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Moral injury is a psychological construct developed in military context, and although it has been expanded to include specific occupational fields outside of the military, it has not yet been proposed as an outcome of workplace bullying. Employees may experience moral injury when their personal values and the legitimate values of the workplace clash with unacknowledged shadow values during incidents of workplace bullying. Workplace bullying could be considered a potentially morally injurious event (PMIE) because it is transgressive, it is asymmetric, and it involves high stakes: livelihood and identity are at risk. Regarding counseling considerations, the use of ritual has been recommended to facilitate the healing of moral injury in ancient sources, and there is indirect evidence that it could function usefully in the present, as well. Addressing moral injury in the workplace could provide many benefits, including of reduction of long-term unemployment.

KEYWORDS: work, moral injury, workplace bullying, values, ethics, therapy, ritual.

Workplace Bullying and Moral Injury

It is not easy to be a thinking person in the workplace. Employees can often find themselves caught within a tug of war between an organization's *legitimate values*, which have been explicitly delineated and adopted, and its *shadow values*, which are unspoken and yet still influence what is going on (Tate, 2005). There is a particularly strained relationship between the legitimate value of productivity and the shadow value of power (Tate, 2005). Because the power drive is often not directly acknowledged or addressed at work, it can emerge in destructive ways, and many people will encounter it in the form of *workplace bullying*, a maladaptive behavior that includes repetitive mistreatment, verbal abuse, coercion, threats to livelihood, micromanaging and covert sabotage to prevent work from getting accomplished (Williams, 2011). Workplace bullying is quite common: nearly 1 in 5 American workers have experienced it directly (Namie, 2017), and a key feature is that it occurs in relationships characterized by asymmetric or unequal levels of power (Keashly, Minkowitz & Nowell, 2020), most frequently top-down, from boss to subordinate (Namie, 2017). Although workplace bullying has been tied to a host of psychological problems (Keashly & Neuman, 2004), it has not yet been considered in connection with the outcome of *moral injury*, profound distress that follows an occurrence in which one's core moral beliefs have been violated by a person in a superior role—or by one's self—in a situation where the stakes are high (Shay, 2014). The idea of moral injury has existed since ancient times, but it emerged as a psychological construct in the aftermath of American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Shay, 2014), and while the majority of scholarship on the phenomenon has focused on the military context, there are compelling reasons why the scope of this moral injury can and should be expanded to include asymmetric interpersonal conflicts in civilian workplaces in which an employee's core sense of a moral self has been violated: workplace bullying.

Although it lacks a single definition that is agreed upon by consensus of the academic research community, moral injury has inspired a wealth of multidisciplinary interest and scholarship. Among the conclusions of a recent meta-study by Griffin et al. (2019) are suggestions

that moral injury as a phenomenon is not unique to the military, and that it can occur in other contexts, citing separate studies involving moral injury in nonmilitary occupations such as social work, nursing and education. Healthcare providers facing morally-challenging decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic have initiated robust discussions about expanding the understanding and scope of moral injury (Shale, 2020). Police officers have described feelings of moral injury in the wake of the death of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests (Hogberg, 2020). It is important to note, however, that although occurrences of moral injury have been documented in specific occupational fields, it has not yet been proposed as an outcome of the behavior of workplace bullying in a generalized sense.

Antecedents

A practical distillation by Drescher et al. (2011) describes moral injury as "disruption in an individual's confidence and expectations about one's own or others' motivation or capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner," (p. 9), and this is certainly possible at work. When every person enters the workplace, they bring with themselves an *assumptive world*, beliefs about reality and how it functions based on deeply-held core values (such as fairness, safety and meaningfulness) that shape their view of what constitutes moral behavior (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Attitudes about work are also shaped by systemic forces, larger cultural narratives about work that cluster around notions of productivity and meaning. In the workplace, values are often adopted alongside mission and value statements as shared organizational values through a group process in which they are identified by committee and ratified, either by mass consent, executive decree, or some combination thereof. Some examples of commonly-adopted organizational values include: professionalism, accountability, open communication, respect, innovation, integrity, community, and personal and professional enrichment. Thus, organizational values are the legitimate values of the workplace, and employees might reasonably believe that if they align with these values and adopt behaviors that support them, they will be rewarded not just with a paycheck, but also respect and a valued place within the organization.

However, the reality that most people encounter at work is radically different; they discover that the workplace is often not about productivity at all. Instead, the workplace can appear to be a stage on which everyone carries out their own psychodramas while casting their co-workers in the play, and most of those dramas revolved around power. The pursuit of power is the shadow value that fills the void of existential meaninglessness that many people secretly feel about their jobs (Somé, 1997). Tate (2005) notes that although legitimate workplace values tend to cluster around productivity, they are often accompanied by a hidden value system based on the accumulation of personal power. Gestalt psychologist Trevor Bentley asserts that these values are part of a *shadow system* that lies outside of the legitimate values adopted by an organization, but nonetheless continues to influence the actions and behavior of people within that organization: "the arena in which members of an organization pursue their own gain" (as cited in Tate, 2005, p. 24). It is important to note that these shadow values are not inherently evil, and they often actually contribute to the survival of an organization. Nonetheless these shadow values remain, for the most part, outside of—and in conflict with—legitimate values (Tate, 2005, p. 22).

Exacerbating the situation is the inescapable reality that most workplaces are built on a hierarchical model, wherein certain members of the group will have greater amounts of status and power than others, based upon their proximity to the top of the org chart. Yalom (1970) has pointed out that in the psychology of group process, the presence of a hierarchical structure will incite

members to struggle for positions of dominance, and more recent research indicates that a hierarchical organizational structure within a professional environment contributes to workplace bullying (Turney, 2003). In addition to this, many organizations routinely review and rank their workers, causing further competitive angst while reifying the toxic side-effects of the hierarchical structure (Sutton, 2007). Even minute power advantages often yield negative behaviors such as rudeness and selfishness (Sutton, 2005). This may be because hierarchy, as a system, increases the tendency of superiors to objectify the people under them and to think of them as tools to be used as a means to an end rather than human beings (Gruenfeld et al., 2008, p. 124).

Conflict-resolution scholar Maire Dugan (2004) notes that, within a hierarchy, bosses often behave quite differently than their subordinates. Bosses expect subordinates to "keep their place," and "actively participate in their own subordination" (Dugan, 2004, para. 22). Dugan (2004) goes so far as to suggest that the active capitulation of these subordinates is what actually cements the whole structure of social hierarchy into place, which in turn reflects larger systemic inequities. This might help explain why the majority of workplace bullies are men, and they are bosses: managers, supervisors and executives (Namie, 2017). In fact, less than 7% of workplace bullying scenarios involve a subordinate bullying their boss (Namie, 2017). It may also explain why women are targeted more often than men, and Hispanic and African Americans more frequently than Whites (Namie, 2017).

Perpetrators of workplace bullying are not just a few bad apples, or isolated individuals exhibiting pathological behavior. Triggered by stressful work environments (Hauge, Skogstad & Einarsen), perpetrators are the products of dysfunctional systems (Johnson, 2011, p. 55). Bateson (1958) observed that escalating conflicts can arise unconsciously within systems where different groups have unequal levels of power, and applied the somewhat unwieldy label *complimentary schismogenesis*. The values of the individual players, however, should not be completely disregarded; Sutton (2007) points out, "the difference between how a person treats the powerless versus the powerful is as good a measure of human character as I know" (p. 25), and Namie (2017) reports 63% of workplace bullying incidents are perpetrated by solo actors.

Workplace Bullying as a Potentially Morally Injurious Event

Moral injury has been described, overall, as the fallout resulting from of an experience of transgression. In Litz's (2009) formulation, moral injury is provoked *by potentially morally injurious events* (PMIEs), "an act of transgression that creates dissonance and conflict because it violates assumptions and beliefs about right and wrong and personal goodness" (p. 638). Workplace bullying, like many other forms of trauma, is transgressive by its very nature: it violates personal boundaries and social standards for acceptable behavior. Given that workplace bullying can attack the very center of a target's character, the inner core of beliefs that constitute a person's values and provide the foundation for *personal morality* (Lan, Gowan, McMahon, Rieger & King, 2008), it would appear to meet the criteria for a PMIE (in a non-military context). In addition, because workplace bullying is asymmetric in many cases, it shares moral injury's contextual component of a betrayal by a person in charge. Finally, because income and self-identity are at risk, workplace bullying shares an element of high-stakes that is similar to, but not the same as, moral injury in the military context. Given these areas of commonality, it stands to reason that moral injury could and should be added to the already known constellation of detrimental mental health effects associated with workplace bullying.

It should be addressed that the threat of losing one's job is not the same as the threat of being brutally killed or utilizing lethal force against other people in a war zone. The intent of expanding moral injury to include workplace bullying is not to diminish the traumatic experiences of military personnel, but rather to acknowledge that morally injurious events can and do occur in the everyday workplace, often go unacknowledged and unaddressed, and leave damaged psyches in their wake. With that in mind, it is important to note that moral injury is unlike other forms of combat-related PTSD in that it does not require exposure to a life-threatening event (Shay, 2014). Also, it is important not to underestimate the psychological damage that can be incurred, cumulatively, at work. Dr. Noreen Tehrani points out that workplace bullying provokes similar symptoms to those experienced by victims of terrorism and soldiers who have returned home after experiencing combat (as cited in Williams, 2011). Furthermore, the importance of work in American society cannot be overstated, and the psychological community is well aware of how closely a person's identity is attached to their job (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). The loss of a job comes in at number seven in a list of the ten most stressful life events an American adult can face, and as such, it can often lead to severe mental distress (Spurgeon, Jackson and Breach, 2001). If a person loses their job, and their identity is so closely related to their work, they risk becoming nothing—losing their core sense of who they are.

The Damage Done

Sadly, for the targets of workplace bullying, job loss is often the outcome. Targets of workplace bullying tend to lose their job more often (54%) than perpetrators (36%) (Namie, 2017). Of that number, 23% of targets leave their jobs voluntarily in order to preserve their health or sanity, 12% leave when working conditions are made worse, 8% are terminated by the employer, and 11% are transferred (Namie, 2017). Namie's (2017) commentary on these results is blunt: "The sad reality is that even the general public seems to know that it is the target, the victim of the abuse, who is asked to make additional sacrifices to stop the bullying" (p. 14).

Individuals who have been the target of workplace bullying may find themselves trapped in states of severe mental and physical distress as a result (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Workplace bullying has been strongly linked over time to mental health problems (including anxiety and depression), physical health problems, somatization, PTSD, burnout, negative self-evaluations, sleep disorders and strain (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Even if a target manages to retain their job, the cost is still high; such survivors are often described as the *working wounded* (LaBier, 1986): in order to survive, they have adapted a mask of exterior calmness while internally they are experiencing mental distress, a maladjustment with serious potential risks for mental health (Vickers, 2011).

Like workplace bullying, the effects of moral injury can be debilitating and severe. According to researchers at Catholic University, moral injury does not simply *resemble* trauma, it *is* trauma (Dombo et al., 2013). Service members who have been exposed to moral injury are at greater risk for suicide and depression (Moral Injury Project, n.d.). Moral injury can lead to lingering ruminations centering on stifled anger and unresolved blame (Litz et al, 2009). In addition to these, moral injury also includes negative self-evaluation from both the inside and out (Dombo et al., 2013); overly harsh self-judgment arises in feelings of *guilt*, while negative self-appraisal due to public judgment manifests as *shame* (Dombo et al., 2013). Perhaps the most pernicious effect of moral injury is that it can lead to a breakdown in spiritual beliefs and/or a negative view of God (Litz et al., 2009). It is also important to note that, as in the case of workplace

bullying, the fallout of moral injury can make it difficult to trust others, causing ripple effects beyond the individuals who are directly involved, outward to their families and communities (Nash & Litz, 2013).

Therapy

Psychotherapists and counselors are, of course, well familiar with people who have been emotionally damaged by the workplace; clinicians are among the healers who are summoned to clean up the mess and help targets of workplace bullying and moral injury recover a sense of trust in themselves and the world. Moral injury, however, presents some difficulty in treatment. Litz et al. (2009) have been critical of attempts to apply commonly-used PTSD therapies to moral injury, arguing that exposure therapy is not a good fit because moral injury is not the product of conditioning, and re-experiencing transgression could actually be harmful, and cognitive-based approaches fall short because they assume that the target holds distorted beliefs about their experience of transgression when, in fact, their beliefs may be totally appropriate (Litz et al, 2009). The Moral Injury Project (n.d.) also cautions that although moral injury often co-occurs with PTSD, standard therapies for PTSD may not always be effective when treating moral injury. Adding to the confusion are a proliferation of studies in the 2010s, summarized thusly by Griffin et al. (2019): "Proponents of nearly every psychotherapeutic intervention have demonstrated statistically significant reductions in guilt/shame over the course of treatment to justify application of their approach to moral injury; however, adequately powered randomized controlled trials and stronger justifications are needed to establish clinical significance" (p. 357). A major point of contention in this debate is whether or not the proposed therapies are simply reducing the severity of symptoms (such as shame and guilt), or activating processes that facilitate moral repair (Griffin et al. 2019). Thus, regarding evidence-based practices (and even their alternative/adjunctive peers), the picture remains murky: more research is needed to gauge therapeutic effects and mechanisms for change (Griffin et al, 2019).

Although empirical validation for therapies remains elusive, the problem of moral injury remains, and affected people need support. The Moral Injury Project provides the following recommendation: "We favor the tenet that 'treatment' of moral injury must be defined by the individual according to their beliefs and needs. Outlets for acknowledging and confronting moral injury include talk therapy, religious dialogue, art, writing, discussion & talking circles, spiritual gatherings, and more" (n.d.). The Moral Injury Project also adamantly insists that the process of healing moral injury is not the sole province of therapists, social workers and clergy; the moral codes of the larger community are intimately and reciprocally interwoven with moral injury, and thus the larger community must play a role in the process of its healing, as well (n.d.).

Moral injury as often described as a "soul wound", and recommendations around healing often suggest a spiritual dimension, "soul repair" (Starnino et al., 2019), and this recommendation echoes ancient remedies. Shay (2003) relates that in classical Athens, soldiers who had experienced the horror of war were considered to be morally tainted, a condition they referred to as *miasma*, and such contamination could only be cleansed by social purification rituals. These tainted soldiers would perform as actors in tragedies, and the resulting purification they experienced alongside their audiences came to be known, famously, as *katharsis* (Shay, 2003). Theater was not just entertainment in Athens; it was also a sacred ritual of purification for moral injury (Shay, 2003). If the use of ritual was helpful in ancient times, it might prove to be so once again, in the current timeframe. A full evaluation of the use of ritual in therapy is, of course, beyond

the scope of this work, but I would like to point out two studies (one old and one new) that provide evidence to support the use of ritual as a tool for healing and the release of anger, guilt and shame (symptoms shared with moral injury) that have occurred in abusive relationships featuring unequal power status and/or power (a context similar to that of workplace bullying).

Jacobs (1989) reported that ritual provided the following healing properties for female victims of abuse: the reduction of fear, the release of anger, the increase of individual empowerment and overall improvement in mental health. Jacobs' (1989) framework is important to note as it could provide a congruent foundation for the use of ritual in workplace moral injury: 1) the abuse must be acknowledged, in a group setting, 2) a ritual action must be undertaken in order to sever the influence of the abuser from the abused, and 3) the abused must mentally identify with an image that represents who they wish to become (in Jacob's experiment, it was a goddess figure).

Fast-forwarding along this line of inquiry, a 2014 study by Allen and Wozniak found that ritual provided a legitimate and effective tool for aiding women survivors of domestic violence (p. 52). Allen and Wozniak's (2014) approach expands on Jacobs' work in the development and inclusion of unique and individualized *iatrogenic rituals* that emerged creatively through group process (and were unique to that group), alongside pre-existing rituals that were tailored for group use and became known as *rituals of incorporation* (p. 57). Allen and Wozniak (2014) found that ritual aided recovery by strengthening social bonds, developing hope for the future, reestablishing an empowered sense of self, and inspiring participants to continue their healing journey. In addition to domestic violence, Allen and Wozniak's (2014) approach could provide a template for developing rituals of recovery that could be utilized for moral injury. Specifically, Allen and Wozniak's iatrogenic approach to ritual honors the recommendations from the Moral Injury Project: a path toward healing should honor the beliefs of the individual who has been hurt, and also incorporate a larger community to provide support.

Conclusion

The connection of workplace bullying to moral injury opens up a vast opportunity for the development of healing strategies outside of the domain of what people generally think of as work psychology (such as Industrial/Organizational psychology). There is a lot to learn about workplace moral injury, in particular, and how to make the outcomes more equitable for everyone involved. One avenue for further study should include proposals for how to intervene and heal toxic workplace systems so that shadow values are addressed rather than ignored and sublimated. Another avenue would be to consider how to intervene with perpetrators of workplace bullying to help shift their managerial and interactional styles so that they no longer need bullying tactics to handle their work and no longer contribute to moral injury.

One particular area that may provide tangible benefits is *long-term unemployment*, or the population of people who have become so frustrated with the workplace that they have given up entirely on trying to find a job. Ritual may help them find a way back into the working world. The possibility of providing a path for even a modest percentage of the long-term unemployed to return to work could potentially have positive and life-changing impacts for many thousands of people. Beyond the specific case of workplace moral injury, there remains a great need to build a solid foundation for the use of ritual as a healing modality in psychology overall. Somé (1993) asks, "who can create ritual in its proper space and sequence when there are no elders?" (p. 58). The

collateral damage of the shadow wars of the workplace—its great human cost—must be brought into the light.

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