Habermas, Relational Leadership, and Public Sector Workplace Bullying

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Abstract

Drawing upon Habermasian theory, this article endeavors to enhance understanding of how public sector changes resulting from the ascendancy of neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM) have impacted negatively on public servants. It examines the growing corpus of research that has associated NPM with workplace bullying in the public sector, and focuses on the detrimental implications for organizational leadership. An alternative conception of what it means to lead people in the public sector is offered, supported by relational leadership literature. This article claims that extant leadership models in the public sector should be interpreted as being part of a wider ideological agenda. Specifically, conceptions of leadership have altered as a result of neoliberalism and NPM, and have become premised on managerialism instead of ethics, and the pursuit of market efficiency over public service principles. This article contends that relational leadership offers a preferable standpoint to the neoliberal conceptualization of public sector leadership, and recommends that further empirical research is undertaken to operationalize the benefits of relational leadership in the public sector, particularly in relation to ameliorating issues such as workplace bullying.

Keywords: Habermas; New Public Management (NPM); Relational Leadership; Workplace Bullying

Introduction

Neoliberal ideology has not only reconstituted the fabric of the state, but has re-positioned workers in the public sector in terms of the nature of their work, value, and professional status. This article aims to review the nature of this "transformation" of the public sector, its impact on public servants, the increase in public sector workplace bullying, and offers an alternative trajectory of leadership to that which has been imposed in the recent past. The period since the 1970s has witnessed a crisis of the liberal-capitalist model of government. The inability to secure political stability and economic growth similar to that of the period 1953-1973 has led the political elite to reappraise why, how, and what the state undertakes as part of its responsibility to govern. This reappraisal has been influenced by a range of pressures, not least neoliberal ideology, and ideas related to free functioning markets, free trade, and economic instrumentalism. This article will consider the impact of NPM on public servants, and consider whether the dominant orthodoxy of public sector leadership and management can be reformed. The discussion will be informed through reference to the work of Jürgen Habermas, as well as more recent concepts drawn from relational leadership literature.

Overview of Public Sector Developments

The post-1945 model of Public Administration was not only typified by the expansion of the state, and its responsibilities, but also of the growth of the public sector salariat. In Britain, for example, the combined effects of the 1944 Education Act and the 1946 National Health Service Act led to the emergence of new forms of work, and additional categories of public sector workers. In particular, during the post-war period, together with the expansion of the administrative Civil Service, the nationalized utilities and sundry government bodies, the British state grew, and with it those who it employed. This expansion of the state was mirrored in Western Europe and the United States (US) albeit on a different scale, and for different reasons. The creation of a new cadre of worker in Britain, specifically the newly professionalized state employee, would infer that not only had the relationship between citizens and the state been redefined by this post-war social contract, but also that between government and the professions. In simple terms, the development of teaching and nursing as emergent professions, for example, tied successive British Governments to a social democratic model of society,

and an accompanying policy agenda. In propagating the growth of the public sector, the British state was implicitly subscribing to their values of public service, and an ethical belief system [1]. Correspondingly, the traditional public sector ethos among workers entailed the setting aside of personal interests and working toward the public good [2].

The Relevance of Habermasian Critical Theory

Jürgen Habermas' intellectual ideas are eclectic, drawing from Arendt's [3] political theory on totalitarianism, Fromm's [4] Marxian interpretation of the state and its aptitude for ideological propaganda, Hegel's [5] theory on prevailing cultural norms and alienation, and Weber's [6] critique of bureaucratic social structure, encapsulated by Parson as the "iron cage" (quoted [7]). Habermas' theorizations elucidate the tension-charged power relations between the "system" and the "lifeworld." Specifically, the macro-level of the "system" represents the formal mechanism of state control including the bureaucratic apparatus of modern capitalism and societal relations; and the micro-level of lifeworld comprises ordinary everyday experience, and intersubjective understanding [8]. Consequently, one is able to develop a theoretical framework within which to view the changing and debilitating relationship between the state, public sector leadership, and the professional.

A key contention of Habermas' [9] theory is that the neoliberal state is a severely dysfunctional instrument for the defense of private wealth and freedoms, resulting in little by way of moral sense of wider social obligation. This situation is accompanied by professionals being deprived of their individual autonomy [10]. According to Habermas [9], contemporary capitalism creates new types of social identity, which leads to a distortion of civil morality and personal ethics through a process of "de-moralization." Correspondingly, the ethical frameworks of individuals are re-engineered to meet the demands of late capitalism. In addition to this assault on the individual's ethical and moral framework, Habermas [9] argues that new forms of knowledge are created and imposed to serve the interests of the evolving capitalist market. Habermas [9] offers then a theory of recent history within which the ideas of distorted ethics, and diminished personal autonomy, are prominent.

In Legitimation crisis, Habermas [11,12] offered a view of social democratic society in crisis during the 1970s characterized by "systematic disequilibrium" in the economy, thus interfering with state propagation of its symbolic and inherent value to citizens. Habermas' critique of the West was predicated on the observation that it could no longer continue to secure the political stability and economic growth of the period 1953-1973, which had been essential for the development of the public sector. The consequence of such failure for Habermas was that liberal democracies thereafter faced a "legitimation crisis," in which the political elite were compelled to engage in so-called "reform" of public services. Habermas [11] correctly predicted this crisis would be addressed through the adoption of a set of

core principles namely efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, legitimated through neoliberal discourses.

In his analysis of the politico-economic crisis of western capitalism, Habermas [11] anticipated the re-construction and demise of the post-1945 state, combined with the end of the social democratic vision that it had previously espoused. The superseding neoliberal doctrine was underpinned by a reassertion of the classical liberal argument associated originally with the advocacy of individualism and laissez-faire principles [13]. This doctrine is combined with the view that societies function more prosperously under a market logic, particularly a state-directed one [14]. For Habermas [9], neoliberalism became concerned with the subjugation of people to the amoral instrumentality of the state, and in turn created a fundamental obstacle to human emancipation.

The New Right ascendancy under Thatcher and Reagan in the early 1980s followed an ideological critique of the post-war public sector that had been caricatured as being detrimental toward market self-regulation, overly bureaucratic, and inefficient. Ultimately, neoliberalism would end the post-1945 model of society, its governance, and the professionalization of new public sector workers. The neoliberal critique of public sector inefficiency was counteracted by NPM promulgated as the new public administrative philosophy [15-17] and which Clark, Denham-Vaughan, and Chidiac [18] described as "the guiding intellectual paradigm for the reform and governance of public services over the last three decades." Although NPM combined two basic precepts, namely, to reduce the role of state intervention and increase public sector performance in monetary terms, it was heterogeneous in nature, and varied from country to country [19,20]. For example, whereas the underlying agenda of NPM in the US was to expel the state from its delivery function, in the UK the primary purpose was to reorganize the public sector on a more marketized, efficient, and commercial basis [16,21,22]. Indeed, the British experience of NPM was typified by the market, managerialism and performativity [23-25]. Public sector workers, in effect, had to conform to policy agendas imposed by government, irrespective of their personal values. Using a Habermasian lens, this article has three areas of focus including the impact of public sector marketization and NPM, workplace bullying in the public sector, and relational leadership-outlined next.

The Impact of Marketization and NPM on the Public Sector

Neoliberal governmental power operates on multiple sites in the form of the state down to civil society, and the individual level [12]. Corporate hegemony ensues when material economic interests become dominant civil society interests, and organizations become how to realize market-oriented interests [26]. Correspondingly, through marketization, the fundamental tenet of NPM has been to make public sector organizations more business-oriented through a focus on performance, cost-

effectiveness, and efficiency, scrutinized through an external auditing system [27]. The recurring strategic objectives that underpin NPM discourses relate to achieving increased organizational efficiency through performance measurement of stakeholder satisfaction [28]; and cost-effectiveness, including competitive tendering, and privatization of services [29].

Public sector marketization has resulted in management practices that are premised on the presumption that private sector management practices are superior to those historically enunciated by the professions. Managers-rather than public sector professionals with subject expertise-have a license to decide how services should be organized, as opposed to professionals legitimately determining how to optimally deliver services [18,30]. The private sector practices adopted include the implementation of explicit performance measures in quantitative terms, specific financialized target setting for employees, an emphasis upon economic rewards and sanctions, and the adoption of internal competition within the public sector through league tables [29,31]. Through the implementation of managerialism, the capitalist model is mirrored, specifically via the execution of neoliberal ideas of designing, organizing, and managing services in a market-oriented, cost effective, performance management, and audit-oriented manner [29,32]. Thus, public service is subsumed under marketization through NPM, and implemented through managerialism with what appear to be legitimate quantitative, target-oriented, and financialized practices. It is within this context that workplace bullying has proliferated. Austerity confirmed how deeply embedded neoliberalism and financialization are in the contemporary global political economy [33]. Through austerity policies, the UK government has significantly reduced expenditure on public sector organizations and services, and further embedded NPM practices [34]. The resultant organizational changes have reinforced the NPM reforms that have been pursued in the public sector for decades [35,36]. Within the austerity context, the public sector was restructured, became diminished, and characterized by precarious insecure employment, alongside pressurized target-driven environments [37].

Workplace Bullying in the Public Sector

Workplace bullying involves situations of mistreatment and harmful behaviors, where a bullied employee is subjected to such behavior repeatedly and persistently over a prolonged period of time, from one or more colleagues. In relation to the professional status of the perpetrators of bullying, it can be varied and could include managers, peers, or even subordinates, but mainly managers [38]. Invariably, the bullied employee is powerless to defend themselves against systematic mistreatment, due to inherent unequal power differentials [39,40]. The mistreatment and harm that workplace bullying targets experience from the bullying perpetrators include being humiliated at work, being criticized unfairly, being demeaned through personal insults, and experiencing ridicule from bullying perpetrators. Eventually, the bullied targets undergo scapegoating for workplace problems and issues, can suffer unfair slander about their personal and professional qualities, and endure being morally condemned in the workplace without justification for minor misdemeanors compared with other colleagues [41-43]. The detrimental impact of the bullying behavior for those who experience it includes significant harm and distress, such as attempting to work within a hostile working environment, and feeling intimidated within the workplace setting. Targets of bullying also experience lowered attitudinal strength, and often become socially isolated from colleagues. Bullied targets can endure potential economic jeopardy and employment insecurity, and in many cases undergo workplace departure through ejection via redundancy, with the decision-making underpinned by bullying tactics [44].

Research has highlighted workplace bullying as a particular issue in the public sector, with bullied targets being subjected to the principal mainstays of workplace bullying behavior including aggressive behaviors, intimidation, and being forced into powerless, defenseless positions by largely managers [39,45]. Several studies have been undertaken worldwide outlining the prevalence of public sector workplace bullying, including in Australia, Sweden, and the UK [46-56]. The full range of implications for public servants remains contested terrain, but there has been a reported increase in workplace bullying in the UK public sector [45], and also in the context of NPM [47,49,54,57]. Within the British context, workplace bullying has been analyzed in the context of profit maximization, and the centrality of worker exploitation in the capital-labor dynamic. Hoel and Salin [57] and Ironside and Siefert [49], for example, contend in conventional Marxist terms, that workplace bullying is a typical component of the power inequality inherent in the social division of labor, dominated by capital, and driven by the neoliberal imperative. Correspondingly, workplace bullying is viewed as being precipitated by the acceleration of drastic changes to British industrial relations within the historical context of Thatcherism, culminating over time in the decline of trade union power, and deteriorating support for workers. Attention is also drawn to NPM governmental initiatives imposing financial constraints on the public sector, leading to the enforcement of quasi-business restructuring, and complex performance management systems, engendering workplace bullying. Furthermore, their analyses center around managerialism, which they view as degrading established conditions of employment for workers in the UK public sector. Hence, it is argued that workplace bullying stems from the managerial prerogative to manage, accompanied by NPM practices leading to work intensification, thus creating a cycle of conflict in which bullying is a central feature. Pivotal to Hoel and Salin's [57], and Ironside and Siefert's [49] analyses are inexorable labor market inequalities, including the power imbalance between workers and employers, which are regarded as leading to bullying to meet the demands of capital.

NPM in the Australian and Swedish public sector has resulted in an increasingly competitive, highly pressurized public sector environments, focused on profit-oriented outputs. The bullying actors include leaders who have internalized externally imposed neoliberal ideology as legitimate, leading to negative behaviors within increasingly high-pressured environments [58]. Furthermore, public sector austerity restructuring strategies include the achievement of budgetary efficiency through job losses, and the intensification of managerial prerogative over workers' continued employment [59]. Hutchinson [47] contends that budget reductions, and restructuring incorporating the downsizing of the workforce, leads to internal competition, individualized reward systems, and fear of job loss, creating a high-risk environment of managerial prerogative being exercised in ways that engender workplace bullying. Similarly, Omari and Paull [54] maintain that the competition elements of NPM have had adverse ramifications for worker interactions, resulting in pressurized target-oriented work environments with performance management focused on income generation and league table positioning. Their research additionally points to power differentials between leaders and workers in the context of imposed NPM and change management, which fuels toxicity in the workplace. A pertinent question that needs to be addressed is where the fine line is between reasonable and constructive leadership and robust performance management, and when it manifests and segues into workplace bullying. Omari and Paull [60] highlight that NPM has changed the nature of leadership and initiate a debate about what it has become, and its implications for workplace bullying. Indeed, it could be argued that public sector leadership has entailed crossing the Rubicon into a negative performance management dynamic, and undue pressure. Conceivably, ethical or moral leadership predicated upon developing shared understandings within a relational context, could ameliorate and address issues such as workplace bullying, which is one of the key contentions in this article.

The Relational Leadership Model

Public sector leadership has come to share some of the characteristics displayed by private sector leaders, such as promulgating a business-oriented vision, but a wider mission exists, which is to conform to the dictates of political masters, and their associated ideology. For some public sector leaders, the challenge of reconciling their personal values to the goals of the government may manifest in a form of values schizophrenia. For others, the legitimation that government policy provides may cloak other agendas that may have less to do with implementation of policy, and more to do with exerting control over others. Specifically, the public sector's primary reliance upon managerial control mechanisms has compromised and deteriorated public leaders' relationships with their followers [61,62]. Furthermore, the focus within traditional leadership approaches upon personality traits, behavioral styles or identifying types of leaders with associated people management techniques [63,64]

reinforces a leader-hero myth of leaders working their magic [65] to successfully subject followers to an apparatus of control. This type of leadership paradigm, however, is merely geared toward facilitating a predefined and prescriptive market improvement within organizational settings, accompanied by an unequal division of labor.

Although public sector management scholars have widely recognized the importance of generating fresh perspectives on leadership, there remains a paucity of literature relating to analyzing the benefits of relational leadership theory, and the succor of its application to the public sector [61,66]. Relational leadership theory offers a way to counteract public sector issues through its perspective that relationships within contextually embedded processes, emanating from interactions and relations among individuals, are key to efficacious leadership [64,67,68]. Relational leadership models contend that people within organizations do not act independently as self-contained individuals, but in relation to each other while embedded in a historically constituted context. Relational leadership contrasts with traditional functionalist leadership studies that make epistemological assumptions that leadership can be known in an atomistic, purportedly value-free way, and through the rigorous application of scientific methods to improve productivity [69], while simultaneously politically propagandizing the kudos of individualized modes of leadership.

Relational leadership scholars have opened new vistas and given prominence ontologically to the emergent socially constructed nature, heteroglossic, and contextual embeddedness of leadership [66,70]. The focus within relational leadership theory is upon intersubjective social reality, and relational dynamics constructed through day-to-day interactions, moving away from a focus on leaders simply achieving alignment to productivity goals, or concurring with a manager's view of what is productive [64,71]. These elements resonate with Habermas' [9] theory of communicative action which describes a process of agonistic speech and action within everyday interactions, and highlights that pluralism requires the achievement of intersubjective agreement. Habermas conceives of democratic processes as an unending process of contestation and critical awareness; however, he highlights that the perspective which is favored is the one that serves the interests of political, and socio-economic power [10,72]. That said, Skeggs [73] emphasizes that market ideology does not entirely replace values of public good; and that there are inevitably collectivist values in the everyday life of public sector organizations, which creates tension, resistance, and opportunities for change.

Relational perspectives view organizations as elaborate relational networks of changing persons, moving forward in space and time in a complex interplay between organizational members and the system in which they enter, enveloped by the broader ever-changing political and socio-economic environment [70].

This perspective resonates with a core component of Habermas' theory on communicative action, and its central theme of the intersubjective agreement [74]. The latter includes negotiated assent consisting of linguistically mediated interaction between individuals, ultimately oriented toward mutual understanding [75]. Specifically, Habermas critiques the notion that individuals can reach a fixed solution applicable to all when societal situations are constantly changing; and challenges how individuals can reach universal conclusions in isolation and separation from their context [76]. Analysis of workplace bullying and leadership paradigms in the context of NPM-oriented radical alterations to UK public sector structures, culture, and practices remains limited. It is within this context that this article recommends further research into relational leadership.

Discussion

In The theory of communicative action Habermas [77,78] sought to address the amoral instrumentality of the state through the development of moral consciousness. Habermas sought to integrate Kohlberg's theory of moral development into an analysis of contemporary society and conflict, with the recognition that we are fundamentally moral beings [79]. The main point of Habermas' thesis is that we should engage in a moral discourse and reflexivity that aims to establish universal norms of behavior based on tolerance and inclusivity. For Habermas [77,78], such an approach echoes his belief in the cause of modernity as a project, and an idealized form of social contract based on mutual consent. To counter the de-moralization of society, and the assertion of amoral organizational management, Habermas [9] argues, therefore, for a fundamental review of how we arrive at a view of the world, and how we interact with others through the recognition of universal interests. For Habermas [9], it is simply not enough to think about why we do what we do at work but how we do it, and what it means to us when we interact with others.

Inherent within Habermas' argument is the idea that we need to understand each other's viewpoints, and to arrive at some form of an intersubjective consensus and then action that is both moral and ethical. Central to his theory of communicative action, therefore, is the development of the idea of linguistic understanding or communicative rationality as a mechanism of action coordination. If monetarization, market imperatives, and bureaucratization determine lifeworld conditions and shape the thought and action of people's daily lives, they prevent unconstrained interaction with others [77]. Habermasian [9,11] ideas are developed in the work of Clark, Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac [18] in which a call is made for the adoption of a new mantra of leadership. In an open and supportive professional relationship, Clark et al. [18] argue that managing public services must be predicated upon the relational and values bases of people involved in delivering services. This is summed-up by O'Flynn [80] and the emphasis on longer-term management skills focused on conflict resolution, building trust, information-sharing, and goal clarity.

Irrespective of national context, the emphasis placed on the individual's demonstration of trust and values is common to the literature on relational leadership. In this respect, relational leadership theory articulates the importance of drawing a link between a principled approach, based on transcendental ethics-based values, and its practical realization in everyday behaviors. In specific terms, research must continue to develop and refine how we can identify relational leadership in practice [18]. A set of values underpin leadership in the public sector and with this a commitment to the ethics of public service [81]. These core values should inform dimensions of leadership and consequently characteristics of effective leaders, which would then be evidenced through their daily competencies. If we are to address problems, such as workplace bullying, then we must look to rebuild public sector leadership more explicitly upon ethics of public service and core values. As the Committee on Standards in Public Life [81] reported: Doing things in the right way and in the public interest is critical for public confidence in the bodies that operate on the public's behalf and supports the delivery of public services. A robust ethical culture supports effective risk management-if people see thinking about ethical issues as part of their job, and feel safe to speak up, this can pick up potential concerns before they escalate. A values-driven culture is also good for morale, and can help attract and retain the highest-caliber staff. Our evidence shows that an ethical culture does not emerge by accident. It requires discussion and action.

In light of this insight, the public sector should review how it develops its leadership cadre and the priorities implicit within its leadership development programs. In future, there should be a re-orientation in how we assess the performance of leaders in favor of measures that demonstrate the achievement of responsible business and ethical practice, and address issues such as workplace bullying effectively. Such an approach echoes Habermas' [9] call for leaders to listen and engage in intersubjective dialogue that is informed by an ethical framework. Within relational leadership theory, social reality is regarded as being experienced in interaction and dialogue between people, and the corollarial emphasis for leaders is situating themselves firmly in relation to others [69]. An associated facet concerns the importance of building trust in supportive professional relationships. For Clark et al. [18] there is a need to recognize that a trust-based approach to leading in the public sector was lacking and is the key dimension to a better model. The defining feature of relational leadership is the preparedness to deliver a nuanced response, appropriate to situations and cognizant of the personal relationship's existent therein, yet still focused on achieving the service users' needs [18]. Such an approach contrasts with much of the practice of contemporary forms of management control, where relationships are hierarchical, transactional in nature, and asymmetrical. For instance, within NPM, approaches to organizing public services include the notion of leadership being ensconced predominantly with a hierarchy of managers. Thus, contemporary management practices in the public sector focus narrowly on

individual qualities, while ignoring the potential benefits of a relational view of leadership and followership.

Public sector reform should be predicated on the ethics of public service, standards, and care, but also on a rebalancing of the relationship between the practice of managerialism and professional autonomy. The challenge for the public services is how to re-engineer their systems of managerial control, in order to empower colleagues, and free them to work most effectively. Relational leadership is predicated upon a different set of values and norms that requires engagement within the workplace in a way that leaders anchor themselves as always in relation with others and are therefore morally accountable to them [69,82], which resonates with characteristically Habermasian themes of co-operation and consensus. When applied to leadership, relational perspectives change the focus from ascribing blame onto the individual to leading an empowered and dynamic collective [82].

Conclusion

Clarion calls for effective leadership tend to reach a critical mass during times of crisis. These rallying cries have been heightened by recent global events including the COVID-19 pandemic, national and international unrest under the Black Lives Matter banner, the inherent economic recession, and not to mention the purported culture of bullying in Whitehall. Van Wart [83] recognizes that how we conceive leadership within the public sector has changed because of NPM, and asks what path it should follow in future, one that focuses on becoming a "public entrepreneur," or another concerned with engaging transparently with the wider public. Each pathway infers a different conception of what it means to lead in the public sector and each policy trajectory is associated with its own distinct values system. It also infers that different ideas of accountability exist, with one aligned to an exclusive role for managers in making decisions, and the other to a more inclusive democratic conception of public service. Ospina [84] argues that studying leadership in complex contexts characterized by multiple relationships of accountability creates an opportunity to explore the relational nature and the collective dimensions of leadership. Most public sector leadership scholars, however, do not yet recognise the benefits of this opportunity. For Ospina [84] this dilemma offers up the prospect of exploring emergent forms of leadership that could lead to a much broader conceptualization of what public leadership is.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life [81] recognizes everyone in public office should uphold the Nolan principles of accountability, honesty, integrity, objectivity, selflessness, openness, and leadership. In moving to a relational model of leadership, changes are required at the public sector macro, meso and micro levels. At the system-wide level, policymakers need to recognize the limitations inherent within a managerialist, target-setting culture, and the corresponding notion of leadership being conflated with managerialist supervision. At the meso-level the empowerment inherent in relational leadership can be articulated and developed within leadership development programs from values-based principles to practice competencies. The recognition of the benefits of empowerment presupposes a constructive and inclusive environment within which ethical issues can be addressed, as envisaged by Habermas [9]. Furthermore, at the organizational level, policies should be introduced that promote the sharing of ideas as well as information, and enable workers to provide input into mission statements, policy and practice. Finally, it must be acknowledged that professional work must be predicated on the presumption and practice of trust [85]. In order to develop trust, leaders should reflect on their own daily practice, and how they interact with others. In the short term, leaders must take the first steps in developing trust in their colleagues and a preparedness to listen to their concerns. Iles [86] asked "why do so many [public sector] professionals not feel excited, purposeful, satisfied, valued, and good about their work?" The root of this problem cannot be attributed solely to budgetary constraints, but to more a fundamental re-ordering of the relationship between the state, its employees and public sector workers.

Workplace bullying, whether it is overt or covert, exists in many social organizations, and extends beyond the public sector. This begs the question why should leadership and management scholars bother to study public sector bullying? Essentially, levels of bullying are indicative of underlying problems in organizational life, and a failure in leadership. Leadership cannot be divorced from a moral context, and it involves the exercise of asymmetrical power over others. If one accepts this premise, then the purpose of leadership should be concerned with inculcating a shared vision and set of values of how we relate to each other fairly within an organization. The period since the 1980s has seen successive reforms of the public sector both in the UK, and elsewhere, which have fundamentally re-positioned public servants into managers and managed. It is within this context that inappropriate behaviors, such as workplace bullying have grown.

Several recent studies have argued that workplace bullying can be justified as legitimate by its perpetrators, particularly by inextricably connecting negative actions and behavior toward others as essential for the maintenance of organizational norms [87,88,89]. Adler, Forbes, Willmott [90] argue that prevailing organizational structures of domination and hierarchy produce a systemic corrosion of moral responsibility and separation in the workplace environment whereby any concern for people or the environment requires justification in terms of their contribution to profitable growth or corporate goals. In turn, conformity is incited by leaders framing an employee's view of a situation so extensively that it leads to employees inculcating organizational approaches, generating the mind-set that they have no other choice but to conform and comply. Herein lies the true peril of corporate workplace bullying in that it can become institutionalized through individual blame, complicity, and organizational legitimation.

In this sense, workplace bullying may be said to become part of the amoral fabric of unethical and poor leadership, rather than simply being attributed to the personality traits of the bullying perpetrators. In such circumstances, the literature on leadership and management must not only highlight its existence, but additionally offer solutions, and be reflexive about recommended approaches.

Relational leadership offers an alternative model of managing others in difficult circumstances but how can it be realized in practice? In part, practical realization is required of those intangibles that underpin all human relationships, such as trust and empowerment, as opposed to maintaining an asymmetrical dynamic of power and subjugation that privileges punitive performance management over ethical leadership. Relational leadership moves the discourse on leadership beyond the transactional-transformational bifurcation that has dominated the leadership literature in recent years and highlights the importance of building relationships based on standards, values, and trust [63,66]. Rather than being an idealized panacea imbued with democratic aspirations, however, further empirical research is required to operationalize the benefits of relational leadership in the public sector. Future lines of inquiry could explore how relational leadership can also draw from the ideas of Habermas [9], and his call for a form of secular morality. In so doing, future research could explore the benefits of leadership approaches that are predicated on standards, values, trust, and conflict resolution, rather than asymmetric managerialist control, and its propensity for workplace bullying.

Acknowledgments

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