

Perceptions of Workplace Bullying Narratives: Exploring Attributions

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Working adults (N = 210) read five workplace bullying narratives that varied in level of coherence and emotionality. Participants then completed a survey exploring the relationship between the way bullied targets tell their story and attributions made about the situation and involved parties. Results show coherent stories with little reference to emotion were viewed more positively than non-linear stories where the narrator discussed strong emotion. Finally, when the narrator discussed having strong emotional reactions they were perceived to be more at fault in the situation. This study advances our understanding of narrative telling and attributions in workplace bullying situations.

Workplace bullying is defined as a repetitive cycle of verbal and/or nonverbal acts that are directed at one or more employees over an extended period of time with the goal of causing harm and humiliation (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009; Namie & Namie, 2009). Roughly 30% of U.S. employees are targeted by a bully at some point in their working lives (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Workplace Bullying Institute, 2014). Given the prevalence of bullying in the workplace and the organizational and human costs associated with it (Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Rayner & Cooper, 1997) it is not surprising that research in this area has grown significantly over the past twenty years (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Namie & Namie, 2009). Workplace bullying is largely a communicative process (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008) as such it is important to understand communication strategies that can remediate bullying. The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of how narrative telling impacts attributions people make about targets and bullies in stories about workplace bullying.

If believed, stories have the power to bring about action. According to Frank (2010), “Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided” (p. 3). In order for targets of workplace bullying to get the support and help they need it is important to examine the narrative elements that help others see their experiences as reflective of workplace bullying and/or abuse. For example, targets are often advised to tell clear, largely unemotional stories to others (Tracy, Alberts, & Rivera, 2007). This study extends past research by examining narrative coherence, emotionality, and attributions to better understand the communicative elements that lead hearers to label target experiences as bullying. Ultimately, “once stories animate, they instigate” (Frank, 2010, p. 3) making it so that change can occur and targets and organizations can be helped and healed. However, the mere telling of one’s story does not necessarily bring about action. Instead, sometimes stories of abuse are ignored or discounted. It is important to examine communicative elements of narratives to determine how to tell one’s story in a way that maximizes the hearer’s willingness to validate painful work experiences such as workplace bullying and intervene. What follows is a discussion of how stories of workplace bullying are reported and responded to.

Responses to Reports of Workplace Bullying

It is incredibly difficult for targets to report instances of bullying in part because they fear others will make negative judgments about the type of worker or person they are. When targets do try to report it, organizational authorities are often unwilling to listen these reports or listen with high levels of skepticism (Keashly & Neuman, 2013; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). Put another way, organizations often take a “see no evil, hear no evil,

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“speak no evil” approach when it comes to dealing with bullying (Ferris, 2004). Intervention can occur if targets share their story with someone in the organization. However, bullying often goes unreported because targets fear that they will be subject to additional abuse or that they won’t be believed (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015).

Bullying also goes unrecognized and unchallenged in organizations with high turnover rates. When targets leave the organization, bullies often remain and enact their abusive behavior on new employees thus perpetuating a cycle of abuse in organizations (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). If left unaddressed bullying can thrive in organizations with very real consequences for targets and organizations. For targets these consequences include but are not limited to anxiety, clinical depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, hypertension, stroke, and (in some instances) suicide (Namie, 2014). Bullying is also costly to organizations as a result of absenteeism, turnover, and reduced efficiency (Hoel & Cooper, 2001).

In order to break the cycle of abuse it is important to understand how organizations can better respond to reports of bullying and also how targets can better communicate about their experience. Targets are often advised to report bullying to organizational authorities and to file formal complaints and grievances even though these actions do not usually help and can even make the situation worse (Keashly & Neuman, 2013). In a study on organizational responses to employee complaints of bullying, organizations responded in one of three ways; (a) the behavior was deemed acceptable; (b) the behavior was attributed to both parties involved; or (c) the behavior was deemed harmful and inappropriate but this was found to be a rare response (Ferris, 2004). A central element of the reporting process is narrative. In order for a target to report their mistreatment to organizational authorities they have to tell their story. Understanding how targets tell stories that contribute to being believed is an important step toward helping targets navigate the difficult process of reporting their story to organizational authorities. What follows is a discussion of the linkages between narrative and workplace bullying.

Narrative Approach to Workplace Bullying

Telling narratives is an important part of everyday life. According to Riessman (1993), we make sense of events by casting them into narrative form. Fisher (1987) defines stories as arguments that involve rationality or consistency between how one acts and their reasons for doing so. Coherence, the extent to which a story makes sense, and fidelity, the extent to which a story rings true to the listener, are central elements in traditional notions of narrative. Other approaches to narrative suggest that a strict focus on narrative coherence and the formation of good stories leads to situations where narrators can be discounted or even silenced because their stories do not adhere to the principles of what makes a “good” story (Frank, 1995).

Many experiences, like workplace bullying, are ongoing making it difficult to tell narratives about these experiences that include a tidy beginning, middle, and end. Additionally, it is difficult to cast irrational events into rational narrative form. Adding to this complexity is the fact that narrative construction is not a solitary process, or according to MacIntyre (1984) our narratives are co-authored with various others. Targets of bullying may edit their narrative so it rings true to the listener with the hope that their story will be believed. However, workplace bullying is seldom reported in organizations in part for this reason; individuals fear they will not be believed. This scenario is further complicated when the individual to whom the target would report their abuse, for example a supervisor, is the bully. Narratives have the potential to provide insight into this complex phenomenon. According to Gabriel (2004),

“Stories could reveal how people make sense of organizational events or fail to do so; they can give useful insights into organizational politics and culture, where they reveal hidden agendas, taboos, and lacunae; very often they can disclose not what happened, but something equally important: what people believe or want to believe happened” (p. 23).

Workplace bullying narratives have been explored in previous research. Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts (2006) used metaphor analysis on data gathered from focus groups, narrative interviews, and target drawings to uncover the costs and feelings associated with workplace bullying and found that targets likened their experience to battle, water torture, nightmares, and noxious substances. Additionally, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) examined narratives of targets and witnesses of workplace bullying to better understand the resistance strategies used to combat bullying

and concluded that “organizational authorities must learn to “read the traces” of resistance to bullying, diagnose the problem early, and construct effective interventions” (p. 429).

In terms of constructing their stories, targets have largely been advised to tell convincing stories that adhere to traditional notions of storytelling (Tracy, Alberts, & Rivera, 2007). However, recent research found that not all workplace bullying narratives adhere to the traditional elements of good storytelling (Fisher, 1987) and instead often represent stories that are disjointed and lack coherence and fidelity (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). Ultimately, workplace bullying narratives take the form of chaos, quest, and report narratives (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). Chaos narratives are non-linear narratives where targets had difficulty constructing narratives that fit traditional conventions of “good” story telling. These narratives were often emotional in nature in that targets frequently discussed the emotional impact bullying had on them. Quest narratives were linear and coherent with moderate levels of emotion discussed. Report narratives were linear in nature but were brief, largely unemotional accounts of bullying. Although chaos narratives are often discounted, research suggests that an inability to put emotional and painful experiences in appropriate narrative form provides insight into the serious impact bullying is having on the target (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). This study extends previous narrative research on bullying by exploring if the way a narrative is told and the amount of emotion discussed in the narrative impacts how others perceive the teller, the bully, and whether or not the situation is perceived as being bullying or not. Because we are interested in how narrative elements impact how listeners attribute fault and blame to parties discussed in workplace bullying narratives attribution theory was used as the guiding theoretical framework.

Attribution Theory

Targets often avoid telling their story in part because they are concerned about how others will view them. The fear of being labeled a cry baby or a whiner and being accused of over reacting often leads targets to keep their stories to themselves (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). Similarly, targets fear their story will be discounted by co-workers and organizational authorities and even friends and family members. Attribution theory focuses on how people view and understand events and the impact these views have on causation (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985). These causal attributions play a central role in human behavior (Kelley & Michela, 1980). According to attribution theory, we draw conclusions about why people act in particular ways along with the type of person who would act in such a way. In the model of attribution theory there are antecedents (information, beliefs, and motivation), attributions (perceived causes) and consequences (behavior, affect, expectancy) (Kelley & Michela, 1980). For example, if a target tells his or her story to someone they are providing that person with information about what is occurring. The listener will take that information and attempt to determine the cause. The consequence is the listener may believe the target and do something about it or may instead sympathize with the bully and do nothing or worse contribute to escalating the situation. Of particular interest is if how targets tell their story impacts whether or not the listener will attribute fault to the target or to the bully. Additionally it is important to examine whether the story communicates that bullying has occurred or if it is an example of a simple misunderstanding or clash of personalities. Some research has applied attribution theory to our understanding of workplace bullying. For example, Cowan (2013) examined attributions human resource professionals make about why bullying happens in organizations and found that HR professionals attribute aggressive management styles, organizational culture, deficient communication skills, personality clashes, and contemporary society for why bullying occurs. The present study used attribution theory to explore how working adults perceive narratives of workplace bullying to get a better sense of how targets can effectively communicate about their experiences to aid them in eliciting help from organizational authorities and witnessing co-workers. The review of literature led to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do attributions about targets of workplace bullying differ based on the way a narrative is told?

RQ2: How do attributions about supervisors differ based on the way a narrative is told about a workplace bullying situation?

RQ3: Are there differences in perceptions of what counts as workplace bullying based on the way a narrative is told?

Method

Participants

Participants were 210 working adults in the US recruited through the researchers' email and social networking contacts, through snowball sampling methods, and through Amazon's Mechanical Turk service (MTurk). MTurk provides a platform for workers to complete online tasks in exchange for compensation including, but not limited to, participation in academic research projects. Past research has shown MTurk to be a useful and valid tool for recruiting from diverse populations (e.g., Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Burhmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Mason & Suri, 2011).

Specifically, 108 males (51.4%) and 102 females (48.6%) were included in this study (M age = 32.94, SD = 10.46, range: 20 – 69). In response to an open-ended question about their race/ethnicity, 160 participants identified as White/Caucasian (76.2%), 14 participants as Hispanic/Latino (8.8%), 13 as African American/Black (6.2%), 10 as Asian American (4.7%), and 9 as another unique race/ethnicity (4.2%). All participants identified as US citizens. Most participants had at least some college experience (high school diploma or high school equivalent, n = 15, 7.1%; some college, n = 71, 33.8%; bachelor's degree, n = 87, 41.4%; master's degree, n = 29, 13.8%; PhD or other advanced graduate/professional degree, n = 7, 3.3%).

Participants worked in a wide range of fields such as accounting, administration/clerical, customer service/hospitality, computer programming/IT, construction, education, management, and sales. On average, participants had worked in their current positions for 4.80 years (SD = 4.90, range: 2 months – 38 years). When asked if they had experienced or knew someone who had experienced workplace bullying, 101 (48.1%) said "yes" and 109 (51.9%) said "no."

Procedures

Study procedures were given IRB approval prior to data collection. Participants completed an online survey hosted on Qualtrics.com. Specifically, they were presented with 5 narratives in randomized order and asked to report their perceptions of each narrative.

Narratives. As part of a different study, bullying narratives were gleaned from in-depth interviews with 48 working adults who had been bullied in the workplace. Each of the five narratives are real-life experiences shared by targets of workplace bullying. The initial study explored the types of narratives targets told about their experiences. This study extends this research by examining how working adults react to these different narrative types. For consistency, the person who is portrayed in the narrative as the bully was described as the narrator's male supervisor. Narratives were shortened to a relatively similar length (276 to 369 words) without removing key details or changing the style of the narrative. In order to extend previous research (Tracy, Alberts, & Rivera, 2007 & Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015) the narratives used in this study were selected based on level of clarity (i.e., coherent narrative style vs. incoherent narrative style) and level of emotionality (i.e., rational description of events vs. mention of emotions felt and/or expressed as a result of the bullying).

In order to test the level of emotionality and coherence in the narratives 15 working adults read them and provided verbal feedback about perceived differences between the narratives. Based on participant responses we were able to proceed with the survey component of the study. To further confirm that participants perceived differences in the narratives, participants were presented with each narrative in random order. They then responded to 7-point likert-scale single item measures regarding the clarity of the narrative and the emotionality of the narrator (i.e., "The narrator in this scenario is emotional" and "The scenario is described in a clear way.") See Appendix A for complete narratives.

First, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in perceptions of clarity across five narratives of workplace bullying. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(9) = 110.89, p < .001$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = .76$; Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). There were overall significant differences in perceptions of the clarity among the five workplace bullying narratives, $F(3.05, 625.56) = 147.49, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .42$. Post hoc analyses using bonferonni adjustment showed that Narrative 3 was seen as significantly less

clear than the other four narratives. Narrative 1 was the second least clear. Narrative 2 and 4 were perceived to be similar in levels of clarity. Narrative 5 was rated highest in level of clarity (See Table 1).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Clarity Across Narratives

Narrative	Clarity	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1: Lunch Hour	5.09 _a	1.52
2: Critical Shadow	5.46 _b	1.26
3: Alienated and Afraid	3.13 _c	1.87
4: Crying Shame	5.45 _b	1.36
5: I am your God	5.77 _d	1.25

Note. Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ by bonferonni adjustment.

To assess perceptions of the level of emotion expressed, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in perceptions of the narrator's emotionality. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(9) = 29.26, p < .001$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = .93$; Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). There were overall significant differences in perceptions of the emotionality among the five workplace bullying narratives, $F(3.70, 765.54) = 72.56, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .26$. Overall, the narrator was seen to be more emotional than not. Post hoc analyses using bonferonni adjustment showed that narrators who talked about multiple emotions (i.e., Narrative 3: "I felt isolated and afraid...victimized" and Narrative 4: "I was so furious...went outside and cried") were perceived to be significantly more emotional than those who did not make any reference to emotion (i.e., Narrative 1), referenced only the supervisor's emotion (i.e., Narrative 2, "he got so angry..."), or referenced a single emotion (i.e., Narrative 5, "I was upset"; See Table 2).

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Narrator Emotionality Across Narratives

Narrative	Emotionality	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1: Lunch Hour	4.01 _a	1.60
2: Critical Shadow	4.40 _b	1.54
3: Alienated and Afraid	5.42 _c	1.28
4: Crying Shame	5.72 _c	1.37
5: I am your God	4.56 _b	1.53

Note. Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ by bonferonni adjustment.

Positive attributions of narrator and supervisor. In order to test the dependent variables, participants were asked to respond to measures regarding their positive attributions of the narrator, positive attributions of the supervisor, and perceptions of whether workplace bullying had occurred for each randomly presented narrative. Specifically, participants completed three 7-point likert scale items regarding positive attributions made about the narrator (e.g., “The narrator’s behavior in the scenario was justifiable”; “The narrator behaved appropriately in this scenario”; “The narrator was at fault in this scenario” (reverse-coded). These items were repeated regarding positive attributions of the supervisor (e.g., “The supervisor’s behavior in the scenario was justifiable,” etc.). Each set of three items were summed and averaged for an overall score for the positive attributions toward the narrator and bully for each narrative (Cronbach’s alpha: range .76 - .86). Participants were also asked a single-item 7-point likert scale item regarding the extent to which workplace bullying had occurred in the scenario (e.g., “This scenario is an example of workplace bullying”).

Finally, participants were asked to provide an open-ended response to the following prompt following each narrative, “Please explain your reactions to this scenario. Specifically, explain whether or not you believe this to be an example of workplace bullying and why you feel this way.” Open-ended responses for each narrative were compiled and analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of how participants made sense of the narratives.

Results and Interpretations

Initial analyses tested whether there were gender differences or differences in responses based on whether participants had experienced workplace bullying prior to testing the research questions. No significant differences were found for these groups.

To answer RQ1, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in attributions made about the narrator across five narratives of workplace bullying. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly’s test of sphericity, $\chi^2(9) = 24.98, p < .01$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = .94$; Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). There were overall significant differences in perceptions of the narrator among the five workplace bullying narratives, $F(3.74, 755.60) = 55.83, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .22$. Of note, the means for each narrative were above the midpoint (means range from 4.54 to 5.80 on a 7 point likert scale), showing that overall participants viewed the narrators’ behaviors as relatively positive in each narrative (See Table 3).

Post hoc analyses using bonferonni adjustment showed there were differences in the extent to which the participants made positive attributions about the narrator when the level of clarity and emotionality is taken into account. Specifically, in Narrative 5 which included a moderate level of negative emotion and high levels of clarity, the narrator was perceived significantly more positively than in the other narratives. Similarly, in Narratives 1 and 2, which made no reference to emotion but were relatively clear, the narrators were viewed more positively than in Narratives 3 and 4, which contained multiple references to emotional reactions (see Table 3). Of note, Narrative 4 was considered relatively clear; however, participants viewed the narrator to be highly emotional. Therefore, in this case, it appears as though emotionality may have had a stronger influence on perceptions of the narrator’s role in the narrative than did clarity, but further exploration would allow for more understanding of the relationship between clarity and emotionality and possible interaction between the two in informing our perceptions of targets who tell their stories of being bullied.

Responses to open-ended questions support these findings. Specifically, in response to Narrative 3, some participants sympathized with the narrator, however most participant comments made attributions regarding the narrator’s level of sensitivity regarding the situation, e.g., “The only thing I can really tell is that the narrator is way too emotionally invested in whatever is going on,” “I think that the problem may lie with the narrator’s perception of the way her boss perceives her,” and “I can’t really understand what kind of attacks they were or if this person was just overly introverted and sensitive and clammed up at every tiny bit of resistance...like a turtle.” Similarly, some participants sympathized with the narrator in Narrative 4 (e.g., “His actions had her working in fear”) but other participants indicated that they felt the narrator was, at least in part, responsible for the situation (e.g., “They (the supervisor and narrator) both behave fairly inappropriately towards one and other,” and “While the supervisor’s behavior was inappropriate and manipulative, the narrator should have made her situation clear to him”). In

comparison, nearly all participants responded in support of the narrator in Narrative 5 (e.g., “The narrator had every right to make the statement that he’s not her husband, boyfriend, or father,” and “The narrator’s standing up for herself, and the supervisor is still being a jerk”).

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Positive Attributions of Narrator Across Narratives

Narrative	Positive Attributions of Narrator	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1: Lunch Hour	5.31 _a	1.25
2: Critical Shadow	5.28 _a	1.15
3: Alienated and Afraid	4.54 _b	1.10
4: Crying Shame	4.75 _b	1.35
5: I am your God	5.80 _c	1.09

Note. Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ by bonferonni adjustment.

To answer RQ2, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in positive attributions made about the supervisor across five narratives of workplace bullying. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly’s test of sphericity, $\chi^2(9) = 35.03$, $p < .01$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = .92$; Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). There were overall significant differences in perceptions of the supervisor among the five workplace bullying narratives, $F(3.69, 763.22) = 60.43$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .23$. Of note, the means for each narrative were below the midpoint (means range from 1.61 to 3.00 on a 7 point likert scale) showing that overall participants perceived supervisors’ behaviors negatively in each narrative (See Table 4).

Post-hoc analyses using the bonferonni adjustment showed that there were differences among positive attributions made about the supervisors described in the five narratives. Specifically, the supervisor was seen most negatively in Narrative 5, which participants perceived to be high in clarity and moderate in narrator emotionality. The supervisor was given the most positive attributions in Narrative 3, which was lowest in clarity and highest in narrator emotionality. Narratives 1, 2, and 4, which were relatively moderate in levels of clarity, did not differ greatly in perceptions of the supervisor. That is, participants saw the supervisor as being at fault for the situation in these narratives, but not to as strong of a degree as they did with Narrative 5. In this case, clarity appeared to impact the participant’s willingness to assign fault for bullying to the supervisor and emotionality of the narrator played a lesser role, however further research is needed to understand the relationship between clarity and emotionality in how we understand a bully’s role in a target’s telling of his/her story of being bullied.

Overall, open ended-responses indicate that participants viewed the supervisors’ behaviors as problematic and unprofessional. However, participants were often hesitant to label the behaviors as bullying. Responses to the more coherent narratives were stronger in terms of assigning negative attributions to the supervisor. For example, the supervisor in Narrative 5 was given a variety of negative labels, (e.g., “bully,” “complete jerk,” “control freak,” “complete lunatic,” etc. In Narratives 1, 2 and 4, participants saw the supervisor’s behavior as inappropriate. However, many participants thought the problem may be better attributed to poor management skills or personality rather than bullying (e.g., Narrative 1: “It just seems like he is an unpleasant person, not necessarily a bully”; Narrative 2: “I don’t think the boss should have followed them or gotten as angry as he did but I can understand why he would be correcting and writing up the worker”). Finally, participants expressed difficulty in making judgments about the supervisor in Narrative 3 due to lack of clarity (e.g., “It seems probable to me that the supervisor

acted in an appropriate way and the narrator had personal issues that affected his/her judgment of what was really going on).”

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Positive Attributions of Supervisor Across Narratives

Narrative	Positive Attributions of Supervisor	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1: Lunch Hour	2.61 _a	1.29
2: Critical Shadow	2.34 _a	1.20
3: Alienated and Afraid	3.15 _b	1.18
4: Crying Shame	2.33 _a	1.29
5: I am your God	1.71 _c	1.09

Note: Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ by bonferonni adjustment.

Finally, RQ3 explored if there were differences in what counts as bullying based on the way a narrative is told. This was answered using a repeated measures ANOVA. The assumption of sphericity was violated, as assessed by Mauchly’s test of sphericity, $\chi^2(9) = 36.26, p < .001$. Therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\epsilon = .92$; Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). There were significant differences overall in perceptions of the supervisor among the five workplace bullying narratives, $F(3.68, 764.91) = 38.00, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$. All narratives were clearly perceived to be examples of workplace bullying (means range from 4.82 to 6.29 on a 7 point likert scale; See Table 5).

Post hoc analyses using bonferonni adjustment found that all of the narratives were relatively equal in terms of perceptions of whether bullying had occurred except for Narrative 5. Specifically, Narrative 5 was perceived to be a stronger example of workplace bullying than the other four narratives (See Table 5). Thus, the narrative that was perceived to be highest in clarity and moderate in levels of emotionality was seen to be the best example of workplace bullying.

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations of Perceptions of Bullying Across Narratives

Narrative	Example of Bullying	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1: Lunch Hour	5.09 _a	1.64
2: Critical Shadow	5.17 _a	1.60
3: Alienated and Afraid	4.82 _a	1.58
4: Crying Shame	5.02 _a	1.78
5: I am your God	6.29 _b	1.20

Note: Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ by bonferonni adjustment.

Specifically, participants reported that they believed Narrative 5 to be a clear example of workplace bullying because of the clarity of examples provided. For example participants said things such as, “Ok. Now **THAT** I can see as workplace bullying, since it involves public humiliation along with playing favorites.” Many participants noted that the supervisor’s claim that he was the narrator’s “God” was a clear sign of bullying (e.g., “A person who thinks he is above treating his employees with anything less than respect, and thinks he is God should absolutely be reprimanded”). These open-ended responses reveal the importance of including clear examples to enhance the clarity of the narrative.

With the exception of Narrative 5, which participants viewed nearly universally to be an example of workplace bullying, statements of whether or not the narratives were examples of workplace bullying varied. Some participants felt that there was sufficient information to label the narratives as bullying, but others were more hesitant to label them as such. This hesitance to label the narratives as examples of workplace bullying was often due to insufficient information (e.g., Narrative 3, “I can’t tell whether this is workplace bullying...The narrator should give more concrete examples”). Participants also at times expressed a desire to provide a different label for the situation (e.g., Narrative 4, “This not an example of workplace bullying because the other guy was just trying to help”; Narrative 1, “It just seems like he is an unpleasant person, not necessarily a bully”; Narrative 2: “This is not bullying. This is overreacting to confrontation.”). Finally, some participants were hesitant to label the narratives as workplace bullying because they felt they didn’t have a clear enough understanding of what workplace bullying is (e.g., Narrative 2: “Frankly, I am not sure what ‘workplace bullying’ is, so I can only apply the ‘I know it if I see it standard’, and this isn’t it”).

Discussion

This study found differences in perceptions of the narrator/target, supervisor/bully, and whether or not a situation was perceived as bullying depending on narrative type. Negative attributions were impacted by the degrees of clarity and emotionality expressed in the narratives. When narratives were communicated in ways reflective of clear and coherent narrative structure participants attributed more positive evaluations to the target and more negative evaluations to the bully. Participants were also more likely to label target experiences as workplace bullying when they were told clear narratives. This finding is in keeping with advice given to targets about telling clear and convincing stories when sharing their experience with others (Tracy, Alberts, & Riveras, 2007).

We also found that participants who expressed moderate emotion when relating their experiences were perceived more positively than those who included a discussion of how the experience negatively impacted them emotionally. For example, when participants discussed crying or feeling victimized, they were seen to be more at fault than targets who largely left emotion out of their narratives. This is problematic given that bullying experiences are traumatic and emotional in nature (Einarsen, Matthiesen, & Stogstad, 1998; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Tehrani, 2004; Vartia, 1996). However, in organizations rationality is typically privileged over emotionality. The difficulty targets might have in tempering the emotions they experience make it so their experience is more likely to be discounted. In short, participants in this study felt it was acceptable for targets to be upset and frustrated, however not to the point where one would cry or engage in other outward displays of emotion. Given the level of abuse targets experience, a completely normal and natural response might be to cry and get angry. From the results of this study, targets who want to be viewed as acting appropriately in a professional context should limit the types of emotion disclosed to those considered appropriate in professional contexts, presenting a potential disconnect between the real and felt experience for targets. This study sheds light on the problematic of rationality and emotionality inherent in organizational life (Mumby & Putnam, 1992).

Implications

The focus of this study is on communication and how targets can communicate in ways that allow their stories to be heard and taken seriously. Findings show that for targets, constructing stories according to traditional narrative conventions of clarity and coherence is important to potentially resolve issues of workplace bullying and get organizational intervention. Telling clear and convincing stories with specific, concrete examples may best

allow practitioners to understand and respond in helpful ways. Although emotion is inherently tied to the experience of workplace bullying, targets able to talk about their experiences in more rational ways without overly emphasizing emotions may lead to more successful outcomes. Telling one's story in this way is helpful for organizational members responsible for intervening in bullying situations. Clear stories with concrete examples help human resource professionals and various others move forward in sanctioning bullies because a clear case can be made for intervention. Without clarity it makes it difficult for those with intervention power to know how to intervene.

Based on our results it is clear that targets who tell coherent narratives with moderate levels of emotion elicit more support from participants. However, targets who have experienced the trauma of repeated abuse may find it difficult if not impossible to put their experiences into traditional narrative form (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). Targets may also find it quite challenging to avoid crying or discussing strong emotional reactions such as anger, hurt, or frustration they feel as a result of their mistreatment. "In stories told out of the deepest chaos, no sense of sequence redeems suffering as orderly, and no one finds purpose in suffering" (Frank, 1995, pp. 105).

Targets can be helped to tell more convincing stories. But this is only one part of the equation. Practitioners must recognize that not all stories are neatly told. Learning to hear stories of trauma and abuse differently is important so that experiences of extreme suffering in the workplace are recognized in all of their forms. In this way, targets struggling to put their suffering into words can be helped and organizations can create healthier environments for all employees. Additionally, when targets share incoherent stories, practitioners could ask questions that aid in understanding the situation instead of discounting the story and person telling it because they did not communicate about their experience well. Since stories are co-constructed approaching narratives of bullying as a joint communication process is a useful strategy to help organizations more effectively address it. If something about the experience is unclear, practitioners need to pose questions that help uncover whether the lack of clarity is due to a misunderstanding, something other than workplace bullying, or if the traumatic nature of bullying is causing the narrative to be poorly constructed. Ultimately, recognizing that all stories deserve to be heard is an important step toward helping to resolve issues of bullying in the workplace.

Limitations

Although this study provides important insights into telling convincing stories of workplace bullying it is not without its limitations. First off, the narratives were altered so the target reported on bullying originating from a supervisor in all cases. While this is reflective of the nature of bullying (Namie & Namie, 2009) where more people are bullied by a supervisor than a co-worker, perceptions of fault may differ based on power status. Participants may find the behavior of a bully even less appropriate if it comes from a co-worker rather than a supervisor. In order to better understand the influence of power dynamics on perceptions of fault, future research should examine the relationship between the hierarchical position of targets and bullies and perceptions of bullying.

Results show a potential interaction between emotionality and clarity in narrative structure so that moderate levels of emotional expression and high levels of clarity are ideal for targets of bullying to be believed in their telling of their stories of bullying. The current study design does not allow for an interaction effect to be tested statistically, however. Future research should examine the ways that these two narrative characteristics may work together in forming perceptions of workplace bullying.

Another limitation pertains to our use of Mturk to recruit participants. Although research supports the use of Mturk for soliciting and gathering diverse populations (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Burhmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Mason & Suri, 2011) the overall results of the study may be limited given that not everyone has access to a computer nor has worker status through Amazon.

A final limitation of this study is that participants were explicitly asked whether or not they felt these were examples of workplace bullying. While this was important to our study, it may have led participants to answer in what they deemed socially desirable ways. However, this question was asked last to help guard against leading participant responses. Despite these limitations, this study makes important contributions to the body of research on communication and workplace bullying.

Future Research

Future research should continue to examine narrative elements that impact perceptions of fault. While it is clear that clarity and emotionality impact perceptions of targets and bullies other factors may also impact these perceptions as well. For example, future research could examine the perceived heinousness of a particular act in addition to clarity and emotionality in order to gain greater insight into the communicative power of narrative in workplace bullying situations. A better understanding of what makes workplace bullying stories believable will help targets construct narratives that are more likely to resonate with listeners and change oppressive work situations.

Because all participants were U.S. citizens working in the United States, the implications of this research in differing cultural contexts is unknown. Examining how working adults from differing cultural perspectives perceive these narratives also represents a potentially fruitful area of inquiry. Specifically, including additional cultural level variables would allow for an understanding of how perceptions of workplace bullying may differ across cultures. Investigating cultural differences is an important research endeavor given the increasingly global nature of organizations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that the ways stories of workplace bullying are told impacts perceptions of targets and bullies as well as the degree to which we label experiences as bullying. Results revealed that targets who told coherent narratives were perceived most favorably. Bullies in coherent narratives were perceived most negatively. Conversely, sharing high levels of negative emotion led to less favorable perceptions of the target and more positive perceptions of the bully. This study advances our understanding of narrative telling and negative attributions in workplace bullying situations. The results have valuable implications for helping targets better communicate about their experiences. Understanding the nuances of communicating about painful work experiences is a vital step toward addressing and resolving instances of bullying in the workplace.

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Appendix A: Narratives

Narrative 1: Coherent Without Emotion

My supervisor was a person who I think was bullied and it was his turn to be the bully. He seemed to come from a certain background and didn't like himself. So, he tried to pretend like he was someone else. He was just mean. I had another coworker describe him as the angriest and nastiest person she had ever encountered. The person who was responsible for causing him problems on the job was still there and verbally attacked him. One time he got into it with me trying to enforce a half hour break for lunch. I said, "No, I've checked that with HR and they told me I had an hour." And he said, "Well, they were wrong." I ended up going back over his head to HR and they said I had an hour. I showed our supervisor, the director of the department an e-mail saying I had an hour for lunch while we were in the negotiating stage of hiring me. She just wanted to push the e-mail aside. So, she seemed very much on my supervisor's side about a lot of things that went on. He was just a very nasty person. He gave me a chart he wanted me to start filling out documenting my break time and I just looked at it strangely. I said, 'Well, I'll try.' And he snapped at me and said, "You have to, you have to." It was so bad that there was someone who worked with us only a short amount of time and she even said, "You know, I think if you get a different job they'll treat you nicer than they do here."

Narrative 2: Coherent with Emotional Bully

When the company restructured I started working for a new boss. It started with him literally following me around. If I got up to go to the bathroom, he was on my heels. Everything I did he was following me. And people would mention to me that they noticed him following me. I didn't think anything of it at first because I was a new employee so I just figured that was the way he was. Then shortly after the company restructured I was given a new job. So, I was new to the position and there were some mistakes in my work, admittedly, but I was never trained on how to do my job. He would pull me into the office and tell me about the mistakes. I just thought it was because I was still new and that it was just regular feedback because he didn't indicate that the things I was doing were going to lead me to get fired. So, I took his criticism like a normal person would. But then he wrote me up instead of giving me a review and from that point forward everything I did was wrong even though I know that it wasn't. There was one specific incident where he was accusing me of doing something that I didn't do and so I defended myself. He got so angry with me that he started shaking. I thought he was going to hit me and so I left the room because it was just me and him in the room. He went into his boss's office and totally turned the story around on me, like it was my fault.

Narrative 3: Non-Linear with Emotional Narrator

I started buying my own property and was able to step back from the relationship because I could see that he would harm other people. I then realized that slowly but surely, because I had distanced myself from it because I wasn't that type of person. I didn't realize that I had become a victim, but I was. The friendship would be on his terms. He would move in and out of the friendship when it suited him. I realized in the end that it was only to gain more access to my weaknesses or to exacerbate my weaknesses so he could attack me. He enjoyed making me insecure and vulnerable. From then on it over an eighteen month period it gradually got worse and worse and I became alienated from the team. At team meetings I would feel that I couldn't speak. I felt isolated and afraid. Then other times I would gain my strength and pick myself up for a while. Then something would happen that would make me feel victimized all over again. In my job there was a lot of report writing. They could always pull your reports to patients and then it went from my senior to the manager. Then he developed alliances against me with several more people. I felt I was becoming more and more in this light and then it was impacting my health slowly, and it just went on from there, really.

Narrative 4: Coherent with Emotional Narrator and Bully

It wasn't every single day but at least once a week I would go home and cry. I'll share the worst thing he did to me. I developed a health problem. I was very sick so I would go home a lot. I had been gone so much that he just decided that I was quitting. One morning I walked in and said, "Good morning," and he ignored me. I thought, "What did I do now?" I started working. I asked about a couple of things and he ignored me or gave one word answers. I thought, "Ok, he is going to say something I just wish he would say it." Finally, he turned to me and said, "I think that you have been very horrible the last few weeks. I don't need to be treated like that and I don't think you have the right to treat me like that. You act like you don't even care about the organization anymore. You act like you don't want to be here. If you don't want to be here, then get the fuck out! Just go ahead and leave! You don't want to be here, I sure as hell don't want you here." I just looked at him stunned and he said, "Oh now I pissed you off didn't I? Go ahead and say it." I just sat there because I was trying so hard not to let my emotions get the best of me. I just said I was sorry. I was so furious that I didn't know what to say. I excused myself and went outside and cried. I was out there trying to calm myself down when he came out and said, "Well I didn't mean to upset you. I just thought you were going to leave us and I just needed to know you weren't going to leave." He came up patted me on the back. He expected everything to be fine after that. I calmed myself down, went back inside, and tried to work. Then he was happy. He was laughing and telling jokes because he had gotten it off his chest. That is how it always worked with him.

Narrative 5: Coherent with Moderate Emotion of Narrator and Bully

If you were good at what you did he made you part of what he called the core team of people he relied on. There were benefits but there were also costs. You belonged to him. You were subject to whatever he decided to throw at you for whatever reason. If you did something bad you and everyone around you were going to know it because you were publicly criticized on a regular basis. He said he only did it because he cared about you. It's also hard to believe that someone cares about you when they're loudly screaming that you are fucking stupid. You spend so much of your time just trying to maintain some type of self-respect. You never know what's going to happen. It's hard to describe. Don was the owner of the company and something as simple as lunch was a big deal. He would insist that his core team sit down and have lunch together every day. But sixty percent of the time he would tear into me and rip me open about something I had supposedly done wrong right before lunch got there. He publicly screamed at me and humiliated me so by the time the food got there I was not in the mood to eat. I just wanted to get back to work and do what I needed to do to fix the problem. What I would usually do was take my lunch and put it in the refrigerator. Well, to him that wouldn't do. I had to eat with everybody else. I didn't want to eat when I was upset but if Don bought you lunch you had to go and eat with everyone else. You had to eat because he told you to. It got to one point where I said, "Don, you're not my father. You're not my husband. You're not my boyfriend. If I don't want to eat I'm not going to eat." And his response to me was "When you're here, I am your God. When you're in this building I am your God and you will do what I say." I never had anyone tell me they were my God before but that's really how he viewed himself.