Bullying as Intra-active Process in Neoliberal Universities

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Abstract

The reformed neoliberal universities, with their micromanagement of ever-increasing productivity, competitiveness, and individualization, have recently been described as unhealthy institutions, creating conditions that incite incivility, workplace bullying, and other forms of employee abuse. In this article, the authors employ collective biography as a form of "diffractive methodology" in order to provide new, theoretically driven insights into workplace bullying in neoliberal universities. Drawing on the concepts of intra-activity and performativity, the authors examine bullying in universities as an intra-active process that informs and is informed by the desire of an individual to be recognized and to perform as a viable academic subject—one who is professional, flexible, and accountable within a neoliberal environment.

In this article we look at what Karen Barad (2007) calls the *intra-active flows* among individual academic workers, managers, and the discursive material contexts of their work. In particular, we examine bullying in universities as an intra-active process that informs and is informed by the complex network of diverse and shifting discursive-material forces. Drawing on collective biography stories of bullying in academe, we specifically focus on three forces: neoliberal discourse and its practices of management, the need to belong and to be recognized as "legitimate" academic workers, and a passionate attachment to work, with an accompanying desire to do it well. We show that bullying is a profound attack on one's viability as a social and professional being in the context of work.

In this analysis, we also take up the concept of *diffraction* (Barad, 2007),[1] as an alternative to one of reflection or reflexivity. For Barad, though practices of reflection and reflexivity seek to go beyond naive empiricism, they are always haunted by a representational remainder. Rather than regarding our stories of bullying as mirroring the truth of bullying within academic regimes, or even as making visible the current discourses of bullying so that they are amenable to reflexive acts of revision, we diffract our own and each other stories of bullying through the "thinking and writing technologies" (Søndergaard, in press) of collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006).

Neoliberalism in Universities: The Context

Successive governments, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, have discovered that the once jealously guarded autonomy of universities can be dismantled by tying funding to neoliberal reforms. Mobilizing the twin rhetorics of economic responsibility and fear of nonsurvival, governments in capitalist economies have installed surveillance and micromanagement as the new normative practice in universities. Governments monitor institutional compliance and in turn universities monitor individual compliance in order to deliver what government thinks it wants. While one part of the vital work of universities in a democratic state has been to provide critique of government, under neoliberalism dissent and critique have become dangerous—being perceived as a threat to funding, and thus, to institutional survival (Bansel & Davies, 2010).

Some have welcomed neoliberal modes of government, believing them capable of correcting some of the sexist and elitist excesses of the liberal university. Others have met these changes with ambivalent opposition and have been hard pressed to generate either an individual or a collective position of resistance (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, & Somerville, 2005; Davies & Petersen, 2005a, 2005b, 2010).

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Whether welcomed or opposed, the new regulative environment is generally taken to be inevitable both by those positioned as managers and those being managed. That sense of inevitability is driven by a complex mix of forces: the strategy of tying reforms to funding, accompanied by threats of (and actual) reduced funding; the notion that reform is necessary for both national and institutional economic survival in a globalised world; the moral ascendancy of its rhetoric of accountability, quality assurance, equity, and transparency; and the vulnerability and desire of individual workers within such regimes. Few guessed, as they embraced some aspects of neoliberalism's managerialism and grumbled about others, the extent to which these systemic transformations, with their heightened competitiveness and individualism, would shape both their subjectivities and the nature of their work (Davies et al., 2005; Davies & Petersen, 2005a, 2005b).

Neoliberalism is a discourse that works on and through desire, making each individual want to accomplish in its terms, despite its negative effects on health, and its capacity to undermine collegiality and open debate (Bansel & Davies, 2010; Davies & Bansel, 2005, 2010). It is a seductive and invidious discourse and set of practices, not only in its capacity to silence critique, but, in the context of this article, in its coimplication in bullying, which has become the new normal mode of academic life.

Neoliberal universities have been recently described as unhealthy institutions, creating conditions that incite incivility, bullying, and other forms of employee abuse (see, for example, Lewis, 2004; McKay, Huberman Arnold, Fratzl, & Thomas, 2008; Twale & De Luca, 2008). Some of the defining features of neoliberal universities are what academic workers describe as integral to workplace bullying. These include an ever-intensifying workload, short-term contracts, job insecurity, funding pressures, excessive competitiveness, the power imbalance between managers and academics, and weakened union power (Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Lewis, 1999; McCarthy, Mayhew, Barker, & Sheehan, 2003).

The blurred boundaries between "strong" management techniques and bullying suggest that the alleged need for strong managerial control under neoliberalism can easily be misused to conceal bullying (Simpson & Cohen, 2004). With the introduction of corporate culture into academe, managerial practices such as assigning unmanageable workloads or giving unwarranted or public criticism are increasingly seen as necessary, commonplace, and acceptable (Twale & De Luca, 2008). Furthermore, neoliberal discourse fosters the narrative that we will all have many jobs in our lifetimes, so normalizing movement from one job to another. This makes it more likely that workers who become targets of bullying will leave the institution, and thus, more likely that bullying will continue unchallenged and unchecked as part of the new "normal" management.

Our own experience supports this picture. All of the seven members of our collective biography research group, who met to study bullying in universities, had relevant personal stories to tell, and several of us have either resigned or considered resignation in the face of managerially inspired bullying and other forms of abuse. Yet we do not consider ourselves unusual or subjected to any more abuse than others. Nor do we want to argue that bullying is a product of neoliberalism or exists in a simple causal relation with it. Workplace bullying was first researched in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Scandinavian researchers under the term "mobbing" or "workplace aggression" (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994; Leymann, 1990). The introduction of neoliberal reforms began, globally, during the same period. Yet bullying has presumably long been part of social existence, so it is not a causal argument that we wish to pursue. Rather, we are interested in the confluence, what Barad (2007) would call the *intra-active* dimensions of bullying.

Intra-action and Diffraction

Unlike the term *interaction*, which presupposes two entities that preexist their encounter with each other, intra-action focuses attention on the entanglement of individual and institutional practice and the meanings brought to bear on and through thought and action:

> To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. [Bullying and neoliberalism] do not preexist their intra-actions; rather, [they] emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. (Barad, 2007, p. ix)

For Barad, so-called individuals and other entities, like ripples on a pond, or waves in an ocean, are inseparable from and constitute each other. The ripples and waves do not exist without the body of water or the wind, or the other matter they encounter (stones, sand, rocks, human bodies, etc.). Just so, human and nonhuman individuals encounter already entangled matter and meanings that affect them and that they affect in an ongoing, always changing set of movements. When something comes to matter, when it actively changes the way things are, and are perceived to be, both the ontology of bodies and the meanings made of what happens are involved: "Mattering is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance . . ." (Barad, 2007, p. 3). As part of these intra-actions, collective biography as diffractive methodology seeks to constitute the phenomenon of bullying differently.

We will thus argue that there is no identifiable, separate object called "bullying," and no separate individuals called "bullies" who preexist the encounter, and upon whom we,

as researchers and writers, can turn our critical gaze. In what follows, our research and writing practices produce a different iteration of what is recognizable as bullying. We explore the intra-active flows between managerial practice and bullying, bully and victim, perpetrator and bystander, and researcher and researched, in order to find the ways in which bullying is performatively accomplished and made real (Butler, 1997).

Cultural and Political Location of Participants' Stories

Our collective biography research group included seven diverse scholars who were from Czech Republic, Iran, and Australia. We were women and men in our 30s, 50s, and 60s and from 5 different disciplinary backgrounds. We had all taught in either Australian or Czech universities, so it is to these two locations that we turn our attention here. The political histories of these countries are, of course, quite different—neoliberal reforms are much more recent in the postcommunist Czech Republic. Nevertheless, in our collective biography workshop, as we focused on moments of being bullied, of bullying and of being bystanders, the emotions and patterns of intra-action had a remarkable commonality. This was in part because collective biography is a methodology that encourages participants to listen to each other and to find the common ground in each of their stories. But it is also because those discourses and practices at work on us and through us do not necessarily respect national borders or dominant national ideologies. One of the stories told in the workshop, for example, was of bullying by a professor from the United Kingdom who was an ardent Marxist working in Australia in the early 1990s. The conversation that was part of the story could easily be imagined as having happened prior to the 1989 Velvet Revolution in the former state-socialist Czechoslovakia.

Notwithstanding different political histories in Australia and Czech Republic, neoliberal reforms draw on common narratives—that social and economic reform is necessary to combat the excesses (whatever they were) of previous decades. Neoliberalism thus inserts itself in popular imagination through this logic of the necessity of dealing with what went before, by the logic of survival in a global market, by the pervasiveness of discourses of globalization itself (it is happening everywhere so we are powerless to resist), and by the lure of freedom expressed through heightened competition and individualism. The value and relevance of social responsibility gives way, under neoliberalism, to the dominance of the market and market values.

Collective Biography: A Diffractive Methodology

The forces intra-acting on and within this article include the research literature, the concepts generated by Barad (2007) and Butler (1997), the stories generated through the methodic practices of collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006, 2009), our specific histories within academe, and the context in which the article is to be published. To bring these into intra-action with each other, our group of 7 researchers met all day for 3 consecutive days.[2] Having read a selection of the literature and agreed on the trigger questions for our stories, we met to tell our own stories of bullying in academe. We then wrote those stories and read them to each other, and after listening to and questioning each other, we rewrote and reread our stories. What we sought, in the manner of collective biography, were specific embodied *moments* rather than the long unwieldy stories that the topic of bullying often evokes (Vickers, 2007). The stories that we focus on in this article were told in response to the trigger question: "Tell one or two stories about your first experiences of being mistreated or bullied in an academic setting (as a student, as an academic)." While we responded to other trigger questions during our workshop (and through them sought to explore how we might have caused harm to others or stood by allowing others to be bullied), our focus in this article is on the one who experiences the impact of being bullied.

Definitions of bullying are always problematic, relying as they do on simplified notions of social reality as measurable and quantifiable, and on the notion of an individual as already preexisting social interaction (rather than being constituted within/through the intra-action). Sometimes, both bullies and victims are pathologized, and the problem is read as one of bullied and bullying individualized subjects (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnell, 2009). Bullying is thus taken to lie outside the normal everyday life of any institution. According to standard definitions, *bullying* refers to repeated hostile acts directed toward one or more individuals who are unable to defend themselves (Björkqvist et al., 1994). In order for particular acts to be labeled bullying, such acts must occur repeatedly (e.g., weekly) and over a longer period of time (e.g., over 6 months; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003b). This idea of the repetition of the bullying behavior generally remains unproblematized, as if any social act were ever simple enough for its "repeat" to be able to be recognized and documented as such (Ellwood & Davies, 2010). Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) points out that bullying research furthermore describes control held by the bully as ubiquitous and impenetrable. Thus, bullying is defined through the power asymmetry between the bully and the target as if power were a property of an individual rather than shifting set of power relations (Davies, Flemmen, Gannon, Laws, & Watson, 2002; Foucault, 1980). Some definitions rely on the assumption that the bully intends to do harm, as if reading intention were an unproblematic thing to do. But as Barad (2007, p. 22) argues, "The crucial point is not merely that intentional states are inherently unknowable but that *the very nature of intentionality needs to be rethought*."

In a diffractive methodology such as collective biography, intentional states are read not so much as the property of an individual, but as an entanglement of various ways of mattering where matter and meaning are mutually constitutive. Indeed, in this view, which Barad names "agential realism" (2007, p. 32), the world is continually coming into being through an entanglement of phenomena that are agentic yet have no essential individuality (for a comprehensive analysis of agentic realism, see Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011). Barad's concept of intra-action signals this radical shift. In this sense a context can be agentic, and a discourse can be agentic. The individual human being is not the solitary source of a particular action or meaning given to an action. Being human is itself performatively constituted in each moment. This idea has similarities with Butler's notions of mattering (Butler, 1993) and performativity (Butler, 1997), though Barad argues that Butler inadvertently reproduces a binary of discourse and materiality in which discourse becomes the privileged term. Barad's radical move is to see both discourse and materiality as mutually constitutive agencies in a performative ontology of being.

So how is collective biography diffractive? Before a collective biography workshop, papers (in this instance, papers analyzing bullying) are circulated and read by all the participants. Like "the diffraction or interference pattern water waves make when they rush through an opening in a breakwater" (Barad, 2007, p. 28), these papers begin to "interfere" with each person's memories before the participants have even met. Within the workshop itself, as the participants begin to tell their stories, each story is diffracted through the iterative processes of collective biography. As it is told, listened to, written, read out loud, listened to again, each story becomes different in the telling/listening/writing of it. The way the stories are told and written, focusing on a specific embodied moment, of mattering (of being matter and experiencing something that makes a difference), makes the ontology-of-being visible, along with the epistemology of the constitutive moment. Barad suggests that we cannot separate ontology, epistemology, and ethics—these are not separable as isolated phenomena, since one is always matter, and engaged in mattering, in ways that make a difference:

Justice, which entails acknowledgement, recognition, and loving attention, is not a state that can be achieved once and for all. There are no solutions; there is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly. The world and its possibilities for becoming are made in each meeting. How then shall we understand our role in helping constitute who and what come to matter? (Barad, 2007, p. x)

The method of open listening that is practiced in collective biography is like what Barad describes as justice. It involves "acknowledgement, recognition, and loving attention." It is a meeting in which matter and meaning intra-act in such a way that new possibilities of understanding our topic, bullying in academic settings, can emerge.

The Stories

The methodic practices of collective biography require us to set aside long explanations and clichéd repetitions. In our workshop we looked for small moments of feeling seriously at risk within a relation of power, in ways that unsettled our sense of belonging, recognition, competence, or identity. The fear and anxiety experienced by individuals who felt themselves positioned as victim were intense. Indeed, early on in our storytelling we ran up against the problem of ongoing fear of the "bully." Writing as both a researcher and insider about what goes on in universities or other organizations can be highly political, and thus, threatening and risky (Vickers, 2002). Would the "bully" read our article and identify the story and so use it as further ammunition against us? Would she or he invoke legal sanctions? Could we, in that case, even dare to tell and write our stories? One of the moments we talked and wrote about became focused on just this ongoing fear of the bully and how it works on us and through us to shape our actions:

Background: It is Day 1 of the collective biography workshop on bullying in academe. The participants have just told and discussed stories of times when they felt bullied or mistreated. They are now to focus on a particular moment in their stories and have moved to different spots around the apartment in order to write.

She sits at the kitchen bench, trying to write. Once pulled from the rip of memory, the moment is a slippery, undersized catch that she should surely throw back. Beside her on the bench, there is a small sharp knife and a twisted smile of cut melon, its transparent wrap pulled aside and glistening as though with diluted blood. She writes until her pencil loses its point. Her handwriting is fuzzy, leaden, weighed down with self-justification. She can't write about this, or if she does, it can't be published. Perhaps this in itself is the moment. The litigious bully inside her head, dictating what she can and can't write, wringing out her phrases, pronouncing an incommutable sentence.

The story had been, in its original version, a long and detailed description, which showed, more than anything else, the author's need to establish the case for her own correct professional behavior in her dealings with the "other," the litigious bullying one. In rewriting the story the author deleted the original story and told instead of the moment of writing this version in which she recognized her own need to justify herself, and the fear, self-doubt, and self-censoring that were at play on and through her body.

Søndergaard draws on Barad's concept of intra-action to analyze bullying amongst schoolchildren as "a complex relation between *social exclusion anxiety* and practices of contempt and worthiness production" where "bullying is not the product of individual pathologies but a feature of social groups and the necessity for individuals to belong to groups—to exist in relation to others." Our first story draws attention to a related dynamic, though here the crucial force is a desire to be recognized by others as a "legitimate" and "competent" member of academe. For the narrator, the idea of openly writing about the bullying practices of her workplace becomes impossible, as it seems both to threaten her survival in the job and to cast her out of the group of other colleagues who are allegedly capable of unproblematic functioning within the limits set by the bullying practices. By presenting herself as a victim of bullying, she would risk being positioned as a "failed" person, as not competent enough to belong to the group of other "legitimate" academics. Furthermore, the story shows how this need for recognition and legitimacy may contradict one's emotionally invested identity and close down the possibilities of resistance. The desire to be seen as a legitimate member of the university, and to comply with the conditions of such recognition, works against the narrator's sense of herself as a critical researcher who is ready to openly resist abuses of power. Instead, the conditions of recognition require her to perform herself differently—as the silent subject of the bully's actions. In Barad's terms, these forces are "interfering" with her own idea of herself, and with her own performance of herself as one who is free to write of her experience.

However, within a diffractive methodology, interference is not an inherently negative force. Although this first story can be interpreted as a representation of passivity in the face of bullying, this reading overlooks the performative dimension of writing. The story *enacts* resistance by telling how it is impossible to tell and *writing* when it is supposedly impossible to write. This second iteration of the story was made possible by "interference" from the other members of the collective biography group, whose responses cut across the author's initially abject account by granting her recognition as an ethical subject. This was a point of diffraction that radically changed this first story from a painful and elongated narrative in which self-criticism alternated with self-justification, into a visceral and embodied mo(ve)ment (Davies & Gannon, 2006).

When the particular interference that we call "bullying" causes us to doubt ourselves or threatens our existence, this is experienced as deeply traumatic. Even when, as in some of our stories, one does not doubt oneself, but is nevertheless cast out, perhaps in part because of the refusal to doubt and so modify one's actions, this material discursive violence impacts on the body and the affect of the person. In one of our stories that involved casting out, the story ends:

> *My body jerks into the present space of the classroom and the yelling voice directed at me. Tears spurt into my eyes and all I can see is a messy chaos of black in front of me. I feel an urgent need for some safe place to be alone, away from this humiliating shouting, away from the silent gaze of the other students. I think of the women's changing room and I remember yes, there is a lock on the door. I rush toward that door with the lock clearly in my mind. Yes, I am right, it has a lock. I lock the door. I am alone. I sit down and begin to sob.*

In Butler's (1997) terms, the affective consequences of misrecognition and abjection are dire. Such interference may not only change the trajectory and patterning of one's life; it threatens one's status as a viable subject. Acts of bullying do not always lead to being cast out from one's group, but the threat that they *might* already influences the moment itself, since fear is at work in the moment of being abused.

The three stories that we have chosen to focus on in what follows take place when the storyteller is new to the job. Each took place within the past 3 years. The settings include a private university, a state regional university, and an elite, state-funded university. In each of these stories, the performance and the moral standing of the new academic is questioned by senior members of the academy. In order to bring into our analysis a nuanced understanding of how bullying intra-acts with academic subjectivity in these instances, we turn to Butler's concept of performativity, which, like Barad's intra-activity, does not presume a separate, preexisting entity or subject.

The self cannot exist except in its performance of itself, and the performance of oneself requires both submission and mastery. Following Althusser's concept of interpellation, Butler (1997) writes, "In this view, neither submission nor mastery is performed by a subject; the lived simultaneity of submission as mastery and mastery as submission, is the condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject" (p. 117). What the following stories show is that the individuals who are accused of insufficiently mastering their jobs, and thus of insufficiently submitting to the neoliberal conditions of interpellation as a viable academic subject, experience (at least momentarily) an extremely uncomfortable self-doubt. The self in the performance of itself is found wrong. There can be no final appeal to a prior

or separate entity, a self whose virtuous existence has the power to disprove the allegation of faulty performance. The self that is accused, already, distressingly, doubts itself in the moment of accusation.

What we find here is a powerful desire on the part of the person new to his or her job, not only to be recognized as having intellectual competence in his or her chosen discipline, but to be understood as virtuously and competently carrying out his or her work. These individuals take pleasure not just in their knowledge, but in their professional competence. Their idea of themselves is strongly linked to both. The attack undermines both their sense of competence and their sense of virtue in their passionate pursuit of that competence. They are found guilty by those who gaze at them, and they both embody and resist taking up that fault as their own.

The author of the story that follows had a successful career in her chosen profession and was now, for the first time, teaching in a university at a weekend workshop:

> *I was pleased that all my experience in the practical world could be shared with undergraduates—making a difference to how they might approach their world of work in the future. The course was 9 to 5. We had worked hard, and by 3.00 we had covered all that I had planned to do, so we negotiated to finish at 3.15. I packed up and walked to the car park. I noticed a senior lecturer walking in front of me. She had come in to do some work in her office. Just the two of us. As we got closer to our cars she turned back and asked me if I was finished already. I had my bag and opened the boot to put it in. "Yes," I said. "Are you giving them an early mark?," she asked. I nodded. "The students will love you," she said. I looked at her as she said it. Her lips were in a closed-mouth accentuated grin, her voice light and cheery, but the edge of disapproval couldn't be mistaken. She got into her car and drove off with a wave. I gave a half smile. I got into mine and sat. I could feel my cheeks redden. I sat with my keys in my hand. All my work experiences drained from me. Got it wrong already. I felt a shame of being caught doing something wrong. I replayed the walk down and the conversation in my head. Really got it wrong. I shakily put the key in the ignition. Still replaying what she had said. I started to drive out, still quite shaken. As I drove the warm cheeks came back to normal. I was replaying the conversation again in my head. When I got to the sarcastic "the students will really love you," I stopped. I felt the shift in my body. Confident. Smiling. Wow. What on earth does that mean? I thought. Is that what this world is about, making sure the students didn't love you? How weird? . . . I thought and drove home thinking about how interesting and weird this university world was.*

This story captures the bodily affect of the moment in which the person loses her sense of competence following the accusation of not behaving correctly. The one who has accumulated so much knowledge and experience in her profession is dismantled with a few brief words. Her critic lets her know that the institution does not approve of or condone the freedom to judge when the work has been completed. She implies that she did not do so for good professional reasons, but to gain favor with the students. She is subjected in that moment to a discourse she does not (yet) understand, in which surveillance of her work (through which she will be made accountable) will find hours worked (a measurable product) is of more significance than the value of her insights into the profession, or her capacity to teach them well to the students. She has acted on the no-longer-valid assumption that professional judgment can be trusted. The forms of recognition made available to her at that moment require her to disregard her "old," now presumably insufficient performance of herself as an experienced professional. Instead, she is invited to take up the position of someone who must yet learn how to be a legitimate academic through surveillance and through measures of time spent. But then the narrator recovers herself, her sense of herself as competent, by calling on another discourse that makes the critic's words weird and interesting. She distances herself from "this university world" as she drives herself home, placing herself emotionally and physically outside it, so lessening its power to harm her.

Our next story comes from a moment that occurs several weeks into a new job. The storyteller has moved disciplines and is taking on teaching she has never done before. She has been given no time or assistance in preparing the courses she is to teach. While she had secured the job on her research track record, she now finds her passion for research being held against her, and her right to do it withheld, as if her research was for her own indulgence and the teaching were the only real work valued by the institution. The two others with whom she meets are in positions that allocate them the responsibility for micromanaging her work:

> *The table in Jo's big office is set along one wall. They sit together on the long side. I have my back to the wall on the short side. They look at me as if I am some kind of specimen to be pitied.*
>
> *I am not sure why the meeting has been called. I am not sure if Kim has called it, asking Jo to support her. Or if Kim has reported problems to Jo and Jo has called it. Perhaps because of this it takes me a few minutes to connect with the topic. Or perhaps I am imagining, in my overtired and desperate state, with the ever-present pain in my skull from the pinched cranial nerve (how shameful to be ill), that they might be going to acknowledge the pressure of the teaching load, to admit that it was a lot to ask that*

someone could slot instantly into this wild assortment of teaching without the support of teaching materials—"didn't you bring your own with you?" Kim had once asked—and without the relevant specialist knowledge or the time and space to get it. Even though Kim had also once said first semester was a terrible time to start and Natalie had said, "It's the medical model: throw you in the deep end and see if you can swim."

But no, it's not a case for sympathy. Rather, apparently, I am "not coping" so it has been decided that—Jo offers this agentless phrase in her sweetest, kindest, and most understanding of voices—until I have sorted out myself and my teaching, I am not permitted to take any more research days. Of course, attending the research workshop cannot be condoned either. That was why she has had to ignore my email. If I choose to go to the workshop, she suggests, oh so sweetly, I will have to take leave without pay.

I am stunned. Confused. They don't want my research output after all? And I am to be punished by no more research "for an indefinite period"?! Not supported, punished!

When I say, dry-mouthed, that I will be taking leave without pay for the workshop because it is a prior commitment, her head jerks back on her neck in surprise.

Here we find the force of two people in management positions, together, searching for a way to persuade a new lecturer to deliver what the institution says must be delivered. Like other workplace bullies, they humiliate, find faults, patronize, and control (Twale & De Luca, 2008). The institution wants research productivity as well as efficient teaching, and it wants both at the lowest possible cost. They guess that by making research the delayed reward for delivering her teaching without becoming ill, she will find how to submit. But no! She will do her research anyway—without pay. Her idea of her self as academic does not include giving up her research and writing. Yet they can and do insist that she sit in her office all day when she is not teaching, because they can monitor that. It makes her teaching preparation less efficient, and less inspired, but she cannot escape the watching eyes. Like many others she continues her research in her "own time" thus turning her official working hours (39 per week) into something more like 60 or 70 hours a week. Before the encounter in her story, she imagined that she would be respected and valued for her passionate attachment to writing, as well as her strong desire to teach well and her competence in doing so. And after all, a strong research output is often seen as the privileged way to gain rewards and (self) respect in the university world. But now her very attachment to writing is turned into an accusation: She is not succeeding in her teaching because she is

devoting too much time to research. It is an indulgence she must forego. The research/practice card can be played in whatever way is seen to work to manage the behavior of an intransigent employee. Her resistance is shocking to Jo, who cannot believe that the concerted force of her and Kim's power cannot achieve the correct level of submission. Mastery and submission go together, says Butler (1997). If there is insufficient mastery, forced submission may be seen as necessary. Even more force will have to be brought to bear on this apparently faulty individual with her pinched cranial nerve, who "has the nerve" to take time without pay to do her research and so diffract the force of their micromanagement.

The forces at work here are not simply two women whose bullying nature preexists the moment and one victim who is undone by their attack. There are other intra-acting forces: the government's neoliberal reforms leading to excessive workloads, and the institution's emphasis on micromanagement in order to produce unrealistic levels of productivity. And there is the passionate attachment to that part of the work called research that allows it to be turned into a personal indulgence. The neoliberal discourse, with its tendency to systematically misinterpret structural and organizational deficiencies as a "personal failure" of an individual, is markedly visible here. Instead of addressing the issue of providing no assistance and time to the new employee to prepare her teaching, the narrator is accused of "not coping." The body of the victim, pinching her cranial nerve, is also a force at play. A prior pastoral discourse that led the victim to hope for support was present in her hope for reprieve from the impossible workload. The reporting mechanisms instituted by the university that valued only the "bottom line" and the brutal "sink or swim" discourse are all at work on the bodies and emotions of the story's participants. The physical organization of Jo's office, with its alignments and oppositions, is also one of the forces at play; it also "matters." The big desk carves out the separation between the author and her smiling interrogators. The short wall where the author sits is a material-discursive echo of the "short straw." All of these lines of force are coimplicated in the production of trauma and the performative mattering of bully and victim.

In our final story the boss of the storyteller is similarly exercised about the faultiness of his employee. Again, the employee is deeply invested in doing the job well and has worked hard to carry out all that has been asked of him. Again, we see the manager going to work on his employee to bring about what he sees as an appropriate level of submission, while his mastery of the work is made irrelevant.

Background: When I started my new job as a research assistant, the summer holidays were about to begin, and, as a newcomer, I wasn't entitled to have a summer break. I agreed with my boss, an older professor,

about tasks I should complete during the summer and worked on them for the next two months unsupervised, as everybody was on leave. I met him again at the beginning of the academic year.

He walked into my office without knocking and without greeting, and said in a serious voice, "Come to my office," and left. It really caught me by surprise. What's the matter? It seemed that there's a problem, but I couldn't figure out what it could possibly be. I was new at the job, and I wanted to make a good impression. For a moment I got nervous. I felt tension in my upper body and had to take a deep breath to relax. Also, the professors' invasion (that was how I perceived his visit) made me feel inferior to him, and it wasn't an emotion I liked. As a result, I started feeling resistant. I kept sitting at my desk for a few moments. Then I slowly stood up and reluctantly went to his office wondering what's going on. When I entered, he didn't greet me and gestured to me to sit down in a chair. It made me feel tense again, and I couldn't help fearing what was going to happen next. At the same time I felt more and more resistant but didn't show it in any way and did what he wanted me to do. He sat opposite me and asked in a serious (possibly angry?) voice, "So, what's new?" I relaxed a bit and started describing what I had done during the summer. I felt that I completed all the tasks we had agreed upon very well, but no sign of approval came. Instead the professor kept asking me, "What else?," with a stern expression on his face. I was confused and finally didn't know what to say next. But he kept asking what else I had done. Feelings of resistance came back. Is he fucking with me or what? Suddenly I realized what he was aiming at. The teaching I promised to the Head of School! I completely forgot about that. "Oh, there's the teaching I promised to the Head of School, I hope it's ok?" Then he almost shouted at me. "No, it is not ok!"

Unlike those engaging in surveillance and management in the earlier stories, who gloss over their criticism with brittle charm, the professor is candidly outraged. He shouts. He does not care about the quality of the work done or the virtue of working over the summer holidays in such a productive manner. He does not care about the commitment to and pleasure in the work that has been done for him. He cares instead about the minute slippage from his control that has come about as a result of the Head of School's request. In his raging and outrageous attack we sense his own defense of his place in the hierarchy. His own boss, the Head of School, has undermined his power to hold exclusive control over the new employee. But his attack goes down the line of power, not up. Here once again the self-doubt that comes with the accusation is visible: The wave of accusation interferes with the accused's sense of pleasure in the mastery that all the work that has been accomplished evidences. His bodily affect oscillates between, on the one hand, fear and confusion, and on the other, a sense of resistance and a belief that what is happening is not acceptable. The professor's rage generates an interference with his sense of who he is or can be taken to be, and although he submits to that interference, responding with deference and politeness, he also begins building with his body an ontology of resistance. In the ensuing weeks he mobilizes the discourse of neoliberalism that one can have many careers in a lifetime. Like Jo and Kim in the previous story, the professor will eventually be left to demolish the next assistant that he employs.

As in our previous story, it is possible to see far more than two individual forces here. The Head of School with his limited budget must make ends meet. A virtuous research assistant can surely be corralled to help with this task. The research assistant's emotion of outrage is magnified by the fact of having worked over the summer when no one else was working. What is normally expected (holidays) has been set aside in service to a productivity discourse, and furthermore, he has taken on additional work outside his allocated tasks. He is doubly, even trebly, virtuous. The attack threatens to rob him of that virtue; it treats him with contempt, as if he is someone who does not know how to do his job. The vulnerability that he feels is not so much to do with fear of losing his job but fear of becoming unrecognizable as someone who is both competent and responsible. He risks becoming someone who will be subjected to contempt, not just from his (contemptuous) boss but from others whose opinion he values. And the professor also struggles with the fear of not being recognized as a legitimate academic and a competent manager. He finds it difficult, and at times impossible, to meet the new expectations of him under the neoliberal reforms being implemented. His fear is of not being able to deliver the results in terms of external funding and high-impact international publications. Despite his blatant effort to wield unlimited power over the research assistant, he is nevertheless dependent on the research assistant's capacity to deliver the products he needs. The multitude of forces that are at play in this intra-action far exceeds the binary between pathological bully and powerless victim.

(In)conclusion: Some Diffractive Interferences in the Thinking on Bullying

What Barad calls a diffractive methodology is one that actively transforms the interrelationships of mutually constitutive agencies, so that what emerges is radically different from what came before. It has been widely recognized that

workplace bullying research—in part because of its relative novelty and the strong focus on empirical, quantitative data—is in need of development of theoretical concepts and understandings (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003a). In this article, we have used collective biography as a form of diffractive methodology to provide new, theoretically driven insights into workplace bullying. Drawing on the concepts of intra-activity and performativity, we examined bullying in universities as it informs and is informed by the necessity of belonging, of being recognized as of value, and the desire to act as one and be seen to act as one who is professional and accountable within a neoliberal environment. We showed how bullying is coimplicated in, and justified by, the alleged need for control and improvement of our performance. Our stories illustrated how the forms of recognition available in neoliberal universities may require us to relinquish professional identities to which we are passionately attached and which are grounded in our sense of competence, autonomy, and in the desire to do our job well. To work in academe in a sustainable way requires "a deep level of commitment and engagement" (Twale & De Luca, 2008, p. 74). However, the stories show how the managerial practices of constant surveillance, control, and shifting demands of managers—instead of contributing to the quality of our work—subvert our sense of competence and mastery, as well as our commitment to, and engagement with, our work.

The practices of surveillance also produce multiple forms of resistance, even though the resistance may not be immediately visible to those in managerial or senior positions who use bullying practices. In some of the stories told, resistance became visible through the narrator's resignation from the job. Quitting is one of the common tactics of resistance employed by victims of bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). It is also a tactic frequently recommended in bullying manuals. However, this tactic is highly ambivalent. Together with providing the victim with a route to escape bullying, it also enables bullying to go unchallenged and to be reproduced through bullying of those who stayed or were newly employed.

We did not want to reduce the entanglement of intra-actions and agencies that constitute instances of bullying to a simple, causal relationship between bullies, victims, or the organization. In contrast to common approaches that identify separate causes of bullying, such as the personality and motivation of the bully, we moved beyond the usual foci on the individualized and dyadic nature of bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006), or on the unhealthy organizational context, or both. Rather than simply placing the personal or interpersonal dynamics of bullying in context, we took up Barad's concept of intra-action in order to explore the complex network of shifting discursive material forces coimplicated in bullying that cannot be easily separated from each another.

We further drew on Butler's theory of performativity in order to understand how bullying is implicated in the processes of subjectification within neoliberal academic regimes. Our sense of mastery and competence and its subversion by neoliberal micromanagement practices came into focus. Each of our stories documented the desire to belong, and to be recognized as a competent and legitimate member of academe. Bullying then took the form of attacks on one's sense of mastery and competence. The fear of being cast out, and of not being recognized in some stories, prevented the narrator from engaging in overt forms of resistance. In order to remain viable academic subjects, they had to remain silent, at least for that moment captured in their stories.

The stories also pointed to a more complex concept of power than the "one-dimensional depiction of power" used in the majority of workplace bullying research (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006, p. 407). Here our findings were similar to those of Lutgen-Sandvik and showed that bullying must be considered more broadly than an action of the powerful bully upon the powerless victim within an impenetrable structure of one-way power. Our last two stories, for example, depicted short intra-actions that were part of persistent mistreatment of the narrators, ending in their resignations. At the same time, the so-called targets of bullying were far from passive or powerless. They engaged in complex forms of resistance, such as defying their superiors, subverting the bully's legitimacy, telling the untellable, and building up a bodily resistance. Our last story dramatized how the bully and the target may be interlocked in a relationship of mutual dependency on the other—each of them striving to be recognized as a competent member of academe, with neither of them holding impenetrable power over the other.

So what are the implications of our analysis for the concept and practice of bullying and for bullying research? By problematizing the three key aspects of the usual definition of bullying, namely, the notions of repetitiveness, power asymmetry, and intentionality, and by recasting bullying in an intra-active network of forces that include neoliberal discourses and practices, our analysis shows the need for a radical rethinking of bullying. It points out the need to shift attention from the focus on (pathological) individuals and their intentions, or motivations, to a more complex (and political) analysis of how the entanglement of diverse forces makes us each, at any one point in time, potential bullies or victims or bystanders. Each one of us is situated ontologically and epistemologically inside a network of ethical dilemmas that arise as part of the ongoing entanglements of matter and meaning and their endless diffractive impact on everyday lives. What this shift in focus implies is a move away from the categorization of bullying and bullies as entities to be identified and acted upon, to an ethical practice that recognizes that each one of us matters and is engaged in mattering, in ways that make a difference.

A commitment to social justice requires that we each take responsibility for the ways in which we find ourselves

mattering, since we are each coimplicated in the matter and meanings being made real within our workplaces. That commitment requires a refusal of neoliberalism's claim that there is no alternative, and a willingness to take up the position of vulnerability that neoliberalism gives to those who engage in critique of its powers. While neoliberal-inspired micromanagement did not invent workplace bullying, it is deeply implicated in current institutional practices that may be experienced as scarifying acts of bullying that undermine the viability of academic life. The move away from pathologizing and categorizing individuals as bullies requires us to think intra-actively and to ask at each moment, "How different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter" (Barad, 2007, p. 30). It is thus a shift away from the current intensification of efforts to regulate the behavior of (faulty) individuals. Such regulations both assume and create an essential difference between those who are responsible (managers and bullies) and those who are vulnerable and weak and need protection (victims). These managerial strategies for the identification and regulation of bullying are located in the same culture of micromanagement that is implicated in the production of bullying. In this sense, the current solution is part of the problem.

Taking up Barad's diffractive methodology, we propose an ethics that requires each one of us, singly and collectively, to see the multiple ways we are caught up in the production of bullying. In a diffractive methodology agency is not simply or solely located in individual subjects, but in events, and in institutional discourses and practices that are collectively maintained. The ethical practice we are advocating gives each of us responsibility for being mindful of what is made to matter and for singly and collectively engaging in rigorous critique of discourses and practices that cause harm to self and to others and to academic work itself. At the same time, just as this ethics requires us to recognize the potential to do harm, so it also undoes the inevitability of the normalization of bullying within neoliberal academic regimes. Each and all of us do matter, after all. As Barad says,

> [Our intra-actions] reconfigure what is possible. Ethicality is part of the fabric of the world; the call to respond and be responsible is part of what is. . . . Questions of responsibility and accountability present themselves with every possibility; each moment is alive with different possibilities for the world's becoming and different reconfigurings of what may yet be possible. (Barad, 2007, p. 182)

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Notes

1. Karen Barad extends Donna Haraway's (1997) model of diffraction into an explicit methodology.
2. Of the seven in the workshop, four are authors of this article, and the others are working on another article using different stories generated at the workshop.

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Bios

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