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Answering Five Key Questions About Workplace Bullying: How Communication Scholarship Provides Thought Leadership for Transforming Abuse at Work

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Abstract

Organizational communication research is vital for understanding and addressing workplace bullying, a problem that affects nearly half of working adults and has devastating results on employee well-being and organizational productivity. A communication approach illustrates the toxic complexity of workplace bullying as it is condoned through societal discourses, sustained by receptive workplace cultures, and perpetuated through local interactions. Examining these (macro, meso, and micro) communicative elements addresses the most pressing questions about workplace bullying, including (a) how abuse manifests, (b) how employees respond, (c) why it is so harmful, (d) why resolution is so difficult, and (e) how it might be resolved. This article provides tips for addressing and transforming workplace bullying.

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which may be of particular interest to consultants and human resource professionals, while also offering a theoretical synthesis and launching pad for future research.

Keywords

organizational communication, workplace bullying, psychological abuse

The just-world hypothesis: A macro-level societal assumption that the world is fair and orderly and that victims of misfortune deserve what happens to them.

Workplace policies: Meso-level communicative structures that regularly address racial discrimination and sexual harassment but do not include information about how to deal with an “equal opportunity” office bully.

Giggles, eye rolls, threats, and silence: Some of the many microinteractions that sustain and perpetuate workplace bullying.

These are the “pictures” of workplace bullying¹ in action—from macro to micro, respectively. Adult bullying is catastrophic for those targeted and devastating to organizations. Most of the typical ways of responding to bullying fail to change the situation and can even worsen the target’s plight, so exploring and addressing the issue from multiple perspectives is essential. Communication scholarship provides a unique perspective and reinvigorates other scholarship by weaving together multidisciplinary voices on workplace abuse.

The communication perspective provides valuable insights into how bullying is driven by macro-level discourses (e.g., cultural, societal values, and beliefs), buttressed by meso-level policies and practices (e.g., organizational, educational), and fashioned or resisted through micro-level talk and interaction. In this article we explore how communication-based workplace bullying studies provide key insights on the most pressing questions about adult bullying, mobbing, and psychological abuse at work. These questions include the following:

1. What does bullying look like, and how does it manifest in organizations?
2. How do employees and organizations make sense of and respond to bullying?
3. Why is adult bullying at work so harmful?
4. Why is workplace abuse so difficult to address and stop?
5. How can workplace bullying be addressed or ameliorated?

To contextualize the communication fields' responses to these questions, we first review the origins and threads of the academic dialogues surrounding the issue.

Workplace Bullying: Tracing Its History and Voices

Workplace bullying is a toxic combination of unrelenting emotional abuse, social ostracism, interactional terrorizing, and other destructive communication that erodes organizational health and damages employee well-being. Bullying affects nearly half of working adults: Approximately 1 in 10 U.S. workers experience persistent abuse in any given year, another 30% to 40% are bullied sometime during their working lives, and an additional 10% witness bullying but are not targeted directly (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Bullying is similarly prevalent in the United Kingdom and EU countries, with somewhat lower rates in Scandinavia (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). Adult bullying at work is clearly a pressing, widespread problem. Two somewhat different conversations about workplace bullying developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s—one focused on targets of abuse, the other on perpetrators.

Target-Focused Perspective

In Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, and the EU researchers focused their attention on targets. Heinz Leymann (1990, 1996), a German psychologist and physician working in Sweden, is one of the field's pioneers. He studied worker trauma after bank robberies and subway drivers' trauma from suicidal and accidental deaths on the subway tracks and eventually linked mobbing to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Norwegian psychologists joined the dialogue and have continued as key voices, particularly regarding the psychological ramifications of workplace bullying (e.g., Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; see also the Bergen Bullying Research Group).

In the 1980s, radio audiences in the United Kingdom learned about bullying through a series of broadcasts that drew interest from business-management and organizational development and behavior scholars (e.g., Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002). While also concerned with the toxicity to targets, U.K. management scholars recognized bullying's corrosive effects on organizations. German academics in organizational behavior and psychology, on the other hand, viewed adult bullying and mobbing as escalated conflicts marked by severe power disparity (e.g., Zapf & Gross, 2001). Interest in the target-based perspective has extended from these early voices to include

management and psychology academics in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, the Netherlands, India, Canada, Japan, China, and a number of other countries (for detailed discussion of these works see Zapf et al., 2003).

Perpetrator-Focused Perspectives

In the early 1990s U.S. researchers began examining the legal and human risks of workplace violence and aggression. Although early U.S. research included psychological perspectives (e.g., Spector, 1975), much of the research in business, management, and organizational behavior was concerned with violence prevention, risk management, and the diagnosis of the violence-prone workplace (e.g., Denenberg & Braverman, 1991). The perpetrator focus differed from the target focus in mobbing-bullying scholarship for the most part due to the occurrence of insider murders (i.e., “going postal”), a predominantly U.S. phenomenon (R. E. Allen & Lucerno, 1996). These early U.S. conversations—chiefly in management/business and organizational behavior—centered on the presence, escalation, and causes of hostile workplace interactions that could lead to violence and insider murder. This body of work has continually been challenged with calls for more complex approaches that access multiple facets of adult bullying and examine the issue in situ.

Target-Focus Emergence in the United States

Carroll Brodsky’s *The Harassed Worker* (1976) recognized psychological harassment as a major factor in many Workers Compensation claimants’ injuries. This out-of-press book represents one of the earliest target-focused studies of bullying in the United States, yet it stirred little interest from U.S. scholars at the time, most of whom were predominantly focused on violence prevention. Brodsky’s psychological research was revived in the early 1990s when interest in bullying surged in Britain, and U.S. medical practitioner-scholars became concerned about verbal abuse of medical students and nurses. In addition during the 1990s U.S. scholarship emerged that examined target-focused workplace injustice. During the 1980s and 1990s U.S. scholarly interest grew slowly regarding target perspectives of bullying and emotional abuse; however, volumes burgeoned in the popular press.²

In the 2000s U.S. scholarship on bullying and mobbing has grown exponentially and the terms *workplace bullying* and *mobbing* have become more widely recognized. Meanwhile, international scholarship is more easily available in digital formats, and the dialogue has become broadly cross-national

and interdisciplinary, extending from its management-psychology roots to include voices from law, education, medicine (especially nursing), and more recently, human resource management (HRM) and industrial relations (e.g., D’Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Macintosh, 2006; Yamada, 2000). The range and number of scholars who research workplace bullying indicate its ubiquity across nations, professions, and settings. Demarcated lines between different perspectives have blurred; psychological researchers now consider organizational dynamics, and organizational researchers have begun to explore psychological variables (e.g., Fast & Chen, 2009). In addition, the perpetrator–target perspective divide has softened. Increasingly, bullying scholarship underscores the complexity of workplace abuse and the need to engage interdisciplinary, multilevel perspectives.

Organizational Communication as a Nexus for Bullying Research

Organizational communication scholars joined the academic conversation about workplace bullying in the early 2000s (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). This research provides a complex yet productive interdisciplinary nexus, richly attending to the pressing questions about adult bullying. The communication field thinks and works in interdisciplinary spaces, and because of this interdisciplinary perspective, it also serves as a cross-pollinator for the varied perspectives and fields concerned with bullying (e.g., education, nursing, law, management, psychology, etc.). That is, communication research offer a unique perspective while also reinvigorating other scholarship by weaving together diverse disciplinary voices. Relatedly, organizational communication research shows that bullying is a complex multilevel issue occurring not only *inside* organizations but also one that is inextricably interconnected with larger social systems of meaning (i.e., discourses) and institutional polices.

Organizational Communication Provides a Critical Voice and View

Organizational communication also has a rich critical tradition that encourages questioning hidden power relations at work (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2006). Moving beyond the surface appearance of organizational phenomena allows for the critique and restructuring of taken-for-granted beliefs, meanings, and patterns of organizing. As demonstrated in the review that follows, communication scholars ask, for example, “Why are target narratives so often

disbelieved?” and “What systems of meaning contribute to stigmatizing targeted workers?”

When pondering such questions, we are concerned with voice in organizations and note that hierarchical position is often equated with voice in a way that designates highly placed bullies as truth tellers and targeted workers as trouble-makers or problems (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Communication scholars critique, for example, the nearly religious adherence to chains of command (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008) and remind organizational members and practitioners that the chain-of-command is a social construction, one that can be reconstructed or circumvented simply by deciding and having the courage to do so (Kassing, 2009).

Macro to Micro for More Effective Interventions

Organizational communication research takes as a guiding premise that to understand workplace bullying (and other institutional processes) researchers and practitioners must move beyond examining abuse as a solely psychological, dyadic issue manifesting “inside” organizations. Although verbal aggressiveness has interconnections with biological impulses (Beatty & McCroskey, 1997; Infante & Wigley, 1986) and at times appears to involve only a bully and a target, bullying at work continues only when organizational cultures condone, model, or reward it. Because of the varied emphases in the communication field, one of the central values of a communication perspective is that it considers how multilevel discourses work within and through each other to constitute, resist, maintain, and transform social phenomena (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008; Mumby & Stohl, 1996).

The importance of recognizing the social forces at macro, meso, and micro levels is rooted in the need to create interventions that get at the source of bullying rather than work on its surface symptoms. Efforts focused solely on the individual or micro level are rarely effective, especially if the organizational culture rewards aggression or upper managers fear confronting bullies (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). Similarly, efforts focused on rebuilding organizational cultures falter if they do not take into consideration the overriding social and cultural beliefs that support aggression as a means toward success at all costs. One of the values of organizational communication scholarship is its inclination to take all three levels into consideration when analyzing problems and suggesting interventions.

A richer understanding is available by examining how three different levels or spheres of communication and meaning contribute to bullying and make bullying exceedingly difficult to address. Organizational members, for

the most part, easily recognize the micro-level processes that comprise bullying—the everyday talk and interaction marked by interpersonal aggression. Members intimately *feel and experience* this level of communication in their daily work lives.

The meso- or mid-level communication processes at the organizational and workgroup level include factors such as organizational climate, culture, policies, and procedures. Although people faced with bullying typically point first to bullies' pathology, they subsequently move from this to ask, "Why doesn't upper-management do something?" (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). This move from micro to meso indicates that affected workers recognize that bullying involves more than human pathology and only continues if sanctioned or ignored.

In the "big picture," macro-level communication processes are cultural and historical systems of meaning that less obviously serve to support and encourage aggression. These belief systems are the "relatively consistent . . . sets of emotionally-charged viewpoints, morals, and customs that act as perception filters" (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011, p. 4). These macroforces are somewhat challenging to recognize because of their taken-for-granted character. And, when recognized, they can evoke feelings of defeatist resignation, represented by comments, such as "This is just the way things are," and "You can't fight city hall." At times, organizational members glimpse macroforces, but they can seem so huge, so overwhelming, that for the exceptional few who take up social issues as moral causes, most turn away with slumped shoulders of defeat.

Taking to heart the importance of macro, meso and micro levels, we overview thought leadership from organizational communication research that has responded to key questions about workplace bullying. Table 1 summarizes these contributions. For ease of discussion, we use the terms *discourse* to mean every-day talk and interaction and *Discourse(s)* to mean the social forces embedded in macro-level communication (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

What Is Workplace Bullying and How Does It Manifest in Organizations?

Naysayers and journalists often ask us, "What is workplace bullying? Isn't bullying something that just happens on the school yard?" Communication research has shown that bullying is socially constructed via a complicated convergence of interactive processes informed, usually in unrecognized ways, by macro-level systems of meanings or discourses.

Table 1. Organizational Communication: Thought Leadership Regarding Central Questions About Workplace Bullying

Key question	Macro	Meso	Micro
How does workplace bullying manifest?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A confluence of discourses support employee abuse and encourage employee objectification (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006) Gender and ethnicity as socially constructed categories make some people easier to target with abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik, Dickinson, & Foss, 2009; Mearns, Oetzel, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cyclical, escalatory process silences onlookers, drives targets out, and new targets emerge (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003) Highly placed aggressors silence others or encourage others to go along with abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010) A collective, communal activity involving many organizational members, levels (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Waldron, 2000) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Essentially communicative phenomenon (Lutgen-Sandvik, Alberts, and Tracy, 2008) Communication with specific features, forms (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005) Talked into being (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Tracy et al., 2006)
How do employees and organizations respond?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moral emotions (Waldron, 2009) and moral imperatives to resist (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) Discourses drawn upon in sense making (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational leadership does not doubt bullying occurs (Keashly, 2001) Organizational responses rarely effective and often blame targets (Keashly, 2001) Responses to collective reports—disciplining bullies; individual reports—disciplining targets (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most targeted workers fight back (Cowan, 2009a; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Mearns et al., 2004) Resistance tactics are mixed in terms of effectiveness (Cowan, 2009a; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) Critique past research's characterization of targets as powerless (Cowan, 2009a; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Mearns et al., 2004)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Key question	Macro	Meso	Micro
How do employees and organizations respond? (con't)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizations take constructive action in one third of cases (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identity work, face saving, re-storying life narratives (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) Targets tell stories, describing pain. These stories may lead to fight, flight, flee (Mearns et al., 2004; Tracy et al., 2006)
Why is bullying so harmful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Antivictim discourses automatically stigmatize target (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008, 2011) Identity is linked to paid work and consumer culture (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Tracy & Trehewey, 2005; Wieland, Bauer, & Deetz, 2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abuse silences, terrifies entire workgroups (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003) Silent witnesses feel guilt (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) Abuse is social and lives on in hundreds of conversations (Waldron, 2000) Poisons and toxifies workplaces (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008) Organizational reputation damaged; workgroups become war zones (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008; Tracy et al., 2006) Threatens deeply held beliefs about work, justice (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stigma, trauma, and damaged self-identities (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) Difficulty describing, explaining (Tracy et al., 2007) Targets' sense making, framing vocabularies can be disempowering (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011) Disorganized narratives reduce believability, increase harm (Tracy et al., 2007); metaphorical language can increase sense of being trapped, hopeless (Tracy et al., 2006)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Key question	Macro	Meso	Micro
Why is workplace bullying so often unaddressed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certain narratives become “truth” and oppressed voices often silenced (Lawler, 2002) • Discursive closure (Deetz, 1992) • Difficulty naming experience due to multiple, confusing labels (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Tracy et al., 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many organizational members involved in bullying (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010) • Antagonistic, ambiguous personnel policies (Fairhurst, Green, & Snavey, 1986; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008; Meares et al., 2004) • HRM’s perceived failures (Cowan, 2009b; Tracy et al., 2006) • Framing vocabularies that inform, limit sense making (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Tracy et al., 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silenced audience of onlookers (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003) • Silent assent, bullies’ henchmen/women (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008) • Target reticence to report abuse (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) • Target defenses weakened by ongoing attack without time to recover between attacks (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) • Taking on “problem-employee” label, voiced desire for vengeance (Cowan, 2009a; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) • Difficulty exploiting abuse story (Tracy et al., 2007) • Naming abuse “workplace bullying” and abuse victims “targets” (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Tracy et al., 2006) • Learning to tell believable stories when reporting (Tracy et al., 2007) • Choosing empowering framing vocabularies (e.g., resistance as moral imperative; Cowan, 2009a;
How can workplace bullying be ameliorated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase public awareness of prevalence (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Namie et al., 2010) • Translational research, buttressing academic reports with alternative lay-friendly representations (Frey, 2009; Tracy, 2007; Wikipedia) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antibullying policies and culture, climate changes (Deetz et al., 2000; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008) • Space for marginalized workers’ voice (Kassing, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie et al., 2009) 	

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Key question	Macro	Meso	Micro
How can workplace bullying be ameliorated? (con't)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academics partnering with advocacy groups (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Namie et al., 2010) Academic work in public-access outlets (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Tracy et al., 2007) Campaigning for anti-bullying statutes (Namie, Namie, & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education, training on importance of language (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie et al., 2009) Teaching reframing tactics and constructive communication skills (Keashly & Neuman, 2005, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008, 2011; Tracy et al., 2006) Training members about what makes bullies bully (Beatty & McCroskey, 1997; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006) Underscoring power of collective resistance (Cowan, 2009a; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) Bystander training, pivoting and re-sourcing in conversations (Foss & Foss, 2003; Keashly, 2010) Teaching argumentation; verbal aggressiveness prevention in schools (Infante, 1995; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foss & Foss, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011) Encouraging collective voice, especially with nontargeted workers (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) Securing social support; increasing support through educating peers, managers (Miller et al., 1988; Þórhóla et al., 2006; Tracy et al., 2006)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Key question	Macro	Meso	Micro
What are future directions for workplace bullying research?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public health campaigns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role of wellness programs HRM policies, practices Integrating superior-subordinate, communication competence, facework, and leadership research Research managers tasked with addressing bullying Evaluate communication competence (argumentation) training Role of new communication technologies Effect of positive organizing and communication on bullying Exploring why organizations fail to intervene Examining how organizations successfully address bullying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bleed over of workplace bullying effects into family communication Exploring bullies' perspective Presence, absence of social support in bullying situations

Macro-Level Manifestation

Although bullying certainly involves individual psychology and aggressive dyadic communication, the phenomenon is informed by multiple Discourses. In response to organizational psychologists' call for a more nuanced theoretical explanation of bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003), organizational communication scholars used a communication flows theoretical approach (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) to illustrate how five levels of human communication (from micro discourse to macro Discourses) contribute to the manifestation of employee-abusive organizations (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). This theoretical explanation, illustrated through an in-situ case study, shows that different message flows (i.e., micro levels of talk, organizational policies, cultural Discourses) are mutually constitutive; that is, "Messages in one flow merge with, shape, and influence—usually in unseen, unintended ways—messages in other flows" (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008, p. 311). Thus, workplace bullying is more than just aggressive information transmission.

Organizational communication scholars suggest that in asking "What does workplace bullying look like?" we must incorporate how the socially constructed categories of race, ethnicity, and gender mute certain members of the workforce and make them easier targets for mistreatment (Lutgen-Sandvik, Dickinson, & Foss, 2009; Meares, Oetzel, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004). Gender, ethnicity, and race are historically stigmatizing markers that contribute to workplace bullying for certain people. Women and persons of color are often targeted by aggressive organizational members because they are easier targets of a variety of negative social phenomena (B. J. Allen, 2009).

From the macro level, adult bullying manifests in organizations because there exist multiple Discourses that encourage disregarding or minimizing worker mistreatment. These Discourses condone goading people at work in the name of productivity and objectifying them by treating them as if they are chattel or objects (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2008) argue that employee abuse emerges from the "meanings inherent in contemporary workplaces [that] come from an amalgamation of economic theory, religious and secularized ideals of work, the merger of corporate interests and governing bodies, . . . [belief in] rugged individualism, [the dogma of] meritocracy, and the ideology of entrepreneurialism" (p. 317). These Discourses, of course, also affect meso-level workplace bullying policies and practices.

Meso-Level Manifestation

At the meso or organizational level, serial bullying is a cycle that generates when a target is singled out, bullied, and driven from the workplace and regenerates when another target is singled out, bullied, driven from the workplace, and so on (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Because serial bullying has this cyclical quality, simplistic solutions (e.g., terminating employment of targets) only give a short-lived impression of solving the problem. Especially in cases of serial bullying where targets are singled out, bullied, and then driven from the organization, firing target after target shifts focus from the collective nature of the problem. Sadly, organizations are likely to see that bullying is a problem only after recognizing these cyclical communication patterns over time.

At the meso level, organizational communication scholars also call attention to the ways bullying effectively mutes organizational members (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003), especially when perpetuated by managers or other influential employees. Powerful persons' persistent hostility toward lower-ranked employees silences most onlookers by evoking fear and discouraging resistance. That said, communicative structures can also provide space for alternative expressions of workplace experience beyond those from managers, spaces that include the perspectives from subordinate staff (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Tracy et al., 2006).

Organizational communication research also invalidates the popular (mis) conception that a few lone aggressors are at fault for bullying. A nationally representative communication study of U.S. workers suggests that in most bullying cases many organizational members—perpetuators, henchmen/women, and silent witnesses—are involved (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010).

Micro-Level Manifestation

At its heart, workplace bullying is a communicative phenomenon that is talked into being (Lutgen-Sandvik, Alberts, & Tracy, 2008). Indeed, all current measures of workplace bullying quantify bullying through the frequency and duration of negative acts, the majority of which are different types of communication (for overview of measures, see Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith, & Pereira, 2002). Bullying manifests by the use of particular communicative *forms*, such as public humiliation and spreading rumors (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005); rude, foul, and abusive language (Vega & Comer, 2005); persistent criticism (Einarsen & Hoel, 2001); and explosive outbursts such as yelling, screaming, and swearing (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009).

Organizational communication research has demonstrated, however, that bullying is not only about these *forms* of communication but is characterized by specific communicative *features*—intensity, persistence, and power disparity between targets and perpetrators (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). Thus, if a certain form of communication (such as screaming or spreading a rumor) lacks these specific *features*, the communication is not considered bullying. The primary feature of bullying is persistence (frequency, repetition, duration), which essentially alters messages' meanings and effects. Screaming occasionally does not equate with bullying. Screaming over and over at the same person, day after day, week after week, and month after month—that is workplace bullying.

Communication is not only central in the perpetuation of bullying but also key to the way targets make sense of it. Targets come to the awareness that they are being bullied through conversations or intersubjective sense making (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Tracy et al., 2006). By talking with friends, family, and c-workers, targets begin to label their treatment as *mis-treatment*, and sense making generates and, to some degree, fixes this meaning (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). In a very real sense then, the involved parties *talk workplace bullying into being*: Perpetrators persistently abuse targets, targets feel and talk about feeling abused, witnesses concur that targets are being treated aggressively, and nonwitnesses listen to and affirm target accounts. If someone in the chains of conversation reads published research or popular press articles about bullying, involved parties grow even more convinced that the experiences do equate with *workplace bullying*. Once so convinced, they face the challenge of how to make sense of and respond to the problem.

How Do Employees and Organizations Make Sense of, Respond to, or Resist Workplace Bullying?

Communication scholarship has paid considerable attention to sensemaking and resistance to power abuses. With a focus on voice, targets' perspectives are central.

Macro-Level Discourses' Effect on Bullying Response

At the macro level, organizational communication scholars are interested in how societal assumptions and Discourses inform employee responses to adult bullying. Waldron (2009), for example, suggests that emotions like

outrage, anger, and indignation are indicators of what people believe is moral or immoral regarding human interactions at the global level. Lutgen-Sandvik (2006), too, argues that employees who resist bullying often do so because they feel a *moral imperative* to act.

Moral Discourses that are embedded in religious doctrine and other ideologies, in turn, inform micro-level responses to adult bullying at work (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). On the one hand, the moral imperative that people should “fight the good fight” propels targets to battle injustice and bullying. Unfortunately, all too often, targets instead make sense of their situation by drawing on discourses of individualism, omnipotent leaders, and unbeatable evil (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). These discourses intensify feelings of powerlessness and can contribute to learned helplessness.

Meso-Level Policies and Practices’ Effect on Bullying Response

Organizational communication researchers conceptualize bullying as a systemic issue that, to a great degree, develops from organizational practice and policy. As Keashly (2001) notes, organizational representatives rarely doubt or deny that bullies act the way targets describe. Nonetheless, even when upper managers accept the veracity of target reports, the majority of their responses typically fail to end abuse. A recent study suggests that in only a third of cases, such responses result in improving target situations (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Most of the research suggests that targeted workers rarely feel satisfied with organizations’ responses (e.g., Keashly, 2001).

The organization’s response largely depends on whether leaders believe the target is at fault for the abuse. If managers blame the employee, they are more likely to minimize the complaints, punish the target, or simply frame bullying as a personality conflict (Keashly, 2001, p. 253). If the organization takes responsibility, upper management is more likely to take direct action with the bully. The organizational response also depends on the number of people complaining. When a contingency of workers collectively report abuse, organizations are more likely to sanction bullies through demoting, transferring, or firing. On the other hand, sole targets reporting bullying are more easily blamed and more likely to be fired, demoted, or transferred themselves (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

Responses at the Micro Level

Organizational communication research provides considerable insight to the ways individuals make sense of and resist workplace bullying through the

field's complex understanding of *voice*, particularly whose voice is privileged in research (Cowan, 2009a; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Mumby, 2009; Mumby & Stohl, 1996). This work extends management research about targets' coping (Zapf & Gross, 2001) through its critical conceptualization of power and resistance in unevenly matched workplace relationships. Prior research typically characterizes targeted workers as powerless, as the term *target* might suggest. However, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006), Cowan (2009a), and Meares et al. (2004) all suggest that targeted workers resist bullying in many ingenious ways. These studies demonstrate the social processes involved in resistance as well as the forms of resistance most likely to result in providing relief from abuse. Taken together we see that communication scholars reconsider and critique the notion of the "powerless" target that heretofore has dominated workplace bullying research.

In addition to resistance, employees engage in a full range of identity work when they are abused, including work to save face, confirm self-perceptions with others, and re-story life narratives (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Targets ask themselves, "Why did this happen to me?" and "What kind of person am I, if this could happen to me?" Because adult bullying includes personal attacks, social ostracism, and a multitude of other painful messages (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006), targets feel traumatized. Targets experience bullying as unexpected and undeserved and feel especially stigmatized because onlookers watch and hear them being mistreated in public settings (Waldron, 2009).

Communication research also provides a distinctive contribution by exploring the narrative form of employee responses to bullying (Meares et al., 2004; Tracy et al., 2006). Targets can make sense of their abuse through rich metaphors. Bullies are "demons," bullying feels like "water torture," and targets feel like "chattel and slaves." Showcasing the stories and metaphors of abuse is crucial for conveying the human pain of bullying, something unavailable in much of the earlier variable-analytic research (Tracy et al., 2006). By studying the metaphorical language targets use to describe their experiences, communication researchers underscore why bullying feels so horrible and why persistently abusive communication pushes targets toward fight, flight, or (most often) freeze paralysis. Such responses can be extremely harmful—a topic we turn to next.

Why Is Workplace Bullying So Harmful?

Workplace bullying is linked to a wide range of negative physical, psychological, and organizational effects. These include psychosomatic illnesses, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal ideation, increased medical expenses, and reduced productivity. Organizational communication

scholarship offers a number of explanations for why bullying results in such harm.

Macro-Level Forces Contributing to Harm

Organizational communication scholars offer a wide range of textured examinations of identity at work (Scott, 2007; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Such analyses suggest that employees form their identity in relation to powerful and sometimes oppressive organizational Discourses and that workplace interactions significantly effect one's identity both within and outside of work (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Deetz, 1992; Scott, 2007; Trethewey, 2001). As other stabilizing macrodiscourses recede as unifying forces (e.g., religion, marriage), employees typically look to their jobs to define their identities. This is especially true for persons who work within economic systems that emphasize paid employment and consumption (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003; Du Gay, 1996; Wieland, Bauer, & Deetz, 2009). Because work is such an important aspect of identity, bullying at work calls into question targets' very value as human beings (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008).

Antivictim Discourses exacerbate the destructiveness of workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). Laypeople, journalists, peers, and targets themselves often minimize and stigmatize those who report abuse, in part because of deeply embedded beliefs that those who are bullied—rather than their tormentors—are to blame (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). Antivictim Discourses such as the just-world hypothesis³ equate being a victim to being weak, impotent, and disadvantaged.

Meso-Level Forces Contributing to Harm

The harms associated with bullying reach far beyond individual targets. Organizational communication scholars recognize how abuse and aggression are profoundly social and, as such, exceedingly harmful to entire workgroups and organizations (Waldron, 2000). Bullying traumatizes and mutes onlooking employees (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). In some cases, peers help fight back, but other witnesses are simply paralyzed—too terrified to sympathize with or support targets lest the bully turn attention to them (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Tracy et al., 2006). Regardless of the reasons for silence, failure to act can evoke extreme feelings of guilt (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006), and targets reinforce that guilt because they equate onlooker silence with consent, complicity, or support for bullies (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008).

Abusive interactions “linger in a hundred conversations as members of the original audience re-encounter one another and negotiate the meaning of the original event” (Waldron, 2000, p. 68). A single bullying incident can monopolize employee conversations for days and even weeks. Rehashing abuse revictimizes targets, takes a severe emotional toll on other employees, and poisons organizational climates (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). Organizational reputations are severely damaged and workgroups feel like “war zones” (Tracy et al., 2006).

Bullying threatens some of people’s deepest held beliefs about the world and their place in it (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008); bullying is conspicuously missing in society’s grand narratives about work (we hear about “pulling yourself up by your boot straps,” not “getting knocked down by your boss or coworkers”). Most people assume that if they work hard and are committed to their jobs, they will be rewarded or, at the very least, *not* punished. Furthermore, abuse is certainly not a requisite aspect of work tasks and demands. Especially when targets cannot find social support or confirmation of abuse, bullying destabilizes their foundation and threatens the bonds that hold them into the social fabric of their lives (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Once those bonds are severed, targets are adrift to fend for themselves in a world that ostracizes the unemployed.

Micro-Level Forces Contributing to Harm

Although past research points to many of the harms associated with bullying (PTSD, depression, suicidal thoughts), organizational communication scholars have provided valuable insight into *why* harm is so extensive and enduring. Specifically, bullying stigmatizes through its content (e.g., accusations of poor work, personal shortcomings, mental illness) and traumatizes because it shakes deeply held beliefs about fairness and fair play. These two forces—stigma and trauma—make bullying an experience that severely disrupts reflexively constructed life narratives or identities (Giddens, 1991; Kerby, 1997; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008).

Contributing to harm are targets’ difficulties in describing and explaining the phenomenon. An analysis of target metaphors reveals that targets often frame their plight as uncontrollable, unbearable, and impossible to mitigate (Tracy et al., 2006). Targets tell stories and draw pictures that liken bullying to a battle, a nightmare, and a force-fed noxious substance. They view the bully as a narcissistic dictator (e.g., “a little Hitler”) or a two-faced actor, and themselves as enslaved animals, prisoners, defenseless children, and heart-broken lovers. These interpretations graphically illustrate the level of pain

and confusion targeted workers have when they try to name, describe, and manage their situations. These metaphors point to why bullying is so emotionally devastating.

Bullying harms those targeted because, all too often, targets are stuck using stories and vocabularies that severely constrain action and exacerbate pain (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Tracy, Alberts, & Rivera, 2007). When targets liken abuse to torture or force feeding, a natural path to survival is completely zoning out—a response that further marginalizes their work and coworkers' respect. When targets view themselves as children, they may cope by “hiding,” and if they take seriously their role as slaves, they may respond by becoming automatons who cannot differentiate the significant from the trivial. When bullying is likened to a nightmare and the bully to an evil demon, the target may believe the only path for survival is “waking up” or fleeing the organization altogether (Tracy et al., 2006).

A communication focus emphasizes how linguistic frames inform and provide the material for employees' sense making (Weick, 1995). For targets, these frameworks combine with experiences to reinforce feelings of “subordinate-ness” and dominant understandings of hierarchy and power-control tensions (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). In addition, when targets attempt to explain their plight, their stories are often disorganized, confusing. In turn, this makes them less credible and they can feel revictimized by others' disbelief (Tracy et al., 2007).

In short, targets understand their experience through language. Metaphors, as one such linguistic mechanism, serve as “linguistic steering devices that guide both thinking and actions” (Kirby & Harter, 2003, p. 33). Organizational communication examinations of these linguistic choices explain *why* an entrenched pattern of bullying is so devastatingly harmful, and, furthermore, why it is so difficult for targets alone to end workplace abuse (Rayner et al., 2002; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Given the wide-ranging damage associated with workplace bullying, stopping it is crucial.

Why Does Workplace Bullying Too Often Go Unaddressed and Unabated?

Workplace bullying affects upwards of half of all workers during their work histories, and once it becomes an entrenched pattern, targets, witnesses, and human resource managers alike face difficulties in effectively addressing or abating the issue. Organizational communication scholarship provides a multifaceted lens for explaining its persistence.

Macro-Level Discourses Discouraging Acknowledgement of Bullying

Victims of workplace bullying face tremendous resistance in the public sphere when they try to enlist sympathy. In large part, this is due to Discourses that configure and inform the kinds of things that can be said (and, conversely, foreclose other stories; Lawler, 2002). These narrowing Discourses include themes that valorize the economic, rational, and productive aspects of organizations, placing these above the emotional and relational features of organizing (Mumby, 2004; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Wieland et al., 2009).

Discourses are powerful not because of their factuality; rather, over time “they *become* ‘truths’ through their frequent repetition across a range of sites” (Lawler, 2002, p. 254, emphasis original) and also via their associations with technical experts, such as psychologists, managers, and HRM personnel. Discourses regarding strength and victory are believed and encouraged. Being a victim, in contrast, carries cultural ideas of deservedness and weakness; victims are subjected to questions about their behavior and efforts (or lack thereof) to protect themselves (Ferraro, 1996). Because targets are blamed for their own mistreatment, they often remain silent. Indeed, people regularly do not talk about experiences that undermine their preferred identities (Riessman, 1993).

Deetz’ (1992) conceptualization of discursive closure is particularly useful in explaining the difficulty of talking about bullying. Dominant Discourses inform and shape meaning through language that in turn enables powerful interests to retain and expand power and restrain alternate voices from being taken seriously. Voice, as opposed to expression, means having a say *and* having what is said taken into consideration in decision making. Points of view that serve dominant interests, such as an assumption that bullying is the “mis-perception” of a few thin-skinned employees (Tracy et al., 2006), become automatic and considered common sense.

The linguistic micropractices that constitute discursive closure are *disqualification*, *naturalization*, *neutralization*, *individualization of experience*, and *topical avoidance* (Deetz, 1992). *Disqualification* excludes or diminishes specific people’s voices. For example, the comment, “She’s just a disgruntled employee,” disqualifies her voice as a target. Disqualification reinforces the dominance of stories by managers and employers and diminishes those from rank and file employees. “The presumption of credibility lays ‘naturally’ with the employer” (Eisenhart & Lawrence, 1994, p. 97).

Naturalization removes the social, historical, and cultural processes that have brought messages and meaning to their current status and treats them as

innate to human beings or inherent in human interactions. If employees see and hear about enough employee abuse, they come to believe that all managers are intrinsically abusive. When they encounter issues about bullying, they think, "That's just the way business works." Such a response reduces chances of resistance and system change.

Neutralization "hides values; [and then] value-laden activities are treated as if they were value-free" (Leonardi & Jackson, 2004, p. 626). Rather than seriously standing against bullying at work, organizational members take for granted that mistreatment is an inevitability, that managers can (and will) treat subordinates anyway they desire. The perception of inevitability closes off discussions about the values or moral issues involved when anyone psychologically terrorizes another under the guise of getting work done.

The process of *individualizing* places the responsibility for collective and interactive experiences on the shoulders of the individuals negatively affected by the events (Deetz, 1992). For instance, though society, media, and organizations perform and reward aggressive, win-at-all-costs business models, and upper management looks the other way when stronger organizational members bully those with less influence, the target is often left to resolve the issue independently. The question, "What did you do to make him or her (i.e., bully) mad?," may seem innocent enough, yet it places responsibility solely on the target, removing organizational or social accountability to halt the abuse. Likewise, the assumption that bullying is due to a few "bad apple" bosses suggests that bullying is simply a personality issue and not the culmination of social norms condoning violence and aggression.

Topical avoidance is the prohibition of discussing certain issues. Rewards and punishments make it unlikely for employees to voice publicly their doubts about managerial actions, talk about the negative effect of work on their home lives, or display too much emotion. Norms about appropriate workplace performance favor calm, rational displays over agitated, emotional displays (Tracy, 2005). When being angry, sad, or fearful are simply disallowed, then it is quite understandable why stories of bully victims remain unarticulated or, when heard, difficult for others to accept.

All of these linguistic moves point to the way social Discourses severely curb the telling and understanding of workplace bullying experiences. To some degree, discursive closure explains why the term workplace bullying is still in a state of denotative hesitancy (Clair, 1993)—a period in which social groups have yet to agree upon a consensual vocabulary to describe a social phenomenon. When a phenomenon is characterized by denotative hesitancy, people collectively question its existence (similar to the case of "sexual harassment" before the 1970s) and use a dizzying array of different terms to

refer to the problem (for an explanation of these terms, see Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007).

Communication researchers also recognize the language-related problem created for targets when scholars label workplace bullying with so many different terms (Tracy et al., 2006). Among other labels, workplace bullying is referred to as *mobbing*, *social undermining*, *generalized workplace abuse*, *employee emotional abuse*, *work harassment*, and *workplace mistreatment* (see Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). These terms may carve out a special niche for researchers, but they are confusing and largely inaccessible to targets trying to identify, name, or fight against workplace abuse (Tracy et al., 2006). The ability to categorize persistent abuse under the umbrella term *bullying* usefully externalizes the phenomenon by shining light on the perpetrator's role and pointing to a material reality outside of targets' psyche.

Meso-Level Practices That Discourage Intervention or Encourage Bullying

Organizational communication scholars suggest that there are a number of workgroup-level dynamics interfering with resistance to bullying that may even encourage its emergence and persistence. These include the collective nature of bullying, antagonistic or ambiguous policies, HRM's perceived failures, and meso-level framing vocabularies that inform sense making.

Communication scholars working with public advocates empirically demonstrate that workplace bullying is perpetuated through many organizational members beyond the target and bully. Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik's (2010) study of both target and non-bullied bystanders' perspectives suggests that in nearly 75% of cases, bullying includes a host of perceived coconspirators and accomplices, including bullies' peers, HRM, and upper managers. The complex cast of characters involved in workplace bullying points to why creating effective organizational interventions is so difficult.

Organizational policies and procedures are also complicit in why bullying often goes unaddressed. Ambiguous policy wording can silence abused workers (Meares et al., 2004) and make it nearly impossible for HRM to respond effectively (Cowan, 2009b). Communication research points to how the adversarial character of personnel policies such as progressive discipline (Fairhurst, Green, & Snavelly, 1986), at-will employment, protracted probationary periods, and one-way employment evaluations contribute to employee abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). Organizational policies can help disguise bullying as legitimate management; mask the one-way power of abusive, hostile supervisory employee evaluations; and provide a slick

means of ejecting new employees who dare question abusive treatment. And though many organizations allow employees to counter disciplinary warnings placed in their personnel files, communication researchers note that the supervisor's version is counted as "reality" and the targeted workers' version is rarely counted at all (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003).

Indeed, targets have a tough time knowing to whom to turn for help. Both targets and witnesses indict HRM personnel for socially ostracizing abused employees, siding with bullies, and failing to protect workers (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Tracy et al., 2006). However, Renee Cowan's (2009b) research questions the categorical faulting of HRM, by showing the tensions, barriers, and struggles HRM face when dealing with reported bullying. Specifically, her work illustrates how HRM defines and understands bullying, often in the same way as targets, and how vague policies thwart their ability to label abusive communication as *bullying*. HRM personnel feel challenged by their lack of organizational power to take action, yet these professionals report taking bullying complaints seriously and acting upon them in the best of their decision latitude.

Meso-level framing vocabularies (Weick, 1995) that inform sense making also discourage addressing adult bullying. Organizational members draw on these framing vocabularies to derive meaning from workplace cues. In bullying situations, for example, when perpetrators persistently rage over targets' perceived shortcomings (cue), targets may weigh the outburst against a paradigm of professional decorum (framing vocabulary), connect the two and conclude that the actor is incompetent (derived meaning). In the alternative, the target could connect raging (cue) to the ideology of individualism (framing vocabulary) and conclude that the actor has a personality disorder (derived meaning). Once organizational members intersubjectively agree upon and thus objectify the meaning of the cue based on the framing vocabularies, they choose action fitting the sense made. For example, targets often describe power as a zero-sum commodity, a commonplace vocabulary of power at work. Power norms necessarily vary, but targets talk about power as material, something that bullies lack or covet so seize from others via aggression (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011).

Micro-Level Employee Interactions Sustain Workplace Bullying

Organizational communication researchers also point to a number of employee interactions that sustain rather than disrupt adult bullying. These include coworkers' silent assent or role as conspirators, ineffective target

responses, and difficulty emplotting believable narratives. Both silent assent and coconspirators increase fear and reduce the odds of collective resistance needed to stop abuse. Onlookers often stay silent because they are afraid of being targeted, which is a legitimate fear in hostile workplaces (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Meanwhile, other coworkers may gravitate toward the bully, serving as henchmen/women. “Similar to schoolyard bullying, these [coworkers] . . . participate indirectly in bullying but rarely take the initiative. They side with the aggressor most likely out of a desire for safety” (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008, p. 316).

Absent or ineffective target responses can also contribute to ongoing bullying. We hasten to add here that targets should not be blamed for being bullied at work; however, some responses appear to encourage more abuse. Not only are witnesses taciturn but targets often remain silent themselves (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). The trauma, terror, pain, and persistence associated with bullying markedly weaken targets’ personal defenses (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) stunning them into a withdrawn *freeze* (versus a *fight or flight*) response. Some targets embrace pejorative labels, for example, by taking on the label of “trouble maker” as an emblem of a desirable self-identity (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

Targets also verbalize desires for vengeance but do this behind abusers’ backs (see also Cowan, 2009a). Abused employees may debrief and depressurize via collective fantasies of revenge, such as one employee group that conjured ways to kill the bully by poisoning his tea, wiring a bomb to his car, and paying a professional hit man (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). One of the most common responses to bullying is *noisy* organizational exit (Gossett & Kilker, 2006). These targets develop a “take this job and shove it!” attitude (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) and hope their exit sends a message to uppermanagement (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Although such responses are effective for making sense of bullying and rebuilding self-identity, they do little to alter hostile dynamics. And directly speaking with the bully does not seem to do much good either, typically enflaming the bully and aggravating the problem (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

As noted earlier, the paradoxical and problematic effect of telling their stories is that targets feel revictimized and blamed for their own abuse (Tracy et al., 2007). Targets—similar to other victims of severe trauma, betrayal, and pain—have trouble creating coherent, consistent story lines that persuasively and tidily express their situation. “Rather than reified plots, there are fragments of stories, bits and pieces told here and there, to varying audiences, so that no one knows a whole story; . . . these are experiences that are just too shattering to put into words” (Boje, 2001, pp. 5, 7). Indeed, in the

process of collecting stories from targets, researchers can also become frustrated and anxious, sometimes wishing that research participants would get to the point more quickly. Despite the myriad challenges in halting workplace bullying, organizational communication scholarship provides promising solutions.

How Can Workplace Bullying Best Be Addressed?

Given the complexity of issues that exacerbate workplace bullying, communication scholars examine how workplace bullying might be best addressed and ameliorated through intervening at macro, meso, or micro levels.

Macro-Level Interventions

Public discourse too often treats bullying as “an Emily Post problem” (Kinosian, 2010, p. 14), implying that bullying is merely a lack of politeness, rather than a major cause of psychological terror (Leymann, 1990). As such, one of the first steps of addressing the issue is demonstrating and publicizing its prevalence. Organizational communication scholars have joined others to demonstrate the widespread nature of bullying, which affects nearly half of employees sometime during their working lives (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). An additional 10% of employees witness bullying but are not directly targeted (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010).

In addition to bolstering evidence of bullying’s existence and harms, organizational communication scholars often write about the issue in ways that are accessible to multiple publics outside of academia. Translational research in the form of easily understandable articles in popular outlets is crucial for effective interventions (e.g., Frey, 2009; Giles, 2008). Organizational communication scholars historically show strength in focusing on real-life contextual communication (Rush & Tracy, 2010), even though doing so involves risk and uncertainty. Engaging a context complete with the shock and messiness that accompanies concrete social situations is vital for developing research that meets the needs of contemporary organizations (Tracy, 2007). Practical impact is also achieved via partnerships with those outside of our discipline and outside the academy.

Pam (first author) realized the importance of strategically aligning with workplace bullying activists early in her career and partnered with the Workplace Bullying Trauma Institute (WBI; <http://www.workplacebullying.org/>), the leading activist center in the United States. During a 2003 summer

internship, she learned about workplace bullying from targets' points of view, which provided an embodied raw knowledge that fueled and informed later research. Throughout the years, she has strengthened relationships and coauthored with the institute's cofounders Drs. Gary and Ruth Namie, two key public advocates on the topic who regularly appear as workplace bullying experts in the U.S. media. As a result, the WBI website features many of the organizational communication pieces cited in this article, which increases the research's impact among a range of audiences.

Furthermore, organizational communication researchers improve the bullying information available on public websites such as Wikipedia (Rush & Tracy, 2010), which allows access to up-to-date information to anyone with a web connection. We have published several papers in online venues that are free and downloadable to anyone. These include the white paper *How to Bust the Office Bully* (Tracy et al., 2007), *Active and Passive Accomplices: The Communal Character of Workplace Bullying* (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010), and *Compassion: Cure for an Ailing Workplace* (Tracy, 2010). This scholarship is available instantly to targets, managers, journalists, and anyone else interested and concerned with workplace bullying.⁴

Finally, at the macro level, organizational communication research has helped increase public awareness of bullying and campaigns for antibullying laws (Namie, Namie, & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Although laws cannot singularly solve workplace bullying, statutes are integral for transforming virtual constructs initially marked by denotative hesitancy to constructs marked by denotative conformity where a critical mass of people share understanding and adhere to a construct's definition (Clair, 1993). Statutes have transformed sexual harassment from a hazy idea into an issue to which organizations pay attention. Linguistically, laws authoritatively stamp a name on amorphous phenomena. These macro-level processes have contributed to *naming* and *understanding* bullying—both of which are necessary to stopping it.

Meso-Level Interventions

Communication scholarship also points to ways adult bullying can be addressed through meso-level activities such as developing workplace policies and altering organizational climate to reflect them, encouraging marginalized workers' voice, and offering training related to workplace aggression and communication skills. Granted, workplace policies, alone—whether about sexual harassment, work-life balance, or race relations—are insufficient for changing behavior. Policies and other formalized communiqué must be coupled with attendant changes in members' and leaders' attitudes

and everyday talk and practice as well as organizational rewards and punishments (Deetz, Tracy, & Simpson, 2000; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Tracy & Rivera, 2010). An important move for ameliorating bullying is incorporating *specific antibullying language* into organizational policies (Cowan, 2009b) and coupling policy change with culture modifications. These may include creating public, sought-after rewards for treating others with respect and spreading efforts to improve climate throughout hierarchical levels in the organization (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie et al., 2009).

Halting emotional abuse hinges on creating opportunities for normally marginalized workers' voices to be heard (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Doing so may require hiring an ombudsperson or explaining when employees should "go above supervisors' heads" to report abuse (Kassing, 2009). Multirater 360° evaluations (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie et al., 2009) provide space for employee voice and reduce the odds of top managers glossing their middle managers' abuse or fearing retribution (Pearson, 1998). This and other forms of confidential staff input also provide the opportunity to identify supervisory bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008).

Communication scholarship also points to the importance of education and organizational training. Similar to research with race and gender issues and organizational policy (B. J. Allen, 2009; Tracy & Rivera, 2010), simply understanding workplace bullying helps leaders and members adopt new attitudes, respond more quickly to reported abuse, and counter bullying in constructive ways (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie et al., 2009).

Areas of training that intersect with bullying include recognizing the types of language use (framing vocabularies, narratives, metaphors) that are more or less empowering. Since the ways people talk construct their experiences, linguistic shifts play an important role in behavioral transformation (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Tracy et al., 2006). For instance, rather than talking about bullying as a cage fight or the bullies as evil dictators, employees may feel more agentic by visualizing themselves as fighters in a moral crusade and view bullies as fearful children.

Knowing why bullies communicate aggressively is also crucial for intervention. More work is needed in this area, but communication research suggests that some people are innately more verbally aggressive (Beatty & McCroskey, 1997), perceiving verbal aggression as more justified (Martin, Anderson, & Horvath, 1996) and less damaging to targets than do people with low verbal aggressiveness (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992). This helps explain why abusers appear to lack empathy (Crawshaw, 2005). Indeed, targets oftentimes frame bullies as innately aggressive (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Tracy et al., 2006).

Despite research linking genetics with verbal aggressiveness, “[the trait] can be influenced somewhat by situational factors” (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006, p. 83). Targets can, therefore, benefit from understanding contextual or personality factors that transform or halt abuse. For instance, some people resort to verbal aggressiveness when they are jealous in order to mask their own feelings of incompetence (Crawshaw, 2005; Fast & Chen, 2009; Gault, 2005). When employees can blame abuse on the bully’s own feelings of fearfulness or incompetence, they can conceptualize their options for influence in different ways. For instance, targets or witnesses might see how building up the bully’s ego could ironically reduce the abuse.

Given that over half of targets blame themselves for being bullied (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011), organizational training should also educate employees on the commonalities and patterns in bullying. When talking with targets, we have seen the comfort they feel in simply learning that many different kinds of people experience abuse and that there is not one tried and true way to resist it. Some targets think they are targeted for being too quiet and noncombative, and others attribute it to being too confrontational. When employees stop blaming themselves, they can focus on more proactive measures of ameliorating the bullying.

Employees would also profit from understanding the power of collective voice when resisting workplace abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Granted, organizations are unlikely to train their employees in collective resistance, but peers can educate one another. Targets have described coalitional efforts, which include leaving articles about “busting bullies” in the break room or in coworkers’ mailboxes (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Tracy et al., 2007).

Such efforts can also include bystander training, an encouraging new meso-level intervention in which workgroups learn how to provide immediate feedback in painful workplace interactions (Keashly, 2010; Scully & Rowe, 2009). Bystander training can increase positive communication and pivot or *re-source* problematic behavior (Foss & Foss, 2003). Resourcing is when a conversant communicates a response on the basis of a neutral or positive element from an otherwise aggressively framed statement. For example, if supervisor Bob says, “Sue is such a bitch. What does she know about working with community members?,” employee Karen can re-source or pivot by saying, “Speaking of community members, we really need to include that new client, and I have an idea.”

Small communication changes in daily interactions can lead to substantial transformation. In an extensive intervention with the Veterans Administration (Keashly & Neuman, 2005, 2009), decentralized teams learned and then used practices like passing a talking stick during meetings in which each person

had the floor until passing the stick to someone else. Members so firmly instituted the practice that, even in restaurants, they passed a salt shaker, reminding each other to listen and refrain from interruptions. These small changes in communication patterns netted enormous culture changes over time, reducing aggressive interactions among peers as well as aggressive supervisor–subordinate interactions.

Moving out of the workplace and into educational institutions, Rancer and Avgtis (2006) suggest that because verbal aggressiveness is so prevalent, “required courses in argumentation [should] be implemented for middle school, high school, and college students” (p. 214). If people are verbally aggressive because they lack the skill to develop or generate effective arguments, training can serve as an ameliorative, enhancing skills and curbing verbal aggressiveness. In fact, both parents and students report that their quality of life improved after completing argumentation training (Rancer & Avgtis, 2006). Along these lines, Infante (1995) has a curriculum to help students develop strategies to control verbal aggressiveness.

Micro-Level Interventions

The lion’s share of bullying research suggests that, despite popular tendencies to consider bullying an individual problem of a few employees, targets should be the last ones to blame. Similar to advice pertaining to domestic violence, often the most caring advice to give a bullying target is to *leave* the toxic environment if at all possible (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Nonetheless, targets do have some options in stopping the abuse. Organizational communication scholarship provides insight on micro-level interventions, including naming abuse, telling believable stories, engaging in collective resistance, bolstering claims with published research, considering more empowering frames for sense making, and finding social support.

Communication scholarship supports and confirms arguments made by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), that simply naming abuse *workplace bullying* and bullied persons as *targets* is an important step in publicizing the abuse and moving beyond assumptions that the target is to blame (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Namie & Namie, 1999, 2009; Tracy et al., 2006). A common language allows targets to externalize the experience, recognize its identifiable patterns, feel better about themselves, and bolster claims to upper management and HRM (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

Telling a coherent, believable story about abuse is also crucial. Unfortunately, many people question targets’ abilities, assume the abuse is petty, or assume targets brought it on themselves (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). To

motivate change, targets must tell credible stories that can eclipse victim-stigma, at least to some degree. Because targets usually have limited time when reporting claims and grievances to supervisors, they profit when they can frame their stories in relatively unemotional and brief ways that will be heard as professionally competent (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Tracy et al., 2007).

Tracy et al. (2007) examined independent evaluations of target stories and found that narratives marked by high emotionality, inconsistencies, and unclear plot lines were rated least credible. Their findings suggest that, when reporting bullying, targets are well advised to tell a story with the following characteristics: (a) clear beginning, middle, and end; (b) clearly identified bully; (c) focus on the bully's destructive behavior, not the target's; (d) specific details about bullying experiences, not other smaller complaints; (e) anticipation of potential objections and acknowledgement of the perspectives of others; (f) vivid portrayal of the cost of the abuse, without being so emotional that the listener must console rather than work toward solving the problem; (g) consistency and the inclusion of detailed quotations, times, places, and people (a suggestion bolstered by Lutgen-Sandvik's [2006] study of resistance); (h) metaphors or examples that others may find familiar; (i) references to other people who have been bullied; (j) details about the negative effects of bullying on peers and workplace productivity; and (k) depiction of the target as a survivor not a victim (p. 14).

Coworkers can be very helpful for supporting targets' stories and breaking the bullying cycle; concerted voice simply increases believability. When witnessing workers are not targeted yet also report the abuse, such reports are even more credible (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Collective resistance is difficult to dismiss. Indeed, employees are more likely to end abuse when they have supportive, especially influential, allies; present their concerns through formal organizational procedures for grievance; and support their claims with scientific research about adult bullying. Collective voice also reduces the risk of being labeled as a troublemaking, mentally ill, problem employee.

Articulating one's story is also central to helping employees make sense of the situation in a more gratifying way. Targets feel stronger and better when they view their situation as a moral imperative or honorable fight (Cowan, 2009a; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Through various types of talk, survivors transform the experience to reaffirm valued aspects of their identity (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). One target explained, "Complaining and standing up and saying 'no' has given me opportunities to grow stronger!! (more than I really wanted!). Today I can honestly say I am happy I stood up, because the greatest growth came with self respect" (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008, p. 112). Through *intensive remedial identity work*—exhaustive communication with

coworkers, friends, and family members—targets resist the victim label, convince others of their value, impugn the bully, and move others to action (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008).

The way people name and label a situation shapes their experiences and responses (Foss & Foss, 200) and the same holds true in terms of workplace bullying. When targets blame themselves or their bullies' idiosyncrasies, they may feel paralyzed; when they view upper managers as parental, all-knowing figures, they are likely to feel frustrated and angry when these "parents" cannot stop the abuse. Communication research suggests that targets can feel better about their situation when they frame bullies and conspirators as people who simply lack knowledge (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). When employees can reframe and make sense of managers as uneducated rather than all-knowing scoundrels who simply ignore abuse, they are more likely to feel better and seek change.

Finally, social support serves as a micro-level intervention (Pörhölä, Karhunen, & Rainivaara, 2006). Social support is helpful for a range of stressful, painful experiences on the job (Miller, Stiff, & Ellis, 1988). After conducting focus groups with targets (Tracy et al., 2006), nearly every participant sent emails noting how much better they felt after sharing their experiences with others, finding support and understanding, and realizing the problem was not isolated to them. Targets report feeling better after talking with a variety of people, but conversations with supportive coworkers—even more so than family or friends—make the most positive difference in this regard (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2008).

Future Directions for Research

Organizational communication scholarship provides fertile ground from which to cultivate answers to future questions and concerns about workplace bullying.

Macro-Level Directions

The intersections of health and organizational communication are of vital importance in addressing workplace bullying at the macro level. Partnering with those who have expertise in public health campaigns is sorely needed because workplace bullying *is* a public health issue. Adult bullying negatively affects millions of workers worldwide (Zapf et al., 2003) and harms organizations, institutions, and social systems. As such, public health campaigns are an important future direction for raising awareness of the frequency of adult

bullying and its corrosive, toxic effects. Public health campaigns could discourage the popular belief that bullying is something that happens only to school children or a few thin-skinned employees.

Target advocates and organizational communication scholars have argued that strategic public health campaigns are needed to raise awareness and reduce general acceptance of adult bullying at work (Namie et al., 2010). Knowledge gleaned from successful past campaigns could provide foundation for these efforts (e.g., Dunlop, Wakefield, & Kashima, 2010; Shen, 2010). Once public health campaigns are developed and launched, the next step is to examine and evaluate the effectiveness of campaigns at raising awareness and reducing acceptance.

Meso-Level Directions

Workplace wellness programs (e.g., Zoller, 2003) are an important step for reducing workplace bullying; however, we still have much to do in order to create nonabusive healthy workplace environments. Although traditional workplace wellness programs have many advantages, they also have the propensity to marginalize and stigmatize those who suffer from weight, substance abuse, or social anxiety problems.

Workplaces would benefit from better understanding and improving HRM policies and practices (Cowan, 2009b), given that they are relatively powerless to protect against workplace abuse when they are ambiguous or silent about bullying. Future research might investigate questions such as the following: How do antibullying policies solve abuse or which problems still exist in spite of clear policies? How do certain groups of people (hierarchical and demographic) interpret and respond to policies? Men and women typically interpret even seemingly clear policies about sexual harassment in very different ways (Dougherty, 2007; Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2010), so it would be interesting to see how different demographics of employees interpret policies about “generalized” harassment.

Organizational communication has a rich history of research on superior–subordinate relationships, communication competence, facework, and leadership. Linking these areas of scholarship with bullying research could leverage points for prevention or amelioration. Laissez-faire or hands-off leadership, for example, might be as ineffective for dealing with abuse as managers who are aggressively authoritarian in bullying cases (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). We currently have very little data from the perspective of organizational members who are tasked with addressing bullying. “Knowing why organizations fail to intervene is important. . . . Potentially, there are

organizational or legal barriers to taking action in these situations. Surveying or interviewing upper managers and HR professionals who deal with bullying could provide important insights” (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, p. 364).

Future researchers could also study how communication competence (or lack thereof) plays a role in workplace bullying. People who lack motivation for and competence in conflict management become easily frustrated and aggressive in heated encounters. This “argumentative skill deficiency explanation for verbal aggressiveness” (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006, p. 27) suggests that training for competent argumentation might reduce verbal aggressiveness. Given that some have questioned whether argumentation reduces aggressiveness (e.g., Hamilton & Minero, 2002), more research is certainly needed in this area. In addition, future research could helpfully evaluate the effectiveness of the Infante’s (1995) curriculum focused on teaching students to develop strategies to control verbal aggressiveness.

The role of new communication technologies suggests another fruitful direction in terms of studying how technology is used to make sense of, resist, and perpetuate bullying. Cowan (2009a) examined resistance to adult bullying through analyzing posts to the Yahoo group, Bullyingonline, a support and information group developed by Tim Field (see Field, 1996). Although communication research has recently flourished in terms of cyberbullying and young adults (Erdur-Baker, 2010), organizational research in this area is quite sparse (for exception see Roberto & Eden, 2010). Although one study suggests the prevalence of organizational cyberbullying is lower than believed (Lea, O’Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992), technologically mediated workplace bullying is certainly an area for additional examination.

Focusing on workplace positivity, compassion, resilience, energy, and wellness may help ameliorate workplace bullying and other negative organizational phenomena like stress and burnout (Tracy, 2010). Recent organizational communication research suggests, however, that the presence of bullying neutralizes efforts to increase positive interactions or build positive organizational cultures (Lutgen-Sandvik & Hood, 2009). Indeed, psychological research also shows the importance of studying the complex interactions of “negative” and “positive” organizational issues in tandem. A meta-analytic psychological study suggests that negative psychological events had stronger effect than positive events (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), but other studies propose that positive organizational events have longer-lasting effects than negative ones (Fredrickson, 2005). Future research specifically linked with communication could fruitfully examine which forms of positive organizing are most promising to reduce the negative effects of workplace bullying.

Indeed, this leads to the suggestion that future researchers not only explore why organizations fail to take action against bullying but also seek out cases when organizational intervention was successful. About a third of employees report that organizations take action that improves situations for targets (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). We know that collective resistance and targets' optimism about gaining justice are associated with bullying cessation (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). In addition, a variety of models highlight how organizations can craft respectful workplaces. These models are predominantly proactive and preventive and would be enhanced with research about what reduces entrenched bullying.

Communication scholars concerned with organizational climate and culture (e.g., Sopow, 2006) are well positioned to uncover the processes leading to positive culture shifts and bullying cessation. Along these same lines it is crucial to understand the extent to which certain interventions (e.g., confronting bullies, mediation programs, conflict resolution approaches, etc.) exacerbate versus ameliorate workplace bullying. For example, some bullying experts argue strongly against the use of mediation, saying it can place targets at enormous risk.

Micro-Level Directions

The effects of workplace bullying on private interpersonal relationships (e.g., marriage, domestic partnership) remain understudied and limited to target perspectives. Existing research suggests that bullying ripples into and harms family communication and relationships (family undermining—Hoobler & Brass, 2006; ripple effect—Lewis & Orford, 2005). Work-life organizational scholars could usefully tap the perspectives of targets' partners and family members and ask them to describe narratively how bullying “comes home” with targets. Given that existing research in this area has been survey based and variable analytic, organizational communication studies could examine how the concepts of *family undermining* and *ripple effects* are communicatively constituted.

Given the field's concern with voice (Mumby & Stohl, 1996), another future direction includes studying the stories of perpetrators—from the mouths of bullies, themselves. Few empirical studies come from bullies' viewpoint. A communicative lens could valuably explore the ways perpetrators justify and narrate their behavior, characterize targets, naturalize aggression, or minimize others' pain. Interpersonal communication scholarship on verbal aggressiveness has a rich history (Infante et al., 1992; Martin et al., 1996; Palazzoloa, Robertoa, & Babin, 2010; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006), and collaborations

between interpersonal and organizational researchers who study aggressive communication would be fruitful.

The role of social support is also a valuable avenue for communication research. Past research has suggested that bullying silences onlookers and pushes them to avoid siding with targets (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Meanwhile, some witnesses are so horrified by bullying that they are galvanized to fight against it (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Although communication researchers have explored social support in many contexts (e.g., health care, family, close relationships; for discussion see Pörhölä et al., 2006), we have yet to explore systematically social support in the face of workplace bullying or other forms of harassment.

Conclusion

Organizational communication scholarship has enriched our understanding of workplace bullying in a number of ways. The field's attention to voice and its orientation to uncover hidden systems of power, particularly those associated with oppression, have led the academic and professional conversation in new directions. Because of organizational communication's interdisciplinary roots, our work pulls together disparate threads of this conversation as scholars from communication, education, psychology, business, and health examine bullying and what to do about it.

This article served to illustrate the toxic complexity of workplace bullying, as it is condoned through societal discourses, sustained by receptive workplace cultures, and perpetuated by local interactions. Examining these macro-, meso- and micro-communicative elements addresses workplace bullying's most pressing questions, including (a) how abuse manifests, (b) employees' response, (c) its significant harm, (d) why resolution is so difficult, and (e) how it can be ameliorated. There is still much to do, particularly as we move from identifying and understanding workplace abuse to addressing and combating it. However, by approaching the adult bullying at various discursive levels, communication scholarship has improved understanding, redressing, and ameliorating abuse at work.

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1. Workplace bullying is also called, among other things, mobbing, nonsexual harassment, psychological terrorizing, generalized workplace harassment, and employee emotional abuse, and includes many different types of negative communication and behavior such as abusive supervision, ethnic harassment, verbal abuse and aggressiveness, incivility, social undermining, social ostracism, and so forth.
2. Popular press books about workplace bullying and mobbing include, but are not limited to, *Bullyproof Yourself at Work*; *Brutal Bosses*; *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace*; *Work Abuse: How to Recognize It and Survive It*; and *You Don't Have to Take It: A Woman's Guide to Confronting Emotional Abuse at Work*; *Taming the Abrasive Manager*, and so forth (for author and availability, see <http://www.Amazon.com>)
3. "The just-world phenomenon, also called the just-world theory, just-world fallacy, just-world effect, or just-world hypothesis, refers to the tendency for people to want to believe that the world is fundamentally just. As a result, when they witness an otherwise inexplicable injustice, they will rationalize it by searching for things that the victim might have done to deserve it. This deflects their anxiety, and lets them continue to believe the world is a just place, but often at the expense of blaming victims for things that were not, objectively, their fault" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just-world_phenomenon).
4. Just between the two authors, they have generated more than 100 media stories. These, in turn, generate a flood of calls and emails from targets seeking to understand and deal with abuse at work. Over the past 6 years, we estimate having received more than 500 personal emails and calls from targets or others wanting to learn more about workplace bullying.

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