

Is the utilitarian agenda sufficient in workplace mobbing prevention?

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INTRODUCTION

The answer to the question of how consequence-oriented ethics affects interpersonal relationships is very important for understanding and predicting the behaviour of bystanders of workplace bullying. Because it is their prosocially active behaviour that can stop persecution and protect the target from negative consequences (Linstead, 2013; Paull et al., 2020). However, several previous studies raise doubts whether utilitarianism can encourage bystanders to act prosocially (Gocke, 2015; Zollo et al., 2017).

Some research, particularly in the field of bioethics, emphasize the role of conscience in moral decision-making (e.g., Hsiao, 2022; Lamb & Pesut, 2021). Therefore, in recent years, even in the works of non-theologians, increasingly more attention was paid to the scholastic conception of synderesis, which refers to an innate human ability to know the basic moral principles that allow the conscience to properly judge the morality of one or another action (das Neves & Melé, 2013; Zollo et al., 2017; O'Shea, 2018). Thus, it can be assumed that conscience directed to good by synderesis, which follows the Golden Rule of not doing anything bad to others, what a person would not want to receive himself (Kärkkäinen, 2012), can encourage bystanders' moral decisions that are favourable to the target of workplace bullying. Although such perspective has not been explored, the mere possibility encourages rethinking of whether the synderesis principle could be an alternative to utilitarianism.

The aim of research

This study aims to examine how utilitarianism and the synderesis principle are capable of coping with the challenges posed by workplace bullying from the bystander's perspective.

The methods of the research

This study employs a narrative review of scientific literature, following a critical paradigm. Unlike systematic reviews, this method distinguishes itself by providing interpretations, critiques and deeper understanding (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the critical paradigm requires presenting and juxtaposing different ideas before presenting one's idea so that the reader can get a clear picture (Saunders & Rojon, 2011).

Theoretical background

Workplace bullying. Before discussing the possible choices of bystanders, it is necessary to assess the complicated situation in which the co-workers find themselves. Several features of the phenomenon, due to which the personality of the target of workplace bullying can be assessed ambiguously, can be distinguished.

According to Zedlacher and Salin (2021), workplace bullying "consists of repeated, long-term exposure to a variety of negative behaviors". It often involves more than one person, and persecution causes severe psychological, physical, and professional consequences for the target (Leymann, 1996; Paull et al., 2012; Zedlacher & Salin, 2021). Other authors emphasize that it is a prolonged process characterized by a pre-conflict phase that develops into a conflict, stigmatization of the target, involvement of management and removal of the target from the organization (Leymann, 1996; Shallcross et al., 2018).

Utilitarianism. Although there are different varieties of utilitarianism, the main principle is based on the pursuit of maximizing the utility of the decision and prioritizing the happiness of the society (Tseng & Wang, 2021); therefore, harm made to individual people is justified if this leads to the welfare of the majority (Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Tseng & Wang, 2021).

Different versions of utilitarianism offer different explanations for when the decision made is right. Two of them can be distinguished: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. At the same time, they also indicate different decision-making strategies. Act utilitarianism is based on the idea that "an act is right if and only if it results in at least as much overall well-being as any act the agent could have performed" (Eggleston, 2014, p. 126).

Rule utilitarianism introduces a certain regulator – rules accepted by consensus: "an act is right if and only if it would be permitted by a system of rules whose general acceptance would result in at least as much overall well-being as would the general acceptance of any system of rules" (Eggleston, 2014, p. 131).

Synderesis. According to the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, synderesis is the innate and indestructible capacity of practical mind to envisage the fundamental principles of natural law (González-Ginocchio, 2017; Zollo et al., 2017). Synderesis is described as a universal, innate habit, independent of the person's cultural background, to seek good and reject evil (das Neves & Melé, 2013; Hogan, 2006). Since synderesis constantly directs a person towards good, it leads to universal moral principles (Melé & Fontrodona, 2017), which boil down to the basic moral rule, also called the Golden Rule: "Do not do to others what you do not want to be done to you" (das Neves & Melé, 2013; Kärkkäinen, 2012).

Main findings

In the perspective of act utilitarianism, the bystander has little freedom of choice, since the majority's welfare outweighs the welfare of the target (Table 1). At first sight, rule utilitarianism should benefit the target but leaves a lot of uncertainty. It is namely the pursuit of greater good in the utilitarian perspective that allows people to be used, harmed, or even killed (Everett & Kahane, 2020).

Table 1. Bystander choices in the perspective of utilitarian ethics

Version	Strategy	Reaction to persecution	Choice	Consequence for the target
Act	Personal assessment	Destructive	To support persecutors	Negative
Rule	Collective agreement	Destructive or constructive	To support persecutors or the target	Depends on the majority's decision

Table 2. Decisions based on the Golden Rule

Choices	Question	Answer	Consequence for the target
To support persecutors	If I were in the co-worker's shoes, would I like others to help hurt me?	Negative	Positive
To do nothing	If I were being bullied, would I want the other person(s) to withdraw and not help me?	Negative	Positive
To defend the target	If I were being bullied, would I want someone to defend me?	Positive	Positive

Unlike in the utilitarian perspective, when considering what is "good", the focus is not on the consequences that would be determined by one or another decision, but on how much the very decision maker would like to receive such decision in a similar situation (Table 2). Even if the target of workplace bullying seems unpleasant, annoying, the Golden Rule serves as a test that in every case checks whether the action can be referred to as good. That is, if in an analogous situation, the decision would be unacceptable to "me", it cannot be acceptable to another person too.

MAIN RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that consequence-focused utilitarianism seems to limit freedom of choice by insisting on calculating the collective benefits received by co-workers, regardless of the act or rule version of utilitarianism. Of course, utilitarian ethics can explain why workplace bullying is harmful at the organizational level, (even if we reject that in some cases the "sacrifice" of the target of bullying, who causes confusion, may seem beneficial to managers). However, this does not guarantee that every employee in all cases can feel safe and protected from being dealt with. Synderesis allows to discover universal moral principles on the basis of which conscience can distinguish between good and bad decisions. The Golden Rule, or the principle of reciprocity, serves as a test for deciding on a case-by-case basis what solution is fair and moral with regard to the target of workplace bullying.

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