

Mobbing and the Maternal Imago: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Workplace Trauma

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Abstract

Between 2009 and 2024, mobbing had an important place in the authors' lives, both professionally and personally. This circumstance prompted us to reflect on the nature and mechanisms of mobbing and, more importantly, coping strategies. Mobbing causes profound suffering and destabilizes identity, requiring therapeutic and legal strategies. Since the events surrounding the stock market crash in 2008, and even more since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have noticed—probably also due to the authors' transition from institutional work to private practice—a significant increase in consultations caused by severe difficulty in managing professional life. At the same time, the authors experienced similarly unexpected and hurtful sequences of difficult situations after a long and successful career. This experience provided them with a painful but extremely rich first-person account of the mobbing mechanisms. This chapter emerged from this “twin approach” and the exchanges with colleagues of the Charles Baudouin International Psychoanalysis Institute during analytic supervision meetings. In the discussion of the clinical cases, we have strictly respected anonymity. This paper is a blend of clinical observation, personal account, and theoretical considerations. We drafted it some time ago, but in the authors' opinion, it is—unfortunately—increasingly relevant, which is why we decided to review it and submit it for publication.

Keywords

Mobbing, Attachment Theory, Psychoanalysis, Workplace Bullying, Maternal Imago

1. Introduction

Although consultations for advice on anxiety related to work-related situations are common, we often find ourselves dealing with patients who, as a result of their

work, no longer sleep, eat poorly or very badly, gain or lose weight dramatically, have problems with their relationships or in the management of their parenthood, have dark thoughts, and sometimes even have a clear “suicidal plan.” (Nielsen et al., 2014). Converging post-pandemic evidence indicates that prevalence has not subsided; large, representative surveys still find substantial levels of workplace bullying and harassment (Bunce et al., 2024).

The typical situation generating these mishaps is that of a perverse narcissistic leader surrounded by a group on the defensive. We can often identify a powerful group dynamic, deciding, without really realizing it, to give the lions the least efficient (or sometimes the most efficient but not the most astute), or the most fragile of the antelopes.

These situations are collectively defined as mobbing. Mobbing (also called *workplace bullying*) refers to *systematic, hostile, and unethical communication directed by one or more individuals primarily toward one individual, who is pushed into a helpless and defenseless position and held there through ongoing harassment*. The canonical definition requires that this behavior constitute a pattern typically characterized by frequency (at least once a week) and duration (lasting for six months or more) (Leymann, 1996; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). This definition carries its own problems. It would be unreasonable to classify as mobbing a single event, however unpleasant, but the requirement to identify a pattern over six months makes it very difficult to provide proof, since usually the mobbing attitudes and behaviors are, as we shall see, subtle, complex to document, and frequently subliminal. Moreover, since the introduction of the concept of mobbing in the late 20th century, managers and companies have learned to avoid behaviors that can be classified formally as mobbing. Mobbing still exists, and we argue it is on the rise, but it is increasingly conducted in a disingenuous and hypocritical manner, making it even harder to document and resist. Much-publicized corporate procedures to address mobbing are typically cumbersome, often humiliating, slow, and centered on “reconciliation processes” that provide ample opportunity to shift or diffuse responsibility and wear down the victim, with the result of pressuring them to resign. It remains that mobbing can destroy lives, cause untold suffering for the victims and their entourage, and deprive society as a whole of valuable resources (Hoel et al., 2017).

In our experience, the victims of mobbing have a characteristic profile (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012): they care about the work they do, have an almost perfectionistic concept of a job well done, tend to be of service to colleagues, and support the company-institution to which they belong by sacrificing their time “beyond the call of duty” or their work contract. In other words, they “do not count the hours.” They also tend to give a lot of importance to their professional success, which very often takes on a magnitude that surpasses all other aspects of life.

The narcissistic pervert—so prevalent in our current world, where form often outweighs substance—has an uncanny ability to identify the prey the group will not defend. Solidarity may fill speeches, but it rarely fills bank accounts. The vic-

tim starts a more or less long period of incomprehensible misunderstandings with the hierarchy and a cooling of ties with the colleagues, who were warm and almost friendly until that moment. This alienating and confusing experience often leads to “devastating” and completely unexpected evaluations by the hierarchy, and in some cases, the initiation of a real “incrimination” for professional malfeasance.

We have identified the perpetrator of mobbing with the term narcissistic pervert (*pervers narcissique*), frequently used in French psychoanalytic and psychosocial literature (Hirigoyen & Moore, 2011; Racamier, 1992). This construct partially overlaps with the Anglo-American notion of “malignant narcissism,” introduced by Fromm (Fromm, 1980) and further developed by Kernberg (Kernberg, 2009), but the French term has acquired specific connotations in relation to harassment and mobbing. In this paper, we retain “narcissistic pervert” for consistency with the French literature, while acknowledging its conceptual proximity to “malignant narcissism.” While the term does not appear as such in the DSM-5 (APA, 2022), it overlaps clinically with narcissistic and antisocial traits. In French psychoanalytic discourse, it has been described as a “perverse-narcissistic configuration,” operationalized in case material to denote manipulative, exploitative relational patterns (Shoshani et al., 2009). Contemporary authors further stress its French specificity, noting that the “narcissistic pervert” has become an identifiable category in discussions of perverse relational dynamics (Evzonas, 2023).

Victims rarely arrive at our office before the devastating assessment and the accusations, when some effective defensive action is still possible. They often fail to consult even after the negative assessment and come to us only after the start of a procedure against them. Sometimes they seek our help only after a dismissal, or after having resigned from their job, with the feeling of having saved their honor. Some come to us even later, having tried and failed to find another job, after having been shunned in several job interviews, each chipping away at their self-esteem and sense of agency. They present themselves to us stunned and ravaged by guilt and shame, for the victim of mobbing is ashamed of being mobbed. They imagine they should not have done this or that; they are often in a dreamy wait for the institution to call them back, say that there was a mistake, just a big misunderstanding, and that everything can start again as before. Confident, positive people with a robust work ethic and a clear sense of their place in society turn into confused human wrecks who feel they do not understand what happened and have lost all hope.

Our workplace is constitutive of our identity. When people introduce themselves, they often mention their profession immediately after their name, as the most salient marker of who they are and what place they occupy in society. The threat of losing this anchor is therefore profoundly destabilizing. Yet the intensity of the psychic damage we observe suggests that more than livelihood or social status is at stake. The salary that sustains us materially and “feeds” us, together with the professional role that shapes our identity with a mechanism reminiscent of Lacan’s “mirror stage,” points toward a deeper symbolic dimension: the com-

pany functions as a maternal figure. Its rejection is experienced unconsciously as a rupture of the maternal bond, which, we argue, gives mobbing its uniquely destructive power.

We long believed that work was a separating masculine third-element function in our conscious and unconscious lives, linked to our Jungian animus (Jung, 1959, 1979). After all, at least in Western society, the workplace was mainly a “man’s world,” and the process of fully integrating women is still ongoing. It is our way of entering the social sphere after leaving our mother’s reassuring petticoat. It is the arena of glorious fights, the place of jousting and valor, where culturally “manly” values such as ambition, competition, and aggression are prized and rewarded. In our innocence, we had therefore given a paternal character to the company, institution, association, foundation, or industry, where the rules and values dominate and social competition came into play. The utter desperation of the mobbing victims made us change our minds.

In fact, we realized, with some surprise, that the profound destabilization that follows the break with the company is not connected with our relation to the paternal law and the Super-Ego, but reactivates primeval pre-oedipal anxieties, nameless anxieties of maternal abandonment (Kaës, 2014). This situation is not a Freudian conflict; it is a Kleinian nightmare where paranoia and schizoid anxieties dominate (Klein, 1997, 2018). The “law of the father” says, “I am going to punish you.” It is terrifying, but it still is a conflict. The brothers of the horde can band together and kill the father (Freud, 1913). The fight is uneven, but the odds of prevailing are not zero. The “law of the mother” says, “I am not feeding you any longer,” and the toddler that we remain forever in our unconscious has no recourse against this.

We remain all our lives with this gaping hole that seeks rest and support, from a mother we did not quite have as we would have liked, in a spouse who is also affected by imperfection, in an institution or company in which we imagine finding our own image, finally, whole and satisfying. The multifaceted company can give us, more than our mother (the real one), more than the spouse, the illusion of soothing completeness.

The work routine offers predictability, providing reassuring habits and rhythms—a soothing regularity that recalls the infant’s need for security: fixed times for feeding, napping, and bedtime. The much-maligned work—sleep cycle thus evokes the early illusion of a repetitive paradise. Yet, like infancy itself, this equilibrium is fragile, and what feels secure can suddenly become unsettling once the balance is disrupted.

Thirty or forty years ago, we lived a whole life of work in the same company. Perhaps it was not all good, but this established regularity, this loyalty bond between the employee and the company, had its good sides. We believed in it and felt we belonged to a social structure and a world where we thought we were an important cog. Yes, rationally we know that graveyards are full of indispensable people, but we took pride in the false feeling that we were not so easily replaceable

after all.

Today, there is a profound instability in the relationship to work, fueled by a sentiment of precarity in the workplace. Job flexibility may benefit the economy, but it is deeply unsettling for individuals. Most people do not stay in the same job for more than ten years, sometimes much less. However, changing jobs after having been forced out from the previous one is not always a “happy ending” story, and often causes deep emotional distress, economic fragility, familial problems, and even addictions and homelessness.

We believe that, at least for some of us, there is an unanswered need to mend an imperfect bond with our mother, and work fills a dangerously significant portion of it. This fragility in some individuals would have been less prominent in an old-fashioned society, with greater stability of work structures; it stands out dramatically in our current society. We are not singing the praises of a “golden era,” which is often simply a projection of our present fears and hopes without connection to historical reality. Every age has challenges and specific ways to test our fragilities.

Research consistently links attachment insecurity with vulnerability to workplace bullying, both as victim and perpetrator, although the dynamics differ (Hamel et al., 2023; Sochos & Rossiter, 2024). Victims often present with an anxious, insecure attachment (Fonagy & Target, 2007; Frankel, 1994; Hamel et al., 2023) that drives them toward diligence, perfectionism, and overcommitment, bordering on compulsive patterns. Their strategy is to please, serve, and make themselves indispensable—a way of securing love and recognition that paradoxically can render them insufferable to others and leave them harboring a covert, and at times unconscious, contempt for those they try so hard to serve. In this sense, their functioning is also a perversion of the attachment bond: rather than destroying the other, as the narcissistic pervert does to stabilize a fragile self (Hirigoyen & Moore, 2011; Racamier, 1992), the victim sacrifices themselves in servitude, masking a similar insecurity and hidden superiority.

At some point, the perpetrators of mobbing also come to consult, later than their victims, when they have suffered greater moral damage, often when they themselves become victims. In treatment, pathological narcissism is well-documented to complicate the therapeutic alliance and to be associated with higher dropout risk, making engagement fragile even though improvement is possible with specialized approaches (Choi-Kain et al., 2022; Kacel et al., 2017; Weinberg & Ronningstam, 2022). Recent evidence also shows that leaders can be targets under certain relational and organizational conditions, underscoring the role of power perceptions and vulnerability in bullying dynamics (Nielsen et al., 2024).

When the victims of mobbing come to seek help, they are in a serious and at times dangerous state. They cannot sleep or eat properly, have dark ideas, have strained relations with their family, and are convinced they will no longer find work. If they have not yet received the dismissal letter, there is still room for maneuver from the legal standpoint. Also, a person who asks for help very early on

shows more clarity in detecting the abuse of which they are victims. There is some “emotional space” between them and the nurturing institution; the dyadic fusion is partly resolved, and the prognosis is more favorable.

Every mobbing situation is unique, yet all follow a disturbingly similar pattern. It begins with an apparently minor misunderstanding—a remark from management, sometimes mild, sometimes unexpectedly harsh. At first, it seems easy to clarify; there is no reason to panic. But the clarification proves impossible. Things soon become “serious.” The hierarchy—a line manager or someone higher up—begins to express doubts about the person’s efficiency, competence, or “soft skills.”

The victim suddenly discovers, with surprise and horror, that they have long been under the critical scrutiny of management. Often, this comes to light during a periodic evaluation, where a litany of unexpected complaints is laid out.

But that is not all. Something has shifted since the “small incident” that started it all. Colleagues who were once friendly and welcoming have grown colder. Conversations at the coffee machine stop abruptly when the victim arrives. Eyes turn away in the corridors. Greetings, if offered at all, come with a forced smile. Some looks carry pity, others embarrassment. Everything is subliminal. Everybody seems to know who the lightning would strike, yet nobody speaks. The victim is told that the missed barbecue invitation was just a mishap: colleagues thought they were on vacation, or their name was accidentally removed from the mailing list. “Nothing to worry about.”

Like most human beings, the victim of mobbing has an innate “unconscious” sensitivity to group movements. They detect all these signs very well. But mobbing is based on the silence of the herd and the denial of the obvious: everyone knows, perhaps without knowing, but everyone is in denial. There is no use in asking colleagues what is going on. They do not know it consciously and, above all, do not want to know it. The victim becomes paranoid, which does not help their popularity; they can become sad, plaintive, even irritable or downright aggressive. This behavior brings grist to the mill of sidelining or even dismissal.

But the damage is primarily internal. The victim perceives this—consciously, but even more unconsciously—yet cannot quite believe themselves. They fear they are going mad and try to continue life as before, but something is off. This process is where much of the psychological damage occurs. The victim begins to lose confidence in their own perception of reality, to fear they are seeing and hearing things that are not there, and to dread becoming paranoid. The attack from outside is brutal and hurtful. Still, the attack from within is devastating: it drains the ability to comprehend and analyze the situation and saps the energy to react.

Undermining is all the more effective: if the prey loses all confidence in their feelings and sensations, it becomes almost too easy for the predator.

The victim of mobbing is tired at work and feels “under siege,” literally and figuratively. They begin to feel insecure about the tasks to accomplish, have doubts, become slow and messy, and start to make mistakes. The hierarchy now has “proof” of the victim’s incompetence and will not hesitate to use it.

To restore normality, the victim prepares for “the meeting”—with management or colleagues—where they imagine they will finally not merely justify themselves—which would be beneath them—but clarify everything, confound the evil manager and colleagues in their own lies, and be welcomed back into the company’s graces. Because the situation makes no sense to them, they are convinced things must return to how they once were. Days, sometimes weeks, are spent rehearsing the right words, fine-tuning the tone, and sharpening the arguments.

When the great day comes, the reality is harrowing. The victim realizes that the meeting is nothing but a formality; their fate has already been sealed. It ends in collapse—either emotional breakdown or outburst—but the outcome is the same: shame, guilt, loss of confidence, rage, and depression. We have seen this pattern so many times, and we have also lived through it.

When this person comes into our practice, our task is, first of all, to restore a modicum of order in their life, trying to have them sleep and eat normally, if necessary, with the help of antidepressants. Their state of confusion and suffering is such that, without this first intervention, it is impossible to understand what happened to them and to have a normal conversation.

Our next battle is to convince the patient to take sick leave. Their emotional state fully justifies this step, but we meet strong resistance here. The patient refuses to consider themselves a victim; they do not want to “abandon the field” to the perceived enemy—or rather, they do not want to be abandoned by the company. They resist any action that might formally acknowledge their condition as victims. They still hope that, by returning to work as usual, things might return to how they were. The idea of staying at home, staring at the gaping void of their crumbling identity, is harrowing for them.

When they finally accept, out of exhaustion and repeated suffering at work, the next hurdle is to prepare them for the appointment with the insurance expert who evaluates their case. We try to advise them not to shower for three days, to wear their worst clothes, and to let their very real pain and disarray show. But it is all in vain. Out of dignity and self-respect, they present to the expert their best self—bright, elegant, and energetic. Women often even go to the hairdresser the day before and carefully choose their make-up and dress. It is admirable and courageous on their part, but the predictable result is that the expert readily declares them fit for work and returns them to the very environment that caused their suffering.

The next step is the introduction of two key “third-party” figures. On one side, we have the therapist, who acts as an alternate self, a narcissistic support. We operate as surrogates of the maternal function unconsciously projected onto the company. The second element is the paternal function, representing the father’s law, i.e., the lawyer. They have the task of “separating third” between the mobbed person and the company, which has now revealed itself as a toxic maternal figure. In normal circumstances, we live in a state of flux between different degrees of fusion with the maternal imago and allegiance with the paternal one, separating

us from the mother. Still, in these situations, we need to impose some order and find external support for the process of separation, mourning, and—hopefully—healing.

The victim regularly balks at the idea: “Not with me, I do not want to make a fuss.” Indeed, they do not wish to become mean and “hurt the mother-institution,” where they dream of returning, of finding their place and habits “as before.” They leave the session deeply troubled, because they had understood that the matter was serious, but hoped to find in us confirmation that everything was fine. Sometimes the resistance to the introduction of the lawyer is reinforced by the company’s HR service, which recommends to the victim not to be “confrontational” to “find more easily a satisfactory settlement.” This argument is disingenuous and regrettable, but plays right into the victim’s fragility.

In principle, we offer advice to consult a lawyer to review their work contract and see how many days of sick leave they are entitled to, since, in this situation, they are clearly unable to work. Homicides of the boss or suicides, unfortunately, can and do happen. They also need to understand the reciprocal rights and duties between employee and employer in their work contract. Very often, the mobbed person is unaware of their legal situation. They do not even know where they stored the signed contract, and they ignore the terms of their loss of earnings insurance. It seems we love the mother-institution without a contract because maternal love is unconditional, or at least that is what we want to believe.

If an evaluation is announced, a reassessment is being prepared, or the dismissal letter slips into the mail, the shock wave jolts the victim into seeking an urgent appointment with the lawyer. Otherwise, we continue a ballet of doubts and procrastination, punctuated by panic attacks doused with benzodiazepines, phone calls, and text messages exuding terror, which can last for months. Sometimes, there is such disarray in the face of increasingly clear threats of being sidelined, if not shown the door, that denial, the first line of defense against mourning, puts the person in a dangerous limbo, where they vainly try to please colleagues and hierarchy.

The external and neutral assessment of a lawyer, who looks at the situation with the eyes of the law, knows how to read the details of an employment contract, is aware of the latest regulations, and, in any case, is there to serve the interest of the person who pays them, introduces the third party and helps the victim to disentangle from their fusional love for the institution mother. The bond with the lawyer is the money, which is symbolic and transactional, the opposite of unconditional love, so beautiful and fulfilling but, unfortunately, with no established rule.

We pay the lawyer with money, which bears the seal of the state and the sovereign. In Freudian terms, this exchange symbolizes the child’s detachment from the devouring maternal imago and entry into the principle of reality, where negotiation with external law becomes possible. The narcissistic pervert fears the truly Machiavellian adversary, and the lawyer embodies this role: able to fight with legal arguments, rationally and without the sentimental fog—the emotional “ink” in

which the narcissistic pervert thrives.

Despite the urgent advice of the therapist, who must prescribe an adapted treatment, the decision to call on a lawyer is also hampered by the victim's illusion of being able to write themselves the "vengeful letter," a powerful account of truths supported by a detailed list of emails accusing the hierarchy. Far from us is any intention to belittle or mock the victims. We have made these mistakes ourselves. And, properly speaking, these are not mistakes; it is simply the belief that there is still some humanity in the narcissistic pervert and their colleagues, some hope that, in the end, the institution-mother will still love us.

When we tell the patient that these actions will only increase their suffering with no tangible results, they rarely believe us. The reaction is sometimes very vivid. We are taking away from them the possibility of vindication and retribution, the chance of healing. They want their "day in court." As a compromise, sometimes we convince the patient to go to this meeting with their lawyer and promise not to say a word themselves. When this happens, it is often an eye-opener. The patient realizes that it would have been an emotional bloodbath without the lawyer's presence.

Sometimes the victim tries to use their legal insurance or the free legal advice that trade unions offer. But precisely because these are free, there is no symbolic exchange of money, and the illusion of an unconditional reality remains. Apart from practical considerations regarding the cost of a lawyer, the patient is afraid to spend money and be left empty "on both sides," as the mother no longer feeds them and they lose their precious fecal gold content. In this case, legal insurance or free legal advice remains a lesser evil.

The therapist's role is complex, especially since they realize the ambiguity of having to act as a good transference therapeutic mother, while there is an open conflict of loyalty with the other mother, the company, which provides the food, in reality.

The therapist needs patience and time because, for the victim, it is common to abandon therapeutic follow-up in the somewhat illusory hope of "getting back in the saddle" alone, to use their time for themselves instead of wasting it in sessions, to practice sports, give more time to the family, or to start vaguely making art, learning a new language, and so on.

On rare occasions, the victim manages to see the game being played at their expense. They may find reasons, right or wrong, for which the lightning struck them among their colleagues, put things in perspective, and understand what is happening. This process helps them to relativize what they went through, reassess their priorities at work—and not only—and evaluate their opportunities and abilities to change. Even after an unjust mobbing and unfair dismissal, a more elaborated view of one's work helps the victim internalize the "paternal rule" that the lawyer has introduced and adopt a more mature relationship with the mother institution.

A real danger is when the victim finds another job before this reflection has

matured. Very often, the same causes produce the same effects, and the workplaces, being rife with narcissistic perverts, lead to the mobbing situation repeating itself. We have seen people who lost a job in conditions of blatant and unfair mobbing find work and lose it to mobbing again, having relapsed into overinvestment, perfectionism, and the tendency to isolate themselves “in order to work better.” Once again, they have been willing to do the work of others, incapable of doing it well enough (according to them) or simply smarter (according to us). Once more, they have overinvested in their role to do well, to be of service, for the ideal of a job well done, to “save the institution,” ultimately, to please, once again, a maternal imago.

2. Some Theoretical Reflections

At least since the 2008 stock market crash, the current social situation has profoundly destabilized ties in the professional environment. The COVID pandemic has further shaken our certainties and sense of stability to the core, confronting us with our relative impotence in the face of a natural event.

The companies and the civil services are increasingly discussing work-life balance, ethics, transparency, and respect. In parallel, we have witnessed a mounting wave of aberrant behaviors, where executives from the top to the bottom of the hierarchical ladder, even in public institutions where everyone is a civil servant, pressure the next layer under the pretext of efficiency and economy. We have the impression that economic theories, including those promoting degrowth, remain caught up in the web of ideology with less and less pragmatism.

Theory must be confronted with practice to become a predictive model and not remain a kind of empty shell. Positive science requires theories to be falsifiable, which is to say that it must be possible to confront them with a reality test. When the reality test is disregarded, we can say or do anything; we are in the register of self-definition, and even the most aberrant decisions are possible. In short, even if they sink the company, the individual who lies the most seems to prevail.

In the public service and the world closest to us, it does not matter if taxpayers' money is wasted by creating such dysfunction that health care services no longer work; the big liar will acquire and retain power—so far at least.

These arguments may inspire some form of militantism. Although social and political action is essential for the progress of democratic societies, the problems we face with our patients, victims of mobbing, are contingent, personal, and urgent. The danger to the individual is immediate. Social reforms may produce positive effects, but usually only over long periods. The proposal to wait for the thaw is not very useful for the mountaineer with one foot stuck in the ice of a glacier. On the other hand, providing him with calm and practical guidance on how to unblock his foot can help. Sometimes you really have to send him the alpine rescue, i.e., psychotherapy and neuroleptics.

However, the possibility of getting out of a condition of mobbing depends on the tools that the person was able to acquire in the very first part of their life, and

if the bonds with the mother and the father were fragile or dysfunctional, therapeutic work via transference and countertransference can help a lot. We are unlocking the mountaineer's foot.

The introduction of the third law-father-lawyer-money, especially on short timescales (we cannot wait for the thaw), may be indispensable, as may the alpine rescue (psychotherapy and neuroleptics). As with the alpine rescue, we should not wait too long.

In a work structure with fair recognition of merit, the weakness of the individual's original maternal bond may not be evident or detrimental. The implicit link of recognition accompanies the person who works throughout their career. However, apart from some fortunate cases, it is often more an illusion than a reality, because the company rarely recognizes or simply knows its employees, executives, and even sometimes its managers. At the same time, the greetings of the doorman, our parking space, the small objects on our desk, the postcards of colleagues hanging on the wall, and the green plant that the last retiree entrusted to us are sources of pride, self-satisfaction, and a sense of belonging, achievement, and stability.

Sometimes the delusion lasts for years, which our patients often remember as "the good times." The mobbing situation is a dry awakening from this reverie; the victim of mobbing is confronted with a reality that is nothing more and nothing less than a transactional environment, but with a perverse reality that wants to eliminate them as an individual. The situation is all the more absurd because the institution cannot live without the people who work there, and sometimes, as we have said, if the institution is state-owned, the person can hardly be dismissed.

3. Two Clinical Vignettes

We will now present two clinical vignettes illustrating situations that provide different techniques to approach mobbing. These clinical vignettes are constructed by merging the stories of different patients drawn from private practice cases from 2009 - 2024 to obtain two prototypical situations illustrating our hypothesis. While doing so, we have been very attentive to remove any references that could threaten patients' anonymity.

This first clinical vignette presents the attitude of the "recidivist victim", while the second illustrates the attitude of the "mobbing victim who accepts help".

Ms. Deprès' Story

Ms. Deprès was referred to us by a colleague rheumatologist who, after a certain number of investigations, found that there was "a psychological basis" for his patient's repetitive low back pain, or, to put it more directly, "she was not getting out of it."

Ms. Deprès is a beautiful woman with a very sporty haircut. She is tall and well-dressed, although a little stiff. She wears high-class jewelry and low heels.

She tells us that she is tired, that her back pain prevents her from walking, which is one of her preferred activities, and that she would like to get back in shape quickly.

On the “quickly” we tilt. It reminds us of the story of the young man who goes to the fencing master because he wants to learn to play foil quickly. The fencing master tells him it will take him a year to learn. The young man balks; he wants to learn faster. The fencing master replied that he would probably need a little more, say, three years. The young man replied curtly that he could do it much quicker, whereupon the fencing master nodded sadly and told him that, unfortunately, he would never be able to learn to play foil. Sadly, this story’s moral is even more true in therapies: rapid changes either do not occur or cause disasters.

A year ago, she resigned from a textile company where she worked as an accounting executive. Ms. Deprès told us that she had wanted to follow the orders from the Directorate (the capital letter is appropriate) to optimize the work of accountants. She had therefore seen the employees one by one to explain a few changes to implement in their routine. Everything had gone well, but then she learned that one of the secretaries, Ms. Margelle, had started complaining everywhere and to the deputy director about the stress Ms. Deprès was subjecting her to. Ms. Deprès had therefore asked to speak to the deputy director to clarify her position. The interview had gone well, and Ms. Deprès had left serenely for her summer vacation. On her return, the management summoned her to point out some issues in applying the “AgendaPrompt” program for employee absences. Ms. Deprès did not understand very well. The management had put this program on hold because it was too complicated and not adaptable to the company’s schedules. The small committee had replied that the program application was essential and would be the focus of an evaluation of Ms. Deprès very soon.

Ms. Deprès had gathered her collaborators to explain that the “AgendaPrompt” program had to be put into production quickly. To everyone’s surprise, the employees balked; the program was a plague, a bunch of bugs, they had lost hours on it, it crashed at any time, and was difficult to learn. Ms. Margelle, being on sick leave, was not present at this meeting.

We tried to gather more personal information about Ms. Deprès, but she said explaining what had happened at work was much more important. We do not dare to contradict her because we can see that it would be useless. Ms. Deprès continues her story by describing her difficulties in managing the employees who are angry with her because of the cursed program, and at the same time, in overcoming her feeling of isolation in front of the management. Through the grapevine, she learns that Ms. Margelle, freshly divorced, has a relationship with the deputy director of the sales department, who, of course, is a member of the Management Committee.

After six increasingly tense months, in which Ms. Deprès had to “suffer” a first negative evaluation, a second so-called intermediate evaluation, and finally a warning, followed by two months of sick leave, she decided to negotiate her resignation with a work certificate about which she continues to fight.

At the subsequent session, we discussed her antecedents. The anamnesis is more like a battlefield: she came out of a nasty divorce, lost her father as a child,

lost her mother ten years ago, is at odds with her brother and sister, and the youngest of her children is paraplegic following a skiing accident. All this is said as if it were not so serious.

About her early childhood, we receive, rather than information, a knowing smile and the matter is settled with the typical sentence (that we have heard a good number of times): “I do not remember much possible to her professional profile. At the third interview, she landed a position in an agri-food company. She is enthusiastic, and we are relieved.

At the next session, Ms. Deprès asked to move to a session every two weeks, and we accepted because we could not force her to continue at a tighter pace, the good excuse being the working hours.

At the next session, two weeks later, she told us that the Management (still in capital letters) had asked her to put the company’s “messy” accounting in order.

We bristle; this story seems like a *déjà vu*. We strongly advise her to adopt an attitude of observation because she does not know the workings, the uses, and the customs of this company, to be, in short, prudent. We remind her that we can sometimes meet ill-intentioned people who can use the newcomer as a fuse for, say, personal revenge, or the destabilization of an opponent, or to climb the hierarchy.

At the next session, Ms. Deprès is worried; she has been summoned on a pretext by her superiors, it seems that employees have complained, her trial period is ending, and she does not know if her contract will be confirmed. She tearfully admits that she stopped the antidepressant treatment when she got this job, because she felt well. She also told us that, without realizing it, she was becoming very irritable at work, but that she had not thought that the cessation of the treatment could be the cause.

A session was missed, Ms. Deprès apologized, explaining that she had confused her agenda.

In the next session, she informed us that her contract had not been confirmed and that she could benefit from a few months of unemployment at most.

Ms. Deprès did not show up for the next appointment, without apologizing, and therefore left therapy without giving any further news of herself.

Mr. Deloin’s Story

Mr. Deloin asked us for an appointment on the advice of his general practitioner, who had given him emergency antidepressant treatment and advised him to see a psychiatrist quickly. Mr. Deloin tells us that he feels awful, has bouts of anxiety, and sleeps very poorly, if at all. He is in great difficulty at work.

Mr. Deloin explained the situation at work, starting some months before our first appointment. At the beginning of the year, after a meeting with Human Resources and his direct manager, which seemed to him generally quite positive, he had been told by the same manager, without witnesses and “between two doors”, that the company wanted to separate from him.

Mr. Deloin had started to feel very worried; he had worked for five years in the

same sporting goods company, and the customers were happy with him. He had even asked to expand his activity to bicycles and rollerblades because he seemed to have potential.

Admittedly, a few months earlier, he had learned that a colleague had left the company after a period of conflict with the same manager, and this had tipped him off, but everything seemed to be going well for him. The conversation with his manager surprised him and made him very uncomfortable, especially after the meeting with Human Resources, which seemed relatively innocuous. Mr. Deloin had therefore re-contacted Human Resources to clarify the situation, and he had obtained an appointment scheduled very far away, well after the planned summer leave.

Back from his vacation, Human Resources summoned him as planned to tell him, to his great surprise, that a restructuring was coming and that staff reductions were being considered, without him being directly concerned. Mr. Deloin reported that his boss had told him of the company's intention to part ways with him, at which the human resources manager showed surprise.

Mr. Deloin was becoming more and more tense. He was suffering from stomach aches, had begun to sleep poorly, and was experiencing dark thoughts. Significantly affected by the situation at work, he had difficulty starting the day.

Three weeks ago, after parking his car in the company's car park, he had to be taken to the emergency room with dizziness and violent chest pain. The doctors kept him under observation for three days and, after ruling out somatic reasons, sent him home and advised him to contact his GP. The latter, with a diagnosis of a panic attack, put him on antidepressants, certified the work stoppage, and gave him a few names of psychiatrists, including ours.

Between making the appointment and our first session, Mr. Deloin received a dismissal letter effective at the end of the following month.

Our first question, apart from enquiring how our patient was managing this news, is whether such a sudden dismissal is legitimate. Mr. Deloin does not seem to doubt it, which makes him even more worried because he has just signed the purchase of a small house where he plans to move with his wife and two young children. He thinks about his future with much apprehension. To avoid worrying his wife about his anxiety and insomnia, he sleeps on the couch, that is to say, he no longer sleeps.

At a subsequent session, he said he received a nice work certificate. However, I notice that it is not normal for the employer to provide an employment certificate before the employee has left the company, and our patient has a justified stoppage, during which the employer cannot terminate his contract. We asked him to contact a lawyer because something seemed off to us. He is very uncomfortable; he does not want to make a scandal, he has never taken this approach, the economic situation does not allow him to spend money, and he refuses, saying he will think about it anyway.

The following week, he arrived at our appointment a little calmer. He has taken

the time to do some DIY work, which has relaxed him by “keeping his hands busy,” he says. We talk about his childhood, his studies, and his parents, who lived in the south of France, in the village where the family elders have always lived.

A month passed; he tolerated the antidepressant treatment well and said that it soothed him. He sent the sick leave certificate and received no news apart from the email acknowledgment of receipt, which surprises him. For our part, we are surprised by his surprise, but we do not show it. Unfortunately, our faces must have been eloquent, and after a rather long pause, our patient came out with a pithy sentence: “I am such a fool.” He explains that, little by little, he realizes that he has been played, that the ousting was well planned, and that he is not the only one to suffer this fate. There is a restructuring, and the managers try to keep their places by “cleaning the shelves,” eliminating those who may take their place or are less compliant.

He tells us that our idea of consulting a lawyer does not seem so absurd to him now, that he is entitled to at least know his rights, and too bad if the lawyer costs, he can see with his legal insurance.

The support therapy continued throughout the implementation of his legal defense and the conciliation in front of the Labor Court, which resulted in substantial compensation because the lack of preliminary mediation and consultation made the dismissal clearly abusive.

A certificate of employment, correct this time, was drawn up after a rather laborious negotiation with Human Resources. Our patient continued to see us for some time, because this whole story had revealed flaws in his life organization that he wanted to address, and to complete the process of separating from the therapist. We saw him every two months, and we stopped the psychotropic treatment after one year.

4. Discussion

Although the accounts of these two cases come from a mixture of real situations, we think they will resonate with fellow therapists.

As we said above, according to our observations, work is a projection of the mother much more than the father, a third party, the bearer of the law. Let us not forget that work gives us food; it is essential for survival, and as such, it has a creative and destructive potential. This maternal projection is difficult to make conscious, even with the help of a therapist, and it remains unconscious if the victim is not supported and is alone in the mobbing situation. Indeed, mobbing rests on the isolation of the victim in the workplace.

Here, we add a budding, somewhat out-of-context, potentially interesting idea about school. There is a growing tendency among teachers to encourage parents to get involved in their children’s homework. On one side, this may prompt better integration between school and family. Still, it also carries the danger that school is no longer experienced as a space different from the family, “a third place,” but as an extension of the family itself. Since this load falls primarily on mothers, ac-

ademic achievement loses its “paternal” connotation of conforming to an external law (the school’s authority, bylaws, and regulations) and becomes associated with the maternal dyad. Going to school, children no longer “leave the mother’s skirt and enter the world,” but instead remain in a prolongation of the maternal bond, with what follows as a fantasy of food, lack of food, and death. We wonder whether the increased episodes of school-related stressful situations have a causal connection to the extension of an intimate link with the maternal imago in the school space.

Our experience has changed the way we approach patients who present as victims of workplace mobbing. In the past, we sought primarily to support them through the various stages of negotiation with management and HR. When possible, we adopted a more psychoanalytic stance, exploring the patient’s vulnerabilities that might compromise their ability to navigate such a difficult period in their professional life. The victims of mobbing almost regularly present symptoms of mild or even severe depression, with hetero-aggressive or suicidal ideations, which are clear indications for the prescription of antidepressants. These patients required very close follow-up, with at least a one-hour session per week to support them and monitor their evolution. We also prescribed sick leave to protect them from a toxic environment and safeguard their mental health and well-being. At the time, we did not consider it our role to advise patients on specific courses of action, such as consulting a lawyer. On the one hand, we believed that not every conflict had to be fought on legal grounds, and that reasonable actors could ultimately reach a win-win solution or, failing that, a fair settlement (Hershcovis, 2011). On the other hand, we felt that a more directive and pragmatic approach was better left to social workers, professional associations, or trade unions.

As mentioned above, however, since the 2008 financial crisis and its aftershocks, and even more so during and after the pandemic, “happy endings” have become the exception rather than the rule (Kniffin et al., 2021). Increasingly, we came to feel that our therapeutic neutrality—always relative in practice—offered patients little real protection. To be blunt, we sometimes had the impression of merely accompanying lambs to the slaughter. Reluctantly, we had to recognize that, in our time, when a patient comes to us for help in such a mobbing situation, the die is usually cast, even if they are far from realizing it. We therefore consider antidepressants as before, but, at the risk of startling them, we now also recommend from the outset that they consult a lawyer and immediately take sick leave. In Switzerland, certified sick leave generally triggers statutory dismissal-blocking periods, offering short-term protection while legal options are explored.

We also tell them that, if things have come to this point, their situation is already compromised, and the best they can do is negotiate a favorable separation from the company. Unfortunately, so far, we have always been proven right.

The patients react with surprise, anger, incredulity, and often aggression toward us. These reactions have motivated us to write this paper, as they remind us more of the frustration of the child who has to separate from the mother than the Oe-

dipal conflict with the father. However, we have also realized that our suggestion to see a lawyer and introduce the “law of the father” is not only practically beneficial, if accepted, but also therapeutic (Leymann, 1996). The mere consideration of introducing a “third party” and separating from the nurturing mother-institution is therapeutic and part of the healing process. As we have seen above, sometimes this process comes to fruition; other times, it is aborted and fails. In either case, the presence of a lawyer, if accepted, provides a modicum of protection to the victim of mobbing.

We realize that two important elements limit the validity of our hypothesis. Although we have treated a sizeable number of victims of mobbing, our experience is still episodic and mostly limited to the Romandy region of Switzerland. Also, the possibility to seek legal help, obtain medical sick leave, and obtain loss of earnings insurance is specific to the Romandy legal context and may have to be adapted in other regulatory contexts.

5. Conclusion

This paper integrates psychoanalytic and attachment theories into the mobbing framework based on our experience and clinical practice. We discuss the hypothesis that the link between the employee and the company is symbolically a projection of the bond with the mother, and we present theoretical and practical arguments supporting this idea.

We advance the hypothesis that victims and perpetrators share structural similarities based on a dysfunctional maternal attachment that they try to heal with different strategies. We have observed how the degradation of social bonds and the aftershocks from the repeated economic crises since 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic have created an environment where these personality traits collide in the workplace, causing widespread suffering and pushing valuable individuals out of the workforce and into social welfare. We believe that a myopic focus on short-term efficiency, often poorly defined, in public and private institutions’ management is mainly responsible for these situations.

We explain how we have been led to a clinical and therapeutic shift in our practice, strongly suggesting that suffering patients protect themselves with sick leave, consult a lawyer to establish their rights, and accompany them in the negotiations with the company. We illustrate our arguments with two clinical vignettes drawn from our clinical work.

As citizens and members of society, we would like to live in a world that privileges its members’ long-term health and happiness and where negotiation can lead to satisfactory problem settlements without necessarily resorting to a legal process. However, our first duty as therapists is toward the well-being of our patients, and, based on our experience, we have come to accept the necessity of introducing legal counsel from the early stages of a work-related conflict.

According to our theory, from the psychoanalytic point of view, this has the advantage of introducing a paternal third-element figure, the representative of law

and authority, who helps to separate the victim from the dysfunctional, dyadic, maternal-like bond with the company. This process has a healing effect on the victim, who can consequently reconsider their relationship with the company in a more mature and balanced way, disentangling reality from Kleinian schizo-paranoid projections.

We hope these considerations will assist both clinicians and patients in facing the painful and challenging process of workplace mobbing, and in finding therapeutic and legal strategies that safeguard health and dignity.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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