

# Managerial Discourse as Neutralizer? The Influence of the Concealment of Social Categories on the Experience of Workplace Bullying in Research Organizations

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## Abstract

This chapter looks at the discursive dimension of the working environment in research and higher education organizations; more specifically at neoliberal managerial discourse and at how it participates in shaping the way researchers, teachers and support staff perceive themselves and their experiences. It is based on a multiple case study and combines an intersectional and a socio-clinical approach. The empirical data is constituted by in-depth interviews with women conducted in Ireland and Chile, and includes some observations made in France. A thematic analysis of individual narratives of self-ascribed experiences of being bullied enables to look behind the veil drawn by managerial discourse, thus providing insights into power vectors and power domains contributing to workplace violence. It also shows that workplace bullying may reinforce identification to undervalued social categories. This contribution argues that neoliberal managerial discourse, by encouraging social representations of “neutral” individuals at work, or else celebrating their “diversity,” conceals power relations rooting on different social categories. This process influences one’s perception of one’s experience and its verbalization. At the same time, feeling assigned to one or more of undervalued social category can raise the

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perception of being bullied or discriminated against. While research has shown that only a minority of incidents of bullying and discrimination are reported within organizations, this contribution suggests that acknowledging the multiplicity and superposition of categories and their influence in shaping power relations could help secure a more collective and caring approach, and thus foster a safer work culture and atmosphere in research organizations.

*Keywords:* Academia; care; clinical sociology; harassment; intersectionality; managerial discourse; power relations; research organization; subjectivity; women; workplace bullying

## Introduction

In this chapter, we look at the discursive dimension of the working environment in research organizations; more specifically in higher education institutions,<sup>1</sup> which undertake research and teaching activities. We question neoliberal managerial discourse and how it participates in shaping the way researchers (often also teachers in academia) and support staff perceive themselves and their experiences.

The managerial (or management) discourse can take various textual forms, such as “governance policies” advertised on the organizations’ websites, trainings offered to academics to teach them how to fund their research projects or to lead their departments, or “personal development reviews,” among others. This dominant discourse, infused with corporate culture, is marked by several “key themes,” that show a shift in priorities, where “economic values” take over “the intrinsic worth of academic enquiry” and teaching (Morrish, 2017: 138), but also where academics have internalized managerial values, such as individualization, performance and positivity... As linguist Liz Morrish points out, this subjective influence of managerial discourse complicates its questioning. However, as shown by social psychology research on emotions and their communication (Rimé, 2005), when confronted with difficult emotional experiences, individuals struggle to make sense of these experiences. This can help question the dominant discourse.

In order to question the subjective influence of managerial discourse, we therefore chose to consider workplace bullying,<sup>2</sup> “a highly complex area where polyphony is important” for sense-making (Liefogge and Mackenzie Davey, 2010: 71),

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<sup>1</sup>In this chapter, the words “higher education institutions,” “academia” and “universities” are considered synonymous and encompass “vocational schools”; the organizations considered link research with teaching activities.

<sup>2</sup>In this chapter, we understand “workplace bullying” in a broad sense, in order to label experiences of victimization at work linked to work-related misconduct, such as emotional abuse, and including (but not limited to) sexual harassment. Workplace bullying is commonly designated as “acoso moral” or “mobbing” in Chile, “harcèlement moral” in France, and “workplace bullying” in Ireland.

but that has been “institutionalized” through legislative and organizational texts (Liefoghe and Mackenzie Davey, 2010). These texts, such as so-called “anti-bullying policy” or “diversity and inclusion charter,” are “anchoring [workers] in a dominant, individualizing discourse” (Liefoghe and Mackenzie Davey, 2010). When acknowledged, bullying is generally framed “as a form of interpersonal conflict or as a response to organizational pressure, change, or chaos” (Hutchinson et al., 2010: 38), interpretations that “obscure the role of power dynamics within institutions” (Hutchinson et al., 2010: 39). We suggested in previous work that managerial discourse can limit the use of the symbolic function of language, and thus the possibilities of making sense of workplace bullying (Vandeveld-Rougale, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2020; Vandeveld-Rougale and Guerrero Morales, 2019), inter alia by “erasing heterogeneity” (Oger and Ollivier-Yaniv, 2006), thus leading the individuals to find fault within themselves rather than questioning the organizational and social systems (including power relations) that facilitate workplace bullying. This contribution investigates this phenomenon further with a focus on research organizations and higher education institutions. It addresses one main research question, namely: how can social categories and their intersection help make sense of bullying experiences in academia?

Our reflection is based on a multiple case study (Yin, 2014) that makes it possible to analyze the data within each situation as well as across different situations. It combines an intersectional approach (Collins, 2009; Bilge, 2013, 2015) with a socio-clinical approach, which links psychoanalytic theories with social ones (Gaulejac et al., 2007; Enriquez, 2009). The empirical data is constituted by in-depth interviews with women conducted in Ireland and in Chile, and it includes observations made in France. Our fieldwork is based on our experiences as researchers; the similarities that we observed in these various countries helped us question the specific influence of neoliberal managerial discourse, that spread across countries and languages.

After a brief overview of neoliberalism and management in academia, a thematic analysis of individual narratives of self-ascribed experiences of being bullied enables us to look behind the veil drawn by managerial discourse, thus providing insights into five main intersecting power vectors and domains contributing to workplace violence (that includes but is not limited to bullying), namely: class, age, gender, structure, and embodied aspects. We argue that neoliberal managerial discourse, by encouraging social representations of “neutral” individuals at work, or else celebrating their “diversity,” conceals power relations rooting on different social categories. This process influences one’s perception of one’s experience and its verbalization. At the same time, feeling assigned to one or more undervalued social category can raise the perception of being bullied or discriminated against. While research has shown that only a minority of incidents of bullying and discrimination are reported within organizations (O’Moore and Lynch, 2007; Schraudner et al., 2019), this contribution suggests that acknowledging the multiplicity and superposition of categories, and their influence in shaping power relations, could help secure a more collective and caring approach, and thus foster a safer work culture and atmosphere in research and higher education organizations.

## Neoliberal Management in Academia

During the past decades, research organizations and higher education institutions have been increasingly confronted with two paradoxical trends documented in research conducted in several fields (mainly education sciences, sociology, psychology, sociolinguistics): on the one hand, they are urged to take part in worldwide competitions symbolized by international rankings systems<sup>3</sup>; on the other hand, they face states' budgetary disengagement and a targeted distribution of resources (Noûs 2020; Hodgins and McNamara, 2021). These trends are accompanied by management practices inspired by the corporate sector (such as the New Public Management reforms that introduced and institutionalized market values in the public sector), embedded in various tools and discursive practices that receive a growing interest since the early 2000s, and even more so since the 2010s. Linguist Liz Morrish thus stresses the “shift towards a new arena of discourse [...] associated with managerialism in Universities” that “has started to cause concern among the academics who are its recipients” (Morrish, 2017: 136).

Managerial discourse conveys a utilitarian view of human beings and relationships, considered as resources to maximize profit or limit expenses (Le Texier, 2016). It is based on the principles of “efficiency, organization, control and rationalization” (Le Texier, 2016: 14 – our translation). Critical work focusing on managerial discourse has shown that it participates in defusing social critics through their integration in organizational communication (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Increased attention for the individual and his/her well-being in the twentieth century has thus been integrated into professional and personal development schemes promising self-actualization, and the search for happiness has been instrumentalized through “happiness management” (Cabanas and Illouz, 2018). The valorization of the individual (through notions like autonomy, responsibility, adaptability etc.), the promotion of excellence and the promise of “objective” measurement have led to the euphemizing of structural inequalities and power relations, and to the “displacement of conflictuality from the social to the psychic dimension” (Gaulejac, 2020: 16 – our translation).

Combined with neoliberalism, managerial discourse is both an ideological tool spreading neoliberal values, a tool of symbolic power, and a pragmatic tool that influences individuals' behavior (Vandeveldde-Rougale and Fugier, 2014). With the globalization that started in the 1980s, neoliberal managerial discourse has thus contributed to the naturalization of market thought across sectors and countries, impacting both work organization and the workers' subjectivities. It has notably participated in the construction of the organizational reality of the

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<sup>3</sup>“There are three prominent and prestigious ranking systems – QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education World University Rankings and Academic Ranking of World Universities (commonly called Shanghai Rankings),” “all commercial enterprises making the irrational adherence to them all the more surprising” (Hodgins and McNamara, 2021: 10–11). Chile, France and Ireland higher education institutions feature in all of them.

“neoliberal university” (Holborow, 2013, 2015), with agencies for evaluation and funding promoting “a culture of ‘performance’, ‘results’, and ‘excellence’” (Noûs, 2020). This trait of neoliberal managerial culture resonates with the “principle of anonymous and asexual meritocracy” that had been introduced with diversity in universities (Cardi et al., 2005: 50 – our translation) and with “the academic predisposition to overwork and to self-scrutiny” (Morrish, 2017: 151). Together with the promise of self-actualization, this contributed to the appropriation of neoliberal managerial discourse by academics. And similarly, managerial discourse can participate in euphemizing or denying structural inequalities, as well as inhibiting critics. Indeed:

a characteristic of neoliberal discourse is that it disguises its own negative impact and so forestalls resistance, and that by locating critique outside the range of the sayable, our resistance is blunted. It is an environment where the rank-and-file academic is made to feel responsible for their own oppression and stress, while at the same time feeling privileged and undeserving of better. (Morrish, 2017: 147, 148 – based on Davies and Petersen, 2005: 85)

Although “academic careers differ from country to country in both form and content,<sup>4</sup>” the evolutions brought on by neoliberalism resulted in several general tendencies affecting conditions of work and employment in academia worldwide, notably: precarious employment with increased use of temporary staff, fiercer competition among workers for permanent positions and/or funds, search for cost-efficiency, and threats on academic freedom (Petersen and Davies, 2010; Monte and Rémi-Giraud, 2013; Collective, 2014; Morrish, 2017; Gray et al., 2018; ILO, 2018; Duclos and Fjeld, 2019...). These trends have inter alia been documented in the countries where we conducted our fieldwork: Ireland (e.g., Holborow, 2013; Holborow and O’Sullivan, 2017; Hodgins and McNamara, 2021), France (e.g., Gaulejac, 2012; Noûs, 2020) and Chile (e.g., Campos-Martinez and Guerrero Morales, 2016; Foladori and Guerrero, 2017; Guerrero, 2017; Guerrero, Foladori, and Silva de los Rios, 2019; Guerrero, Gárate Chateau et al., 2019).

## **Workplace Bullying**

Parallel to the interest for neoliberalism and managerial discourse, workplace bullying has received a growing attention since the 1990s, with “bullying at work research” now constituting “a field in its own right” (Liefhooghe, 2004: 265). The interest from researchers resonated with the concern from legislators and organizations alike, thus leading to an “institutionalization” of bullying at work that

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<sup>4</sup>See the Academic Careers Observatory from the European University Institute: <https://www.eui.eu/ProgrammesAndFellowships/AcademicCareersObservatory/AcademicCareersByCountry> (retrieved on October 25, 2020).

limits its understanding to “the dominant perspectives conceptualizing workplace bullying as an individual or interpersonal issue” (Liefoghe and Mackenzie Davey, 2010: 71). This conception is embedded in organizational texts on the prevention of workplace bullying and the promotion of and respect for diversity in organizations, that form part of today’s managerial discourse.

European higher education institutions have followed the trend set in the United States, and have been increasingly committing in writing to “creating an environment where diversity is celebrated and everyone is treated fairly regardless of gender, age, race, disability, ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation, civil status, family status [...]”<sup>5</sup> over the last decade. Such statements can be read on French or Irish universities’ websites for instance. They are usually signed by the universities’ head and accompanied by dedicated “policies and procedures,” notably guidelines setting out “the framework for dealing with complaints of bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment.” Although prevention of bullying as such hasn’t been integrated in the institutional communication of Chilean universities, the late 2010s have also seen an increased attention to the promotion of diversity and gender equality, as exemplified with the creation of a “unit for equality and diversity” and a commission to define “criteria and protocols to address cases of sexual harassment that may occur within the institution” in the University of Valparaiso in 2016.<sup>6</sup>

Workplace bullying can be defined as “systematic negative treatment of an individual over an extended time in situations which he or she has difficulties to defend against” (Rosander et al., 2020: 2, based on Einarsen et al., 2010) and two main methods are usually used when assessing bullying:

- (a) the self-labelling method, involving people assessing if they feel they have been victimised based on their own understanding of the concept of bullying, or based on a given definition; and
- (b) the behavioral experience method, which entails the perception of being exposed to a range of different bullying behaviors without ever mentioning bullying. (Rosander et al., 2020: 2, based on Nielsen et al., 2010)

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<sup>5</sup>Quote from the website of an Irish university (2020); similar wordings can be read on French universities’ websites consulted in October 2020. One or more task managers (named “equality referent”) from the human resources department are usually in charge of coordinating action with members of the faculty that can be identified as “equality referees.” The comparative work conducted by Laure Bereni on diversity managers in the private sector in New York and Paris highlights “the salience of race and gender in the corporate framing of diversity, beyond the ubiquitous rhetoric celebrating an infinite array of differences” (Bereni and Noûs, 2020). The same may be said about higher education institutions, whose rhetoric copies the corporate framing of diversity, but it would need further study to be confirmed.

<sup>6</sup>See <https://igualdadydiversidad.uv.cl/unidad> and <https://pdn.uv.cl/?id=7748> (retrieved on October 25, 2020).

Andreas Liefoghe and Kate Mackenzie Davey (2010) stress the complexity of workplace bullying and the importance of the perception of powerlessness that it entails:

With bullying at work, sense-making plays an important role. Certain acts are experienced as negative. They are long-term, ongoing and individuals perceive themselves as powerless to do anything about them.

Workplace bullying is not limited to interpersonal acts, but can encompass “institutional bullying,” that imposes “oppressive or damaging conditions on the individuals in the organization” and “is characterized by on-going, persistent unreasonable demands on staff and lack of care for the impact of these processes on welfare and well-being” (Hodgins and McNamara, 2021). In addition to contributing to the alteration of the working environment (that is often associated with increased levels of interpersonal bullying), institutional bullying can have direct detrimental effects on the individuals. Considering recent evolutions in Irish public universities, Margaret Hodgins and Patricia McNamara have thus argued that the policies and practices of new public management, such as increased individualism, over-competitiveness and “the tyranny of performativity,” are in themselves a form of bullying. For instance, the lack of funding for research can lead to “a pejorative distinction between research-active and non-research-active academics” (Hodgins and McNamara, 2021: 7), while the promotional process to achieve tenure (with its shifting goalposts and its large committees) can contribute to the humiliation and demoralization of those who are not promoted (Hodgins and McNamara, 2021: 8), and the intensification of work can push academics to “breaking point” (Hodgins and McNamara, 2021: 11).

Following these definitions, we consider “workplace bullying” in a broad sense, focusing not on the “systematic” nature of the acts experienced as negative, but rather on the feeling of victimization linked with acts conducted in the workplace and that could be referred to as workplace bullying, emotional abuse and/or harassment.

Although social awareness has increased in the past decades, it has been found in a study conducted within a research institute in Germany that “only a minority of incidents of bullying and discrimination are reported to the corresponding points of contact” (Schraudner et al., 2019: 5). It has been “argued that self-reports may underestimate the problem of bullying because admitting being bullied at work is akin to admitting being weak and unable to cope” (O’Moore and Lynch, 2007: 112) i.e., to admitting not being in line with the managerial representation of what a professional person should be. It has also been shown that bullied workers “often blame themselves for being targeted and have trouble creating coherent story lines that persuasively and succinctly convey their situation” (Tracy et al., 2006: 7), although such a “coherent story line” is needed for the acknowledgment of the bullying experience by others. This is especially the case in the professional context, where the check-lists and procedures drafted by human resources departments set up the standard for the “adequate way” to report one’s experience.

We suggested earlier (Vandevelde-Rougale, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2020; Vandevelde-Rougale and Guerrero Morales, 2019) that managerial discourse can hinder both the self-awareness of being bullied and the expression of ill-being at work. Our study of organizational procedures designed to “deal with incidents of bullying” has shown that they tend to focus on the individual, while the gap between organizational communication and practices related to the management of workplace bullying can contribute to the individual’s confusion and feeling of insecurity. The individuals are thus led to find fault within themselves rather than question the organizational and social systems that enable workplace bullying (Vandevelde-Rougale, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2020; Vandevelde-Rougale and Guerrero Morales, 2019). Others have also stressed that “‘well-being initiatives’ offered to combat stress just facilitate the internalization of the narrative of individual responsibility and even failure to perform” (Hodgins and McNamara, 2021: 17), while organizational process and policies, that fail to acknowledge that the perceptions of events can vary from one person to another, can contribute to the problem (McKay and Fratzl, 2011).

Despite this focus on the individual, social categories intersecting with organizational and socioeconomic factors seem to play a part both in bullying experiences and in acknowledging them. Research has indeed shown that some groups of employees, such as women (Salin, 2018), persons with precarious employment such as untenured academics (McKay et al., 2008), young working parents (Kelan, 2014), ethnic or sexual minorities (Hoel et al., 2018), persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses (Lewis et al., 2018), are more vulnerable to workplace violence, while gender can also influence ways of coping (Jóhannsdóttir and Ólafsson, 2004). As stressed by Hutchinson et al. (2010: 25) when researching bullying in nursing, power is a key dimension to understand this phenomenon – not only power considered in relation between two or more individuals, but also “less readily observable forms of power that manifest within institutions.” We explore this phenomenon further, in academia.

## Methodology

Critical discourse analysis of organizational charters on the prevention of bullying showed that the focus of managerial discourse on individuals and interpersonal relations, when looking at allegations of bullying, tends to hide or neutralize power dimensions (Vandevelde-Rougale, 2016). We adopt a qualitative approach in order to look behind this discursive veil and provide some insights on the influence of intersecting social dimensions.

### *A Multiple Case Study*

Although “bullying is often presented as a gender-neutral phenomenon” (Escartín et al., 2011: 162), gender differences in what forms of behavior are perceived as threatening or undermining have been documented (Escartín et al., 2011; Rosander et al., 2020), as well as “different thresholds for men and women for when acknowledging to oneself that a negative treatment actually is bullying”

(Rosander et al., 2020: 8). It has also been shown that cultural dimensions may affect both “the preferred forms of bullying” and “how targets make sense of different negative social acts” (Salin, 2021). We therefore decided on a multiple case study (Yin, 2014) based on narratives from women about self-ascribed bullying experiences in academia, and we chose to consider experiences in different countries, namely Ireland and Chile, where we conducted fieldwork on workplace bullying. We also take into consideration the situation of academia in France, based on our observations as well as those from other researchers.<sup>7</sup> This approach enables us to analyze the data within each situation as well as across different situations, based on the assumption that thinking about and from particularities can help develop “an argumentation of a more general scope, and whose conclusions can be used again” (Passeron and Revel, 2005: 9, translated by Lacour and Campos, 2005).

We focus on six cases from a corpus constituted by in-depth interviews with female professionals in higher education institutions that we conducted in Ireland (Vandeveldde-Rougale) between 2011 and 2013, in the framework of a Ph.D. research in sociology and anthropology considering the verbalization of emotions related to workplace bullying, and in Chile (Guerrero Morales) since 2012, as part of two action-research projects (2012–2016 and 2019–2022) with professionals confronted with workplace bullying. All participants were consenting adults. The participation was voluntary, with no incentives given for participation. These research projects were exempt from prior approval by an ethics committee, in accordance with the rules for non-biomedical research in our countries and institutions. Trust is essential for empirical research in human and social sciences, between researchers and participants in their research, but also between researchers (Chaumont, 2019: 219); “our responsibility lies in the other and is justified by the other” (Maritza, 2016: 20). Informed consent to research and publication was obtained from the participants, including consent for recording their voices during the interviews. Opportunity was provided to the participants to ask question and receive answer prior to the interviews, during and after the interviews, as well as to withdraw from the research even after their participation had begun (it can be noted that none of our participants withdrew). Provisions were taken to ensure the confidentiality of participants’ data by the anonymization of the transcripts and of the results, so that neither the interviewees nor their working organizations are identifiable. All names of participants and organizations mentioned in our work are pseudonyms and no personal information that could lead to the recognition of the individuals or their specific living and working places have been disclosed. The interviews were conducted in English in Ireland and in Spanish in Chile. For easier understanding here, we translated the verbatims from Spanish to English. The in-depth comprehensive interviews (from 65 to 85 minutes for

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<sup>7</sup>For instance, on <https://academia.hypotheses.org> and <https://universiteouverte.org>. These websites share information and tools on the situation (recruitment, evaluation, working conditions, governance...) and mobilization in academia in France (and also include some information on the situation in other countries).

those conducted in Chile, from 105 to 200 minutes for those conducted in Ireland) were loosely structured and provided a space where the participants could narrate their experiences without interruption or judgment. Some of the people we interviewed were still working in the context of abuse at the time, while the context had changed for others (either thanks to change in the organizations or because they departed from them).

Our first observations aligned those made by Tracy et al. (2006: 31) regarding the similarities among workers' emotional experiences from various employment sectors, ages and status when confronted with bullying, suggesting "that the emotional experience of workplace bullying can be similar across workgroups, age, and sex." We decided to re-enter our data, not to question the similarity or differences in emotional experiences, but to question what these emotional experiences can reveal about underlying social categories and their influences. The six cases presented here have been selected for their focus on bullying in academia. Indeed, our original research projects were not focusing on workplace bullying solely in research organizations and higher education institutions, but included interviews with workers in other types of organizations (school, bank and hospital for instance).

From the Irish corpus, we consider three narratives of bullying experiences recorded in the early 2010s: Tara's, Eryn's and Betty's. At the time of the interview, Tara was a single white female academic from British origin in her early 50s. Eryn was a married white female academic from Irish background in her 30s. Betty was a married white woman from Irish background in her 50s; she was support staff within a higher education institution, mother of a university student and sole provider for the family. Tara kept her job in her department after the bullying ended; both Eryn and Betty left their organizations.

From the Chilean corpus, we also focus on three cases of bullying: Matilde's, Ana's and Amanda's. Matilde (interviewed in the mid 2010s) and Amanda (interviewed a few years later) were both Latino women academics in their 30s at the time of the interview; they came from upper-middle class families, were married with young children. Matilde had dark hair (so-called "morena"), a trait that is culturally associated with the representation of a "sexy" woman in Chile. Both Matilde and Amanda had studied in prestigious universities and first worked with working-class private universities promoting excellence, that they left when confronted with bullying. Ana was a 28-year-old Latino woman when interviewed in the mid 2010s; she came from a working-class family, lived with her boyfriend at her mother's house, and didn't want to have children. Ana had studied at a prestigious private university for the working-class, and held two part-time jobs, one as a teacher in a non-selective working-class university (where she didn't earn enough to live) and the other as a research-assistant in a prestigious selective university, in order to earn additional resources.

### *An Approach Combining Intersectionality and Clinical Sociology*

Bullying experiences in research and higher education institutions can be defined as follows from this excerpt from the "Dignity and respect policy" of an Irish

University (2017), based on the definition of workplace bullying by the Irish Health and Safety Authority adopted in 2007:

repeated inappropriate behaviour, direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical or otherwise, conducted by one or more persons against another or others, at the place of work/study and/or in the course of employment/study which could reasonably be regarded as undermining the individual's right to dignity at the place of work/study.

While organizational procedures addressing workplace bullying focus on the individual experience of the person who feels that s/he is being bullied and tend to consider it on an individual and on an interpersonal level (with the planning of “mediations” between the parties involved), we pay special attention to what the narratives reveal regarding demographic and social characteristics and functional dimensions, such as status. We combine an intersectional and a socio-clinical approach in order to conduct a thematic analysis of the narratives based on “power vectors” and “power domains” (Bilge, 2015).

Intersectionality implies that inequalities result from a complex architecture and that they must be analyzed together because they are inseparable and irreducible (Collins, 2009). This concept incites us to explore the power structures and organizations based on the analysis of “power vectors” (Bilge, 2015). Power vectors are markers of difference and of identity categories, and the most important ones are gender, class, nation and race (Bilge, 2015). Intersectionality also implies linking power vectors with “power domains” (structural, representational, disciplinary, interpersonal and embodied aspects) (Bilge, 2015). Bilge's definition gives ground to cross the analysis of power vectors with the analysis of power domains. The latter are also present in the critical study of management systems in organizations by clinical sociology.

Clinical sociology links psychoanalytic perspectives with social ones, and builds on the comprehensive and critical paradigms. It acknowledges the role of subjectivity in producing knowledge and the role of the unconscious in social life. The unconscious designates phenomena that aren't necessarily unknown or unspeakable but that act with “an uncontrollable strength and intensity” (Enriquez, 2009: 27 – our translation). In particular, seven “instances” (or levels) of analysis have been identified by Enriquez to study the linkage between the “psychic reality” of organizations and their “historical reality”: “mythical, socio-historical, institutional, organizational (or structural), group, individual and instinctual instances,” with the instinctual instance “going through the others” (Enriquez, 2009: 41). Organizations show an explicit will to be driven by life instincts, with their corporate communication stressing values such as positivity, efficacy, dynamism and change (Enriquez, 2009: 139), all key “values” of the neoliberal managerial discourse. But they are also subjected to death instincts fighting otherness, that can be perceived at three levels: intra-subjective (internal other), inter-subjective (against others), and trans-subjective (at the level of the link between the individual and the socio-cultural context, notably behavioral

conventions). Death instincts do not necessarily lead to the end of the organizations; the latter can instead stabilize in a pathological mode, preserving institutionalized power relations (Enriquez, 2009: 141–142).

While today's organizations insist on core values driving their "culture" such as "excellence," "integrity," "engagement," "diversity" – thus exemplifying their focus on "life instincts" (Enriquez, 2009) –, the fact that bullying experiences take place amidst them, sometimes despite clear prevention procedures (when specific legislation exists and where written policies to promote dignity and respect in the workplace have been adopted), illustrates the combination of these three levels of death instincts: intra-subjective (when the person targeted by the inappropriate behavior blames him/herself for what's happening), inter-subjective (when one or more persons repeatedly behave inappropriately against another or others), and trans-subjective – for instance, when inappropriate behaviors are tolerated by the organization so that they can be repeated, and when the people targeted by bullying behaviors no longer know how they should behave, both in general terms and so that their suffering could be heard by human resources departments and steps taken to stop the causes.

Considering both the difficulty of persons who experienced bullying to tell their stories in "neatly emplott[ed] narratives" (Tracy et al., 2006: 10) and the euphemizing of power relations by managerial discourse, we paid special attention both to the categories or discriminatory factors mentioned by the interviewees and to the metaphors and images used in their narratives. Indeed, as stressed by Tracy et al. (2006) quoting Robert Marshak:

metaphors provide people with a way to "express aspects both of themselves and of situations about which they may not be consciously aware, nor be able to express analytically and/or literally." (Marshak, 1996: 156)

## Findings

Like other researchers before us, we noted that "decades [or in the cases we studied, years] after experiencing abuse at work, people still vividly recall the painful, oftentimes shattering and life-changing, experience" (Tracy et al., 2006: 8), and also that "the emotional pain reported and metaphorical language used across [our] samples were remarkably similar" (Tracy et al., 2006). The fact that bullying happened in Ireland or in Chile did not seem to play a part in what workplace bullying felt like. Our attention to singularities in this corpus from different countries thus helps highlight the influence of neoliberal managerial discourse within organizations across languages and continents.

The women we interviewed were still trying to make sense of their experiences, even those whose bullying had stopped some years prior to the interviews. From their narratives emerged several markers of difference and of identity categories, linked with various "power domains" (Bilge, 2015), some specific to academia. In Ireland, where the majority of university staff are white Europeans and where white women, with mostly white colleagues, were interviewed by a white female

European (French) researcher, race and nation didn't appear as important "power vectors" (Bilge, 2015). The same mostly goes for our data in Chile, where Latino Chilean women were interviewed by a Latino Chilean female researcher in Chile about their experiences with Latino colleagues. One characteristic only can be related to race as a power vector, intertwined with gender: women with dark hair (so-called "morenas") are perceived as "sexy" in Chile and this can trigger sexual harassment. But other markers of difference and of identity categories emerged from our corpus as significant in shaping power relations, namely: class, age, gender, structure, and embodied aspects.

### *Class*

**Class and the Use of Language.** Class-related issues can appear in relation with the use of language in the working environment. They are linked with social background, qualification (education, diploma) and accents.

Betty, who was personal assistant to the head of a scientific school within an Irish university but had been moved to the front desk following a restructuration, stressed that she used a "simple language," whereas the administration manager by whom she felt bullied was "qualified" in the area of "writing reports," so that she was afraid of not being able to defend herself properly in the internal investigation launched by the university. On the contrary, Eryn, who was an academic in a medical school and who felt bullied by a colleague and her line manager, perceived language as a resource to regain some control over the situation; she stressed her ability to use an "appropriate language."

Tara, who felt bullied by another academic who had the same professional status and same national origin (British) but had taken up the temporary position of head of school, stressed both a discrimination and a class-struggle linked to language. She recalled that when studying, she had been advised to change her "regional accent" to the "Oxford accent," considered as the "proper" manner to speak in British universities, so that she could be promoted. Tara resisted this advice to take on an accent that she considered to be "very class-ridden," even though she also studied at Oxford University after having first studied at free public schools. She also resisted what she perceived as expected from individuals in order to be successful academics, namely speaking in a "high register," using "pretentious ways of expressing ideas," "being bitchy [...] really nice to [others] in meetings and then get [them] in the back." Confronted with bullying from a colleague who spoke with an "Oxford accent" (associated with prestigious private education), she wondered if her "inverted snobbery," which gave visibility to class-struggle (showing that she managed to "get there" without having "all the advantages"), may not have been a trigger for the violence she experienced. This led her to feel somewhat responsible for what happened to her.

In Chile, where education is segregated by wealth in a three-tiered system according to socioeconomic backgrounds (the more privileged the background, the better the education), Ana, who came from the working-class, also illustrated the importance of speaking habits in discrimination related to class. But unlike Tara, who took pride in her regional background and public education and

manifested her resistance to class contempt, Ana spoke of her humiliation and her resignation:

I realized that [teachers] didn't value me, they corrected my speech.

I'm used to everything costing me [...] since I was a child [...] I was the best, but I was sure that everything would be difficult, because I lack basic skills. I have had to learn everything, from speaking like the upper class to thinking like the upper class.

**Class and the Structural Environment.** Class-related issues can be entangled with the structural environment and revealed by subjective experiences of bullying, where the micro-processes of harassment are both triggered by and causing social discrimination.

As shown by the sociologist [Pierre Bourdieu \(1966\)](#) when studying social reproduction, social classes play a part in the education and orientation of children and students, as well as on their employment perspectives. This is notably the case in the Chilean higher education market, where there is a segregation of students in private universities according to classes, with different universities for the working class, the middle class and the most affluent classes ([Guerrero, 2017](#); [Guerrero Morales, Gárate Chateu et al., 2019](#)). Parallel to this system, there are also public universities with high entrance requirements that mix all social classes. They are based on the promise of “equal opportunities” for “excellent” students and academics, but at the cost of excluding those who cannot compete within the excellence framework promoted by the neoliberal culture ([Guerrero, 2017](#); [Guerrero Morales, Gárate Chateu et al., 2019](#)). It can be noted that in general, students who study in these highly selective universities end up teaching and conducting research in their own or similar universities, studying in international universities or in highly prestigious national universities. Therefore, they are not likely to question the neoliberal paradigm that enabled their “success stories” ([Guerrero, 2017](#); [Guerrero Morales, Gárate Chateu et al., 2019](#)), nor the indirect segregation that it entails, which also impacts the possibilities of conducting research. In fact, in Chile, non-selective private and public universities only have scarce resources for research – they are also called “universities to teach” (“Universidades docentes”).

Ana explained that, despite her efforts, she was discriminated against on a class-related basis both during and after her studies in a prestigious selective university. Her teachers didn't support her in her research (not helping her while she worked on her master thesis and taking a year to correct it), nor in finding job opportunities, while they supported other students from more privileged backgrounds. She became afraid of working in prestigious universities where she felt that “the rich [were] aggressive.” She took refuge in a working-class university, where she was working part-time as a teacher and where, despite her master's degree, she was paid like a teacher without higher education and lacked resources to conduct research. In order to survive financially, she also took on a part-time job as a research assistant in a highly selective university, where she remained subjected to class-related strain.

Amanda and Matilde, both with privileged background, experienced an inverted class-related discrimination. They both studied at prestigious public selective universities and received higher education, where they were recognized for their abilities and performance. After these studies, they were offered jobs at private universities for the working-class. They gladly took up these positions, because of their political commitment to the underprivileged classes in Chile. But they were led to feel that “it [was] not their place.” They were bullied by men and women from lower social classes and without similar studies, who did not accept that a place should be given in “their” universities to women from high social classes and with high capacities, and who disparaged their studies and class-affiliation and prevented them from working serenely. Amanda and Matilde both expressed emotions of injustice and powerlessness, as well as anger and a feeling of being unprotected. They finally left these working-class universities to follow the more traditional path for graduates who studied in high-selective universities, namely to teach in their own or similar universities or international universities.

Ana, Matilde and Amanda showed the difficulty of changing educational paths and breaking free from the larger system of class-related segregation in Chilean universities. In Chile today, and despite progressive political discourse calling for more diversity, academics must continue to teach their own social classes.

**Class and Metaphors.** Class-related issues also emerge in the metaphors used by the persons who feel bullied. As already pointed out, “abused workers feel like slaves and animals, prisoners, children [...]” (Tracy et al., 2006: 20). These metaphors express and may “accentuate feelings of vulnerability and degradation” (Tracy et al., 2006: 21), but they also reveal that these social categories are associated with degradation. Thus, in Ireland, Eryn expressed both her feeling of degradation and the perception of the job of sex-worker at the bottom of the class hierarchy of workers, when she said:

ok, if I can't work here [in her teaching and research unit] because of this colleague and if I can't be a manager [in the school], the only thing that's left is being a prostitute.

The class-related metaphor can also give insights into the process of bullying and resistance to bullying. Tara thus compared the strength of slaves, who “stick up for themselves and fight back,” with her shame that she didn't stand up. She suggested that belonging to the middle class instead of an oppressed class could have contributed to her lack of reaction.

### *Age*

Tara was in her 50s and felt bullied by a colleague that she estimated to be slightly older than her. Betty was about 55 years old and felt bullied by two women somewhat younger; Eryn was in her 30s and didn't give specific information on the age of the colleague and the head of school by whom she felt victimized. The 28-year-old Ana was the youngest member of her department and working with

much older teachers. In their narratives, representations and feelings associated with age emerged: helplessness was associated with childhood, while power – to speak up or to abuse – was associated with adulthood.

Age doesn't appear as a "power vector" (Bilge, 2015) per se, but is linked with statutory and behavioral dimensions, so that it can be considered both a "power vector" and a "power domain" (Bilge, 2015).

**Age and Recognition.** Age creates differences between people. Tara, who is in her 50s, thus recounted that the change in the age composition of her department contributed to her feeling more isolated. She "fe[lt] protective" of her younger colleagues but tended not to socialize with them. She also felt that in the "transition period" where "the older people had left" the department, the "younger people who were just new and tried to fit in" would not have noticed the bullying she felt exposed to from the new head of school or would not have spoken up on her behalf. On the contrary, she assumed that reaching retirement (i.e., being older than others but also on the path to leave the organization) could give more freedom to speak up.

On the other side of the age and status spectrum, and of the Atlantic, Ana, who was working in a non-selective university as a part-time teacher, was seen as "the baby of the department," despite being almost 30 years old and not in the early stages of her career. She received a very low salary compared to the other teachers, many older professors (some over 65 years old) having well-paid tenured positions with overtime that did not allow them to do research. In addition, they didn't have Ana's skills to do research, since qualitative research was not in favor at the time they were trained, during Pinochet's dictatorship. They were therefore calling on her as an assistant, so that she had to do all the research work. Ana accepted the situation, in order to find a place in that space:

I still like being the "baby" of the department. I like it because I'm taken care of. I get more work because I do everyone's job. The old professors don't know how to do any research. [...] My only problem is that I get paid as a baby.

She preferred this situation to the class-discrimination she felt at the selective university when studying for her master's degree, but expressed the wish that the situation would change after she did a Ph.D. abroad, maybe trusting that a higher degree could compensate her lack of recognition.

**Age and Perceived Position of Power.** Feeling like children fosters a feeling of helplessness that is revealed in situations of discrimination and bullying. In particular, it makes it harder to face the bully and talk to him/her, as generally advised as a first step to improve the situation and work toward a better working atmosphere; this weakens the individual further (Vandeveldde-Rougale, 2017).

Tara thus stressed that being bullied made her feel like a child, because she felt that she couldn't "act in a grown-up way about it" – i.e., by standing up for herself and being able to ask the bully to stop the inappropriate behavior. Both Betty and

Eryn recalled an incident involving their line manager and a pen, which put them back in the position of being school-children confronted with a scolding teacher. Betty remembered her manager in the administrative department tapping a table with a pen “like a teacher” while talking to her about her body language and her personality, and her being subdued. Eryn recalled a meeting where after her line manager said “put your pen down, you’re not taking notes,” she indeed put her pen down, for two reasons: one resulting from rational thinking (putting her pen down did not affect her aim, namely to be heard so that a colleague would stop having inappropriate behavior toward her), the other associated with fear of the head of school who “ha[d] the power” and could “block her career,” like a teacher who could pass or fail her.

In these examples, the real age of the persons involved wasn’t what mattered, but rather the perceived position of power: Betty was older than her manager, but nevertheless felt like a child. This perception appeared suffused with the power relation linked to the status in the managerial hierarchy, and a higher level in the managerial reporting lines seems to take precedence over the academic ranking. Indeed, Eryn’s manager had a lower academic status (since she didn’t have a Ph.D., while Eryn had one); Tara and the head of school were both senior academics with similar ranking; but both Eryn and Tara felt powerless.

### *Gender*

Gender inequalities in academia, to the detriment of women, are still documented today, reminding us that, as “in most cases, work is organized on the image of an unencumbered worker who is totally dedicated to the work and who has no responsibilities for children and family demands other than earning a living. [...] implicitly a man” (Acker, 2019). Even if the last decades have seen changes in university employment, with an increased gender-parity and a diversity of experiences (Le Feuvre, 2017), women researchers and academics in several countries stress the persistence of gender inequalities, linked to various factors: the indicators chosen to acknowledge research and teaching work and taken into account for promotion (e.g. the focus on bibliometric calculations, while the attention to and accompaniment of students in their research, often taken care of by women or younger teaching staff, aren’t measured) (Devineau et al., 2018); unequal division of labor at home and of tasks related to care at university (Amano-Patiño et al., 2020; Confinée Libérée, 2020; Larochelle et al., 2020); cultural representations (Goerg, 2017). Among such representations are for instance the perception of parenting (Toffoletti and Starr, 2016) and the persistence of a “maternity penalty” (Kelan, 2014). Another one is the perception of intellectual work as more “masculine,” so that some women researchers are thanked for their work in footnotes instead of being properly quoted and referenced – their work then being under the radar of rankings based on bibliometric calculations (Heinich, 2020) – and/or are paradoxically submitted to higher standards (Hengel, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic rendered some of these trends and their intersection more visible, for instance in slowing down the careers of academic mothers (Amano-Patiño et al., 2020; Confinée Libérée, 2020).

Even if men in academia still have more positions of power than women, and despite the fact that having more power can increase the risk of abusing it, our observations show that both women and men can be bullied, and that bullies can be men as well as women. Our data enables us to explore gender not so much as one of the “barriers that obstruct women’s opportunities for advancement” (Acker, 2019), but more as a dimension increasing vulnerability, where some misbehaviors are built on gendered aspects of the target woman’s life (being a mother, experiencing gendered illnesses) and on sexual drives (including through sexual harassment).

**Social Relations of Gender and Gendered Social Representations.** Due to the class segregation in Chilean universities, class-differences spurred the bullying that Matilde and Amanda (highly qualified and from upper middle-class) have been subjected to: their managers (male heads of school belonging to the working-class, in working-class universities, and less qualified than they were) devalued their studies and class-affiliation in a reaction to the symbolic violence that they associated with Matilde and Amanda’s presence. But in their cases, reported harassment and discrimination are also clearly gender-based. Matilde and Amanda faced two main forms of discrimination: one was to send them back to “their place” as mothers, the other was sexual harassment. Recalling the occasion where she got funds to conduct a Ph.D. research, and was the only one in her department to get it, Amanda pointed out:

instead of congratulating me, they [colleagues] asked me: “how are you going to do it, with your daughter, if your husband is also studying?” I was angry and sad, a feeling of lack of recognition [...] But I realised that there was envy, that although it seems to be just gender discrimination, it is also a class issue. They can’t stand that I handle the codes, that I come from the best universities, that I have training outside the country, that I am from the privileged social class and that this is recognized. I remind them that they can only apply to this university, that for them this is their place and they must defend it from people like me.

Recounting the situation where she asked for explanations from her manager when he refused her the possibility to teach in her field of specialization after returning from her Ph.D. research in the UK, Matilde explained:

my boss asks me “Why did you do a Ph.D.? In this university you don’t need a doctorate. Look at me, I only have a master’s degree and I’m your boss. [...] Stop studying, stop doing things that take time away from your son.” Then he came over and tried to touch me, before I grabbed his hand and hit him. I felt really powerless, the situation was terrible. At that moment, I knew that I had to give up, because all the bosses were the same.

These examples show that bullying can be prompted by class differences and envy, and can feed of traditional gendered representations: representation of

parenting (Toffoletti and Starr, 2016), where the mother is supposed to take care of her children and give them priority over her career, and “traditional” practice of sexual harassment, where men feel somehow “authorized” to physically touch women.

**Gendered Violence and Fantasy Scene.** Cases from Ireland show other gender-related violence, drawing on personal experiences and playing on the fantasy scene. After the bullying started in her research unit, Eryn had a miscarriage. When she returned from sick leave, her manager (also a woman) decided to put her in charge of some teachings with a pregnant woman and, somewhat later, she sent her pictures of funny baby faces. In her narrative, Eryn expressed the feeling of having been “tortured.” Furthermore, academics, like other workers, aren’t neutral individuals. Sexuality is usually kept at bay in the workplace, but sexual drives can act on the fantasy scene. Tara’s narrative unveiled the scene of male-bonding and of a disappointed lover who tried to take revenge:

I couldn’t think he was interested in me, I didn’t... think he thought about me at all [...] And suddenly it was like... .... He tried to make my life misery so every power, position of power, I was removed from [...] He would be horrible to me in front of everybody. [...] So, I felt completely isolated [...] some of the younger men would try to be friendly with him and then they would also attack me.

Tara’s narrative also showed that gender divide can be used as a tool to maintain or gain power: she had the impression that the younger male colleagues in her department sided with the male head of school (who had the same academic grade than she had and was bullying her) and felt more and more isolated. This gender-divide was also palpable in Betty’s experience: she was bullied by two women and felt let down by the head of school (a male senior academic) whom she had been personal assistant to. Betty explained that she appealed to him, but he ignored her, adding to her confusion:

I’ve seen the head of school and I told him “why do you let them do this to me? How can you not know?” And he told me, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Betty’s narrative gives the impression that the male head of school couldn’t be bothered with what happened among the women administrative staff. This lack of acknowledgment, or even contempt, echoes the image of a dominant male with his female harem. It seems at the intersection of gender (male/female) and structural dimensions (head of school/administrative staff).

### ***Structure***

The introduction of “academic capitalism” in universities has been accompanied by changes in their structure: “changes to structure have followed changes

in ethos and ideology” (Morrish, 2017: 141). The narratives that we gathered show that several hierarchical systems are competing within academia, and that they can exacerbate tensions and violence at work, including through bullying. This competition between hierarchical systems has been nurtured by the reforms toward a “neoliberal academy,” whereby layers of management are added to existing reporting lines, and administrative tasks are allocated to academic staff, changing the nature of part of their work. In addition, the scarcity of permanent positions raises competition among workers as well as precarity, which can be understood as “growing existential and structural uncertainties” (Ivancheva et al., 2019: 449).

**Competing Hierarchical Orders and Feeling of Unfairness.** Betty was an administrative staff in a successful scientific school of an Irish university. After some new managerial layers were added to the reporting line, and although she was still officially personal assistant to the head of school, she was moved to the front desk and lost her direct access to her director. She felt bullied by the new head of administration and not supported by the human resources department. A colleague advised her to “go to an academic, get an academic behind [her],” which could be interpreted as a belief in a power of academics over administrative staff.

However, all academics don’t have the same power, and it seems that managing roles – although not related to the core aspects of their work (research and teaching) – can confer powers to some academics over others, which can be resented as unfair. This can disrupt the traditional hierarchy in academia, based on diplomas, years of research and teaching experience, research supervision, peer reviews, etc., both by increasing the administrative workload on some (which leaves less time for researching and teaching) and by giving others some power over fellow researchers, so that they can support or hinder their progress.

Tara, who started working in academia before the managerial turn, pointed out that “academics are very jealous people” and that the “restructuring” and the “new style” of management, which “is more telling people what to do, what [academics] are not used to” complicated matters, with a feeling that some people had been unjustly promoted to positions of power and then abused them. For instance, when her colleague who had the same academic status used his managerial position as head of school to prevent her taking a sabbatical leave, she resented it as an unfair tentative to prevent her doing research.

**Envy and Place Struggle.** In a context of scarce permanent positions, differences can also lead to feelings of insecurity and jealousy or, more precisely, envy. While jealousy is linked to a feeling of loss of something to someone else, envy is a will to have something that someone else has or to have him/her deprived of it (Vidaillet, 2019). It confronts the envious person to his/her limits, is exacerbated in neoliberal societies promoting competition and excellence, and can lead to violent behaviors (Vidaillet, 2019). Our corpus exemplifies this dynamic.

Being the only one in her section with a Ph.D. in the post-2008 financial crisis in Ireland where rumors had it that “only Ph.D. employees would be kept,” Eryn had been faced by envy from a colleague and their line manager, both of whom probably felt threatened by her diploma. Eryn understood their feeling, but resented it as unfair, because it was not linked to her behavior. She described herself as “easy going”:

I don't see myself as something special because I have a Ph.D., I don't treat people as anything but equals no matter where they are in the spectrum.

She dated the animosity that she suffered from the time she completed her Ph.D., and noted that “things have gotten worse” after she conducted a research job in another department for a year:

Because now, not only do I have the experience of a Ph.D. but I now have had the experience of working as an academic in another department.

She thought that her colleague was angry at the system and felt threatened in her job, so that this colleague tried to put her out to “ensure [her] continuous survival [...] in terms of career.”

Eryn explained that her colleague took it out on her with verbal abuse, while her line manager tried to humiliate her (for instance by putting her in charge of “the sluice” i.e., the room designed for the disposal of human waste products) or to distress her (for instance by sending her pictures of baby faces after her miscarriage). Both of them tried to block her from doing Ph.D. supervision and writing articles at the workplace. This had consequences both on her teaching and research work, but also on her life, which she described as a “misery,” “unbearable,” “horrendous.”

Eryn's bullying experience found some echoes in Matilde's and Amanda's. The three of them had high capacities and managed to obtain funds to conduct their Ph.D. research, which differentiated them further from their colleagues. The latter felt threatened in their positions within the workplace, where there was high competition for jobs; they were also envious of others' achievements.

**Class Struggle and Place Struggle.** With respect to Matilde, Amanda and Ana, it is important to stress that the bullying targeting them is installed within the segregation of the Chilean higher education system. Ana, with a working-class background not well-received in affluent universities, has been prevented from teaching and researching in more prestigious universities: she did not get any scholarship, her efforts weren't acknowledged. As a result, although she hopes for a different future where she would get a scholarship to conduct a Ph.D. research abroad and would be acknowledged as a full teacher and not only “the baby of the department,” she contributes to her own segregation by teaching at a

non-selective university, that lacks funds both for doing research and for paying her as a full-time teacher.

Amanda's path is different, but it reveals a similar pattern of lack of recognition related to both class struggle and place struggle. Amanda decided to work in an underprivileged sector, but had requirements and expectations based on the standards of the prestigious university where she studied. Her managers, less qualified and from the working-class, didn't have the cultural capital to compete with her and tried to isolate her. She stressed that her line manager "didn't like [her] to shine." She also narrates the example of one of her colleagues, who became her friend and with whom she organized seminars. This female colleague had a working-class background but was more qualified than others (thanks to a scholarship, she had studied at a prestigious university) and shared Amanda's will to promote an educational path outside the class-segregated system. This colleague had a precarious job, not a permanent position, and lost her job, which Amanda feels guilty about: "I had a tenure, but she was weaker. She lost her job." These examples illustrate the vulnerability linked to status within organizations, that is not specific to Chile but can be observed worldwide.<sup>8</sup>

**Precarity and Vulnerability.** Precarity is increasing in universities and other research organizations, and even more so since the 2008 economic crisis. This precarity can take on various forms<sup>9</sup>: financial, administrative, contractual, affective, but also cognitive precarity, when researchers, submitted to performance reviews, are confronted with a tension between scientific rigor and managerial pressure for productivity.<sup>10</sup>

Precarity impacts both permanent and precarious workers in academia, and may lead to increased vulnerability. Thus, Amanda's colleague, who didn't have a tenure, lost her job when Amanda's managers tried to isolate her. Tara, who had a permanent position as an academic, pointed out the lack of suitable positions for her (it can be difficult to move from one university to another due to specialization, lack of opening of positions...), her attachment to a job she liked and in which she felt "useful," but also her "affective precarity" (Ivancheva et al., 2019), which increased the importance of work in her life and, therefore, her feeling of

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<sup>8</sup>See for instance the survey conducted on workplace bullying in a mid-sized Canadian university (McKay et al., 2008).

<sup>9</sup>As shown by testimonies of researchers and academics, both women and men, in France in 2020. See for instance: <https://universiteouverte.org/2020/04/24/portraits-de-precaires-entretiens-dessines-avec-cyril-pedrosa/> and <https://universiteouverte.org/2021/04/14/pas-de-postes-on-craque-ou-on-crame/> (retrieved on April 20, 2021).

<sup>10</sup>This tension is increasing with the "audit culture" and "performance reviews" in academia (Morrish, 2017). It mirrors the tension experienced by archaeologists recruited outside academia, in preventive archaeology in France, as well as other countries, notably UK, Canada, Australia and Japan (Zorzini, 2015; Vandeveldde-Rougale and Zorzini, 2019).

being trapped when bullied. She explained: “that’s a very important part of my life anyway, because I don’t have, I’m not married, I don’t have children. So, my job is very important.”

### ***Embodied Aspects***

Martha Nussbaum points out that:

disgust and primitive shame are deeply rooted in the structure of human life [...] both of these emotions are ways in which we negotiate deep tensions involved in the very fact of being human, with the high aspirations and harsh limits that such a life involves. (Nussbaum, 2006: 70)

She suggests that these emotions “have an intimate connection to social hierarchy and to a public culture that expresses the belief that people are unequal in worth” (Nussbaum, 2006: 340). Following this perspective, and analyzing further the narratives of bullied persons with a focus on shame and disgust, can reveal both the normalcy of what a professional (here in academia) should be, and some categories that remain undervalued despite the insistence on the protection and promotion of diversity in the communication of research and higher education institutions.

**Somatization and Vulnerability.** When telling about their bullying experiences, victims (or targets) talk about psychological and physical ill-being. Calling in sick is often a step in the process of conscientization of the violence caused by bullying practices, since somatization takes place when one cannot think and act when being confronted with a conflict (Grenier-Pezé, 2001). Individuals facing bullying also express shame and disgust toward physical and emotional expressions of fear and weakness, as well as fear and disgust toward the bullies.

Matilde thus mentioned her disgust at the manager who bullied her; his smell bothered her. When she wrote a letter of resignation after having hold her position at a selective working-class university for 17 years, she felt nauseous, a feeling that she compared to the first months of pregnancy, a time where she felt fragile and in need of protection:

I am a tremendously strong woman. I never suffer so much. But I had been working there for 17 years. My life was there. My commitment to the working-class sectors of my country was there. So, I was leaving a life of political commitment to the institutions. My feeling was the same as the first few months of pregnancy. I was fragile. [I] felt that they had filled me in with rage and grief and that my hormones were working to get it out somehow. And I had to resist, to be there, to look at their faces.

Seeing herself as a “tremendously strong woman,” she also expressed her efforts to resist, “to look at their [the bullies] faces”; in other words, not to lose face.

Bullying experiences confront their victims with their vulnerability: their vulnerability as human beings, but also their vulnerability as “professionals” – where professionalism is a complex notion based on self-recognition and recognition by others as “professional” (Boussard et al., 2010). Indeed, the women we interviewed expressed a fear of no longer being able to be, nor to be seen, as “professional” if they expressed negative emotions in the workplace, especially through physical manifestations: fear of being “too human,” with embodied sensations (“sick to my stomach,” “upset,” “cry,” ...), but also fear of being “less professional” if they were perceived as lacking mental sanity or not being strong. At the same time, as also shown by Tracy et al. (2006), bullying experiences lead the victims to perceive the bullies as “less human” or “abnormal,” as can be seen through some of the metaphors (e.g., “monster,” “demon,” “evil,” “lunatic”) they use.

The fear for one’s mental sanity, and the suspicion or accusation of mental health problem of the bully, can be perceived as two sides of the same coin: the rejection of mental illness and the association of mental illness with an undervalued category in the workplace.<sup>11</sup> This makes it difficult for the victims of bullying to ask for help from colleagues or human resources, who tend to direct them to psychological support, thus reinforcing their feeling of inadequacy. As Tara indicated:

you always worry that people then think you’re mad, you know. Like one woman who said to me “well, you should take sick leave”; “but I can’t take sick leave.” It’s like saying, I’m, you know, like I am in a nervous breakdown and I never get into the job.

The same goes for the fear of being “weak,” not being able “to cope,” when faced with a bully perceived as “strong,” whether by him/herself or thanks to the support from the organization (other colleagues, human resources department, which tolerate bullying behaviors), thus creating power imbalance. Feeling and showing weakness is perceived both as shameful, an attack on one’s identity, and as increasing the risk of vulnerability in the workplace. “They smell blood and then maybe it would be worse, because he would know that you are weak,” explained Tara...

**Role Expectations and Corporal Involvement.** Narratives on bullying experiences can reveal representations framing role expectations at work (e.g., keeping negative emotions inside, having a healthy mind and body), but also their intersection with other dimensions that can impact the bullying process. For instance, when Betty explained her nervous breakdown, she stressed the gap between this

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<sup>11</sup>This is not specific to research and higher education institutions; we also observed this phenomenon in other organizations. We suggest that the fear for one’s sanity is linked to the confusion created by the bullying process, while the accusation or suspicion of mental problems of the bully are linked to the difficulty to understand his/her behavior from a rational point of view.

state and her “normal self,” its undermining effect, but also the fact that for economic reasons, she couldn’t quit her job, so that she had to do with the shame of facing people who had seen her in an “inappropriate” state:

Like Monday I really went into panic. I was crying out loud, which is... I don’t allow things like that. [...] I dread going back on Monday and to face people who have seen me in such a state. [...] I’m the main income, I’m the main provider, I can’t afford to lose my job. I would love to walk out of it.

Eryn showed that a different combination of factors can lead to a different approach. Unlike Betty, she had a working husband and she believed that she could easily find another job in her sector (medical sector), although a different type of job. She also mentioned jokingly that as a last resort, she could become a prostitute. Eryn stressed her grounded involvement in research, but the violence she had been confronted with at work and the vulnerability she experienced both physically (miscarriage) and psychologically (fear, state of shock, inability to cope) finally led her to decide that “[her] health is more important than a career,” so that she left the field of research.

Matilde shared the same concern for her health. She explained that she was no longer ready to sacrifice her health to her political commitment, previously entangled with her academic career (until she left the working-class university after having been bullied). She pointed out that in her new position at a selective university, she wouldn’t commit herself as much as before, and expressly pointed out the embodied dimension of commitment:

the truth is that I don’t give my body, I don’t work overtime, I don’t ‘get hooked’ on anything, I don’t ‘put the shirt’ from my work [i.e., I don’t engage in my work]. I don’t plan to give more than what is necessary, nor hours of sleep. At any moment you are no longer useful. And that hurts, in the stomach, in the head, you get depressed. Less political commitment, less corporal commitment.

This verbatim also recalls the metaphor of the prostitute (with expressions such as “give my body,” “get hooked” and the feeling of having been used and “no longer being useful”), mentioned by Eryn as a last resort. It shows both the corporal involvement in work, and the feelings that victims of bullying have of being pushed toward the margins of society (considering the persistent stigmatization attached to professional sex workers in today’s societies and the social recognition attached to “being useful”).

## **Conclusion**

The intersectional and clinical approach adopted in this paper to question narratives of bullying experiences in academia shows that being confronted with bullying exposes one’s vulnerability as a complex being: a biological and psychological

being (with body and mind), a social being (in relation with others, with economic constraints and resources, entangled in social structures – such as the present class segregation in the Chilean educational system...), a worker (teacher, researcher, support staff...) etc. These findings also shed additional light on the denial that sustains research and higher education institutions – namely the conception of university as “the depository of universal values in the name of which its anchoring in social reality is of the order of the vulgar, the unthinkable and, consequently, the unthought” (Cardi et al., 2005: 61 – our translation). A denial linked to the “neutral masculine” historical coloration of university (Cardi et al., 2005), now sustained by the managerial discourse of the neoliberal academy, and that the attention to social dimensions helps question.

Modern managerial discourse, that is centered on “excellence” and on the “just” relation to oneself and the other, and that diffuses in organizations and society through personal and professional development training, self-help books, coaching, the medias..., draws from and contributes to the development of a psychological culture, that hides the importance of social dimensions (Gordo and De Vos, 2010). This participates in making the individual subject “taking ownership” and “responsibility” for the difficulties s/he encounters, be they linked to bullying behaviors or other types of violence, such as systemic lack of time and funds preventing a researcher to conduct research in line with the ethics of his/her field, or institutional segregation linked to socioeconomic backgrounds for instance. Indeed:

Due to a lack of references to think what comes from the social area, [the subject] repatriates the causality as intrapsychic. She [or he] thinks her [or his] suffering in terms of personal responsibility. (Pezé, 2003: 160 – our translation)

Place struggle (Aubert and Gaulejac, 1991) covers up class-struggle and gender discriminations, while those can be exacerbated by neoliberal managerial values and organization of work, as has been exemplified here by cases from Ireland and Chile. We focused in this paper on experiences from women, but this dynamic also concerns men, as illustrated by a recent testimony of a male archaeologist in France who explained the tension between the quality of work he would like to achieve, the lack of paid time allocated to do so, and his fear to go back to being long-term unemployed. This tension led to his personal involvement in his work during his free time, finally leading to his burning-out.<sup>12</sup>

By concealing power relations rooting on different social categories and emphasizing the individual feeling that one would be “faulty,” individually responsible for being targeted by bullying behaviors, managerial discourse encourages the social representation of a “neutral” individual at work, who would be free from the markers of difference and identity categories that contribute to power play in organizations and societies. The cases presented here give a different picture:

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<sup>12</sup><https://archoenlutte.tumblr.com/post/634485435546140672/ce-métier-ma-littérament-consumé-alors-que-jen> (retrieved on November 11, 2020).

narratives of bullying experiences can help unveil dimensions that are usually hidden when individuals are led to view their experiences of bullying through the managerial lens, and show their intersection. They also show that experiencing bullying can lead one to feel associated with undervalued social categories (sick, disabled, unemployed, prostitute), or to fear joining them, thus contributing to the suffering caused by bullying.

While neoliberal notions frame organizational and social life “not as collective, but as the interaction of individual social entrepreneurs” (Bilge, 2013: 407), thus “den[ying] preconditions leading to structural inequalities” (Bilge, 2013), the attention to “power vectors” and “power domains” (Bilge, 2015) and their intersection proves a useful tool to question narratives of bullying experiences and go beyond the “institutionalized” conception of workplace bullying (Liefvooghe and Mackenzie Davey, 2010). It shows the importance that demographic and social characteristics and functional dimensions such as status can have in workplace bullying, confirming the interest to look beyond individual characteristics and interpersonal relations (as managerial discourse would have it) in order to understand “inappropriate manifestations of power within institutions” (Hutchinson et al., 2010: 25).

Increased attention has been given to gender social relationships in academia in recent years (Amano-Patiño et al., 2020; Confinée Libérée, 2020; Devineau et al., 2018; Goerg, 2017; Heinich, 2020; Hengel, 2017; Kelan, 2014; Larochelle et al., 2020; Le Feuvre, 2017; Toffoletti and Starr, 2016...), showing inter alia the “contradictions between the schedule of an ideal researcher and that of a mother” (Marry and Jonas, 2005), the persistence of unequal access to high-ranking functions (Buscatto and Marry, 2009), but also the subjective strain on those who can’t abide with the “care-free masculinized ideals of competitive performance, 24/7 work and geographical mobility” sustained by the “globalized academic market” (Ivancheva et al., 2019: 448). Our findings encourage to look further at gender and other social dimensions as well as their interaction in order to better understand the complexity of power relations in academia.

Discourses and measures tackling one type of discrimination or imbalance of power don’t seem to be sufficient to bring about change, and can even have detrimental effects, as shown by Toffoletti and Starr when considering the “work-life balance discourse” in academia in Australia. They show that it has a “power to pathologize individuals who fail to live up to this ideal” (Toffoletti and Starr, 2016: 501), notably because it ignores the influence of other factors such as employment level, career perspectives, attitude of management etc. Therefore, a first step to foster a safer work culture and atmosphere in research and higher education organizations could be to acknowledge the multiplicity and superposition of categories, in order to help secure a more collective and caring approach. To do so, the path opened by the “ethic of care” (Gilligan, 1982, 2011) seems especially relevant, where the “ethic or care” is:

“an ethic grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms) and heard with respect,” with an “inductive, contextual, psychological” logic. (Gilligan, 2011)

It could help promote equity in a grounded and reflexive approach, thanks to multiple initiatives to induce change.

This could seem to be somewhat mirrored in the “diversity rhetoric,” whereby universities are apparently showing a more complex understanding of the social dimensions infusing the workplace. But caution should be exerted when considering this discourse, by remembering the lessons learnt from studying management discourse in the corporate sector. Indeed, as previously shown by critical studies of management discourse (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), a major characteristic of this discourse is that it absorbs social critics and defuses it. Research has shown that the “diversity rhetoric,” which transformed a legal constraint into a managerial category (Bereni, 2009), participates in hiding hierarchies and antagonisms between social groups (Bereni, 2020), by emphasizing individual differences and euphemizing social inequalities. For instance, the valorization of presumably “women characteristics” (cooperation, common good, care) can have an adverse effect on equality, by hiding the fact that access to power is still based on qualities socially viewed as “masculine,” such as ambition or the ability to delegate domestic tasks (Bereni, 2020).

As Hodgins and McNamara (2021) stressed when reflecting on the Irish case:

if universities [both the universities as organizations and academic staff within] remain stuck in the NPM [New Public Management] narrative, they will remain in a narrative that keeps failing academics, their students and society.

They advocate for a “cultural change for the academy,” in order to “recreate an altruistic culture,” away from “businessification” (Hodgins and McNamara, 2021). Our findings suggest we look at solutions beyond the individual level, in order to associate practical measures with the “diversity rhetoric” (Bereni, 2009) and the managerial discursive claims of “good places to work,” so as to help build not only better “subjective working conditions” but also better “objective working conditions” (Heller, 2020). An initiative launched by French and Belgian female archaeologists illustrates the implementation of such an approach: taking into account their experiences and observations on excavation sites as well as various testimonies on discriminations occurring during fieldwork, they drafted a charter to encourage the prevention of discrimination and risks on excavation sites (Vandevelde, 2020). The first excavation sites were labeled in 2019,<sup>13</sup> giving some visibility to underlying power relations so as to promote better working conditions.

With its wealth-based discriminatory structure, the Chilean situation also calls for strong political measures to desegregate the educational and the higher education systems. Political protests against neoliberalism in schools and higher education institutions are now gaining momentum, with school teachers and academics joining forces both to think and oppose the “evaluation culture” of the SIMCE

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<sup>13</sup>See: <https://archoethique.wixsite.com/association/charte-chantier-ethique> (retrieved on November 29, 2020).

(Education Quality Measurement System) in Chile.<sup>14</sup> This exemplifies the necessity to act beyond the borders of education levels, of scientific disciplines and of each research and higher education institution in order to foster change. Initiatives to re-politicize issues such as precarity,<sup>15</sup> individualization of performance assessment,<sup>16</sup> and search for knowledge,<sup>17</sup> are emerging locally. Let us hope that the globalization that helped the spread of neoliberal managerial discourse and practices will also contribute to the sharing of local alternatives, and thus help bring about change for less discriminatory and more fulfilling work in research and higher education institutions worldwide.

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Both authors have read and agreed to the submitted version of the manuscript.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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<sup>14</sup>See for instance the video released on April 28, 2021, that denounces “the culture of management and standardized evaluation [that] has built a culture of workplace bullying for teachers, excessive demands and senseless evaluation for students” in Chile: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7pwBVMqrSg> (retrieved on April 30, 2021).

<sup>15</sup>See for instance the “group of precarious workers of research and higher education” launched in 2016 in France: <https://precaireser.fr> (consulted on April 11, 2021).

<sup>16</sup>On the acknowledgment of the collaborative dimension of research, see for instance the initiative “Camille Noûs,” launched in March 2020 in France by a group of academics of various fields as a symbolic signature to show the contribution of the scientific community as a whole to individual work of research. See: <https://www.cogitamus.fr/camilleen.html> (consulted on April 11, 2021).

<sup>17</sup>See for instance the initiative “Université Buissonnière,” launched by sociolinguists in France, in order to create a space dedicated to the search for knowledge and liberated from the obligation of rentability. See: <https://universitebuissonniere.com/2018/07/> (consulted on April 11, 2021).

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