not want to directly participate. Essentially these individuals function as the bullies helpers and are vicariously involved with the bullying. The bystander/victim is often a frozen and frightened bystander who is too afraid to deviate from the social norms and from the strong charismatic leadership of the bully and the bully/bystander. Repeated lack of support by other workers, and the lack of support by employees, friends and family who may be too afraid to help for fear of job loss or other recriminations, makes the social isolation of the victim doubly difficult. In my clinical experience it is not uncommon for the victim of harassment to find that they do not have the support of friends that they would have had under other conditions. Unsupportive coworkers may even apologize to the harassed worker for being so lacking in courage. Such victim/bystanders often have a history of chronic childhood abuse. The avoidant bystander, typically denies the existence of the problem in spite of often strong evidence to the contrary. This denial is frequently omnipotent, as if the denier has some magical knowledge or power, to ameliorate the harassment merely by denying it. A principal of a middle school was regularly confronted by staff and parents, about worsening playground violence. As one parent was angrily told there was "no problem in this school," school security personnel burst in, for a 911 call due to discharge of a firearm during recess. The principal was quite psychologically sophisticated, and could minimize each complaint as alarmist with a quasi psychological plan to "focus on positives" as an antidote to the negative school climate. The ambivalent bystander is much less pathologically involved and less fixed in compulsively repeated patterns of interactions, than the other three types. This healthier ambivalent group offers an opportunity for

the consultant to muster them to redirect the workplace towards greater harmony and effectiveness.

Central to this interactionist point of view is the dialectical nature of this bully-victim-bystander relationship. In previous work, (Twemlow 1995a and 1995b) we defined the relationship between the victim and victimizer as a classical dialectic defined by Ogden (1986), as "a process in which each of two opposing opposites creates, informs, preserves and negates the other; each standing in a dynamic, ever changing relationship with the other" (page 208). From a practical point of view, this dialectic in the work place usually involves the entire company. Everybody eventually gets involved in some way, usually in a bystander role based on gossip and rumor. Since neither side of the dialectic has any meaning independent of the other, each role creates a special form of pathological interaction. The roles can result in violent and/or damaging consequences, for example, violent attack or sudden termination of work. From a clinical point of view this dialectical perspective focuses on the regression which can occur as the victim of the harassment becomes more and more victimized, with their capacity to respond self protectively becoming severely diminished.

DYNAMICS OF THE VICTIM

An example will illustrate prolonged sexual harassment and the variety of traumatic roles assumed at different times: victim, rescuer, attacker, martyr and detached observer, as explained in more detail in Twemlow (1995a and 1995b). In addition, in this case, the role of the bystander audience was a complex one. None of this patient's colleagues in the janitorial service would even listen to her accounts for fear of job loss, making made her feel all the more helpless and hopeless. At home her husband, for reasons that he said related to the need for money, also refused to listen. At times he appeared to vicariously enjoy aspects of her harassment. The personnel chief colluded with the harasser, refusing to believe the victim's accusations, and so this women was surrounded by an audience of bystanders who facilitated an abusive environment for more than a year. An adequate intervention began when a close friend made an appointment for her with an attorney.

The patient was a middle-aged African American woman who worked as a janitor for a local insurance company, and who decided to bring a suit for sexual harassment against her white supervisor. She grew up in a poor ghetto family with at least six known siblings. Her mother was a constant, help-rejecting complainer and her father was an alcoholic who died when the patient was 12. At that time she became the surrogate mother for the

family as her own mother became incapacitated. She had been devoted to her father, in a patriarchal family, with the father's mood swings and drinking having an ongoing impact on how the family functioned. The patient completed high school and quickly married unsuccessfully on three separate occasions, bearing several children along the way, all of whom have had psychiatric and legal difficulties. She herself was not involved with drug or alcohol abuse and claims no physical or sexual abuse as a child but was constantly verbally abused by her father who berated her for her inability to meet his needs. She reenacted this in her marital relationships where there was little she could do other than comply with her husband, who like the supervisor, functioned as a narcissistic tyrant.

Her account of the actual harassment involved daily contact when her supervisor would corner her in a closet, stare at her unblinkingly while masturbating, rub himself against her, show her pornographic pictures, and make comments emphasizing her helplessness and his desire to humiliate her sexually with the constant undertone that she was "stupid and black" and should be glad that he had any interest whatsoever in her. At times he gave her more responsibility and treated her as if she had some special skills that he appreciated, to which she responded with alacrity. In this chronic harassing environment, her mind could not focus on anything other than thoughts of the supervisor. She spoke of him constantly to friends and relatives, much to their annoyance. She felt helpless and hopeless; so much so that on one occasion when the supervisor wanted to make advances to her daughter at a company Christmas party, she allowed him to do so in a way that made her feel even more ashamed of herself. She berated herself for being "dumb and stupid" and asked, "Why did I take it, why did I stay in the job? I should have walked off and left." She felt the need to mollify him in a variety of ways, and was consciously aware of performing favors like bringing him food and reading the Bible to him in an attempt to reform his ways. Besides this highly victimized, submissive and mindless state, for long periods she functioned like a detached observer in which she said she felt "dead; too stupid to be alive." She would pinch herself so that she could say to herself, "this is me." She often felt in a dreamlike state as if she was not in her body, but above and behind herself, watching. At other times she felt like a rescuer. She would feel sorry for him and would take breakfast to him in the morning, and would work especially hard to keep the building clean so that he would receive accolades from his supervisor. At times she felt like a martyr, especially when it seemed almost impossible for her to continue. She would pray and ask the Lord if there was a purpose in what she was doing, had she done something wrong and what could she do to straighten it out? She would talk to him about God and life and how he could be different. In this role, she would

often feel that he was excessively tired and worn out by the demands of his work although she would always be there to help him. She felt she could "straighten it out so that it doesn't worry him." At other times she also felt like hurting him viciously. She would envision herself walking to his office and hurting him "really, really badly." She would feel, when sitting with him, that she wanted to "hit him, and hit him, and beat him." When she would express this to him, he responded with a smile that immediately made her feel submissive. She has sequelae of post traumatic stress disorder, often precipitated by a smell similar to the smell of his bad breath (Twemlow 1995b).

The harasser in this instance was shown to have a past history of similar problems which he had hidden from his employer. The case resulted in a settlement which allowed the patient to receive the needed treatment and to reestablish herself in another job.

These object relations configurations (roles) of victim, victimizer, rescuer, martyr and detached observer serve to temporarily bind anxiety and thus preserve an unstable peaceful, albeit pathological, status quo. Another clinically important issue is how the state of consciousness of the harassed victim alters, so that the quality of thinking becomes far less creative, with response options reduced. The harasser often becomes an intrusive thought repeating over and over again in the mind of the victim. In severe harassment the victim can enter a sleepy, dreamlike state, and recover memories of similar feelings of helplessness and fearfulness especially if the victim has a background of physical and/or sexual abuse. The feelings of helplessness and hopelessness further aggravates the victim's submissiveness. Such states of mind can lead the employee to absence from work, poor productivity, exhaustion, and lack of creativity. We have called this complex interaction The Giving Up Given Up On syndrome (Twemlow 1995b). These general features of the response of the victim to physical and/or psychological attack are often embedded in a whole variety of individualized specific psychiatric syndromes including depression, anxiety states, bereavement reactions and post traumatic stress disorder, not to speak of idiosyncratic responses like psychotic episodes and dissociative reactions in predisposed individuals.

Men and women who depend on the harasser for training and employment may be trapped in employment situations that are not dissimilar to domestic abuse. A gradual beating down of the individual occurs when the victim is emotionally and economically dependent on the abuser. Frequently the abuser has the support of bystanders, who can facilitate continued abuse by virtue of chronic disbelief and minimization of the original harassment. Legal and social denial of the significance of the events and the severity of the consequences leads often to limited options for redress.

In cases of sexual abuse in the workplace there is a certain pressure on a women to internalize the blame for the problem, especially if she is convinced that she somehow prompted the sexual response. Mynatt and Allgeier (1990), showed that psychological pressure creates greater self doubt in the victim than physical abuse, especially when there is lack of validation and feedback to the victim, as often occurs when coworkers function as victim-bystander, and are unsupportive to the victim. Retaliation is also possible, not only by the individual abuser but by the institution or organization, in a mishandled attempt to avoid suit, as if further pressure will result in submission or surrender in the victim, as it often does when that victim is predisposed (Twemlow 1995a and 1995b). Finally, there are often secondary emotional effects not only from the reporting process but also from the subsequent extensive and protracted investigations, including reporting to state and federal agencies, and then legal action, which can protract the whole process over a number of years. It should be noted that all of these reactions can be seen in men as well as women and in any vulnerable groups. Embarrassment and humiliation can be equally felt by men and women for different reasons. In the case of women, sexual issues are hard to report and are embarrassing because of the myth that women deserve what they are assumed to stimulate. For men, being unable to be strong enough to withstand harassment is often seen as a sign of a weak man who cannot face the music or "take the shot."

Another vignette will illustrate the demoralizing effect of protracted investigation and legal proceedings in a complicated multi-racial case of sexual harassment of a vulnerable Hispanic women by an African American woman. My patient was a 50 year old Hispanic women with a 30 year history of recurrent depression and two prior serious suicide attempts. She had received psychoanalytic psychotherapy and anti-depressants intermittently and had responded well to them. She had had one previous marriage of 10 years that had been childless and ended in a divorce, but she had maintained that relationship. Her ex-husband had, for the past decade or so, been the sole stable male in her life. She had a family background in which her Hispanic heritage resulted from a brief liaison between her mother and a Hispanic man, who had nothing further to do with her upbringing. This created a sense of oddness about her role in the family, since she looked so different from her Caucasian siblings. A "protective favoritism" developed between her mother and herself in which the mother protected her from the siblings and the protection created a great deal of rivalry. She ended up in several fights with her two siblings and has not had good relationships with them since. At the same time they come to her for help, since she is the highest earning member of the family.

With the history of considerable ambivalence about her ethnic background⁷ and with her low self esteem and tendency to see herself as a victim, she responded extremely angrily to any confrontation with retaliation, which usually resulted in further trouble for herself and loss of friendships. She had intense relationships with males and females that usually ended in screaming matches and occasionally physical altercations. Throughout this time she maintained a good job in a local factory running a machine which manufactured products which were of a highly specialized nature. It worried her that her skills would perhaps not be transferable to other jobs. After being promoted to a supervisory level, she then began to experience harassment by her supervisor. Over a period of three years she gradually became more and more depressed and angry about this. The form of the harassment consisted of sexual comments about her clothing which were always dismissed as unintentional jokes or "compliments" when she would become angry. Little by little all the workers on her shift ganged up in support of the powerful charismatic supervisor who demanded utmost loyalty from all those she worked with. This black supervisor created a significant complication to the harassment. My patient felt she detected some racial dislike of her as an Hispanic with accounts of supposed hating racial stereotypes that occur between Hispanic and Black Americans.

By the time I saw her she had developed severe migraine headaches and a serious recurrence of a major depressive disorder resulting from what she felt was significant retaliation after she complained to state and federal agencies about the working conditions. Over a period of four years she obtained an attorney to represent her; however her case was dismissed by the court. In a detailed and sympathetic letter from her attorney after the case had been dismissed he said: "There is not doubt that you have been damaged greatly by discriminatory treatment. It is clear that Latasha and others have treated you without respect. However, all discrimination is not illegal. Threats to pride, power, prestige and position which end up in personality conflicts are not actionable." The tragic part about this case was that even though the attorney considered harassment to have been present to an extreme degree, the law was not able to support the victim. Productivity of this worker has deteriorated markedly. Instead of exceeding her daily quota by some 200%, as she used to, she now barely meets it. Her entire shift has become less productive.⁸ This will continue unless the organization intervenes to alter the atmosphere which allows this bullying power differential to flourish.

⁷Race is a social construct indicating that individuals and groups are distinguishable by external characteristics like skin color, but has no biological basis. Ethnicity refers to a shared sociocultural heritage, which can for example be defined along religious lines or nationality.

⁸Since the organization would not change, she did some valuable intrapsychic work and was able to resign, for a better job.

The adult equivalent of schoolyard bullying called "mobbing" by Leymann, 1990, can lead to violence in the workplace, if not nipped in the bud. Even without formal organizational consultation, an intelligent worker, if equipped with the appropriate knowledge, can defuse a potentially dangerous mobbing. A vignette will illustrate this phenomenon:

The patient was a 40 year old semi-skilled laborer who worked in a newsprint manufacturing company in a small town. He had been referred for forensic evaluation following a charge of sexual involvement with a minor. He had no prior psychiatric history or family history of psychological problems and had a very stable work record. He had been subject to two forms of mobbing, one within the family and the other within the workplace. In the family context he had married a woman who was symbiotically attached to a religious cult in which her parents were prominent leaders. This fundamentalist Christian cult practiced open ostracization and forms of bullying and victimization of any person seen to be straying in any way from their idiosyncratic precepts. His wife came to the marriage completely sexually naive and unable to perform any sort of household duties without regular consultation with her mother. Although extensive psychological testing did not reveal antisocial traits, this man had developed a level of sexual frustration which ultimately led to inappropriate sexual touching of a 16 year old girl. He admitted the crime while in therapy and later made restitution, performed extensive community service and entered therapy in what appeared to be a genuine attempt to alter his life. His main interest was to reunite with his very angry wife and her family who by now had disowned him and declared him a mortal sinner. This mobbing made him at first angry but he gradually became more beaten down and depressed.

He worked hard in therapy but became more withdrawn and depressed in the course of several experiences at work: One worker joked relentlessly about his interest in young girls. Little by little other workers joined in so that he was harassed continuously during all of his break times. At first he did not speak up about this in his treatment but I detected an increase in his depression and rage in spite of improvements in his marital situation. He began to ask me how one deals with people who are pushing you around and then finally described his work situation. We were able to conduct an experiment, "in vivo," so to speak. I described to him the bully-victim-bystander interactionist perspective, in lay terms, and then suggested that he create a mediation situation with his workers, laying out to them his dilemma without apology and without trying to hide or excuse his behavior. I suggested that he describe to them the deleterious effects of their actions on himself and his family and ask not that they agree with what he had done, but that they allow him to rehabilitate himself and to continue the employment necessary for the well being of himself, his family and his

newborn daughter. He accomplished this during several break time meetings with the coworkers, and was eventually able to resolve the situation. He said that the workers who were initially very tense and ready to fight had little to say when he combined a wish to conciliate with an admission of his problem and a request that they be reasonable with him.

Harassment of men by women is much less commonly reported, but may become more prominent as the corporate workplace continues to contain more women. In the vignette to be next described, the harassment was between peers, and was complicated by racial issues:

John, is a 40 year old forklift operator who values his highly conservative mores, and exemplary work record. He became angry because a female coworker, a "hippie type," began to play her stereo loudly near him. In a rather impolite fashion, he asked her to turn down the stereo. This initiated an extraordinary spiral of harassment. Over the next three years, it was documented that he was often surrounded by other employee's boom boxes, all turned to maximum volume. On one occasion this bullying "hippie female" as he describes her, was accompanied by an Hispanic male who would suddenly pull him to the ground from behind, so that he could never rest or relax as he sat in front of his computer. From the moment he entered the plant, other employees would goose step behind him, encouraging others to laugh at him. If any money was missing in the plant it was attributed to him without evidence, since he was known to be proud of his scrupulous honesty. Further collusion with the harassment occurred from his supervisor, a black women, who suspended him with pay on several occasions but did not document it. At times he was falsely accused of being on drugs; the negative drug screens were then billed to him! There were no investigations of his complaints, and his union representative felt unable to do anything in the light of the fact that it was a man being harassed by women and especially by minority women. Eventually he was unable to continue working due to increasing depression and very high anxiety; on the way to and from work he would sometimes vomit with fear. He finally requested and was given a night job where he could work alone without the ongoing harassment.

The spiral of Giving Up and Given Up On was created in this employee by a combination of machismo and the disbelief of others that a strong conservative white male could be subject to any form of sexual or racial harassment by women. His coworkers would jeer at him when he complained about how women harassed him; implying that his lack of masculinity made him unable to put these women in their place. The bully/victim relationship between himself and the initial harassing woman was complicated by the bully/bystander function of the Hispanic male who would attack him without warning. The victimized/bystanding role of his coworkers was

facilitated by jokes, but they did not feel like making complaints in spite of observing these phenomena on many occasions. The union representative avoided presenting a strong case on his behalf and thus fell into a facilitating victim/bystanding role. The bully/bystanding role of his supervisors was also well illustrated by the peculiar and unusual pattern of unrecorded suspensions with pay, not investigating his complaints and even billing him for negative drug screens.

John's family background predisposed him for victimization. He grew up in a poor Midwestern family with a mixed farming background. His parents were very hard workers but had little money and he remembers being bullied at school about his poor home situation. School bullying reached extreme degrees when he suffered physical injury to both his shoulders from the bullies who would swing him around by his arms. The relationship with his father was an ambivalent one about which he had a significant degree of narcissistic sensitivity, with a lasting need for strong male mentors. He was always competing and trying to get the praise of his supervisors and it was very important that he be an exemplary employee. He had three marriages, two of them to women whom he felt exploited him for his money, and the last stable to an established career woman. The harassment was very damaging to his sense of masculinity and to his self esteem and reactivated a number of early traumatic memories of his victimization as a child.

What was particularly significant in this case was the ineffectiveness of management to deal with the bully-victim-bystander dynamic that was obvious to everybody. Even the employee assistance counselor who subsequently met with this man and his wife did little more than to record in her notes his complaints, without comment. All of the records I examined from the work place were neutral as if the individuals were afraid to be in any way confrontive of the clearly validated harassment of this worker. The entire organization ultimately became a bystanding audience that allowed the bullying to continue. It is this collusion which, I believe, exaggerated the psychological impact of the experience for this man. An astute consulting psychoanalyst could easily have engaged the company in interventions to deal with the group dynamics of this unfortunate situation many years before the damage occurred.

*Transference and Countertransference Enactments in the Psychoanalysis
of an Harassed Woman*

The complexities of the internal object world of a chronic and severely work harassed woman are documented in the analysis of Clara, a 49 year

old telephone operator who works taking 911 emergency calls. I first began seeing her in expressive psychoanalytic psychotherapy twice weekly some two years before transition into four times a week psychoanalysis. Initially, she had complained among other things of depressive symptoms created by a feeling of constant victimization in the workplace with a series of bad evaluations which she felt were unjustified, a failure to receive promotions and being accused of errors in her work that were later deemed not to be her fault, but which she claimed were not removed from her personnel file. She was maintained on 20 mg of Prozac daily. In the months prior to the sessions to be reported, she'd only taken Prozac intermittently and she felt it was not really necessary now.

Clara was brought up in a hard working WASP family who were quite poor but whose father created a successful business leaving the family quite well off in their later years. Her childhood was characterized by extensive sibling rivalry with a two year old older sister who was the father's favorite, a rivalry that continues to this day. Her sister married a very wealthy man who is also an object of Clara's envy. Critical events of her childhood included: sleeping in her parents' bedroom until she was about 10 years of age because of a mysterious epileptic malady, although there was no record of treatment or of any subsequent seizures.

A feeling of being highly sexually aroused in the presences of the paternal grandfather whom she idealized. She had a nagging feeling that there may have been some abuse, but she was not sure, and could not remember any particular incidences.

Her mother's severe irritable nervousness later improved with thyroidectomy, but she continued to be controlling and confusing often by anticipating Clara's achievements with comments that claims the achievements as her own. For example, "of course I told you that would happen, I'm glad you followed my advice."

There were several violent outbursts of temper by her father who on one occasion kicked the family dog to death and went after an abusive boyfriend with his shot gun. She has had a series of relationships with men who were both dangerous (on one occasion she dated a convicted murderer for a prolonged period of time) and with whom she could only keep the relationship viable by submission to the will of the male.

An early brief period of therapy after divorce in her only marriage was by a psychiatrist who was known for his highly directive therapy. She responded positively to his directives. He had indicated to her that all she needed to do was to allow him "to think for her." This support miraculously helped her overcome the crisis but she was left with a strong and lasting feeling that she owed her life to the psychiatrist to whom she felt inexplicably resentful.

With that background, at the beginning of the third year of psychoanalysis, her relationship with her harassing sister, father, and supervisor had remarkably improved as her rage and paranoid fear of me deepened in the transference. A pattern had emerged whereby when she lay on her back on the couch her associations were confused and she was afflicted with floods of rage, sadness and a feeling of emptiness. She could terminate these feelings by turning on one side, which enabled her to keep me under observation behind her on the couch from her peripheral vision. Then her feelings were one of a blissful relaxedness and a feeling of being comforted and contained in the relationship with me. She had observed this phenomenon but had no ideas about it other than the feeling that I was putting her through her traces to see if she was a good patient or suitable for analysis but I imprisoned her in a way so that she could not be herself but only what I wanted her to be. My personal reflections, were that she had projected into me both bad self-representations in paranoid fears and good self-representations reflected in an idealized transference. I began the first sample session by being 12 minutes late with a sense that a major counter-transference issue was being enacted here. After apologizing that I was behind because my secretary was away she said that she was enjoying the lovely music in the waiting room and that was fine with her. I thought I detected a look of triumph on her face. She laid down and immediately and somewhat uncharacteristically began reporting a detailed dream. In the past she had had trouble remembering dreams. In the dream she had given tickets to her parents and, the harassing supervisor for a major theater performance. This was a very large theater on Statehouse grounds. However, she quickly noticed that people were in the play that were not supposed to be there and that she was being dragged onto the stage protesting; "I'm 60 years old." The police were called by her parents. Her immediate associations to the dream as a whole were to an event where she had just gotten out of the shower the day before as her parents were banging on the door, since they were very worried about her. She felt invaded and not cared for at all and then she felt very sad and a prisoner everywhere she was. Another association included the idea that I may have been one of the actors in this play. She finished the associations by saying that she wanted to break a mirror that hung in my office. During the session I had trouble listening since I was increasingly uncomfortable with my lateness and found it hard to attend to her associations. At the next session she was 5 minutes late to the session and said she'd had a sleepless night and had trouble focusing and had a mounting anger which she assured me was not directed at me. I began to feel sleepy and also very uncomfortable and agitated and I had several consecutive random associations to her material. One was; Could I contain her if she became psychotic? and secondly, I

associated to a scene in a movie with explicit sadomasochistic highly eroticized brutality in the context of suicide pacts to crash cars. I realized that I was enacting both the victimized self-representation feeling helpless to contain her father's violent psychotic behavior and the sadomasochistic fantasy, representing the projection into me of an object sub-organization of the ego in which I become the sexually aroused harasser or persecutor, a condensation of father and grandfather. She had reported in the same session that her supervisor complimented her on an improvement in her attitude. The supervisor said she did not feel Clara was being as sarcastic, defensive and arrogant as previously.

In the final session to be reported she walked quickly to the couch and laid down in an uncharacteristically rigid pose saying that she had had a dream which she could not remember but that it was horrifying and had left her feeling totally empty and lonely. She was crying as if she was separated off from all those who loved her and even from me. She said that she felt I was speaking to her from a great distance. She thought that I may have been in that dream but she was not sure. She fell silent for about 10 minutes and then began retching violently, being unable to speak, making only strangulated noises. She sat up and I saw a look of terrible fear in her eyes. I made the following interpretation: I wondered if the dream had not realized her worst fears, that is that I was like her destructive father and arousing grandfather and that I was plotting to hurt her even more than she had been before. I wondered also if that dream had not made it very difficult for her to think thoughts as they seemed to be fragmented and confused and her mind may have seemed full of garbage or like a stomach full of poisoned food that she wished to get rid of. I further reflected that perhaps this understanding would help her regain her capacity to think again and to feel less isolated as her mind became more and more able to think thoughts. The interpretation seemed to be very helpful and lead to a flood of associations reflecting a feeling of a reconstituted self as if something that had been once removed from her had been given back. (A mind to think with and a self to experience with.)

These sessions illustrate how workplace harassment, the primary precipitant into treatment reflected the ghosts of Clara's past now displaced into the here and now transference with a consequent deepening quasi psychotic regression. The primary mechanism of projective identification allowed the exchange of primitive persecutory mental contents with a deep primordial countertransference (counter projective identification), in me. Bollas, 1987 describes an additional defense useful in explaining the kaleidoscope of projections in these cases. He coined the term extractive introjection, in which the extractor in this instance the object stealing mother/father/analyst extracts self-representations from Clara's mind, leaving a

feeling of being empty of thoughts and a capacity to think and a loss of sense of ones own person. Clara was already subject to thought stealing by her mother's omnipotent style, the harassing supervisor's contradictory evaluations and the destructive men who required submission and who did her thinking for her. As Bollas points out these multiple extractions; "constitutes a serious deconstruction of ones history," (pg. 166) which can be irreparable and which I believe this patient repeated compulsively in her personal and work relationships. The effects of extractive introjection was to render her thoughts "thing fragments" akin to Bion's 1983 beta fragments, which were ultimately experienced as unthinkable thought trash. The lack of thoughts and lack of a functioning mind in Bion's sense increased the feeling of emptiness and isolation. My interpretive healing reverie derived from analysis of my countertransference in the previous session, precipitated a transformation helping render her thoughts meaningful (thinkable) and aided reconstruction of her mind (Symington, 1996).

This fragment of three sessions in the psychoanalysis of a woman chronically victimized in the workplace illustrates rather typical primitive psychotic states often dialectically enacted on a larger scale in the workplace sometimes resulting in bizarre and violent acts, highly regressed group dynamics and irrational management decisions.

DYNAMICS OF THE HARASSER

Little research has focused on the harasser, primarily because the victims of harassment are usually the ones who end up in psychiatric care or in some of form of job related counseling due to absences and performance problems. The harasser/bully may be fired, disciplined, reprimanded or even promoted out of their role depending on his or her perceived value in the work hierarchy, but rarely will receive psychiatric care. Little objective information is available on those who harass, especially in cases of non sexual harassment. In the case of sexual harassment the findings of Dziech and Weiner (1984) give a descriptive outline of the typical college professor who harasses female students. Based on their ideas I suggest a broader classification, with more general application to workplace harassers:

1. **The spurious counselor/helper.** This individual acts as a special helper, offering personal, financial and other advice, and takes an interest in the personal life of the worker. Often that relationship starts positively, but its goal is to obtain enough information to allow the harassment to occur, and to set up an atmosphere of "trust" facilitating the harassment.

2. **The confidant harasser.** This individual not only encourages confidences but behaves more like a peer, sharing his or her own problems and life stories. He or she will frequently do favors for the employee. Thus the worker feels obligated or trapped into the relationship, at times even feeling sympathy for the harasser.
3. **The intellectual harasser.** This individual uses knowledge and intelligence to overwhelm and impress the victim, and thus sometimes is able to uncover information which can lead to further exploitation. The harassment may look accidental, for example brushing by the employee in a way which causes near injury, or touching the worker sexually, as if by mistake.
4. **Harassing joker.** A vignette will illustrate the main characteristics of this type. Older black man—harasser; younger white woman—victim. He jokes constantly “if I weren’t married, I’d fire you up.” Comes up behind her while talking to a colleague and touches her and inserts his tongue in her ear “Did you like that?” Plays a song titled “I wish I was a fish in your aquarium” which he says is a gross idiom for intimacy. When confronted, this type of harasser acts hurt and misunderstood, as if a budding friendship has been destroyed, or a gesture of friendship viciously repulsed.
5. **The power broker.** This is usually the quid pro quo harasser who uses power directly to bargain for the required submission.
6. **Sadistic harasser.** This harasser often has anti-social traits and does not experience caring feelings very easily. He/she has trouble empathizing with others, and at times is perplexed by the emotional reactions of others. A sadistic harasser expects and is even excited by the helplessness of the victim. The harassment itself becomes the primary goal rather than anything that results from it. Such harassment sometimes results in violence.

Passive submissiveness of the victim may promote a grandiosity in the attacker that is in proportion to the degree of submissiveness, especially if the victim is locked in to the situation by social and economic pressures and/or by the reactions of the bystanders. As the victim submits, the initial fearfulness of the harasser is quickly assuaged, and the harasser amplifies his or her response in an increasing spiral of grandiose harassing responses, often accompanied by omnipotent fantasies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although vulnerable workers will always be with us, there are many ways in which their vulnerability and its social and psychological conse-

quences can be reduced. For example, the legal system in the United States has attempted to protect vulnerable workers. It has also shaped the structure of the labor markets so that they do not disadvantage the vulnerable worker. In addition, the law has made it illegal for employers to discriminate against them. However, the law is haphazard in its application, with some groups being protected and others not; and various areas of the country differ in the severity and clarity of their laws concerning sexual harassment. Statutes compensating workers for violence in the workplace under workers' compensation are quite limited. Women and ethnic minorities receive the most extensive protection from discrimination. Laws also make it difficult to distinguish those with certain diseases like AIDS from being detected in the workplace.

Problems with interventions in organizations often have to do with the lack of seriousness with which an organization takes harassment. Years ago, sexual harassment was seen by some organizations to be a natural consequence of the presence of both sexes in the workplace and thus was considered to be harmless; for example in 1981 Collins and Blodgett (1981), report that two-thirds of the men and half of the women felt that sexual harassment in the workplace was greatly exaggerated. However, in 1996 about 97% of all companies have some form of sexual harassment policy. Hulin (1996) and his associates are one of the few research groups who has paid attention to the role of the organizational climate in the promotion of harassment. They emphasize two aspects which increase sexual harassment; when there are more men than women in the workplace, and an intolerant organizational climate. The organizational climate refers to the degree to which an organization is perceived by the employees to be sensitive to or tolerant of sexual harassment. A defect of their work is that the bystanding audience, that is, the nonharassed employees, are considered to be blamelessly passive in the harassing interaction, i.e. timidly waiting for their own harassment to occur, and thus experiencing stress because of that. Little research has focused on the role of the bystanding audience in aggravating the harassment of the original victim. In addition, frequently the victim of harassment is initially the more outspoken scapegoat for the group as a whole, i.e. the most vocal person who draws attention to themselves. The phenomenon of individual scapegoating in groups is well recognized in group and family psychotherapy, but less well recognized in organizations. In such groups individuals can disavow undesirable aspects of themselves into the scapegoat by projective identification, and thus vicariously enjoy the harassment because they are ridding themselves of the personal traits they hate.

There is much that can be done by the psychoanalytically informed professional to increase the level of sensitivity of the organization to issues

of potential asymmetrical power relationships in the workplace. Managers these days are becoming more and more aware that by paying attention to their employee's psychological well-being, they increase productivity. Some organizations provide only legal information to the employee, which sets up an unnecessarily adversarial atmosphere. The insightful psychoanalyst can nip much harassment in the bud by using role playing workshops and ongoing supervisory consultations to key management personnel to effect lasting change in organizations. We have found that the usual brief consultation, intense workshop approach does not create lasting change, but instead a psychoanalytically influenced model emphasizing self awareness and awareness of unconscious processes in the manager, is more likely to be helpful. (Twemlow, Sacco & Casanelli 1998).

Organizations should provide informal means for dealing with harassment and supervisors should be trained to mediate harassment issues long before they become matters for the unions and courts. It is my experience that, without such training, managers often feel that a bullying or a hostile mode of communicating is the only way to get your point across in a situation where you are in charge of another person's activities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported by the Child & Family Center, Menninger Clinic. Glen O. Gabbard, M.D. and Frank C. Sacco, Ph.D. provided creative suggestions for improvement of the model.

NOTE

Cases are either composite or have the permission of those involved.

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