

Chaos, Reports, and Quests: Narrative Agency and Co-Workers  
in Stories of Workplace Bullying

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### Abstract

This study examined narratives targets of workplace bullying told about their difficult work experiences along with how co-workers were framed in these narratives. Three different narrative types emerged from their accounts: chaos, report, and quest narratives. Co-worker responses of support or lack thereof were related to the construction of various narrative forms and the level of narrative agency evident in target accounts. The study has important implications for the difference co-workers can make in a target's ability to withstand bullying and narrate their experience.

*Keywords:* workplace bullying, co-worker, narrative, agency

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Bullying

Despite a decided and enthusiastic turn toward studies of positive organizational behavior among academics, everyday accounts of workplace bullying and other forms of workplace aggression continue apace (Cowan, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009). This study aims to sustain attention on the enduring social problem of workplace bullying and to contribute to the growing body of communication research on the subject by examining the distinctive types of stories targets tell about their experiences and the ways in which co-workers are positioned in these stories. Previous research encourages targets to develop and tell a convincing and detailed story of their experiences (Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, & Ginnosar, 2004; Tracy, Alberts, & Rivera, 2007), a process akin to the formation of narrative agency. Here we explore the role of co-workers in stories of workplace bullying and the ways in which co-worker responses enable and constrain the construction of various types of stories. We view narrative agency at least in part, as a product of interaction with co-workers that can intensify the bullying experience, help cope with the experience, or inspire more liberating responses within a larger system of aggression and violence. Because the stories we tell each other teach us who we are (Frank, 2010), the framing of co-workers in accounts of bullying illustrates their contribution to further damaging or repairing target identity (Nelson, 2001). Next, we further develop the conceptual context of our study.

### **Conceptual Background**

Defined as verbal and nonverbal acts that are directed at one or more employees over an extended period of time with the intent of causing humiliation and harm (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009) workplace bullying is problematic for organizations and employees alike.

According to recent estimates 35% of workers or roughly 54 million U.S. employees are targeted by a bully at some point in their lives (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2010). Early estimates of the cost of bullying as a result of lost productivity were 30,000 to 100,000 dollars per year per target (Leymann, 1990). More recent estimates place costs to organizations at \$180 million annually as a result of outcomes such as absenteeism and turnover (Harrison Psychological Associates, 2002). Perhaps more staggering are consequences of bullying for those who suffer as targets.

Research has shown that exposure to bullying has a range of negative effects on targets including feelings of frustration and stress, helplessness, work alienation, and diminished levels of self-esteem (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). Targets also report lower levels of productivity and job and life satisfaction (Spector & Fox, 2005; Tepper, 2000). Bullying has been linked to employee burnout (Tracy, 2009) along with diminished health and well-being in the form of anxiety, Chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, heart disease, stroke, and in some instances suicide (Namie & Namie, 2009). While not an exhaustive list it is clear that the human costs of bullying are high. Perhaps Heinz Leymann, the first scholar to define workplace bullying, said it best, “In the societies of the highly industrialized Western world, the workplace is the only remaining battlefield where people can “kill” each other without running the risk of being taken to court” (as cited in Namie & Namie, 2009, p. 255). At the same time, those who are directly targeted by bullies are not the only ones impacted by such treatment. Simply witnessing these patterns of mistreatment also affects co-workers. We turn next to a discussion of how.

### **Co-worker Relationships and Bullying**

Bullying is largely viewed as an interpersonal phenomenon. For example, Namie (2003) describes it as a form of interpersonal hostility. Most of the research in this area focuses on

bullying as a dyadic process between the target and the bully rather than examining it from a more communal perspective (for exceptions see Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). The impact of bullying goes well beyond harming targets. Witnessing co-workers also report an increase in various stress-related health problems and a decrease in job satisfaction (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002). This research points to a ripple effect whereby multiple people in the organization are being harmed whether or not they are actively being bullied (Rayner, 1999). Just as the effects of bullying can be felt by many, the ways in which people make sense of the experience and develop ways to cope with it are also impacted by various actors within the organization. Despite the central nature of interpersonal relationships and communication in workplace bullying, little research has examined target communication of their experiences to supervisors, co-workers, family, and friends (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003), which presents an important area of inquiry. To address this gap, the present study examines the role of witnessing co-workers in how targets narrate their experiences.

As mentioned earlier, roughly 35% of employees in the U.S. experience workplace bullying (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2010). Additional estimates indicate that 18 million employees in the U.S. report witnessing it (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Examining the role of witnesses is crucial in gaining a more nuanced understanding of the relational experiences involved in the larger workplace context. The relational dynamics between those who are targeted and those who are witnesses of these events warrant further exploration. For example, co-workers often distance themselves from targets out of fear that they too will be targeted (see Sias, 2009). In addition, co-workers will often side with the bully under the guise of an “if you can’t beat them join them” mentality (Namie & Namie, 2000). Both of these responses contribute to the isolation targets experience. While co-worker support can be helpful to targets as they

attempt to cope with poor treatment, research suggests that targets rarely can count on their co-workers for support (Vartia, 2001).

Targets with supportive co-workers report lower levels of depression and higher levels of job satisfaction than their unsupported counterparts (Quine, 1999). Colleagues have the ability to raise consciousness about the occurrence of bullying in the organization and provide support (Lewis, 1999). However, research also shows that uncertainty about what to do when witnessing bullying silences co-workers (van Heugten, 2011). Targets typically report that their co-workers contribute to the abuse or remain silent with only a few standing up for targets (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). In a related field, research on sexual harassment indicates that out of general uncertainty about how to intervene, bystanders often do nothing which contributes to the ambiguity of sexual harassment, diminishes the moral intensity of the issue, and can even create an environment that encourages it (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). This combined research points to the central nature of co-worker relationships to the investigation of bullying. Therefore, in addition to examining the types of bullying narratives told, this study also examines the impact co-workers have on a target's ability to narrate their experiences. Learning more about how co-worker support shapes a target's ability to narrate their experiences can lead to a more communal approach to understanding and intervening in bullying processes. Next we discuss further the interplay between agency and storytelling.

### **Narrative, Agency, and Stories of Workplace Bullying**

According to Czarniawska (1997) "Conversations in particular, and human action in general, are enacted narratives" (p. 13). Narrative is at the heart of everyday communication and life. Telling stories helps build social bonds and make sense of unexpected experiences. Traditional notions of narrative are rooted in assumptions of rationality, fidelity, and coherence



(Fisher, 1987). () “(W)e cannot, without danger of becoming unintelligible, tell stories that break the rules of storytelling. To go beyond the rules is to engage in tales told by idiots” (Gergen and Gergen, 1987, p. 270). Conventionally, stories must make sense, ring true to the listener, and follow preferred forms of narrative structure. Traditional theorization conceptualizes narratives as “discrete units, with clear beginnings and endings, as detachable from the surrounding discourse rather than as situated events” (Riessman, 1993, p. 17). However, requiring these formal elements and structure, detached from a larger context, can marginalize and silence some storytellers and produce only a partial understanding of human experience.

This may be especially true in instances of workplace bullying as targets’ attempts to narrate these events can be filled with confusion and chaos. These narratives may appear to lack coherence as tellers struggle to make sense of their mistreatment over time (see Frank, 1995 for information about post-chaos narratives). Similarly, narratives are not fixed or final scripts. Instead, they are in a continual process of recreation and reproduction. To reflect this turn in narrative theorizing, scholars have challenged traditional requirements of narrative coherence and rationality (e.g., Boje, 2011 and Hyvarinen, Hyden, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010). It is important to examine incoherent and nonlinear narratives to gain greater insight into how targets communicate about their experiences (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). Fragmented stories of pain and abuse may lack coherence but still deserve attention in order to better understand the experience of being bullied along with the complex relationship between bullying and narrative agency (Frank, 1995).

Agency is one’s perception of their competency or ability to take action. Put another way agency is “having a voice and being free to use that voice or not to use it” (Anderson, 1997, p. 231). According to Giddens (1984), agency goes beyond one’s intentions to do something and

instead is a marker of their capability to accomplish it. Meaningful agency accordingly is the capacity to have acted differently in a particular situation. With respect to narratives in particular, agency is the ability to construct narratives given the constraints inevitably placed on storytellers (Atkins & Mackenzie, 2008). In particular, because narrative construction is always grounded in the dynamics of power and politics (Somers, 1994) we do not have absolute control over the narratives we tell. Ultimately, the personal narratives we tell have the capacity to further develop or hinder the development of agency.

Traditional approaches to narratives suggest presence of narrative agency when the narrative accomplishes something such as persuading the listener (Fisher, 1987). Others argue that the sheer act of telling stories is an act of empowerment and agency no matter how the story is told (Becker, 1997). As was mentioned earlier, constructing narratives is not an entirely solitary event. Rather, “(s)stories breathe life not only into individuals, but also into groups that assemble around telling and believing certain stories. After stories animate, they instigate” (Frank, 2010, p. 3). It is important to note that we do not construct our narratives individually, but instead we construct our personal narratives in conjunction with the narratives others tell about us (Nelson, 2001). Our narratives are formed from our interactions with others. In attempting to make sense of the experience of workplace bullying, targets often co-author their experience with various others such as witnessing and non-witnessing co-workers. The ways others respond to these narrative attempts may enable or constrain the target’s level of narrative agency.

With respect to workplace bullying in particular, previous research indicates that sharing stories of bullying with co-workers can strengthen target agency when the process involves gaining advice and support from co-workers. According to Lutgen-Sandvik (2006), this produces

“collective voice” and strengthens the capacity among targets to resist bullying. Telling narratives about bullying may serve as a way to vent anger and frustrations about systematic abuse in the organization. However, it is important to note that the opposite may also be true. While the telling of narratives is often thought to be cathartic and empowering the act may also result in deeper anguish. For example, targets often feel that there is little they can do to change their situation. Telling their narratives may not just reflect but also may reproduce a loss of hope and reinforce the target’s belief that attempts to change their work experience would be futile. Agency is the freedom to make choices and act with the hope that those actions will bring about change (Anderson, 1997). The interplay between telling one’s narrative and whether or not the telling helps or hinders target agency is important to explore.

One way to gain deeper insight into this complex phenomenon is to investigate further the role of co-workers in target narratives of abuse. The stories of individuals who experience bullying in the workplace remain largely untold (for exceptions, see Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Tracy et al., 2006). These stories represent muted narratives in which—out of shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and fear—their voices are silenced (Meares et al., 2004). It is through the telling of narratives that individuals construct meaning about life events (Riessman, 1993). As such, target narratives and the ways co-workers enable and constrain the construction of these narratives provide greater insight into target experiences and how they are able to respond to these experiences. This review led to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do targets of workplace bullying narrate their experiences?

RQ2: How do targets frame co-workers in their narrative?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited in a number of ways. The study was announced in courses at several large Midwestern universities, flyers were distributed around campuses and communities, and the study was announced on the message boards of two online workplace bullying support forums. Recruitment efforts yielded a total of 48 participants. Thirty of the participants were female and 18 were male. Ages ranged from 19 to 61 years, with a mean age of 28.4 years. Participants self-identified as 28 Caucasian Americans, 4 Asian Americans, 4 Brits, 3 African Americans, 2 Latinos, 1 Native American, 1 Portuguese, 1 Canadian, 1 Irish, 1 African Caribbean, 1 Jewish, and 1 Indian. In regard to education: 7 had earned doctoral or other advance degrees, 8 master degrees, 13 bachelor degrees, 4 associate degrees; 15 responded that they had some college or were currently in college; 1 had completed high school.

A wide range of occupations were represented including: professional/technical (21%), education (15%), manufacturing/laborer (13%), fast food/food service (13%), banking and finance (10%), office support staff (6%), health care (physicians and nurses) (6%), clinical research (4%), social work (4%), sales and services (4%), and the military (4%). The length of time participants worked in the organizations where they were abused ranged from 2 months to 20 years with an average of 5.5 years. The length of the time participants experienced abuse ranged from 3 weeks to 19 years with an average of 1.5 years. Thirty-two of the participants indicated that their manager or boss was the person who bullied them, 13 reported being bullied by a co-worker, and 3 reported being bullied by both their boss and a co-worker(s). Twenty nine participants experienced the bullying in the past and 19 participants were currently experiencing it. At the time of the study, 26 participants reported it to someone in the organization while 22 had not.

**Data Collection**

In the first stage of data collection, participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire which covered basic information such as age, ethnicity, gender, length of time working in their organization, their position in the organization, the length of time the individual had been bullied, the position of the individual(s) responsible for bullying them, and if the target had reported it. After the demographic questionnaire was completed, participants were asked to participate in an interview.

In this stage of data collection the first author developed and relied upon the use of a semi-structured interview protocol (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) which allowed targets to tell their narratives in ways that reflected their own potentially unique experiences and included open ended questions to ensure that participants' responses reflected their experiences as they perceived them. Participants were primarily asked to tell their story of being bullied in the workplace without additional prompts from the researcher. If participants asked for additional guidance on how to respond they were encouraged to begin their narrative where they deemed appropriate and to include the information they felt was relevant to their experience. This elicited participant narratives rather than mere answers to set of pre-determined questions. After participants finished telling their narratives they were asked to discuss the role of their co-workers in their experience. Some of the initial narratives included co-workers particularly if they were responsible for the bullying or played an active support role while other narratives did not include co-workers. Despite whether or not co-workers were discussed in their narratives all participants were asked about how they saw co-worker involvement in their experience. This follow-up question allowed for consistency across participants. Targets were interviewed until theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews ranged in length from 30

minutes to 4 hours with an average length of 1.5 hours. After each interview was completed, audiotapes were transcribed, which yielded 1,270 pages of single-spaced text.

### **Data Analysis**

Because we were interested in how targets narrated their experiences we first analyzed stories by looking at the structure of each narrative. Each narrative was analyzed using Fisher's (1987) criterion of narrative coherence (how well target narratives hung together and reflected preferred narrative conventions of structure such as having a clear beginning, middle, and end) and narrative fidelity (whether or not the participant narratives rang true). In addition to narrative coherence and fidelity, we also examined how the narratives were punctuated and discerned the overall purpose. Fisher's (1987) criteria provided a good starting point but did not allow for the analysis of stories that did not adhere to these criteria. To address this limitation, narrative patterns were identified by using constant comparative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and thematic analysis (Spradley, 1980). We also employed an antenarrative approach to theme analysis (Boje, 2001) which allowed us to analyze beyond Fisher's (1987) criterion of coherence, structure, and fidelity. In antenarrative theme analysis the researcher "steps outside containment to engage fragmentation, becoming and undoing" (Boje, 2001, p. 122). In this level of data analysis we grouped the information that was left out of our original categories. We then used constant comparative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to refine the data and make sense of it. In order to better understand how co-workers were framed in bullying narratives, targets were specifically asked about the role their co-workers played in their experience. Each response was analyzed using Spradley's (1980) steps of theme analysis. Narrative forms were then analyzed for patterns in the ways in which co-workers were framed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Following the guidelines of the University of Nebraska's Institutional Review Board, participant identity

has been protected in this study by assigning pseudonyms for all participants, their organizations, and any specific others mentioned in the narratives (e.g. bullies and co-workers).

### **Results and Interpretations**

Based on our analysis, these narrative accounts of workplace bullying clustered into three different forms. We labeled these chaos, report, and quest narratives. In what follows we discuss the contours of each narrative form along with how co-workers were framed in each (See Appendix). Our results suggest that how co-workers respond to a target's experience of having been bullied contributed to whether a narrative emerged as chaotic, report-like, or quest-like in form.

#### **Chaos Narratives: Tales from the Brink**

The most common type of narrative targets told was chaos narratives. According to Frank (1995) chaos stories lack narrative order and sequence. In traumatic life experiences such as workplace bullying the mere telling about that experience is difficult. There is a difficulty in putting the suffering in words. Similarly, targets of bullying reportedly have difficulty talking about their experiences as a result of attempting to "describe the indescribable" (Keashly, 2001, p. 239). Narratives that reflected chaos narratives were typified by isolation and loss, included multiple instances that were not in chronological order, and were largely unpunctuated in a way that reflected the unfinished nature of bullying. Chaos narratives are ultimately examples of improper storytelling (Boje, 2001). The narratives told by targets did not reflect a flowing account of how the bullying began culminating in a realization that everything would be okay in the end. Instead these narratives were a series of instances that did not necessarily have a clear beginning, were not always told in the order in which events occurred, and often lacked an ending that nicely wrapped up the story. These narratives were punctuated by an ellipsis which

shed light on the ongoing nature of abuse. In stories of disrupted life experiences, “The order of the text gives way as the story moves from the disruptive event and people are plunged deeper and deeper into chaos” (Becker, 1997, p. 195). Ultimately, chaos narratives represented unfinished narratives about unfinished experiences.

**Isolation and loss.** A central element in the telling of chaos narratives was the tendency of targets to focus on the loss and isolation that resulted from being bullied. Targets were frequently shunned in their organizations by the bully and witnessing co-workers. Isolation can result in increased burnout and stress for targets (Sias, 2009). The increase of stress and burnout leads to greater difficulty narrating their painful experience. When discussing her experience Caroline, a researcher, focused on the isolating nature of bullying:

She was a classic bully because it was all manipulative and humiliating me and making me feel like I had no good ideas. Nothing I did was right, you know? Eventually, I was like a pariah in the department. Nobody would talk to me.

The narratives targets shared were also highlighted by sense of loss. Targets discussed losing their jobs, homes, mental, and/or physical health to name a few. Ava, an auditor, discussed her experience of loss. “I went through a depression at the end and they finally took away my responsibility. I was broke and was very sick as a consequence of the bullying.” Targets shared that they lost their good health, jobs, relationships, dignity, and in some cases reported losing their sanity. The trauma of loss impacted the way targets talked about their experience. The narratives targets told revealed the upheaval of their lives.

**Fragmented.** In telling chaos narratives participants emphasized the repetitive nature of bullying, a theme consistent with the literature (Namie & Namie, 2000). Its repetitive nature made it more difficult to punctuate the experience, lending a chaotic quality to some of the



narrative accounts. For example, Jackie, a bank teller, had difficulty telling her story because of the disjointed nature of bullying. “It’s kind of hard to, I mean, it was everyday things. So, it’s kind of hard to, like, give specific instances. But, like, I’ll try to remember ‘em.” That these narratives lacked narrative coherence (Fisher, 1987) was further illustrated when Bill, a social worker, offered his account of having been bullied by a superior:

Um, I started buying my own property and was able, just stepped back from the relationship because I could see that she was, um, would harm other people. Um, I then realized that, that, um, slowly but surely, because I had distanced myself from it cause I wasn’t that type of person I, I had, I didn’t realize that I had become a victim, um, uh. It was, uh, the befriending would, would, would sort of, well the friendship would, would be on the, her terms, as in, she would move in and out of the friendship when it suited her and it was, I, I realized in the end that it was only to, to, to gain more access to my weaknesses or to, to sort of exacerbate my weaknesses. Right, okay, so, and, and, from, from then on it, it just sort of over an eighteen month period, it, it gradually got worse and worse and I became, um, alienated from the team. At team meetings I would feel, um, that, that I couldn’t speak sometimes and then other times I would, I would, I would gain my strength and, and pick myself up for a while but then something would happen because, because, being frank, a lot of report writing and there were always that they could pull your reports to patients, you see and then it, it, it went from my senior to, to, to the manager who I don’t think he’ll move anywhere really so, and then she sort of developed, and several more people or, or I just felt I was becoming more and more in this light and then it was impacting on my health slowly and, uh, it just went on from there, really.

Bill discusses several instances but does not link them together in any sort of clear structure that follows the conventions of preferred narrative construction. His inability to narrate his experience in conventional ways was impacted in part by the lack of co-worker support he experienced as a result of being alienated by his team. We next turn to a discussion of co-worker framing.

**Framing of co-workers in chaos narratives.** Co-worker support has been found to lessen employee experiences of stress and burnout (Tracy, 2009). Unfortunately, targets who told chaos narratives did not frame co-workers as providing this crucial form of stress relieving support. Participants who told chaos narratives described their co-workers as not responding or minimizing their experiences which appeared to perpetuate and intensify the abuse. In chaos narratives, targets framed their co-workers as bullies, bystanders, or chameleons which were articulated as a cross between the two.

**Bullies.** In many chaos narratives co-workers were framed as actively participating in the bullying. An example was from Ann, who described her co-workers in the following way:

I think that they're all in one big gang really they're like gang members. I also think that it's like they've got no guts. They can't stand up for what's right and yeah they're not prepared to put themselves on the line and say, "Wait a minute this isn't right, you know.

We need to think again." They're hiding behind each other I'm afraid.

Here Ann describes her co-workers as gang members who are all complicit. Mobbing, a term first coined by Leymann (1990), describes a situation where several organizational members team up to bully one or a few individuals in the organization. Research suggests that bullies are typically in positions of power however co-workers are also responsible (Namie, 2003). When co-workers bullied, targets reported feeling even more alone because they perceived that there

was no one in the organization to turn to for support. Targets discussed how bullying co-workers contributed even more to the chaos and uncertainty they endured.

***Bystanders.*** Co-workers were also framed as bystanders in chaos narratives. Within this frame, co-workers were not directly responsible for bullying. However, they were not willing to stand up for targets and discouraged discussion about the situation. Targets characterized bystanders as being aware but unwilling to step in to help targets report the abuse or provide behind-the-scenes support. Storytelling attempts in the absence of co-worker validation impacted target agency and their ability to construct narratives about their experiences. An example of framing co-workers as bystanders comes from Donna, a physician:

Well, I think a lot of co-workers who were also witnessing or suffering the abuse themselves, tended to fall back and just quietly endure and not want to speak up. Um, a lot of times they are in a position where they could lose their job or have trouble, ya know? One nurse had three children she was trying to take care of and another had very few options because he was from another country and ya know this was a job he had and if he lost it, he would have to go back to his home country. And so they tended not to speak out and they tended not to really support me when things got bad.

Not speaking up against the bullying is reportedly a common co-worker reaction. Rayner (1999) found that often co-workers want to speak out but feel that they cannot or should not because of the negative repercussions it would mean for them. Co-workers fear job loss and becoming targets themselves. As such, they see what is happening but often remain silent out of fear.

***Chameleons.*** Some participants framed their co-workers as a blend of bullies and bystanders, a characterization consistent with a chameleon-like stance. Within this frame, co-workers are positioned as unpredictable, offering support at times, and withholding support or

even siding with the bully at times. Co-workers framed in this way were said to blend into whatever situation they found themselves. Participants experienced chameleon-like responses from co-workers as emotionally and morally ambiguous. Such responses disrupt and lend a chaotic quality to sensemaking. One example came from Nancy:

Uh, well when people were new like an administrative assistant who had just started with the company and was relatively new like the first month, they were stunned they were angered that I was treated that way. Nobody would say anything while this was going on they would just let it happen and say something to me later you know, “Why didn’t you say something?” “Why didn’t you do something?” Then later they would end up joining in with it. It was just part of the mob mentality.

Not being able to count on support from co-workers was a key feature of chaos narratives and likely contributes to the difficulty targets have narrating their experiences more coherently. An absence of people willing and able to validate individual teller’s experiences closes off story development. This helps explain the sense of isolation and silencing experienced by tellers of chaos narratives.

In the absence of supportive responses from co-workers, chaos narratives mirror and reinforce a lack of target control over their difficult work experiences. That chaos narratives are devoid of hope for the future may be due, at least in part, to how co-workers respond. When one’s experience of mistreatment is met with additional mistreatment or with silence, it diminishes the ability of targets to envision ways in which they could act otherwise. In order to visualize opportunities for change and transformation, targets need support structures that enable narrative agency. We will now discuss report narratives as one alternative to chaos narratives.

### **Report Narratives: Just the Facts**

When asked to tell their story, targets also constructed narratives where they simply reported the facts of what happened. These narratives involved characters and plot. However unlike chaos narratives, reports were far less emotionally charged. Gabriel (2000) suggests that reports may lack the emotive power of more fully developed narratives but still serve an important role in sensemaking. Reports were factual descriptions of the bullying event. The focus was so fixed on articulating the facts of the experience that emotion was largely left out.

**Factual accounts.** Report narratives tended to be brief accounts of what happened, who did it, and explanations of why. In one example, Amber, a member of the military, used report to discuss her experience:

Yea, like I said, it was a co-worker and um she, I'm not really sure what the problem was, it just seemed like she didn't really like me. My interpretation was that I was probably a little bit more ambitious than she was and so you know, I would go and do work and stuff and we had like tickets that we had to go and take care of from the help desk and I would go out and do them and she wouldn't so it would make her look bad. She ended up not liking me for it and would just be pretty snotty and made snide comments and would ignore me at times if we were in a group or whatever. There was one time in particular where she went so far as to you know tell me, this was actually while she was acting as my supervisor, that I needed to quit walking around acting like I knew everything. It was just a lot of like small incidents that she would just do over and over.

Amber talked about her experience as a series of events. Unlike chaos narratives, reports were told in a very linear way. Like other report tellers, Amber expressed that the bullying happened. However, unlike chaos narratives reports contained very little emotion. Gabriel (2000) refers to

reports as “descriptive accounts of events, emphasizing factual accuracy rather than narrative effect” (p. 60).

**Framing of co-workers in report narratives.** Participants who told report narratives saw their co-workers as being important sources of support. Participants characterized their co-workers as comrades in arms. These co-workers also tended to be on the lower rungs of the organizational hierarchies which appeared to contribute to their sense of camaraderie.

*Comrades.* Tellers of report narratives were often just starting out in their careers. Their co-workers tended to be quite similar to them in terms of work experience and age. They would go out and swap stories about what the bully did that day at work and fantasize about what work would be like in the future. They bonded over their shared experience of being bullied along with the shared recognition that this was only a stepping stone to bigger and better life and career goals. Drawing from Samir, he framed his co-workers as being supportive but, since he knew he would be receiving a promotion, no one actively fought back against the bully:

I shrugged it off because I knew I was going to get sergeant soon enough. They [co-workers] said you know, “Don't worry about it.” And they didn't have enough rank to tell him off anyway so there was no reason for them to get in trouble so I just told them not to worry about it. I let it slide and the higher-ups saw what he was doing and they knew that I was going to get promoted soon enough. And once you get the same rank you can usually deal with stuff a lot better because it just goes to fist-a-cuffs.

Samir felt that the bullying was serious but due to the nature of his organization, problems were corrected by obtaining higher levels of rank. Overall, co-workers were a valuable source of support for targets that impacted how they constructed their stories.

Ultimately, reports were brief accounts of the facts surrounding the experience. Unlike other narrative types, reports were largely unemotional. Although these narratives are not emotionally charged they have important implications for understanding how targets respond to bullying. Tellers of report narratives see their experience as being temporary. Very few of these participants reported their mistreatment to others in the organization because they felt that soon the bullying would end either through taking a different job or obtaining a promotion. Co-workers were seen as active supporters. This valuable support allowed targets greater agency in how they told their stories and how they coped with their experience. We next discuss quest narratives as a more agentic alternative to chaos and report narratives.

### **Quest Narratives: The Transformative Journey**

According to Frank (1995) quest narratives are the antithesis of chaos narratives. The tellers of quest narratives frame difficult experiences as a journey. These tellers believe that at the end of the journey something important will be gained. Often at the heart of quest narratives is the notion that through extreme suffering come great wisdom and opportunity. Quest narratives differ significantly from chaos narratives. One major difference is that quest tellers have a stronger sense of voice. Another major difference between quest and chaos narratives is that quest narratives are more orderly in that there is an overall sense of linearity and coherence. Ultimately quest narratives better reflect traditional notions of good narratives. These narratives are typified by a clear beginning, middle, and end. At the end of their journey the teller is able to share a major life lesson that makes it so the extreme suffering was not done in vain. Genevieve shared an example of a quest narrative:

It was very clear to me from day one that my graduate advisor had complete and total control, or at least there was a mythos of her, but, that was the case. From day one I was

trying to figure out how to not make my advisor mad, how to do what I needed to do, how to please, basically, and I was scared to death of disappointing or stepping out of line or doing anything that I thought could jeopardize my career. It was just, you know, fear. It was just total fear from the get go, which was kind of new to me because where I got my master's degree the faculty were not seen as that at all. They were seen as friends and mentors. You went to their house for dinner and you could even talk to them about personal problems sometimes. This was just a totally different ball of wax. I guess it pretty much has gone on. I mean it has ended now because I have graduated and I don't feel like she has any power over me anymore. Although, I still think in the recesses of my mind, I wonder, you know, could they say something bad about me to colleagues although, I don't really think so. But for basically three years I did everything I could to please her. I could not ever stand up and say "No, I don't want to do this," or "No, that's not something I am interested in," out of fear and it wasn't good. It really took a huge toll on my mental health, huge toll, so much so that I went and got some counseling. And while I think the presenting problem that I gave to the counselor was my relationship with my graduate advisor. I think we just delved into deeper issues about my people pleasing nature and how I was just a very good candidate to be bullied by this person because that's my, I guess maybe I have a propensity to be bullied. I fell right into her web. [laughs] Yes. But through that process I learned a lot about myself and how to avoid situations like this in the future.

Unlike Bill's chaos narrative, Genevieve discusses her experience in a linear fashion and ends her story with the life lesson she was able to gain as a result of her difficult experience.

**Framing of co-workers in quest narratives.** When asked to discuss the role of their co-workers in quest narratives, targets framed co-workers as either interactive supporters or silent



sympathizers. In quest narratives a battle is being fought. The hero, target, is trying to vanquish the villain, bully. Targets who told quest narratives framed co-workers as supportive of their heroic efforts. This support came in the form of supportive listening and combining forces to combat bullying.

*Supporters.* Co-workers who were framed in this way went beyond simply listening and made active moves to support targets. The support ranged from developing weather reports as an early warning system for the bully's mood to actively discussing the bullying with the target to develop strategies to bring about change. One example of framing co-workers as supporters came from Janice, an assistant newspaper editor:

I guess, you know, she [the bully] was pretty fair in that she kind of spread it around. But we actually developed this system called weather reports, and, so whoever was first in or had the first dealings with this woman on that day, all we had at the time was the intra-mail, not this whole internet, inter-e-mail and all that stuff. So we would send weather reports like partly cloudy, stormy, dark clouds, lightning, you know. And so we, developed these reports because we'd never want to get caught with actually what we were talking about. I always thought that part was amusing. It actually caused, sometimes that type of situation can polarize the rest of the people in the unit because it's like, "Hey, everybody for themselves. I'm not the target now, you are, so much the better for me" and instead for a long time, what it did was kind of bring us all together.

Weather reports and other forms of co-worker support served not only as a form of support but also brought co-workers together. In this way co-workers constructed their stories collectively. This allowed tellers greater agency because they were listened to and supported.

*Sympathizers.* Some participants described their co-workers as sympathizers. The difference between a bystander in chaos narratives and sympathizers in quest narratives as described by targets related to the level of co-worker involvement. Bystanders saw it happening but would not get involved and did not want to discuss it. Sympathizers witnessed the bullying, acknowledged that it was happening, and supported the target. However, the support was expressed behind-the-scenes and was discussed by targets as involving very little co-worker risk. Genevieve's characterized her co-workers in the following way:

You know, I think maybe, you know, we could have, and this is, of course, pie in the sky, but maybe we could've banded together and been better support. I mean we were supportive but it was like we just kind of all wallowed in our own misery instead of saying, "Hey, you know what? We don't have to take this."

According to Genevieve, her co-workers were supportive and actively commiserated with her, but ideally they could have worked together to effect change in her department. Ultimately, in quest narratives co-workers were typically framed as valuable supporters. Although these co-workers did not always actively come to the target's aid, simply listening to target stories was reported to aid them in their ability to discuss mistreatment with greater clarity than targets that lacked this type of support. Ultimately, according to participants, support of any kind helped them talk about their experience and exhibit a greater sense of agency.

### **Limitations, Implications, and Conclusions**

While great care was taken to ensure that theoretical saturation was reached in this study, there may be other narrative types that frame co-workers differently not uncovered here. Another limitation of the current study was that targets were at various stages in their bullying experiences. Some were just newly experiencing it while others had endured it for years. Still

others had experienced it in the past and were not experiencing it at the time they were interviewed. This did not appear to impact results as targets that experienced bullying in the past and present told all three types of narratives with the same frequency and was in keeping with Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik's (2010) study, which did not find differences in results of groups who had experienced bullying recently compared with those who had experienced it in the past. Still this is a potential limitation nonetheless. We found stage in one's career to be a factor in report narratives or report tellers tended to be working entry level jobs that they deemed temporary. However, we did not find support for the impact of other factors such as gender or race on narrative structure across narrative type. While this was consistent with other research (Tracy et al., 2006), these factors simply may not have surfaced in our data and thus represents another possible limitation and area for future inquiry.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This research has important theoretical implications in regard to narrative theory. Traditional notions of telling stories suggest that "good" stories are coherent and also have fidelity (Fisher, 1987). Coherence and fidelity ultimately enhance the persuasive appeal of the narrative. While this is a useful way to think about the power of narrative it is not possible for all narratives to fit into the Aristotelian notion of narratives. Not all stories have a proper beginning, middle, and end. In the case of highly traumatic events such as workplace bullying, fitting ones experience into conventional notions of storytelling is difficult at best and impossible for some. Applying these rules to storytelling may result in silencing those who might be unable to conform to the standards of good storytelling.

Scholars have started problematizing the privileging of traditional forms of narratives over narratives that do not meet these conventions. For example, Hyvarinen et al., (2010) argue

that the “mission to find and value coherence marginalizes many narrative phenomena, omits non-fitting narrators, encourages scholars to read narratives obsessively from the perspective of coherence, and pose ethically questionable pressures upon narrators who have experienced severe political or other trauma” (p. 1).

A telling example of this from the present study was that targets who told chaos narratives in particular were not believed when they shared their stories with organizational authorities, coworkers, friends, and family members. Their narratives were deemed too fragmented to make sense of and thus were discounted. To address this issue researchers largely encourage targets to tell coherent stories (Tracy et al., 2007). However, in order to lend voice to all experiences researchers and practitioners must learn to suspend widely held notions of proper storytelling and learn to listen in a different way. As Frank (1995) eloquently stated:

The need to honor chaos stories is both moral and clinical. Until the chaos narrative can be honored, the world in all its possibilities is being denied. To deny a chaos story is to deny the person telling the story, and people who are being denied cannot be cared for (p. 109).

Allowing a space where stories that do not meet the standards of traditional storytelling can be shared and heard is an important step in helping bring individuals experiencing extreme emotional trauma back from the brinks of despair. Traditional approaches to narrative cannot classify narratives such as the chaos narratives told by targets of bullying except to say that they represent improper storytelling. Findings of this study substantiate the need for post-modern approaches to narrative theory and narratology.

### **Practical Implications**

One important implication of this research pertains to co-worker support. In its presence targets demonstrated heightened levels of narrative agency. We recognize that other factors might impact narrative telling. For example comparing the narratives that get told in various types of organizations and industries could lead to greater insight into the way targets communicate their experiences. Additionally, this would also extend our understanding of how narratives ultimately get created. We are all members of the social world. As such the way we talk about the world is impacted by our location within it. The role of organizational culture in the way workplace bullying narratives get constructed is important to examine in subsequent research studies. Ultimately the type of organization one belongs to may influence what targets are able to say about being bullied and how they say it. This study found that when targets received co-worker support they were better able to narrate their experiences. Examining other factors, such as organizational culture and individual perceptions of power along with gender and race, will reveal ways these might contribute to narrative agency.

Another implication of this research pertains to the way workplace bullying was internalized by targets who told different types of narratives and how that impacted the action targets took. Report tellers appeared to be minimally impacted by their experiences. Targets that told these narratives typically did not report the bullying to anyone in the organization because of the sense that it was only going to be temporary and they personally were not impacted too negatively. In this way bullying becomes perpetuated, because as employees leave the cycle begins anew (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Reporting bullying to someone in the organization is an important way to stop the cycle (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009). However, most targets do not report bullying and eventually leave the organization. This points to the need to conduct organization-wide workplace bullying training sessions that emphasize the importance

of reporting bullying to stop the cycle of abuse. However, it is not enough to train organizational members on how to combat bullying if they become targets. Managers also need to understand their role in safe guarding the organization and its' members against the consequences of workplace bullying.

Specifically, managers and others who handle cases of workplace bullying need to understand how they can listen to stories of mistreatment differently. Managers need to recognize the many types of stories so as to give voice to organizational experiences. Some of these stories will not conform to our preferred conventions of how a story should be told but should be taken seriously nonetheless. This study shows that these stories often get told by employees who are struggling to “describe the indescribable” (Keashly, 2001, p. 239). In order to listen to stories differently and open up a space where targets can be heard, managers should first listen to the story in its entirety. During this process it is important to suspend judgment and listen to understand. Once the story has been fully told managers should ask questions to help achieve clarity about the situation. Specifically, asking questions like, “How did it begin?” and “How did it progress?” could effectively aid in the sensemaking process for targets and managers. Managers should then reconstruct the story to ensure that all elements are understood. Finally, management should suggest a resolution that outlines the actions that will be taken to give the target a sense that there will eventually be some closure on the experience. By following these steps managers can help make the stories of even the most traumatized members be heard and responded to effectively.

Across narrative type, target narratives reflected constructing and telling narratives in a way that privatized their experience. Even in the strongest cases of co-worker support, the bullying did not change. Co-worker support contributed to a heightened ability to cope and feel

empowered. Although this is a positive outcome of co-worker support, alternative co-worker responses, such as offering to talk to organizational authorities with the target, could encourage greater target agency and concrete strategizing about how to address it. Additionally, these alternate responses could open up and transform the narratives targets are able to construct about their experiences. One way to help co-workers become better advocates for targets would be to hold training sessions for all members of the organization. This would help employees understand the important role they can play in combating bullying (van Heugten, 2011). Additionally, co-worker training should focus on how co-workers can be more immediate and involved so that targets can get the help and support they need (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). Framing reporting bullying as a process of collective storytelling might be one useful way to examine joint efforts to address it. Exploring ways in which organizational members form alliances and engage in collective storytelling about the experience of bullying could be a useful way for organizational members to equalize power and control and strengthen voice.

In addition to training individuals the overall organizational climate needs to be examined and addressed as well. Co-workers will be more likely to support targets if they believe being helpful is supported and encouraged by the organization. The absence of this support makes it less likely for co-workers to enact an advocate role. Organizations need to focus on creating environments that encourage constructive and supportive co-worker behavior.

In conclusion, this research explored how targets narrated their experience of being bullied and found that targets tell chaos, report, and quest narratives. We also explored how targets framed co-workers and their role in stilling or animating voice. Targets framed co-workers as responding in ways that normalized bullying and hindered story development or in ways that validated target experiences thereby supporting the development of narrative agency.

This study points to the important role co-workers can play in helping targets better narrate, cope with and make sense of their difficult work experiences. Without co-worker support, targets have difficulty imagining how they might act otherwise (Giddens, 1984). This support helps targets develop more convincing narratives and perhaps cultivates a heightened sense of agency. Ultimately, co-workers play a crucial role in creating spaces where individuals who have been harmed by emotionally traumatic events in the workplace can tell their stories and begin to heal.



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*Appendix*

Narrative Type and Framing of Co-Workers

<b>Element</b>	<b>Chaos Narrative</b>	<b>Quest Narrative</b>	<b>Report Narrative</b>
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<b>Style</b>	Lack coherence Non-Linear Unpunctuated	Coherent Linear Clear structure	Factual accounts Unemotional
<b>Purpose</b>	Unclear	Get support Learn life lessons	Compare notes Venting
<b>Framing of Co-workers</b>	Bullies Bystanders Chameleons	Supporters Sympathizers	Comrades