Sociology at the Frontiers of Psychology
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FOREWORD

Albeit somewhat schematically, sociology may be described as the study of the relationship between man and society. Psychology may perhaps, by the same token, be termed the study of the relationship of man to himself. Social psychology, like social medicine, is often concerned with the ways in which individuals and groups are affected psychologically by the social structures among which they live and work: social conditions, the environment, cultural restraints, and so on.

There is also, however, a nameless field at the frontiers between sociology and psychology, where theories and perspectives are freely borrowed from one to the other - an autonomous zone between the two disciplines that we have called “sociology at the frontiers of psychology”. This Alsace-Lorraine of the social sciences was explored in a workshop at the 37th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology in Stockholm in July 2005. The title captured the interest of a group of sociologists who found themselves theoretically or empirically at the crossing. In addition, two psychologists have contributed articles which border on the sociological field from the other side of the frontier.

The papers from the workshop which have become the chapters of this book spanned from those that used psychological theory for studies of sociological phenomena to those that used sociological perspectives for studies of psychological phenomena. Some were largely theoretical, others rather empirical. Some found psychological concepts useful for sociological projects, others set themselves the task of showing the potential of sociological theory in the domain of psychology. Some writers were research fellows at the beginning of their careers, some professors at the pinnacle of theirs. The Scottish, Dutch, Moroccan-French, Norwegian, Canadian and North American sociologists in the workshop found inspiration in classical sociological theory from Durkheim to Foucault and produced original thinking grounded in empirical work. During the workshop presenters placed themselves on an axis drawn on these dimensions:

Theoretical

Psychological theory       sociological perspectives

Empirical
Laïla Salah-Eddine explores the frontiers between sociology and psychology in her chapter on "The Example of Moral Harassment in the French Workplace". "Moral harassment" at work is defined as a relationship setting a perverse aggressor and a victim in opposition and it has now become a common expression in France. Salah-Eddine is interested in determining whether the increasing attention to the phenomenon "moral harassment" stems from psychological or sociological factors. To what extent may the emergence of "moral harassment" result from the "psychologisation" of society? The emergence of moral harassment as a psychological concept – the use of the words « moral » and « harassment » referring clearly to a psychic and inner reality – tends to mask the social and economic grounds of violence in the workplace. Organizations have to deal with tough work conditions, with the « citius, altius, fortius » motto, and the « financial harassment », all reasons why employees are more strained than before. Aggressive work environments are framed, through the use of « moral harassment », into relationships setting a perverse aggressor and a victim in opposition. The psychologization of society is a double-edged sword. To a certain extent, it contributes to an increased awareness of mental problems; but, at the same time, the frontier between « psychologization » and « psychologism » is porous, thus turning collective problems into interpersonal ones.

Thomas J. Scheff takes his departure from the well-known Maslow pyramid (1968) in his article "Universal Human Needs? After Maslow". The idea that there are human needs that transcend culture and historical era was clearly expressed by Maslow. This idea is important to the extent that it states outright our assumptions about human nature, since these are seldom made explicit. Because they lack clear definitions, however, Maslow’s formulations were only a first step. Scheff’s essay shows how with some modification, Maslow’s ideas can be related to existing theories and research on alienation, attachment, and self-esteem. He also includes a new category, ‘experiencing the full range of appropriate emotions’. Each of the needs is defined, and the relations between them explored. If these definitions have any validity, then not only the poor but also the affluent are failing to get most of their basic needs met.

In “The Habitus Process-A Biopsychosocial Conception” Andreas Pickel addresses the concept habitus, popularized in the last two decades of the twentieth century especially by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias. Habitus is a term frequently employed in the social sciences. It seems to offer a fruitful way of dealing with some fundamental problems in social theory by providing a conceptual linkage between cultural, social, psychological, and biological dimensions of reality. “The Habitus Process” sets out to work towards a clearer and more systematic conception of habitus based on a systemic philosophy of science. The paper surveys the various forms in which habitus
appears in the social world, presents a systematic account of its structures and effects, and sketches a dynamic model of the workings of habitus as a process in biopsychosocial systems. The illustrative case discussed is that of national habitus and homo nationis as a biopsychosocial system.

Eva Maria Merz enriches the sociological ‘solidarity’ concept with Bowlby’s psychological attachment theory in her study, “The Case of Intergenerational Solidarity”. Her empirical basis is a study of interaction between adult children and their aging parents in the Netherlands. Sociological analyses of solidarity go back to Emile Durkheim who introduced the concept. A form of societal integration or over-individual cohesion, solidarity was conceived as countering the anomic and egoistic tendencies of the single members of the society. Solidarity was a strongly positively connotated term, for which ‘cohesion’ could often be used synonymously. For sociologists today, family solidarity is a fluid concept that deals with social support, social cohesion, and relationships within families. Not surprisingly, the term has continued to have high actuality. Merz found sociological concepts of solidarity elusive, however, when it came to building and testing hypotheses. A supplementary source was found in psychological attachment theory.

Psychological attachment theory and the sociological theory of intergenerational solidarity refer to processes within intimate interpersonal relationships. The chapter outlines a new conceptualization of central dimensions of attachment, which would enable a fruitful integration of attachment theory’s theoretical propositions and empirical findings with sociological research into intergenerational solidarity. This integration would further the understanding of family relations and the interaction between family processes and political, policy-related, and cultural processes.

James Moir’s “A Sociology of Psychological Representations” sets out to describe a grammar or set of rules for interpersonal contact rooted in everyday discursive constructions that refer to what people are like ‘inside’: what they think, feel or believe. Moir sees these mechanisms both as providing publicly accountable rules for agency and as reinforcing dualistic ways of thinking. Both thinking (the rational) and feeling (the affective) can be used to account for action. Further exploring conceptions of discursive psychology developed by Potter and Edwards, Moir sees a psychologising of human interaction as contributing to an inner–outer dualism.

In “Wilhelm Reich and Erik Grønseth: Character Analysis and its Influence on Norwegian Sociology”, Hans Petter Sand opens with a biographical sketch of Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957). This strange and haunting figure made little known contributions to Norwegian sociology and family therapy. Reich, who originally belonged to the circle around Sigmund Freud, gradually developed his own approach to therapy and analysis. His influence in Norway dates back to
the 1930s, when he came to the country as a refugee. Although marginalised in psychology because of his involvement with theories of ‘cosmic energy flows’, in Norway his influence in family therapy became a lasting one. In Norwegian sociology Reich’s influence was transmitted through the work of Erik Gronseth (1924-2005). Gronseth, who became one of the post-war pioneers of sociology in the country, used Reich’s approach to the sociology of the family consistently from the 1950s until his retirement. Its influence spread, becoming trend-setting for the development of family therapy in Norway in the post-war years.

While some of the contributors supplement sociological concepts with psychological theory, others suggest that sociological perspectives may be used to interpret, understand, and explain individual and group psychological states. Each sociological perspective has its view of the relationship between human action and social structure and substantive areas where the ‘fit’ is good. The most elementary classification divides the sociological perspectives into two rough groups: those that view human beings as agents and those that view them as “puppets controlled by the strings of structure”. However, between the position that people can do what they want if they only want hard enough, and the view that nothing helps because we are all slaves of social structure, there is quite a broad spectrum.

The range of perspectives available in sociology reflects the complexity of life and society. Like the different schools of therapy in psychology, the different sociological perspectives provide alternative analytical models. Depending on how it views the relationship between human action and social structure, each perspective has the potential both for generating frameworks for understanding human action and for suggesting courses of action as alternatives or supplements to psychological treatment. The potential of sociological tools in this field is relatively unexplored. Holmesland, Vik, and Overland, colleagues in a sociological minority at a large Norwegian hospital, have found their separate ways to the borders of psychology.

In “Video Interaction Guidance Offered to Mothers with Postnatal Depression: Experiences from a Pilot Study”, Kari Vik tells the story of a pilot study in the use of video interaction guidance with postnatal depressed mothers. The data collected through interviews and video recordings were analysed in a phenomenological perspective. In short, the mothers experienced their own coping, the mothers engaged in mutual dialogue with their babies, and the mothers’ suffering was recognized. The authors’ hypothesis is that pictures on the television screen were especially powerful in effecting a change in the mothers’ self-image.

Anne Lise Holmesland approaches the field in her report from an on-going research project, “The intersection between Foucauldian discourses and the
individual’s life world in therapy”. Her empirical bases are observation and sociological analysis of a psychological intervention model – the network intervention model called Open Dialogue by, among others, the Finnish psychologist Jaakko Saekkula. The model is observed in the context of a project where it is introduced as an alternative or supplement to individual therapy for young people.

Holmesland observes what happens in the therapy room when representatives for the patient’s social network are brought together with mental health professionals and patients. In particular, she explores how reality can appear to be differentially experienced and defined by therapists, representatives from the social network, and the patient. Her analysis is based on observations: at a micro level, of the direct interaction that takes place in the therapy room; and at a macro level, of the way the situation is viewed, albeit unwittingly, in the context of outer limitations. In spite of the fact that social structures at a macro level seem abstract, these structures may from time to time be perceived as dominating therapy and influencing the treatment process to a great degree.

The individual’s psychological resilience – the ability to ‘bounce back’ or regain form after great strain – may make the difference between integration and disintegration for survivors of traumatic events, including refugee survivors of human rights abuses. The final “sociological chapter”, Overland’s “Resilience and Generosity: A Study in Survival”, visits the personal accounts of successfully rehabilitated Cambodian survivors, who explain what they think has contributed most to their survival and psychological rehabilitation. While research (both sociological and psychological) has indicated various factors that appear to play in to the resilience of survivors, refugees’ perspectives on their own recoveries are less common. In recent years the focus of psychological research on survival has slowly shifted from ‘misery’ to ‘mastering’ – from the study of problems to the study of resilient behaviour, from risk factors to protective factors, and from therapy to efforts to strengthen competency. A parallel turn is seen in sociology. Among the protective elements are found both social, cultural, and religious factors.

In the final section, “Psychology at the Frontiers of Sociology” we receive a view from the other side. Two psychologists and an anthropologist approach their fields of study with an eye to sociological theory and social issues.

From the other side of the frontier, psychologist Dag Nordanger and anthropologist Thera Mjaaland look at cultural sensitivity in psychosocial work with immigrants from war-torn areas. This requires a reflexive attitude in relation to the cultural foundations of therapy. In such work, the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis has become a core instrument for measuring vulnerability and for guiding interventions. The article focuses on the trauma discourse of western folk psychology on which some diagnostic criteria for
PTSD are based. This discourse gives credence to psychosocial coping strategies that aim at confronting rather than avoiding emotions and painful memories. The article brings to attention ethnographic data from Tigray, Ethiopia, showing that Tigrayan folk psychology builds on an avoidance discourse which gives credence to coping strategies aiming at containing emotions and painful memories. The article elaborates on how psychosocial discourses might be functional in their context, and discusses some clinical implications for psychosocial work with refugees and asylum seekers.

In her chapter, “Changing Patterns of Intimate Partnership Formation and Intergenerational Relationships among Ethnic Minority Youth in Denmark”, psychologist Rashmi Singla combines theories of modernization/individualization, family relations and discrimination effects in a social psychological study of youth and parents belonging to the five largest ethnic minority groups in Denmark. The main focus is on intergenerational relations in the context of intimate partnership formation. Singla is critical of “the reductionist juxtaposition of own or parental choice, and appeals for broader concepts that include both own choice and parental acceptance”.

As anthropologist Liisa Malkki has remarked:

“Psychologising modes of knowledge and therapeutic forms of relationships have too often been unreflectively imported into the disciplinary toolkit of anthropology and sociology, subtly reinforcing the de-politicising and dehistoricising tendencies of an implicit functionalism”.

The explanatory power of sociological models and their contributions to an understanding of the relationship between man and society are often discounted, not least perhaps by the social scientists themselves, as sociology becomes increasingly identified in the public discourse with ‘survey sociology’. Since its origins, sociology has been steadily concerned with seeking such explanations; this is the very content of sociological theory. This volume seeks to make inroads into a territory lost by default in a frontier skirmish of the mind.

Endnotes

PART I

Sociology at the Frontiers of Psychology
CHAPTER ONE

SOCIOLOGY AT THE FRONTIERS OF PSYCHOLOGY: THE EXAMPLE OF “MORAL HARASSMENT” IN THE FRENCH WORKPLACE

LAÏLA SALAH-EDDINE

Abstract

The emergence of moral harassment as a psychological concept – the use of the words « moral » and « harassment » referring clearly to a psychic and inner reality – tends to mask the social and economic grounds of violence in the workplace. Organizations have to deal with tough work conditions, with the « citius, altius, fortius » motto, and the « financial harassment », all reasons why employees are more strained than before. Aggressive work environments are framed, through the use of « moral harassment », into relationships setting a perverse aggressor and a victim in opposition. The psychologization of society is a double-edged sword. To a certain extent, it contributes to the increased awareness of mental problems, but, at the same time, the frontier between « psychologization » and « psychologism » is porous, thus turning collective problems into interpersonal ones.

Introduction

In his work, Georg Simmel stressed the links between sociology and psychology. A clear frontier between the two is, in his view, all the more difficult to establish as sociologists use basic psychological processes to analyze their subject matter.

The issue of “moral harassment” in the workplace is one of analysis of a psychological process from a sociological point of view, which clearly brings into play the frontier between the two disciplines. The links between sociology and psychology are ambiguous, and the least one can say is that the frontier is
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Porous. This ambiguity is especially relevant in the case of “moral harassment” as evidenced in the French workplace.

We will in the following explore the literature on the subject, as well as French-language television reports. Data also includes analysis of semi-structured interviews carried out with self-designated “victims”, suspected harassers, human resource consultants and managers, trade unionists, barristers, occupational therapists, psychologists, and workplace inspectors.

The emergence of moral harassment as a psychological concept

It is important first of all to consider how “moral harassment” came to be defined. Research on the “moral harassment” phenomenon was pioneered by Marie-France Hirigoyen, a French practicing psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and family psychotherapist, with French and American training in victimology. She was following in the steps of Heinz Leymann, a German psychiatrist who had conducted a thorough study on “mobbing” in Sweden – one of the English equivalents to the French “harcèlement moral” (“moral harassment”). Other common terms found in this context might be “workplace bullying” (Salin, 2003), “employee abuse”, “emotional abuse”, “workplace incivility”, “workplace aggression”, “mental harassment” (Gupta, Sharma, 2003: 612) In 1998, the book M.-F. Hirigoyen published on this issue met with broad and unexpected success.

Marie-France Hirigoyen coined the phrase “moral harassment” and used it as the title of her best-selling book. She defined moral harassment at work as “any and all abusive conduct, notably manifesting itself through behavior, words, acts, gestures, or writing that can harm a person’s personality, dignity, physical or psychic integrity, put their employment at risk, or degrade the atmosphere at work” (1998: 55).

The subtitle, “Perverse Everyday Violence”, illustrates the author’s psychological perspective. She framed moral harassment as a form of interpersonal violence:

“I deliberately chose to use the terms aggressor and aggressed, because violence is at stake, even if it is hidden, which tends to attack the identity of another person, and to take from him his individuality. It is a real process of moral destruction, which can lead to mental illness or suicide. I will also keep the denomination “perverse” because it clearly evokes the notion of abuse, which is the case with all perverse people. It begins with an abuse of power, continues with a narcissistic abuse in that the other loses all self esteem, and can sometimes lead to sexual abuse” (1998: 12).
The book captivated France, bringing to the fore a previously non-formulated concept. It drew on clinical cases involving either managers who use their authority to humiliate subordinates or co-workers who gang up on individuals. The author documented the abuse and often the tragic implications “moral harassment” may have for employees (such as suicide attempts).

For M.-F. Hirigoyen, moral harassment is a form of psycho-dynamics between individuals or between a group and an individual, not a product of structures. “Her analysis is thus fundamentally psychological and interindividual rather than structural. For her, harassers are perverse rather than bigoted people” (Saguy, 2003: 146).

Media reception thus focused on the author’s conceptualization of “moral harassment” as a form of interpersonal violence, especially in the workplace. It perceived moral harassment as psychological terrorism, as an attempt to harass, persecute and/or isolate workers through acts such as not allocating tasks to workers or allocating tasks for which they are over- or under-qualified; shifting assignments so as to hinder their career progression; unjustified demotions; keeping relevant information from workers or deliberately providing them with erroneous information; or making threatening or insinuating comments to the worker outside the workplace. The media presented these acts as intending to cause instability and/or compel workers to leave their jobs. Therefore, the harassed person reacts defensively, feels humiliated and incompetent, and can develop a post-traumatic stress syndrome (nightmares, anxiety attacks...).

The coverage that the issue of harassment received in the media sparked considerable attention and heightened awareness among the public. Many people and non-profit organizations became involved in this problem, which was debated on television, in numerous newspaper and magazine articles, with unanimous agreement that M.-F. Hirigoyen had spotlighted a major issue. Some members of the public mentioned that they had encountered cases in the past but had felt powerless to act; others said they had been unaware of the problem. Following media treatment, there has been an increase in “moral harassment” claims; not known is whether this is due to “real” harassment or to various difficult work situations incorrectly assessed as moral harassment. Subsequent to this, many people have identified themselves as victims of “moral harassment” to the point that it became a broad social phenomenon. “Moral harassment” has now become the main common expression for describing work disorders in France. In “collective consciousness”, it is defined as repeated and persistent negative behaviour towards one or more individuals.

In short, the concept seemed to resonate with the French public, who turned the book into a best-seller and formed collective interest groups such as HMS (“Harcèlement Moral Stop”) to obtain moral harassment legislation. The media, union activists, public figures and human resource managers discussed the
implications of the book and lawmakers proposed new laws to address this
problem more specifically.

Moral harassment has been addressed in both penal and labor law. French
employers are now held responsible for moral harassment within their
structures. French lawmakers banned “moral harassment” and added this issue
to a larger “modernization” law (loi de modernisation sociale). More
specifically, the “moral harassment” law fell under Chapter II (Combating
Moral Harassment at Work) of Title II (Work, Employment, and Professional
Training) of the new legislation. Influenced by the media buzz surrounding
Hirigoyen’s book, lawmakers added the following moral harassment statute into
the penal code:

Art. 222 – 33 – 2. – The act of harassing another person through repeated
actions having as object or effect the deterioration of work conditions which are
likely to undermine that person’s rights and dignity, altering his/her physical or
mental health, or jeopardizing their professional future, is punished by one year
of imprisonment and a fine of 15,000 euros.

The moral harassment statutes in the labor code state:

Art. L. 122 – 49. – No employee shall suffer repeated acts of moral
harassment that have as their object or effect the deterioration of work conditions
likely to affect the employee’s rights and dignity, to alter his/her physical or
mental health, or to endanger his/her professional future.

No employee can be penalized, discharged, or be the object of a direct or
indirect discriminatory measure, notably in terms of salary, training, change of
status, position, qualification, professional advancement, transfer, or contract
renewal for having submitted or refusing to submit to acts defined in the above
paragraph or for having witnessed such acts or having reported them.

Any cessation of the work contract resulting from (such harassment) or any
contradictory disposition or act is void.

Art. L. 122 – 50. -Any employee having breached article L. 122 – 49 may
face disciplinary sanctions.

Art. L. 122 – 51. – The head of the company will take all measures conducive
to preventing the acts targeted by article L. 122 – 49.

Moral harassment is viewed as an offense for which the individual harasser
is held responsible. In France, courts and employers are seen as legitimate
arbitrators.
This recent law illustrates the currently growing concern for safeguarding the workers’ dignity and psychological integrity. It thus seeks to protect people from psychological violence at work, which may be perpetrated by employers or their representatives, hierarchical supervisors, fellow workers or any individual of whatever category who wields de facto power over the employee at the workplace.

Its entire approach also expresses the conceptualization of violence at the workplace as a psychological phenomenon.

**Psychologization of society and moral harassment**

Over the last few years, the psychological concept of moral harassment has become the main concept for describing and assessing workplace malfunctions. The question thus arises whether the rapidly expanding emergence of moral harassment within French society is due to psychological or other factors. We will accordingly analyze to what extent the emergence of moral harassment may result from the “psychologization” of society. Such a process is closely related to that of individualization. An increased sensitivity to the self has kept growing in France from the late 1960s. Everyone is socially enjoined to acquire an identity of his/her own and remains preoccupied with his/her own little self. Simultaneously, the power of the state and of institutions has shrunk. We may wonder whether this weakening of the state has led to the individualization process (Richard Sennett) or whether conversely individualization has brought about the weakening of public institutions (Anthony Giddens)...

The modern self-governing individual maintains a dialogue with him/herself and is used to introspection. He/she has an intimate reality accommodating multiple sides: passion, pleasure, ideas and “dark” sides such as stress and depression. Psychology takes the inner-directed person as an object to the highest degree. This then contributes to the individualization process. In the same way, individualization and “the fall of public man” (R. Sennett) tend to codifying social reality through psychological knowledge.

One consequence of “psychologization” is the increasing public awareness of basic psychological concepts. In our modern societies, principal psychological processes are widely known and popular among the public. Women’s magazines and their vast readership are worth mentioning because they privilege the points of view of physicians and psychologists and, as such, have popularized Freud’s fundamental concepts (Ehrenberg, 1996: 225). The concept of reparation plays a key role in psychology. French lawyer and author Thierry Lévy asserts that: “Whether minor or major, misery will not change, but it will be easier to bear if recognized” (2003: 174). As a consequence of widespread usage of psychological interpretations, the belief is prevalent that
victims vitally need to identify those responsible for their suffering. This is the only way for them to obtain redress. Unless the victim has identified the offender and been acknowledged as a victim, he/she will not recover and receive reparation. The law banning moral harassment aims to recognize victims’ suffering and to make up for the damage they have suffered, at the suggestion of G. Hage, a French member of Parliament: “there is a need for a law banning moral harassment as […] recognition of suffering and as the means for obtaining judicial reparation for damage suffered, which can also be considered factors for closure”.

There is another capital psychological concept: talking about one’s feelings is a means for healing. Psychoanalysis is fundamentally meant to help patients through words and introspection. Suffering in silence is just a way to prolong pain whereas resorting to words helps you liberate the self. Words provide such a relief that one may wonder whether our society does not foster an over-expression of the subjective self, noting with the French philosopher G. Canguilhem that “subjectivity is dissatisfaction”.

According to essayist Pascal Bruckner, by conceptualizing the unconscious, Freud and his followers paved the way to introspection and, as such, contributed to romanticizing the most humdrum of lives. “There are no insignificant people any more, only outstanding personalities unaware of their being so” (2000 : 123). While “classic suffering used to be everybody’s fate, modern suffering has become a true identity, almost a reason to exist” (p. 125). Through introspection the inner man gives a meaning to his life and, in return, obtains recognition. As P. Bruckner puts it, “the great modern adventure is the exploration of one’s inmost being” (p. 166).

Psychologization of society also involves reunifying body and soul. The former distinction by Descartes between the two entities has been severely questioned. Body and soul do not live in separate “headquarters”; they are intimately linked and influence each other. French sociologist A. Ehrenberg explains that “a psychic breach is considered today at least as serious as a body breach and, often, as more insidious” (2004: 134). Through interpreting parts of clinical cases, M.-F. Hirigoyen sought to explain that emotional or psychological violence can be just as destructive as physical violence, thereby expanding the notion of violence itself.

Moreover, modern societies involve a growing concern for the well-being of the individual, for harmonious life, happiness and mental health. The World Health Organization takes this into account when defining health not only as an “absence of illness” but as a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being”. As Alain Ehrenberg puts it: “Well-being has become a fundamental value in the modern era (…). What is new is not the collective and egalitarian aspiration for well-being, it is well-being as the foundation of life” (1996 : 88).
As a result of these more recent concerns, the trend has been to affirm that people have the right to work in a violence-free environment.

“From the time of the French and American revolutions, the pursuit of happiness has been a Western passion” (Bruckner, 2000: 16). One of the paradoxes of this passion is that it avoids suffering to such an extent that people are left completely defenseless when confronted with it. While seeking to make pain disappear, such hedonism has put it back at the core of the system. Modern man suffers from the fact that he does not want to suffer, the same exact way as striving for perfect health can lead to sickness. In a society completely dedicated to the “duty of happiness” (according to the philosopher Malebranche), anything can be a source of displeasure, and “misfortune is not only that: worse, it is the failure of happiness” (p. 17). Conversely, in the heyday of Christianity, suffering was seen as bringing people closer to God, and thus as a form of progress (p. 37). In the modern era, democratic societies increasingly fear suffering, especially as they no more resort to God to obtain solace (p. 50). In his never-ending task to construct himself, the self-governing individual is a responsible person, but at the same time he bears the burden of this responsibility: if he fails, he has nobody to blame but himself (p. 65). The obsession of health implies medicalizing every single instant of life (p. 72). It is then difficult to control the boundaries of illness as against uneasiness. As happiness is viewed as a norm and no longer as a gift from God, we end up living in a permanently dysfunctional society. What was normal in traditional societies, to wit, pain and suffering, has now become a pathology. The pursuit of happiness is a source of anguish and unhappiness, the more so as the meaning of unhappiness has become unclear. The latter has conquered and invaded all that is not pleasure (p. 224).

Maslow’s pyramid gives additional information which clarifies this aspect. According to Abraham Maslow, when a need is satisfied, another and higher one emerges and dominates the organism; and once this other need is satisfied, new and still higher needs will emerge, and so on. As one desire is satisfied, another pops up to take its place. Once physiological needs (very basic ones such as air, food, sleep...) are fulfilled, we may think about safety needs which have to do with establishing stability and consistency. Love and a sense of belonging are next on the ladder. Then come needs of esteem: self-esteem which results from competence or command of a task, and the expected admiration from others. People who have all their lower needs satisfied seek self-actualization, which lies at the top of the pyramid: it is the desire to assert oneself and achieve complete fulfillment.

When applying Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to evolution in the workplace, we may say that work has shifted from a functional to an existential role. Work is supposed to help us reach personal fulfillment, and no longer merely to
provide for us. The modern worker needs to get pleasure through personal development. Recent developments evidence previously unconceivable behaviors. For instance, French nurses were seen demonstrating not to demand an increase in salaries but to obtain additional means for discharging their responsibilities.

Considering the above, we can indeed say that the evolution of modern societies has led to the rejection of behaviors such as moral harassment.

**Moral harassment and sociological factors**

We would now like to consider to what extent the treatment of the issue of moral harassment in the French workplace may have shifted from a psychological to a sociological approach and, if so, how to account for this. Current literature tends to deal less predominantly with the individual relationships between harasser and harassed employee and to put more stress on changing workplace organization. Additionally, the initial researchers were more oriented to psychology, as mentioned earlier, whereas current ones tend to be more sociology-minded. We thus aim to clarify the following question: Does “moral harassment” stem from psychological or sociological factors?

In a fresh study, French economist Philippe Askenazy posed the question: “Should we understand work exclusively through the prism of psychological relations?” (2004: 7). In order to answer it, he analyses the degree of specificity of a recently popular trend in management practice, that of: “reactive productivism”. According to him, this new management trend intensifies workplace constraints, with negative effects for members of the workforce.

What is “reactive productivism”? It embodies a number of innovations which result from contrasting the American-style Fordist-Taylorist production model and Japanese-style Toyotism, with a set of rules for employees to follow. Originating in the USA in the 1980s, it became influential in French management practice some years later. The first major element can be subsumed under “lean production”, with “just in time” and “zero stock” constraints, horizontal circulation of information, and “quality circles” to incite employees to make suggestions for productivity and quality improvements. The other major element goes under “re-engineering”, which basically means minimizing costs. An additional element is versatility, that is, the ability to execute a variety of occupational tasks, of being multi-competent (for example, as producer and also as quality controller), to work in teams, to mass-customize, to satisfy all the client’s wishes…

This modernized management paradigm was designed to make work more enriching and motivating. Instead of performing a given task isolated from other tasks, the modern worker would diversify his/her tasks, or actively participate in
team projects. Overall, Taylorist-type binomial intensive tempo / lack of autonomy has given way to a binomial combination of intensive tempo / autonomy.

Unfortunately, the observed outcome has not been as expected. As a first consequence of this new management style, workplace involvement today implies cumulating mental and physical constraints. This departs from a generally admitted view that Taylorism and physical exertion have disappeared. In surveys on French work conditions carried out in 1991 and 1998, respondents mentioned increasing physical hardship and workplace injuries. In all sectors, a larger proportion of employees report frequency of required physical effort (such as having to carry heavy loads, keep the same painful position for a long period of time, frequently cover distances...) and musculoskeletal disorders. Simultaneously, more people emphasized increased overall job strain, with many more mentioning the frequent need to forsake one task for another (due to multi-tasking), visual strain from computer screens, lack of sufficient time (especially since the country-wide implementation of the 35-hour work week), and the fear of making mistakes. However, since these surveys were based upon employees’ impressions, one may wonder whether the reported figures reflected actually worsened work conditions or merely changing representations. It is difficult to precisely define the boundaries between individual and organizational impact. Nevertheless, as French sociologist Jean-Pierre Le Goff puts it, “Employees are aware of the fact that they have to meet greater pressure and requirements than in the past, without any quid-pro-quo in terms of compensation, work conditions or employment opportunities” (2000: 88). They are required to be more reactive and flexible than in the past.

Let us now consider the second consequence of this new management style: more than a third of employees interviewed complained about receiving contradictory orders. How can one satisfy clients simultaneously in terms of quality and quantity? How can one combine total quality, zero defect and maximum productivity? Employees are told to be self-sufficient, yet they have never been more checked-on than currently. According to French sociologist Christophe Dejours, such contradictory injunctions create psychological tensions (2000: 16).

As Jean-Pierre Le Goff stated, the increasing proportions of people complaining from moral harassment cannot result from a suddenly exploding number of “perverse” managers. The very terms “moral” and “harassment” tend to obscure the fact that moral harassment is due to social conditions which one should also analyze. Firms themselves face new demands: “An obsession with productivity can lead to “financial harassment”” (2000: 144) as management from top on down has to satisfy shareholders’ requirements (higher productivity
at lower costs), employees have to be quick, precise and totally committed to their tasks in order to achieve outstanding performance levels. Errors are of course unacceptable, and the fear of sanctions for unsatisfactory task achievement has increased. These constraints might be easier to bear were it not for a high French rate of unemployment (approximately 10%), putting employers in a privileged position to abusively pressure employees. Precisely defining the boundaries of individual as vs. organizational violence is no easy task either. It does however seem quite clear that harassment is inherent in the current system and that France lacks socializing processes for work environments tinged with violence. The fundamental issues include ill-defined expectations, the employee’s extreme dependence on the employer, insufficient guidance, and the lack of efficient mediation in cases of conflict. People face great obstacles in defending themselves against diffuse violence.

At the same time, Philippe Askenazy mentions a US example. In the late 1990s, American health and workplace safety improved substantially, he indicates, while productivity was sustained. Over the last few years, he mentions, occupational injury and illness rates have decreased by over a third in the private sector (2004 : 59). American corporations implemented safety and health provisions to protect their employees. But because the top priority of any company is to generate sales and profits, the true motivation was financial: not implementing such provisions would have meant additional costs. In fact, cost of insurance increased from 1.4% of the total work cost in 1985 to 2.4% in 1994. Companies had to protect their employees from injuries and disease to reduce the costs/benefits ratio (p. 70). This resulted in a lower insurance cost, representing 1.6% of work cost in 2001 (p. 72). Contrary to the U.S. system, French firms are charged by law insurance costs much below the real cost of hazards incurred. In addition, employees in the U.S. have easy access to inspectors’ reports on their work conditions. France lacks processes which might socialize work disorders so that French firms do not have to suffer the cost of a poor public image, contrary to American ones. Media coverage is the only factor in this respect (p. 86). And, as mentioned before, journalists tend to propagate a psychologistic conceptualization of work disorders.

The psychologization of social factors: case studies

The victim-perpetrator structure

Although human resource managers, barristers, occupational therapists, and workplace inspectors insisted that moral harassment is a fuzzy and subjective notion (identical types of behaviour will be felt or evaluated to be moral harassment by some, and to be normal by others), we noted from our survey a
repeated scheme in respondents’ discourse, which can be called “the victim-perpetrator structure”. Moral harassment is depicted as interpersonal by nature: it typically takes place between members of a given organization. The focus is generally on the “victim-perpetrator” dimension and more specifically on the personality traits of the perpetrators.

From approximately 50 interviews or other work situations, we singled out two which seem to us to be especially illuminating.

Marie-Thérèse had been working for the same firm for nearly 30 years. She had steadily advanced in responsibility until 1998, the year when her employer was bought out by a large insurance group. From that time on, she started complaining from moral harassment and criticizing the new executive in charge of marketing and communications as follows:

“It (moral harassment) is very much indeed linked to the manager’s personality, which was almost pathological… I mean, (he was) extremely conceited. He knew everything, he could do anything, er… he was the biggest, the handsomest guy around, as he kept repeating. And actually, as far as marketing and communications, well, his interest is in marketing, well, he was truly a professional… but he was also a communications man, and for him a perfect piece of communications… for him, I mean… was to express his own degree of perfection to others, that is to say we had to act in such a manner that people considered his communication actions as tokens of his own personal perfection”.

She describes him as a narcissistic person who manipulates, destabilizes and censors his subordinates. We have been told of many others instances of “victims” describing managers with a highly autocratic style of management.

As another example, a garment manufacturer by the name of Maryflo became famous in the late 1990s when a TV documentary showed a manager mistreating female factory workers. The following quotation provides a good example: “This place is my playground, you’re my toys and I’ll break you if I want!”. He would insult and harshly discipline them day after day.

These two instances are representative of typical statements from victims of moral harassment: authoritarian managers, insults, threats (“If you don’t do such and such, we’ll make your life a nightmare!”, “If you don’t like it here, go ahead and quit!”), manipulative behavior, unjustified demotion, etc. The victims also mention pathological symptoms: constant high levels of stress and anxiety, headaches and migraine, constant fatigue, sleeplessness, flashbacks and replay, obsessiveness, poor concentration, forgetfulness, reactive depression, shattered self-confidence…
Moral harassment and organizational factors

In the above examples, we see that people blamed designated perpetrators for their suffering. A thorough analysis of their statements, however, brings up other factors. Let us go back to the “Marie-Thérèse” and “Maryflo” instances.

Marie-Thérèse’s employer was bought out by a large insurance group in 1998. Subsequent to this, the manager she reported to was terminated. A new senior management team put in new work processes rationalizing and speeding up work, as the following quotation helps to highlight:

“Well, I was a bit over 50. And… and then… they treated me as if I’d been 25… and I had to prove everything”.

She adds:

“So it was difficult because… we never knew how far we had to go. What did we leave out that would be blown out of all proportion? Er… and because everything had to be absolutely perfect, that meant you had to be available all the time, your life had to become work-centred, way over working hours. There were no week-ends. Now that could be understandable as far as sporting events, which took place over the week-end. Now generally employees rest over the week-end. But he behaved as if he didn’t know you’re not supposed to work Sundays. And to just requesting time off, his reaction was: ‘What do you mean?!...’”.

In the course of the company’s restructuring, significant rationalisation and deterioration of work conditions ensued. As a consequence of this new working environment, Marie-Thérèse was required to be absolutely up-to-date at all times on all facts regarding sporting events. Her manager would call her at any time, Sundays included, to check she had the latest results at hand. Poor organization led to excessive workloads.

The Maryflo situation leads to a similar conclusion: the interpersonal relationships had an organizational problem in the background. A new manager was appointed with the goal of doubling labour productivity. Work processes were rationalised to an extreme: breaks – including toilet breaks – were timed; workers were disciplined every time they were considered to have been inattentive. (A warning by recorded delivery letter was sent to one female worker for having looked up from her machine for 8 seconds). Practically all the victims stated that the harassment started upon the arrival of a new manager or, more generally, after organizational changes.

There are organization-related problems underlying moral harassment, e.g. downsizing and restructuring, cost-cutting, re-engineering, organizational
changes, changes in work group composition, all of which impact on employees’ interpersonal relationships.

Organizational changes are liable to increase the prevalence of harassment. For instance, a move towards more horizontal, more autonomous structures reduces the number of managerial positions, thereby potentially increasing competition and enhancing incentives for impeding and eliminating competitors.

The performance-related reward system may encourage supervisors to try and get rid of both very high or very low-performing subordinates. In the first instance a supervisor might perceive a highly talented subordinate as a rival and a threat to his own career and therefore seek to expel him/her or sabotage his/her work performance. Supervisor-subordinate moral harassment may however also occur in the reverse case. If a supervisor’s own evaluation is based on the performance of his subordinates, a low-performing subordinate may be perceived as a liability for the department. The supervisor may then hope that harassment will lead the subordinate to either request a transfer or leave the organization.

Increasing workloads and internal competition, time pressure and a hectic work environment provide favourable conditions for harassment to develop.

The psychologization of social factors

This takes us to our final stage, that of interpreting the empirical evidence, noting that the respondents expressed themselves using basically psychological terms.

Respondents’ statements do not take into account such factors as ever-increasing demands for efficiency, performance-related reward systems, increasing internal competition leading to try and eliminate “threats” and “burdens”, work intensification reflecting cost and competitive pressures on firms; nor do they deal with the management policies that create and support the growing trend towards more abusive managers. Having recourse to the concept of “moral harassment” fails to recognize the role of cost-rational and profit-centred policies in employees’ pain and suffering.

Respondents’ testimonies used predominantly psychological wording: that of suffering (“I felt humiliated”, “despised”, “battered and bruised”...), of depression, illness and post-traumatic stress syndrome (anxiety...) and also wording describing perpetrators’ personality traits (“A psychopath”, “He’s real nuts”...)

To describe any specific reality appropriate wording is always called for. The vocabulary disseminated by mass media is psychologically-oriented. In the insightful study previously mentioned, Philippe Askenazy explained that in France media tend “to psychologize the harshness of the work environment”
They use individual-centered vocabulary to analyze a collective reality, which is liable to mask its social and economic root causes. Facts are related as follows: a perverse manager faces a wronged employee, and the solutions to this faulty relationship lie in the hands of the physician, the psychotherapist, or the trial judge. In order to fight moral harassment, government has to punish the aggressor, and employees need the psychotherapist’s help.

The perverse consequences of such psychologization

The perversity stems from the fact that psychologization can be apprehended from various perspectives. At first glance, we might consider the psychologization of society as a sign of progress. Before 1998, what we now call “moral harassment” was known by no specific designation, which made it all the more difficult to denounce. Today, people are more likely to feel that they have been wronged and to condemn such behavior. Few will go to court, but many more will probably confront their harasser, speak to friends or report the reprehensible behavior to their management. Of course, many people continue to suffer in silence or quit their job rather than stay and fight, but they have more options than they had before the 2002 law came into force. Potential harassers and employers are also more likely to refrain themselves or their employees from harassment behavior due to heightened, widespread concern about such behavior.

Thus, a dual trend has emerged: on the one hand, thanks to the psychologization of society, there is a growing awareness of relational risks in the workplace. Risks at work used to be “incorporated”, they are now “made objective” (Michel Gollac). The threshold of tolerance has decreased, which has led workers to reject some previously accepted behaviors. On the other hand, harsh work conditions have become widespread as employees must perform their tasks more rapidly than in the past, thus following the motto “citius, altius, fortius”.

The psychologization of society is a double-edged sword. To a certain extent, it contributed to the increased awareness of mental problems, and consequently, of moral harassment. For example, French nation-wide studies on work conditions, initiated in 1978, never mentioned job strain until 1991, whereas employees must obviously have been subjected to mental tensions before that time. Besides, the first European survey on work conditions, carried out in 1990, did not contain questions about stress and violence in the workplace. The second one, in 1995, did so. On the other hand, because it targets the aggressor rather than the work conditions, the use of the phrase “moral harassment” does little to encourage employers to take preventive or
remedial action. By not stating social and economic causes, M.-F. Hirigoyen and the media reinforce viewing work conditions as psychologically determined.

Most specifically, moral harassment functions as an alibi. Instead of seeking to improve work conditions, clinical specialists are now setting up cooperative programs with physicians and psychotherapists to listen to harassment victims, provide situational analysis, pull them out of isolation, rebuild their self-esteem, and/or help them find new jobs and live a normal life. This treats the consequences of violence and not its root causes. Alain Ehrenberg refreshingly expresses this perspective: psychology is called into play for the problems that politics and economics can no longer deal with. “Nowadays we codify a lot of daily problems using psychological terms, especially ones linked to depression, whereas in the past we chose social or political wording”. Thus, instead of using the register of “claiming”, “fighting” and “inequalities”, we turn to the psychological register (1996 : 23). Language focuses on the subjective self and individual vulnerability. Instead of exploring difficult and expensive solutions to the problems of work organization, one simple solution is to assist workers psychologically. To this end, collective problems are turned into interpersonal ones, through the use of psychological nomenclature.

**Conclusion**

Moral harassment exemplifies the way in which social factors can be psychologized. It is worth adding that naming moral harassment as such and the specific way that this conduct is defined—as say, a psychological problem, an act of violence, inappropriate behaviour in specific locations, or as inherent in the current system—have far-reaching political implications. Because of these political implications, many people are deeply involved in how this issue is defined, if defined at all.

Using the phrase “moral harassment” fails to recognize the role of work processes in employees’ suffering. Research suggests that the working environment, including its physical and organisational settings or structure and its managerial style and culture, can bear upon the risk of mistreatment. The managerial style may also be relevant in terms of open participatory management style being conducive to reducing the risk of violence compared to a closed, authoritarian management style that may increase such risk. The cost and competitive pressures on firms are also likely to be important factors in the workplace violence equation. Most importantly, the cost-minimization and profit-maximization policies that create and support the growing trend towards abusive employers are left outside the scope of respondents’ statements.

The relevance of an ideology is to mask reality. Indeed, moral harassment makes us overlook the link between the individual and the organization which
makes him/her suffer. We only focus on the individual, as if he/she was both the problem and the solution. If the problems in the workplace are individual, so should the solutions be.

Every ideology benefits some individuals, groups or goals. The obvious ones here are firms and their profits. Indeed, the psychologization of harsh work conditions allows them to externalize the costs linked to their dangerousness. By treating moral harassment as an interpersonal conflict rather than as an organizational violence, this statute does not tackle the root causes of the problem. This will probably continue to undermine the employer’s liability for organizational factors. Addressing violence in terms of psychological relations gives rise to a critical point of view on reality without seriously threatening such reality. This idea of the individualization of violence is likewise reflected in Newton et al’s (1995) exploration of the concept of stress. “They argue that society’s notion of stress does not allow the “stressed subject” to see the thing that causes the stress as a legitimate grievance, but instead they are told to change themselves and their coping mechanisms”. In the new context of the labor market, collective solidarity mechanisms no longer work as they used to. Due to widespread unemployment and individualization processes, people selfishly defend their personal interests and are willing to do anything not to lose their jobs. Some have named “moral harassment” the “isolation sickness” (Dejours, 2000 : 17).

The very intensity of workers’ indignation over moral harassment should have alerted politicians about the need for a solution. But by bringing into the limelight moral harassment and by blaming narcissistic perverse harassers, it appears businesses have dismissed the problem. They have left it to others to voice the growing wellspring of anger.

In exploring how moral harassment has been defined in France, we have shed light on how violence in the workplace is handled. Moral harassment provides an interesting example of the current trend towards psychologizing social problems. The history of moral harassment has thus provided a useful prism for understanding larger issues such as how an ideology can shape a society. We may wonder whether the psychologization of society is not a prerequisite for the survival of harassing organizations. Violence at work is taken for granted, and psychology is presented as a solution to all problems. The media incessantly advertise psychotherapies, relaxation sessions and anti-stress drugs; more and more books deal with personal development and propose recipes to seduce, to be “cool”, and to be smart. The number of psychological help-lines has exploded. We may wonder whether, by putting lives in their care, psychologists release employers and politicians from their due responsibilities. Put another way : does politics pass off its duties onto psychology?