Mimetic desire and workplace conflict

Damian Stoupe argues that when desires shift to needs, we trigger new behaviours

René Girard[1] proposes that human beings are the most imitative of all animals. Not only do we imitate behaviour and gestures, but we also imitate the desire of those around us, even though we are unaware that we do so. In the diagram below, this can be shown as the subject, who is convinced that the object they desire is a creation of their own self. However, Girard would argue that the desire is actually created for them by a model, another individual or group of individuals; in a sense this is the theory behind the idea of keeping up with the Jones. The model is often depicted as a triangle, as shown in figure 1.

Desire is different from our needs, although we seem to get caught up in not understanding the difference between the two. I would argue that we have a tendency to elevate desires to the status of a need, which increases the value of the desire to a point where we are willing to use some form of violence to satisfy it. This is particularly the case where two individuals desire the same object. This competition begins to lose its focus on the object and a personal rivalry develops between the two individuals, which may result, unless mitigated, in conflict. The potential for conflict and its resulting intensity will increase with the proximity of the model and the subject. An example often quoted is that of two young children in a room full of toys. Invariably one child will wish to play with the toy the other child is playing with, and trouble often follows. Placing this in the workplace situation, I would argue that as people move up the career ladder, fewer jobs are available and the competition for those jobs intensifies. Competition in itself is not negative; what is negative is where the focus becomes the destruction of the rival and not the attainment of the object.

Research shows an empirical link between conflict and workplace bullying. In their recent qualitative study, Baillien et al[2] identified three causes of workplace bullying, all of which I believe support the Girardian understanding of conflict. Their results suggest that bullying develops as a result of three elements: individuals' inability to deal with frustration, escalating conflict, and team and organisational cultures.

I believe that Baillien is suggesting that where an individual's desires are not met, or are frustrated, conflict will develop. It is suggested that while conflict resolution focuses on the importance of relationships and perceptions, currently it does not take into account an 'objective base of conflict – unfulfilled human needs'. While I might argue that we are discussing human desires rather than needs, I would not disagree with this assertion. Further, I would identify it in Girardian terms as mimetic rivalry. This rivalry is rooted in the belief that desire is not only self-generated, independent of others, but also that that desire has 'seniority'[3], in other words 'I thought of it first!' If the belief is there, then people will tend to hang on to that belief and move away from the object to the person as an outlet for the frustration.

Baillien[2] supports Oughourlian[3] in understanding that escalating conflict will cause bullying. Oughourlian argues that if violence/trauma cannot be addressed as and when it happens, the 'energy for that retaliation is saved up for later use'. He adds that the level of vengeance stored up is dependent upon the humiliation felt by the aggrieved party and that this 'deferred violence' will intensify. This can be seen in two ways: first, as a feeling of hatred, and/or second, as a drive – 'a compulsive desire to destroy, which will animate
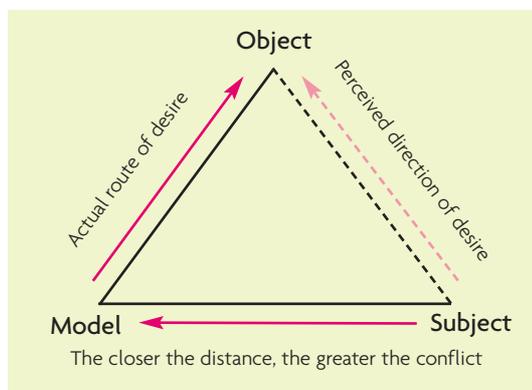

Figure 1. The mimetic desire triangle

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ALBERTO RUGGIERI/GETTY

the offended and organise all his efforts in view of the vengeance that will set him free'. The drive may be directed at the individual concerned, or at others, or may be to prove the other wrong, or simply to be the best, typified by the thought 'I'll show him!' He adds that if the energy is not released, 'it produces all kinds of psychopathological symptoms and shapes the life and destiny of the frustrated avenger'. Therefore the aim would be to reduce the amount of humiliation, or maybe change the word to 'frustration', that a person feels.

The danger here is that both parties begin to see themselves as victims of an unwarranted attack and therefore the 'violence' they inflict on each other is totally warranted as an attempt to expel an aggressor. Both assume defensive postures in what Girard would describe as an escalation to extremes. If this escalation cannot be dealt with in the workplace, the aggrieved parties may allow the conflict to spill over into the wider community: for example, I may metaphorically kick the cat – or worse. If I do begin to use violence at home or elsewhere, it is likely, due to other mimetic/imitative processes, that others around me may react in a reciprocal way towards me, or if they feel powerless, against others to whom they feel superior.

Is bullying deliberate?

I am unsure as to whether the majority of bullying situations are a deliberate action. By humiliating the accused, we may actually be developing further problems in the future, maybe even leading an individual into developing bullying behaviours as a means of expending their mimetic energy on another. The language and imagery used in bullying presents a problem to me in working with bullying. We all have our own thoughts and feelings that the words 'bully' or 'bullying' evoke. We have all been exposed to the bullying triangle at some level – as witness, recipient or accused. However, in much of the literature we still find what may be considered to be 'loaded' words – victim, bully, target, perpetrator – all of which have a tendency to prejudge a situation and raise the emotional content of any discussion.

To understand what is happening in bullying events, we need to discern the desires that drive an individual to behave in a certain manner, either from their personal background or from their working environment.

The scapegoat

Many writers have likened modern businesses to forms of religious organisations. As with any

religious organisation there are taboos, rituals and myths that are promoted by the organisation, and rituals that are dictated by the organisation. All are designed to reduce the scope of conflict in the organisation. Many organisations now have policies on workplace bullying and harassment; they detail the taboos or prohibitions that govern behaviour. In some circumstances they detail the rituals that must be undertaken to cleanse the organisation when the taboos are broken. There are also myths, which disguise the truths of the organisation from itself.

Bullies are seen to be people who have broken the overt cultural prohibitions, whereas one might argue that victims are those who have broken the sub-cultural prohibitions. In either case, the organisation will be experiencing a certain amount of conflict as a result of the breaking of the taboos. While these mimetic conflicts are ongoing at all times in organisations, the danger comes when the conflict begins to expand and draw others into it. This is what Girard would describe as 'mimetic contagion'. People put their own differences to one side to join together for the 'greater good': think about football fans – a diverse group of people united in their dislike of the opposition.

Someone who has broken the taboos may then become the target of the mimetic contagion, with everyone agreeing that they are responsible for the ills of the group. This person may well be innocent – they may just be different in some way – but they become a 'legitimate' target (think about the issues over Sir Fred Goodwin during the financial crisis). The individual becomes a focal point for discontent – if only they can be dealt with, then everything will be all right. For example, if the bully is expelled from the group, then it is clear to the mob that the performance issues and personal relationships will be perfect.

If we look at how the bully is demonised in the mythology of bullying through literature and art, we can see that once someone is labelled as a bully, they are perceived as something subhuman and as such will need to be exorcised. The bully is seen to be the cause of numerous hurts and wrongs on the part of individuals, and the organisation would also accept that the individual has affected productivity and thereby performance. The bully needs to be driven out or sacrificed. Once the rituals have taken place in respect of preparing for the sacrifice, the scapegoat may be slain in private or in public. However, the mob will know of it and a sense of peace is restored to the community – until the next crisis.

It is worth noting that this sacrificial approach can also be played out for the victim, who is not necessarily demonised but characterised by their 'weakness'; and as we all need to be something akin to Nietzsche's superman, they become expendable.

In both scenarios it only takes one voice to start the mimetic contagion gathering pace: the main vehicle used for this is gossip. We all know that gossip gains credence the further away from the source it goes. To tackle bullying we actually need to tackle gossip and the blame subcultures that exist in many organisations.

Revisiting policies

Girard asks us to recognise situations where true scapegoating occurs[4] and be willing to challenge them. He is explicit that these events are unconscious. It is not for us to pass judgment but to seek to help. However, we are caught up in a culture that appears to cry out for punishment based upon a millennia-old theory of atonement which demands an eye for an eye.

It may be that we need to re-imagine atonement[5], to one in which we are infinitely beloved[6]. A starting point for this may be to recognise that we have an infinite responsibility for others[7], to see behind the 'face' and what is instantly recognisable. This way, we may reduce the humiliation that they feel and therefore reduce the 'desire' for conflict.

Levinas[7] challenges the modernist trend to focus on self, in terms of identity and ego, and instead suggests focusing on a priority of ethics in relation to others. What Levinas actually does is provide an argument for prioritising the duty of care that we have to and for others[8]. Levinas argues that ethics is the 'first philosophy', and that without ethics there would actually have been no society. This relationship with the other goes beyond comprehension and can only be brought into being through communication, primarily through the use of images or what he calls 'expression'.

It has only been since my own experience of being bullied that I have become truly aware of the impact that I have on others and my capacity to lose sight of our common humanity. I wanted to reduce people to my own image, rather than being able to understand that I cannot really understand someone, and the more I am aware of someone, the less I actually know.

This approach allows for uncertainty from which we can begin to learn rather than trying to define a certainty and search to prove it. Knowledge in this way becomes a lived experience, which is based upon a precept that good exists beyond being, while not suitable for all. Levinas does have a large number of critics but his argument does, after careful consideration, feel right for me at a

level that I cannot fully explain; which in a sense is what Levinas is actually arguing in favour of.

I suggest that policies on bullying should be based upon a Levinasian perspective that our ethics should be centred on others, and not be self-centred, as the self originates in the 'other', through communication. Levinas argues there are three components to communication: the face, the trace and the saying. If we centre ourselves on the other, then we let go of our own desires and reduce the mimetic rivalry that would ordinarily ensue. The emphasis of many workplace policies is on subjective acts, the very subjectivity of which leads to a sense of indifference towards suffering. When I forcefully assert my rights, I am truly being indifferent towards those around me, a movement away from individualism to communitarianism. Communitarianism might just reduce the levels of adversarial relationships.

Levinas[7] says that the 'face of a neighbour signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every consent, every pact, every contract. It escapes representation ... the disclosing of face is nudity, non form abandon of self, ageing, dying, more naked than nudity, it is poverty, skin with wrinkles'. This nudity is often what we try to hide behind by providing a false face to those we meet. We learn to 'mask' our face, thereby hiding our real selves from others. In a very real sense we seem to try to deny our mutual dependency in favour of a competitive independency, gained at the expense of others.

Levinas states that the 'face is a trace of itself'. The trace in this instance refers to what he calls 'alteriority' or separateness of the other person; almost like looking at a photograph of someone – we can see them but it does not allow us a full picture of them. We cannot know them from the picture just as we cannot know the other from who they are. Recognising this inability to know the other, in a sense forces me to accept the uniqueness of the individual, and in turn requires me to help that person keep that uniqueness through a development of my responsibility to them. This challenges me in my insistence on my own subjective rights being protected. It also challenges me to action: can I stay quiet when someone else is being bullied?

Taking up the responsibility

In a recent series of workshops I asked this question of the participants: when you see bullying occurring, what stops you intervening? Variations on two answers were provided. First, 'I might get noticed and therefore be the next target', and second, apathy. The challenge for any organisation that is serious about removing bullying is to provide an environment that supports people's ability to challenge bullying.

In response to the question 'What would help you feel able to confront bullying behaviour?' people's fear appeared to shine through in their responses: whistleblowing policy; support – emotional and practical; robust systems; treat information confidentially; change the culture of the organisation; trust.

There is a need for people to feel safe in being able to challenge the bully, and the organisation must do what it can to assist that. Confidential whistleblowing phone lines may be useful, but the challenge needs to come from those witnessing the events at close hand, rather than being left to someone else. It takes one person to begin the challenge.

What I understand Levinas is challenging us to do is look beyond the external masks that we wear and see the 'other' in front of us, rather than seeing what we want to see of the person and particularly not seeing them, consciously or unconsciously, for what we desire of them. In my opinion, the thoughts of Girard and Levinas work well together as they are both relationship-driven positions. Levinas challenges us to have a responsibility for the other; Girard challenges us to find a positive model; Levinas challenges us to take the responsibility to be that positive model for others.

I leave you with a question to ask yourself: *In what ways do I contribute to or support workplace bullying?* ∎

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