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Reconciliation in Workplace Bullying Contexts: Renarration, Responsibility, Grace(?)

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The purpose of this article is to discuss reconciliation in workplace bullying contexts. Bullying is a complex and subtle phenomenon that appears in multilayered workplace contexts, which makes reconciliation a controversial issue. What might reconciliation mean in escalated and deeply harmful bullying processes in ordinary workplaces? By discussing this question, I also address the urgent ethical question of justice and the distribution of responsibilities in reconciliatory processes. Drawing from previous research on bullying interventions, primarily focusing on the views of interventions by HR professionals, I trace underlying assumptions about reconciliation and the human beings involved. These tend to be derived from endeavors for financial gain and virtues like efficiency and predictability. As an alternative frame to an individualist approach that seem to be silently operative in the intervention discourse, I seek to explore the ontological imagery of the social body. From there, I elaborate on potential implications of what reconciliation could mean in a workplace bullying context. Resisting the efficiency and predictability of fixed procedures, I suggest organic, social restorative processes of renarration, responsibility, and grace, from within which reconciliation may appear as one among other potential outcomes.

Introduction

Bullying is a complex and subtle phenomenon that appears in ordinary workplaces, yet it is still responsible for devastating health effects on victims and bystanders.[1] Therefore, it is of great importance to be able to intervene and support processes of healing in one way or another. In workplace bullying cases, reconciliation has become a controversial issue. In this article I ask, what might reconciliation mean in a working-life context where bullying has escalated among the workers? I will discuss the possibilities for reconciliation, in the sense of more or less healed relationships. By doing so, I engage in difficult ethical problems regarding how justice can be demanded and how responsibilities might be distributed in reconciliatory processes in cases of serious bullying.

[1] Health effects include a wide range of psychological and somatic symptoms and medical diagnoses. See Eva Gemzøe Mikkelsen et al., ´Individual Consequences of Being Exposed to Workplace Bullying´, *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Ståle Valvatne Einarsen et al. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020 (2002)), pp. 163–208.

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Firstly, I describe the concept of bullying according to previous European bullying research and the complexities that needs to be considered when dealing with reconciliation. Secondly, I explore the reluctance and limitations regarding reconciliation, which have been highlighted in some empirical research on bullying interventions, specifically among HR professionals. Thirdly, I trace some underlying assumptions regarding reconciliation and the human being that seems to be operative in the intervention discourse. Fourthly, I explore alternative anthropological assumptions to see if and how that may change the course of considerations regarding interventions. And finally, based on these anthropological assumptions, I also draw out some implications for reconciliation and propose guidelines for what might signify restorative processes, including the demand for justice in workplace bullying contexts.

The Complexity of Workplace Bullying and the Problem of Reconciliation

According to previous research, especially in the European context, bullying refers to negative and unwanted words and actions that are repeated over a period of time and presuppose or develop certain power dynamics. Words and actions may be targeted at particular individuals, either passively (for example, silences) or in an active manner (for example, verbal offences). Negative behaviors can be either work-related (for example, unmanageable workload and unreasonable deadlines) or person-related (for example, excessive teasing or spreading rumors). These negative behaviors are not isolated or accidental events but repeated and intensified over a period of time. Bullying presupposes or produces an imbalance of power that makes the victim unable to defend themselves. The imbalance can be based, for example, on different positions in a hierarchy or a single individual exposed to negative behaviors by a group of colleagues.[2] This third aspect is critical regarding the conditions for reconciliation. It is debated whether bullying should be understood as a subcategory of conflict (i.e., a serious and prolonged conflict) or a phenomenon in its own right. I prefer to speak about bullying and conflicts as distinct but related phenomena, primarily based on the power imbalance that is essential for bullying but not necessarily a considered and problematic aspect of ordinary conflicts. Bullying is usually not a permanent state, but rather an intensified process, from subtle offences to serious violations. What started as a conflict between equal combatants may subtly escalate into serious bullying where the imbalance of power leaves the victim in a powerless position.[3] Moreover, the changing state of the situation and the different experiences of victims, perpetrators and bystanders make it possible to interpret behaviors and narrate situations differently.

Bullying evolves in a multilayered, work-life context. On the level of the workplace, the context is characterized by specific structures, organizational cultures, roles, and leadership styles. Moreover, the workplace is situated in a sociocultural and political context, which provides different working conditions and possibilities for union organizations and so forth. Beyond that, contemporary work-life is for the most part

[2] Ståle Valvatne Einarsen et al., ´The Concept of Bullying and Harassment at Work: The European Tradition´, *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Ståle Valvatne Einarsen et al. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020 (2002)), pp. 3-54, at pp. 10–18.
[3] Einarsen et al., ´The Concept of Bullying and Harassment at Work: The European Tradition´, pp. 24–29. See also Dieter Zapf and Claudia Gross, ´Conflict escalation and coping with workplace bullying: A replication and extension´, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 10:4 (2001), pp. 497–522, at pp. 499-503.

affected by a neoliberal economy, with its own cultural characteristics, and thus conditioned by enhanced endeavors to achieve virtues like competitiveness, efficiency, and adaptability.[4] This multilayered context provides the normative frame for what particular collegial relationships are expected to be like. Depending on how that normative frame is configured, bullying can be more or less visible, deviating from the perceived normal state. Thus, bullying processes can be driven and masked by interests, embedded in the specific context, and still cause serious harm to individuals and interpersonal relationships. The multilayered context with its embedded and hidden driving forces certainly does not take away or diminish the responsibility of perpetrators. It instead complicates the way in which responsibilities are understood and distributed.

Considering the contextual complexity and subtly changing state of the process, bullying appears as an urgent, multidimensional and difficult ethical problem. In this context, reconciliation has become a controversial and debated issue. What might reconciliation mean in such a context? Is reconciliation a possible or even desirable solution? Much research about bullying and reconciliation belongs to the practical field of intervention instead of the philosophical field of ontology, ethics, and so forth. Which intervening methods are most efficient in dealing with bullying? Which strategies should be adopted by the employer? In early-conflict stages of bullying, different kinds of dialogical conflict resolution methods have been recommended.[5] Dialogue-based practices such as mediation and restorative practices have been considered.[6]

However, in serious and long-standing cases of bullying, an investigation of filed complaints, separation of the parties, and sanctions against the perpetrators are usually preferred.[7] Thus, the bullying case is handled in a kind of legal and retributive framework. Dialogue-based procedures are not necessarily considered unwanted or problematic, but inappropriate, if not practically impossible, in long-term bullying processes. The only realistic solution seems to be separation of the parties. Such difficulties have led to an emphasis on prevention rather than reconciliation. This reluctance is confirmed by the stories told by the former bullying victims that I have interviewed in my ongoing research project. Very little is said about reconciliation. It seems to be out of reach. One of the participants stated: "I will never ask them this question because I never want to contact them. I want nothing to do with them, but I would like to know: did you see in retrospect what this was about?"[8] There do not seem to be any possibilities for a continued relationship. Furthermore, the reluctance of reconciliation poses a serious ethical question whether it is possible to defend reconciliatory processes as adequate interventions. Are such interventions able to accommodate an ethical demand for justice, or is retribution the only defendable choice in cases of serious bullying?

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[4] Premilla D'Cruz, ´Back to the Drawing Board: Revisiting the Bases of the Field of Workplace Bullying´, Keynote lecture, *International Association on Workplace Bullying and Harassment, Virtual Conference* (April 12, 2021).

[5] Loraleigh Keashly, Honey Mindkowitz, and Branda L. Nowell, ´Conflict, Conflict Resolution and Workplace Bullying´, *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Ståle Valvatne Einarsen et al. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020 (2002)), pp. 332-362, at p. 349.

[6] See, for example, Moira Jenkins, ´Practice Note: Is Mediation Suitable for Complaints of Workplace Bullying?´, *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 29:1 (2011), pp. 25–38; Pia Helena Lappalainen, ´Conflicts as Triggers of Personal Growth: Post-Traumatic Growth in the Organizational Setup´, *SciMedicine Journal* 1:3 (2019), pp. 124–136.

[7] Dieter Zapf and Maarit Vartia, ´Prevention and Treatment of Workplace Bullying: An Overview´, *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Ståle Valvatne Einarsen et al. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020 (2002)), pp. 457-496, at p. 471.

[8] Interview, August 16, 2021.

Views of Interventions by Human Resource Professionals

When workplace bullying is managed by the employer, human resource (henceforth HR) professionals usually get involved at an early phase. The dual expectations of their role are instructive when it comes to understanding the complexity of interventions in workplace contexts. On the one hand, HR professionals are part of the management and thus expected to contribute to the competitive advantage of the workplace. On the other hand, they are responsible for the well-being of employees, and thus they are involved in the design of anti-bullying policies and practices.[9]

A global study by Denise Salin and colleagues on the views of prevention and interventions in interviews with HR professionals in 14 countries may help illuminate the issue in more detail.[10] Regarding secondary interventions (i.e., interventions applied when bullying has occurred), the study shows that fact-finding about what has happened in the particular case, followed by prompt action, was widely agreed to be the necessary initial intervention. But what kind of prompt action is appropriate? The responses to this question differed. Of those who specified a preference, the majority were in favor of disciplinary actions like formal warnings and threat of dismissal (in other words, retributive interventions). This preference is also seen in a study in Norwegian municipalities, which recommended sanctions.[11] According to the interviews conducted by Salin and colleagues, HR professionals from only three out of 14 countries (Finland, Austria, and some participants from Australia) preferred reconciliation and reconciliatory intervention methods instead. The authors explain this difference by pointing to cultural factors. Bullying in these countries usually takes place between peers, which makes the power imbalance less obvious, and thus dialogical methods are more appropriate. When bullying is expressed through subtle processes of social exclusion, it is more difficult to prove and punish through disciplinary actions. Moreover, the power distance in these contexts is often modest, which is considered to ease mediation. While considering these factors, there might be another thinkable aspect to reflect on, namely the reasons for intervening that was mentioned by the HR professionals.

Of the participants, 40.2% mentioned productivity and efficiency as the primary reasons for intervening. This—as well as other recurrent factors like absenteeism and workers' attitudes and commitment, together with company branding—refers implicitly to economic factors. The message was summed up as follows: "a happy worker is a productive worker." Only 9.8% of the participants were motivated by ethical aspects, and this minority of participants mostly belonged to the same contexts (Finland, Australia, and Mexico) as those who favored reconciliatory interventions. Listening to HR professionals worldwide, it may be suggested that the reluctance toward reconciliatory processes in workplace bullying cases is often based more on economic than ethical considerations. This does not mean that no ethical problems with reconciliation exist or that a retributive response would be unethical. Despite the relative lack of ethical considerations among HR professionals, especially those in favor of retribution, it may be argued that retributive

[9] Denise Salin, ´Human Resource Management and Bullying: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution´, *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Ståle Valvatne Einarsen et al. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020 (2002)), pp. 521-540, at p. 531.

[10] Denise Salin et al., ´Prevention and interventions in workplace bullying: a global study of human resource professionals` reflections on preferred actions´, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 31:20 (2020), pp. 2622–2644.

[11] Kari Einarsen et al., ´Ethical Infrastructure and Successful Handling of Workplace Bullying´, *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* 7:1 (2017), pp. 37–54.

interventions could be used to protect the victim from further harm, and that an ethical demand for justice is obscured in more dialogical approaches. Moreover, while the reluctance toward reconciliation among the interviewed HR professionals seems to primarily follow economic considerations, it does not mean that economic considerations have no ethical value. Economic factors tend to frame the process of decision-making in specific ways that are not ethically neutral but put virtues like efficiency and productivity in the foreground.

Tracing Assumptions in the HR Discourse

To better understand the considerations by HR professionals regarding bullying interventions, I ask two different but related questions: What assumptions are implied and operative about reconciliation in the considerations on bullying interventions? And, extending the discussion into the philosophical and theological fields, what philosophical anthropology is implied and operative in the intervention discourse?

First, interventions should be preceded by an investigation of facts about what has been going on, followed by prompt action. In other words, we find an active leadership asking: What has happened, and what can be done about it? Secondly, as we have seen, the overarching aim of reconciliation seems to be restored productivity rather than restored relationships. The call for an efficient method and a good strategy primarily reflects an economic language rather that a language of ethics and care for the other person. Thirdly, there seem to be a wish for predictability. If reconciliatory interventions are to be adopted on an institutional level, there needs to be some kind of way—or more than one—to make sure that they will work. Why else would an employer invest the time, money, and energy needed for costly reconciliatory processes? From that perspective, separation of the parties seems safer.

As for the next question, virtues like efficiency and predictability seem to be regarded as superior in the search for intervening actions. Thus, a corresponding anthropological assumption seems to be silently operative and taken for granted in the background. Such virtues are compatible with how the philosopher Joseph Dunne has characterized the modern individual, dating back to René Descartes, as “sovereign” and “originally posited in isolation.”[12] The autonomous and independent individual creates their own self and destiny, undisturbed by other similarly autonomous individuals. Dunne speaks for the modern ego: “no one else can be in a relationship with me of a kind that would enable her or him to interpret for me where my interest or good might lie; nor can any prior relationship in which I stand have any constitutive role in shaping what my preferences will be.”[13] As the modern individual chooses independently, they become relatively stable and predictable. Few surprises are expected in encounters with others. Starting from here, the interests and preferences of the autonomous parties of a bullying process are not expected to be deeply affected by each other in a social process. If they are, the procedure is no longer as predictable as desired for the sake of the financial calculation. The modern ego can be described differently and in a more nuanced way, but for pedagogical reasons and to make my point clear I am consciously overemphasizing the

[12] Joseph Dunne, ´Beyond Sovereignty and Deconstruction: The Storied Self´, *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, edited by Richard Kearney and Paul Ricoeur (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 138-157, at p. 139.
[13] Joseph Dunne, ´Beyond Sovereignty and Deconstruction´, p. 139.

individualist assumption: it makes a difference what we assume ontologically about the human being when human beings are to be reconciled or separated.

Testing an Alternative: The Social Body

To respond to these assumptions about reconciliation and the human beings involved, I will explore an alternative view to see if and how that may change the course of considerations regarding intervention. Let me start with the anthropological question and from there draw out implications for the question about reconciliation. A lot of late modern voices have already questioned the stability of the modern ego. Drawing from Marxism and psychoanalysis, Dunne highlighted the deconstructed and the narrative self. But instead of starting with another abstract identity theory, I would like to start with the concrete existence of the body—or rather bodies in community with each other. When considerations about reconciliatory interventions are framed by financial calculations, it tends to be considered from a position that is abstracted from the level of the involved bodies. To explore a different starting point, I thus begin with an analysis of this community of bodies. Here, I am not proposing something else than, or something separated from, the mind or the spirit but rather an aspect of personhood that underlines the embodied, exposed, and vulnerable nature of the person.

In contrast to the closed and lifeless body that Michel Foucault identified in the modern birth of the clinic, contemporary voices have been raised to pinpoint the living, situated, and social body.[14] The anthropologist Mary Douglas notes how bodies are communicative, having "a natural tendency to express situations of a certain kind in an appropriate bodily style. It is generated in response to a perceived social situation, […] clothed in its local history and culture."[15] According to her, there is no such a thing as an autonomous body, closed to other bodies. The bodily expression always responds to and is affected by social expectations and historical contexts. Douglas continues by arguing that "the human body is always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension."[16] By arguing for such a strong connection between the individual and the societal body, the body as an image of society, she finally concludes: "What it (the body) symbolizes naturally is the relation of parts of an organism to the whole."[17]

In this way, Douglas reconnects with ancient traditions, dating back to Plato's *Dialogues* and New Testament texts, that make use of the individual body as a microcosm of the city, the church, or the entire cosmos. Historically, the metaphor has been used in different ways, and in the ancient era it was widely used in a conservative defense of the traditional hierarchies of the society.[18] But just like the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, I do not identify the imagery of the social body with a specific social arrangement of justice or injustice, equality or inequality: "it`s not a matter of signifying those *things*, but of giving

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[14] See Jeffrey P. Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power and the Care of the Dying* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), ch. 1, 2, 10.
[15] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London: Routledge, 2003 (1970)), p. 76.
[16] Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 78.
[17] Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 91.
[18] Ola Sigurdsson, *Himmelska kroppar: Inkarnation, blick, kroppslighet*, Logos Pathos 6 (Göteborg: Glänta produktion, 2006), p. 368.

them a *place*."[19] Thus, I do not understand the social body as an image of a friendly and idealistic community of equals, but a specific metaphorical place that accommodates the complexities of human relationships in a specific way. While the Pauline use of the metaphor relativized the societal hierarchies of his time by signifying equal relationships in the church community between men and women, Jews and Greeks, slaves and freedmen,[20] people nevertheless did continuously live with these tensions in the Roman society, as well as in the apparent group conflicts of the church. The social body was a vision of human community from which hierarchies, chaotic relationships, and enmity were identified, criticized, and dealt with.

The image of the social body may seem odd to illuminate the community of the contemporary workplace, which is based on labor relations and economic agreements. Contemporary workplaces are often enough characterized by hierarchies and rivalry, both between and within working organizations. And often enough, one does not actively choose their colleagues. Thus, the workplace of a company or state agency is primarily expected to be characterized by professional relationships rather than friendship. But, as indicated above in the reference to Nancy, I do not use the image of the social body as a sociological metaphor, envisioning or promoting a certain kind of "close" or "good" community. Of course, the ancient church and a contemporary workplace are sociologically very different. Still, the contemporary workplace, as well as the ancient church, is assumed to be characterized by human relationships of friendship and enmity, justice and injustice, equality and inequality, a complex sociological reality that is not possible to capture in a single metaphor. I am rather exploring the social body as an *ontological* metaphor, a vision of human existence at its most basic level, assuming foundational interpersonal connections that are not possible to opt out of. It places the messy sociological reality of the workplace in a specific ontological and metaphorical place of interpretation, where words, actions, events, and processes among colleagues are identified, interpreted, named, and recognized as just or unjust.

The theologian Ola Sigurdsson highlights that in the ancient context, the social body was used as more than a symbol in the modern sense. The ontological interconnectedness between the social and individual body was real, organic, and immediate.[21] Paul states: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor 12:12). Just as the parts of the body is connected in one body, so the members of the community are analogically connected to each other. Paul draws out the ethical implications of this kind of ontological interconnectedness: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor 12:21–22). Thus, one *cannot* say to the other "I don't need you!," even when that other is weaker and less powerful. Such a statement would simply run contrary to the assumed ontological and cosmological understanding. Injustices like bullying in a community could be considered a practical way of saying "I don't need you." So, the metaphor of the social body does not necessarily imply a "good" community, freed from enmity and exclusion, but it instead gives the exclusionary behaviors and patterns a frame,

[19] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, e-book, translated by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 134.
[20] Sigurdsson, *Himmelska kroppar*, p. 369. This use of the image is also challenging the conservative political concept of the organism, which instead takes societal hierarchies as a natural condition.
[21] Sigurdsson, *Himmelska kroppar*, pp. 367–368.

a name, and an image: a division in the body, with specific bodily parts literally *split* from the rest of the body. It means open wounds in the individual as well as the social body.

By this discussion, I am not aiming to establish a dichotomy between individuality and sociality, but rather highlight different ontological frames in which individuality and sociality are understood. My aim is to clarify how different ontological imageries, when used and repeated over time, establish different expectations about the social process between victims and perpetrators. I am looking for alternative ways of framing the understanding of human beings in relationship and thus new ways of framing the search for adequate interventions in cases of workplace bullying. What does separation mean? What does reconciliation mean? I argue that the answers to such questions are conditioned by the assumptions on which they are based.

If human beings, the workers, are assumed to be preferably autonomous and "originally posited in isolation,"[22] then bullying should not be regarded as a notably dramatic event. The independent victim should reasonably be able to dismiss the bully and move on. But the verified serious health effects of exposure to bullying challenge such a conclusion. Bullying *is* a dramatic and dangerous event, and we need an ontological imagery that makes it visible and understandable. Regarding reconciliation, the (overemphasized) individualist starting point has the advantage that it places the parties in a position to make their own choice. Their freedom of choice is not expected to be disturbed or manipulated by the more powerful combatant. This freedom is crucial in a restorative or reconciliatory process, as it may never be forced on anyone. The problem is the far-reaching independency claimed about the choice. That easily makes the social process superfluous. Why invest time and energy in a process that is not expected to entail any profound reassessments?

However, if human beings are assumed to be ontologically connected in social bodies of interdependent relationships, relationships are no longer only the result of independent rational choices. This does not take away the autonomy and responsibility of the one choosing. Relationships are considered to be the inevitable shared ground, the *place* in which responsible choices are made. Note again that the metaphor does not necessarily refer to "good" or "close" relationships, but rather assumed foundational and unavoidable interpersonal connections. If the condition of the individual body is interconnected to the condition of the social body, there are no possibilities to say "I don't need you" in a final and absolute sense. But a critic may fairly object: does not this talk about interdependency obscure the fact that the victim may be radically dependent on the perpetrator? What happens to a victim who is unable to say "I don't need you" to a perpetrator? Are there no possibilities for the victim to reject the perpetrator? These are fair questions in defense of the victim's individual autonomy and agency. However, the impossibility to say "I don't need you" should not be described in moral terms as a prohibition. It is rather the ontological precondition that makes bullying *appear* as a deviating and damaging phenomenon from the outset. If interdependency is used to describe the sociological bullying condition, the body metaphor becomes highly problematic, as it risks obscuring the imbalance of power between the parties. But I suggest that the ontological interdependency of the social body actually clarifies the original relationality that has been broken, and thus indicates what has been going wrong. Thus, the division is not caused by the victim who needs to distance themselves from the perpetrator, but by the perpetrator who initially cut off the victim from the community. This consideration does not in itself

[22] Dunne, ´Beyond Sovereignty and Deconstruction´, p. 139.

imply a preference for reconciliatory interventions but instead modifies the meaning of the consideration of interventions itself and what is at stake.

Reconciliation? Practical Guidelines

What practical implications regarding reconciliation are possible to work out from this discussion? I would propose guidelines based on the alternative anthropological assumptions that have been explored, having careful respect of the complexities of the bullying phenomenon. By doing so, I am also exploring a potential critique of the assumptions about reconciliation that seem to underlie the HR discourse.

The ontological assumption of the social body has a double edge. On the one hand, it can be used to argue for reconciled healed relationships, as the view implies a strong interrelatedness between the condition of the individual body and the condition of the social body. On the other, it expands on the meaning and the seriousness of the harm that the bullying process entails, which may make reconciliation even more problematic and difficult to imagine and embrace. Thus, I want to underline initially that I resist speaking about reconciliation in normative terms. It cannot be *expected* of the victim that they will be reconciled with their bully. This also means reconciliation as such should not be institutionalized or established as a fixed procedure but rather regarded as one potential outcome of a restorative social process. Thus, I distinguish between a restorative and preparatory process and reconciliation as a potential outcome.

What can be done is to investigate the possibilities for—and, if possible, facilitate—a restorative process. If speaking about reconciliation as an outcome is to make sense, it needs to be backed up by some components of such a restorative social process. I am here inspired by the founder of the restorative justice movement, Howard Zehr.[23] I suggest a process of "renarration," "responsibility," and finally "grace(?)."

Renarration

One of the less reluctant voices in my interview study said this: "But if I had been given an explanation, I could have forgiven her."[24] To this participant, forgiveness and maybe also reconciliation could have become a possibility if it was based on trustworthy communication. A similar desire for an honest story seems to underlie the question posed by the other participant that I referred to above, in which she describes an imagined confrontation with the former perpetrators: "did you see in retrospect what this was about?"[25]

I find no reason to question the adequacy of the preparing actions suggested by the HR professionals in the global study, namely, fact-finding and prompt action. But I would expand the terminology by understanding facts in the context of stories. As considered initially, bullying processes are usually slowly and subtly changing states, and thus events, words, silences, and actions may be interpreted differently. Single events and actions find their meaning for the involved parties in the context of stories. This makes me more interested in the story than in isolated actions and events. The questions posed by the investigator are: What has happened? How does the victim tell their story? How do

[23] Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (New York: Good Books, 2015), ch. 2–3.
[24] Interview, September 2, 2021.
[25] Interview, August 16, 2021.

they understand the temporality and causality of events, words, silences, and actions? And how are the perpetrators telling their stories? This investigation should be done with deep sensitivity for and with a critical awareness of the power imbalances involved in a bullying process. The interpretative prerogative has likely belonged to the perpetrators, and this may have silenced and/or perverted the story of the victim.[26]

If the parties are voluntarily motivated, they may be invited to facilitated meetings to listen to and try to understand the story of the other persons, both regarding what has happened and how it has affected the victim. Zehr prefers face-to-face meetings but suggests that writing- and/or video-based encounters may be used initially or entirely to ease the communicative process. The facilitator encourages the participants to express feelings about what has been going on, and the encounter should include opportunities to ask questions.[27] The facilitator should strive to create as equal conditions as possible by including, for example, supporters of the victim. If the awareness of the harm that the perpetrators have caused is raised, their stories may resemble a confession, in which they clearly articulate their guilt and responsibility but maybe also the unintentional effects of their words and actions. The goal should be overlapping stories, which touch each other in close enough a manner to generate new and partly shared understandings of what has been going on. In these stories, the harms and experiences of the victim should also be recognized. Without a confession leading to a changed story and new understandings, reconciliation is simply nonsensical. The need for and adequacy of reconciliation are expected to appear as a potential *result* of and *response* to this groundwork.

Responsibility

To tell overlapping and changed stories about what has been going on implies expanded narrative identities for both the victim and the perpetrators.[28] New positions in the story also imply a redistribution of responsibilities and obligations. The question of responsibility brings us back to the ethical question posed before about justice, and actualizes the choice between retributive and restorative justice.[29] How is justice to be demanded? Both theories share a common endeavor for justice and reestablishing balance between the parties. They also share a moral intuition that the balance has been thrown off by the wrongdoing and that there should be a proportional relationship between the wrongdoing and the response.[30] However, there are significant differences between the approaches in terms of what kind of response is recommended. Retributive justice seeks to demand justice by imposing a proportionate penalty for the bully, which could mean, for example, warnings and/or dismissal. From this perspective, the perpetrator is the object

[26] See Sarah Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2021), p. 150.
[27] Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, pp. 56–57.
[28] Narrative identity is here understood in a Ricœurian sense. Richard Kearney states: "Ricœur ties the question of identity to narrative by suggesting that the best response to the question 'Who is the author or agent?' is to tell the story of a life." Richard Kearney, ´Narrative Imagination: Between Ethics and Poetics´, *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, edited by Richard Kearney and Paul Ricoeur (London: Sage, 1996), p. 181. Ricœur himself states: "The story told tells about the action of the 'who.' And the identity of this 'who' therefore itself must be a narrative identity" (Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 246.
[29] I am here discussing interventions by the employer, not by the court. If the bullying process involves criminal actions, the case is handled in a legal process, which is not discussed here.
[30] Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, p. 75.

of actions and the demand for responsibility relates primarily to what should *be done to* the perpetrator in terms of a penalty. This intervention has the advantage of, at least for the moment, guaranteeing the protection of the victim and minimizing the risk of further harm. As we have seen, this alternative is widely accepted in serious bullying cases in previous research, as well as among HR professionals worldwide. Still, the obvious problem with this position is that justice and responsibility are demanded by, and directed to, an institution rather than the victim themselves. Thus, the needs and the voice of the victim run the risk of being silenced anew. As was also argued in the global HR investigation, a retributive approach demands strong evidence as a possible option, but this is not always feasible when the bullying process is subtle and ambiguous. In such cases, dialogical approaches may be more practicable.

From the perspective of restorative justice, combined with the ontology of social bodies, the exercise here is to demand justice and responsibility in a relational context from within a social process which certainly—at least for the moment—entails a higher risk. Justice means demanding responsibility by obligating practical reparations for the wrong that has been done to the "weaker part" and the split that has shattered the social body, including the wider community. Thus, the restorative process should include practical reparation by the perpetrator, not in terms of penalty but in terms of penance or remedy, clarified by Paul Leer Salvesen as "trust-building praxis."[31] From the perspective of restorative justice, therefore, the perpetrator is the subject of actions and the demand for responsibility relates primarily to what should *be done by* them in terms of a remedy. A responsible action by the perpetrator thus functions as a kind of embodied renarration of the continuous story. The expanded narrative identity opens a widened scope of reasonable and responsible actions. Thus, the distribution of responsibilities should follow from how the narrative is retold.

The subsequent facilitated meetings represent an expanded setting, which also includes stakeholders who may have influenced or been influenced by the bullying process. These may include, for example, union representatives, the employer, close colleagues, and HR professionals. In this wider setting, the restorative process may involve a critical review of the structures, culture, and interests that fueled the bullying process. What changes in the workplace are called for by the renarration? And what responsibilities are identified in the wider setting? This wider investigation is motivated by the multilayered context of workplace bullying and the fact that bullying usually not only refers to isolated cases but rather to patterns that characterize the whole working environment.

Grace(?)

If stories are retold and if responsibilities are acknowledged and distributed accordingly, restorative processes still remain open-ended. The open-endedness of the process follows from the anthropological assumption of the social body. Starting from the independent individual, relationships have no "constitutive role in shaping what my preferences will be,"[32] at least theoretically. From there, social restorative processes are not clearly expected to give rise to any profound reassessments. But if the social processes of the working community are interpreted in light of the anthropology of the social body, with different

[31] See Paul Leer Salvesen, *Forsoning etter krenkelser* (Bergen: Fagboksforlaget, 2009), p. 206.
[32] Dunne, ´Beyond Sovereignty and Deconstruction´, p. 139.

individual bodies connected in one social body, the social process cannot be easily predicted. As Paul states: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor 12:26). What affects the one has the potential to affect the other. Once again, there are no guarantees that this or other theoretical lenses will change anything in practice, but I would argue that the ontological imagery we use repeatedly creates normative imaginations and expectations. If the social process is interpreted as a negotiation between different parts of a social body, whose potential to suffer and rejoice with each other may be deeply disturbed and corrupted but still taken for granted, it affects the imagination of what the process *is about*. It conceptually reframes the restorative process itself.

Based on such assumptions, the restorative process remains unpredictable and open-ended. Reconciliation still needs to be followed by a question mark, and it cannot be implemented as a stable method, strategy, or procedure. It is rather constituted as instability, as unpredictability, not beyond participation but beyond control. Every attempt to control or force the process toward reconciliation runs the risk of new violations. For reconciliation to appear as a possibility, it presupposes a space to think, to feel, to speak, to act, and to choose. Reconciliation needs space. A restorative process creates space. And in this space, different possibilities are kept open. The restorative process should prepare for a variety of possible outcomes and actions. Separation may be one—and sometimes the only—possible choice. Other outcomes may be a professional relationship in terms of friendship, an ability to stay under the same roof, or something in between. As Zehr underlines, "forgiveness or reconciliation is not a primary principle or focus of restorative justice."[33] It is a process and framework that may have different outcomes. However, as said above no matter how the process ends, it should be followed by some kind of prompt action. Reconciliation appears as *one* potential possibility *from within* the dynamic social process. It cannot be an external prescription but is rather characterized in theological terms of grace: an experience of interpersonal transformation, as my enemy appears as *someone* beyond the enmity. It entails a renewed willingness to freely give and receive a gift. It is not the result of a calculation. It is rather a miracle that no one involved could predict, a gift that *may* be given and received in due time. It means that grace also must be followed by a question mark.

Reconciliation? Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, workplace bullying is a highly complex phenomenon that causes serious damage to victims. The complexity and seriousness of the phenomenon, as well as its multilayered context, need to be considered when dealing with bullying interventions in the workplace.

Workplaces are not neutral ground but ideologically established frames of decision-making. Even if I have problematized the endeavor for financial gain, which is often dominant in work-life settings, that endeavor will always—to a certain degree, at least—frame decision-making in the workplace. Thus, I ask for self-critical awareness of the underlying assumptions that may determine the considerations and expectations regarding actions of intervention. Such considerations extend beyond the efficiency of the intervention itself. What are interventions about? What are social processes about? What is at stake? Such questions are not independent from the ontological assumptions we make

[33] Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, p. 13.

about the human beings involved. I have argued that the imagery of the social body frames the consideration in a different way than the concept of autonomous individuals does. My point is, ontological imageries matter.

On the basis of the different ontological imageries, I have elaborated on the question of reconciliation. I have suggested a restorative process of renarration, responsibility and grace(?), from which reconciliation may appear as a potential outcome. By doing so, I have also addressed the urgent ethical question regarding the demand for justice and responsibility as a choice between penalty (what should *be done to* the perpetrator) and remedy (what should *be done by* the perpetrator). While retribution may sometimes be the only possible option in serious bullying cases, I propose that a restorative process *may* be worthy of consideration from the relational perspective of the social body, even if it is potentially more risky and not easily justifiable from the individualist point of view. I agree with Zehr's conclusion, applied to cases of workplace bullying: "A realistic goal, perhaps, is to move as far as we can towards an approach that is restorative."[34]

As far as I can ascertain, one of the serious ethical problems with reconciliation arises when it is framed and implemented as a fixed and determined procedure. In other words, the problem appears when the question mark, following terms such as reconciliation, forgiveness, and grace, is replaced by an exclamation mark. Such institutionalization and instrumentalization of organic social processes run the risk of worsening the wounds of both individuals and communities.

I firmly believe that the door to reconciliation—the healing of the individual and social bodies—should be kept open, even in serious bullying cases, not for everyone to enter, but because the workings of unpredictable grace are beyond the control of everyone involved. If reconciliation is a miracle, then who is anyone to close that door?[35]

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[34] Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, p. 76.

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