

**“It’s Like Walking on Eggshells”: The Lived Experiences of Workplace Bullying
Bystanders in Academia**

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DEDICATION

This dissertation, and all things I do in my life, is dedicated to my husband, Nathan Williams. You have been by my side through the many ups and downs of life. I am so very lucky to spend my life with you and build our home together. I would never achieve all that I have without your support, encouragement, and love. You fill my days with absolute joy, laughter, and happiness. You make my life worth living. I hope I take care of you as well as you take care of me. I love you with all my heart.

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ABSTRACT

Over 60 million working adults in the U.S. report bullying experiences (Namie, 2017). However, many organizations fail to actively intervene. Workplace bullying becomes a detrimental process riddled with emotional trauma, confusion, and depleted organizational productivity. Workplace bullying bystanders are pivotal as they impact the trajectory of these issues. Bystanders can either be a target-ally (e.g., offer support or actively intervene), bully-ally (e.g., act as a henchman), or silent-bystander (e.g., ignore the situation). Bystanders contend with their own complex sensemaking processes when witnessing bullying happen to others. Researchers have often examined this role through a post-positivistic lens in the quest to better predict bystander responses.

This study used sensemaking in organizations (Weick, 1995) theoretical framework to examine workplace bullying in academia and how bystanders in this environment make sense of these processes. This study asked five research questions:

RQ1: How do bystanders come to label an experience as workplace bullying?

RQ2: How does emotion inform the sensemaking process for bystanders?

RQ3: How do people come to label their role as bystanders throughout workplace bullying processes?

RQ4: What does it feel like to be a workplace bullying bystander?

RQ5: How does a person's rank within the organizational hierarchy play a role in workplace bullying sensemaking processes?

Thirty-seven in-depth interviews serve as the data to accomplish the central purpose: examining how workplace bullying bystanders experience and construct meaning based upon their unique perspective over time. Through grounded theory data analysis, five themes emerged among

participant narratives – shattered dreams, occupational identity, backstage sensemaking, thrownness, and toxic atmosphere.

This study extends conceptualization of workplace bullying to include expectations, lingering trauma, and frontstage/backstage dimensions. The data also reveal bystander feelings, roles, and motivations, including feeling thrown into their perspective and possibly taking on a protector role. Theory of sensemaking in organizations is extended to include additional identity formation phases, emotional responses, and enactment. Organizational practitioners can develop intervention campaigns with bystanders' unique perspectives as well as socialization methods that acknowledge lingering trauma stemming from workplace bullying. A goal of this study is to bring comfort to anyone experiencing workplace bullying—know that you are not alone.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Over 60% of working adults in the U.S. alone are affected by workplace bullying and over 77% indicate a need to create policies and laws addressing these issues (Namie, 2017). Many organizations fail to actively address workplace bullying (Namie et al., 2009); American colleges and universities rarely have specific policies for these issues (Smith & Coel, 2018). Few organizational policies and complicit upper management may provide avenues for bullies to continue engaging in destructive, hostile communication (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). The absence of organizational policy and action may be due to a lack of agreed-upon language and understanding of what constitutes workplace bullying, known as denotative hesitancy (Cowan, 2012; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). This, in turn, may cause difficulty during the sensemaking process for individuals involved in workplace bullying issues. Workplace bullying is generally understood to be repeated, hostile messages occurring over time, causing a power imbalance between the bully and target (Einarsen et al., 2011). These messages can take on many forms, ranging from covert acts such as emotional abuse, gossip, or social ostracism to overt acts such as yelling or harsh criticism (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009).

Organizational members who experience the brunt of workplace bullying (e.g., targets and bystanders) or who oversee reports (e.g., human resource professionals or supervisors) often face confusion about their experiences (Cowan, 2012; Tye-Williams & Ruble, 2017). Many HR professionals consider bully intentions as they make sense of reports (Cowan, 2012), yet intentionality is rarely in research's conceptual definition (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). Due to lack of policy and sensemaking difficulty, many events may go unnoticed or unreported (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011), targets may seek help from others to make sense of their experiences (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015), bullies can refute the destructive nature of their

actions (Namie, 2017), and bystanders may become hesitant to help (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). Indeed, workplace bullying becomes a communal process co-constructed through communication (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). The community surrounding workplace bullying issues, in addition to bullies and targets, include bystanders (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013; Pouwelse et al., 2018), human resource professionals (Cowan, 2012), managers (Namie, 2017), and other supportive communication networks, such as coworkers or family members (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). Targets are not the only individuals impacted by workplace bullying issues. Bystanders (e.g., first-hand witnesses) often report they experience the same harmful psychological effects as targets (Emdad et al., 2013).

Bystanders become pivotal because they can either hinder or perpetuate workplace bullying processes (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). Even one workplace bullying bystander intervening in a situation is powerful enough to encourage others to intervene (Báez-León et al., 2016). Those who witness bullying can take on multiple roles, such as siding with the target, aligning with the bully, or becoming passive bystanders (Paull et al., 2012). These roles often stem from social affiliations, personal resources, or justice communication goals (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). Communication research also highlights how target narratives become more understandable when they include the role of coworkers (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015), how bystanders' perceptions of bullying messages influence their intentions to intervene (Pavlich et al., 2017), and how bystander supportive communication could become pivotal for targets during bullying events (High & Young, 2018). The role of bystanders during workplace bullying issues is complex.

Researchers are perplexed as they focus on predicting bystander behaviors—cognitive sensemaking processes (Ng et al., 2019), the role of emotion and justice (O'Reilly & Aquino,

2011), and communication goals (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). Examining various factors that predict bystander behavior is an important endeavor. As research attempts to explain and understand how bystanders come to their various actions, we must be mindful that our perspective may make assumptions not shared by this population. The question that begs to be asked is how individuals who witness workplace bullying make sense of, and communicate, their experiences from their own perspective.

An inductive research approach captures how bystanders narrate their own perspectives, how they make sense of their lived experiences, how their own and others' emotion informs this process, and how they come to terms with their viewpoint as witnesses to such harmful bullying events in the workplace. Therefore, this study's goal is to examine how bystanders experience and make sense of their position within workplace bullying processes.

Literature Review

Workplace Bullying

This study adopts the conceptual definition of workplace bullying as repetitive, hostile communication that occurs over time, causing a power imbalance between bully and target (Leyman, 1996) and a host of detrimental individual and organizational outcomes for both targets (e.g., those whom the hostile messages are directed; Tracy et al., 2006) and witnesses (e.g., those who see or hear workplace bullying take place; Emdad et al., 2013). This hostile communication may be covert, such as social ostracism, emotional abuse, and/or gossip. For example, employees repeatedly leave a targeted coworker out of meetings or work functions. Hostile communication could also be in the form of overt acts, such as verbal aggression, threats, and/or public humiliation, such as a manager constantly criticizing an employee in front of others (Einarsen et al., 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). Often, the covert and overt forms of

bullying can be experienced simultaneously (e.g., an employee is left out of the group for lunch only to come into the office and get yelled at by the boss). These processes may cause distress, humiliation, feelings of powerlessness, and/or intimidation as well as impact an individual's work environment, job duties, and psychological well-being (Einarsen et al., 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). Many bullying targets may also exhibit increased burnout symptoms and decreased organizational citizenship behaviors (Goodboy et al., 2017), as well as stigmatization and blame for their experiences (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011).

Exposure to this constant negative communication can cause a detrimental effect on a target's psychological wellbeing. Many targets use metaphors, such as water torture, chipping away, or hammering to describe the repetitive psychological harm of their experiences (Tracy et al., 2006). The repetitious and durational nature unique to workplace bullying does not allow for psychological recovery (Einarsen et al., 2011). As such, targets experience prolonged psychological stress that manifests into a perceived sense of powerlessness (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). This is due to experiencing repeated humiliation, distress, and dependency on the perpetrator (Branch et al., 2018) and many targets may have difficulty in processing such harmful experiences (Tracy et al., 2006). For example, if an employee is constantly left out of the group and/or constantly yelled at by their manager, it does not allow them time to recover and heal from the trauma of those experiences. Workplace bullying becomes a painful and confusing experience for many.

Evidence suggests that targets often struggle to make sense of, and voice, their experiences to others. While support from coworkers increases sensemaking for targets (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015), many other organizational members (e.g., human resource professionals and/or supervisors) may struggle to fully understand targets' accounts (Cowan,

2012) due to lack of a widely understood definition (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). Targets often struggle to make sense of the intense emotion surrounding their experiences and fail to communicate to supervisors in a clear, rational way (Tye-Williams & Ruble, 2017). Targets also face a stigma if they report their situations to upper management and are often characterized as weak or incompetent (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). For example, other organizational members may view the target as unable to handle their own situations or worthy of the constant negative communication. Thus, many actors involved in these processes may face difficulties to make sense of what constitutes workplace bullying.

An understanding of what constitutes workplace bullying is heavily reliant on larger societal and organizational processes (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). Aggressive communication may be rewarded within a competitive working environment (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). For example, a company that places value on competitive and aggressive communication styles may inadvertently reward bullying behaviors. Also, highly demanding, and low supportive organizational spaces may increase the likelihood of workplace bullying occurrences (Goodboy et al., 2017). Bullies only act when the organizational environment provides an outlet to do so (Einarsen et al., 2011). The most common organizational response to workplace bullying is to take no action (43.7%) and few perpetrators face repercussions for their behaviors (Namie, 2017). Clear policies for workplace bullying in higher education contexts are often lacking (Smith & Coel, 2018). Many workplace bullying policies that are in place may often serve to silence target and bystander experiences (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). The complexities of workplace bullying are not only influenced by environmental factors, but also involve many other people surrounding this process.

Workplace Bullying Bystanders

Fundamentally, workplace bullying is co-constructed and, essentially, experienced communally (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Bystanders are an essential element of workplace bullying processes because the type of communication they choose can either mitigate or prolong workplace bullying processes (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). For example, witnesses could either choose to not do anything about bullying behaviors, actively step in and say something, or try to comfort the target afterward. Indeed, bystanders can take on several active and/or passive roles alongside either the bully or target (Paull et al., 2012). This may be due to factors such as assessments of target responsibility (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013), perceptions of low support from upper management (MacCurtain et al., 2017), and/or experiencing the same detrimental psychological effects as targets (Emdad et al., 2013), to name a few. Clearly, the role of bystanders is a complicated one interwoven into the communal nature of workplace bullying processes and involves a very complex sensemaking process.

Bystander Sensemaking

Bystanders go through their own sensemaking processes when perceiving significant events (Latané & Darley, 1970). Developed from a cost-reward model of helping behavior, Latané & Darley (1970) proposed a five-step psychological process for bystander sensemaking in their foundational study of this phenomenon. The term bystander constitutes individuals who are considered non-bullied witnesses (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). Bystanders must first notice the event, interpret the causes, evaluate responsibility, and form an action plan. They can perceive a diffusion of responsibility during the sensemaking process as well (Latané & Darley, 1970). In their study of cyberbullying bystanders, Brody & Vangelisti (2016) reported that individuals were more likely not to notice a situation if other witnesses were present and the

bystanders did not have an interpersonal relationship with the bullying target. In other words, deflecting responsibility for speaking up in the moment or reporting the situation may be diffused when one can assume other witnesses will address the situation. The vocal volume of negative communication and physical distance also plays a key role in bystander sensemaking processes (Pavlich et al., 2017). Not only are external factors integral to sensemaking, but also bystanders go through internal psychological processes.

Ng et al. (2019) have proposed an extended workplace bullying bystander sensemaking model that incorporates self-efficacy, organizational context, and bullying severity, in addition to moral obligation variables that influence bystander sensemaking processes. The model's propositions predict constructive or destructive behaviors for bystanders. Perceptions of bullying severity predict bystander response—less severe bullying results in a more passive, destructive response outcome (e.g., ignoring the issue). The bystander also perceives self- and target-efficacy during the sensemaking process (Ng et al., 2019). The less self-efficacy and the more target-efficacy perceived will likely result in destructive behaviors (e.g., punishing the target). As a result of engaging in active or passive destructive behaviors, bystanders may engage in retrospective moral disengagement (Ng et al., 2019) by shifting the narrative to explain why the destructive behavior was enacted. While psychological factors for bystanders are complex, other organizational factors become key elements during the workplace bullying events sensemaking process.

Organizational Context

Perceptions of low organizational support (MacCurtain et al., 2017) and fear of going against the organizational culture (Bloch, 2012) may impede prosocial bystander behavior. According to O'Reilly & Aquino's (2011) model of workplace bullying bystander behavior,

even highly morally obligated bystanders fail to act due to organizational power dynamics. Feelings of powerlessness and organizational constraints are reasons why bystanders do not act in these situations (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008). While perceptions of the organizational context coupled with perceptions of target-efficacy often predict bystander behavior, emotion also plays a large role.

Bystander Emotion

Mulder et al. (2016) pointed to fear of guilt by association as other causes of destructive bystander communication (e.g., siding with the bully or becoming passive). A highly influential affective reaction, fear, becomes more predictive of antisocial bystander communication (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). For example, a witness could sympathize with a target who gets mistreated. However, if they are also fearful of being bullied as well, a witness may prefer to stay silent. The absence of fear becomes a leading cause of prosocial workplace bullying bystander helping behavior (Báez-León et al., 2016). The cognition-emotion-behavior sequence model indicates bystanders may feel anger if the target is seen as at fault and sympathy if the target is perceived as powerless (Mulder et al., 2016). The role of bystander emotion in sensemaking becomes complex during events such as workplace bullying.

Many bystanders often feel the same harmful effects as targets (Emdad et al., 2013; Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013) and supportive communication for bystanders has been shown to increase prosocial behavior (Báez-León et al., 2016). Perceptions of organizational support are greater predictors of prosocial bystander behavior than bystander intervention training (Sundstrom et al., 2018). While previous research has examined the affective response through a post-positivist lens (Mulder et al., 2016), it is necessary to elucidate how emotion becomes interwoven into the lived-experiences narrative for bystanders over time. The many facets of

bystander sensemaking models become predictors of the roles that bystanders may enact during workplace bullying events.

Bystander Roles

Based on the assessment of psychological and situational or contextual factors, bystanders may take on several active or passive roles within workplace bullying processes. Bystanders may take on either constructive (e.g., comforting the target or intervening) or destructive roles (e.g., siding with the bully or failing to intervene) that may improve or perpetuate workplace bullying issues (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Paull et al., 2012). Bystanders may become bully allies such as encouraging the bully or acting as henchmen (e.g., do the bully's bidding). Bystanders may also take on the role of passive bystander where they try to ignore the situation and stay under the bully's radar. Target allies are bystanders who take on a prosocial role where they help the target through comfort or standing up for them (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). These roles are largely influenced by bystanders' communication goals. Motivations for negative bystander roles (e.g., bully ally or passivity) include protecting one's own job, preserving face, or maintaining a positive relationship with the bully in power. Those who offer comfort to the target or attempt to intervene are often motivated by perceptions of justice and fairness (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). The role of bystander and workplace bullying experiences in general are marked by intense emotion throughout the process.

Workplace Emotion

Emotional experiences within organizations may become paradoxical due to assumptions of the workplace as a rational, emotionless space (Putnam et al., 2016). First introduced by Hochschild (1983), many organizational members engage in two forms of emotional communication (e.g., surface acting and deep acting) to fulfill organizational expectations. Miller

et al., (2007) later refined the duality of work-related emotional communication as authentic and inauthentic expression. Authentic emotion is truly felt and expressed by the individual. Inauthentic emotion is a display of emotion that is contrary to what is felt by the person. Often, organizational members must engage in inauthentic communication, especially during highly emotional events, due to organizational norms. For example, a target may claim that they are fine with harsh criticism or office gossip as to not cause unnecessary drama when it truly is a very detrimental and painful experience. Over time, suppressing work-related emotion can lead to burnout and work exhaustion (Powers & Myers, 2020). This may become a point of tension as bystanders attempt to make sense of their experiences through perceiving their own and others' emotional communication.

Social-Emotion Perception

Bystanders' perspectives are unique in that they are simultaneously perceiving their own emotion and others' emotions (e.g., bully, target, and other bystanders). Naturally, people are more accurate at perceiving their own emotional intensity versus others' emotional experiences (Van Boven et al., 2013). The dual judgement model of social-emotional perception proposes that two judgements across two dimensions are made during the perception of self and others' emotional experiences (Van Boven et al., 2013). Additionally, individuals are more likely to report a greater intensity of current emotion than previous emotion (White & Van Boven, 2011). For example, currently experiencing the brunt of hostile criticism hurts more in the moment than it does later after the events have subsided. Additionally, individuals use their own emotional experiences as a lens when perceiving the emotion of others such as witnessing the harsh criticism of a coworker. Some people may be able to perceive the intensity of that emotion more accurately if they themselves have previously had that experience. However, the ability to

perceive the emotion of others fully and accurately is impeded by psychological distance. A two-step process occurs in the psychological distance of one's own emotion over time and again in perceiving others' emotions, which may cause an empathy gap.

Empathy gap occurs when this dual judgement process is overlapped with the psychological distance between self and others and when social-emotional perception is inaccurate to true emotion (Van Boven et al., 2013). For example, while previously bullied witnesses may understand the pain that bullying can cause for someone else, it is impossible to truly feel the intensity of the targets' emotion in the moment. These complexities of self- and social-emotion perception increase when bystanders may want to take prosocial actions to support targets.

Emotional Support

Emotional experiences in the workplace are unique—organizational members simultaneously contend with the dichotomous nature of emotion and rationality. Individuals make sense of organizational experiences in terms of emotion that either disrupts or reaffirms the common rationality of organizational life (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006). Therefore, emotions perceived as work appropriate, or inappropriate, greatly inform the sensemaking process. Many faculty members make sense of tragic events through both a professional and emotional lens, often making efforts to blend the two (Miller, 2002). Because of this, many emotional experiences may become enigmatic within the organizational context.

Some forms of emotional support, such as advice, may also become paradoxical within the workplace. A paradox exists regarding target advice people failed to consider the intense emotion of targets' experiences and the constraints of organizational support (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2017). Human resource practitioners often face confusion when assessing target accounts

due to the prevailing emotionality of their experiences (Cowan, 2012). For example, a targets' account of bullying may be riddled with tears and a disoriented narrative, which makes it difficult for HR professionals to make sense of the issues. Listeners perceive more validity in workplace bullying target accounts that contain little to no emotion (Tye-Williams & Ruble, 2017). This may become another point of tension as bystanders make sense of their individual, and unique, emotional experiences within workplace bullying processes.

Organizational Sensemaking

The theory of sensemaking in organizations highlights how individuals collectively assign meaning through communication during uncertain, ambiguous, or disruptive events within the workplace (Weick et al. 2005). Shifting from a rational decision-making model for organizing, Weick (1995) proposed the process of organizing becomes a nonlinear cycle of "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). During the sensemaking process, organizational members notice fluctuations that deviate from the normal routine of organizational life, actively label events to reach commonly understood meaning systems, and prospectively preserve meaning of these significant events to predict plausible future encounters.

Sensemaking Properties

Weick (1995) conceptualized sensemaking theory as having seven core properties. First, identity is central to how organizational members make sense of disruptions. An organizational member's concept of self is reliant on interaction with the collective. Next, retrospection aids in sensemaking in that consciousness fundamentally exists in the past. Organizational members are conscious of what has occurred previously, and any new disruption is measured against those previous significant events, a recursive cycle. Organizations are not singular, fixed entities

external to the individuals who occupy the space. Instead, organizational members are active participants in their own environments. This is what Weick (1995) conceptualized as enactment. The enactment component of sensemaking theory involves people actively playing a role in producing the organizational environment they face. Fundamentally, the sensemaking process is an ongoing social activity in which organizational members are in a constant state of extracting cues from the social context to deal with paradoxes, inconsistencies, expectancy violations, and disruptive events. Finally, organizational members favor plausibility over accuracy in the pursuit of clarity and meaning for the event. This study focuses on the properties of emotion, identity, and environmental cues of sensemaking theory to examine how bystanders constitute what is workplace bullying, understand their role within workplace bullying processes, perceive self- and social-emotions, and use unique framing language to label their experience during the process of workplace bullying.

Emotion

Following disruptive events, cognitive arousal gives way to emotional experiences for organizational members. Weick, et al. (2005) emphasized that emotions play an influential role during the sensemaking process because unmet expectations often serve as an impetus to emotional experiences. When disruptions of everyday organizational life occur, they generate either positive or negative emotional responses. As organizational members build relationships and become more interdependent, they increase expectancies of one another's activities. As a result, the likelihood of expectancy violation and emotional experiences increase. Once the emotion is experienced, the organizational member engages in other components of the sensemaking process.

Identity

Sensemaking is also grounded in identity construction (Weick et al., 2005). How individuals see themselves and others in the organizational context impacts how they interpret certain events. Workplace bullying destabilizes targets' identity (Lutgen-Sanvik, 2008; Zabrodska, et al., 2016). Organizational identity also shapes how individuals enact and interpret their environment. Therefore, new identities may be formed as organizational members retrospectively make sense of their role during workplace bullying processes because identity is "an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others" during system disruptions (Weick, 1995, p. 20).

Environmental Cues

Organizational members take cues from their environment when making sense of, and defining, workplace bullying. Targets make sense of workplace bullying through the lens of an all-powerful management (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). Human resource professionals also take cues from organizational norms when determining what constitutes a workplace bullying situation (Cowan, 2012). Organizational norms influence bystanders' perceptions of workplace bullying severity (Ng et al., 2019). Within these examples, meaning is derived from environmental cues and enacted back into the organizational space. The actions outlined in the studies actively reaffirm the organizational norms members face when making sense of workplace bullying.

Framing Language

During system disruptions, organizational members retrospectively extract cues from the environment, often comparing what is familiar and what is newly experienced (Weick et al., 2005). These retrospective accounts also set the tone for future sensemaking and, therefore,

become prospective for events that may follow (Weick et al., 2005). Capturing how these cues become salient can provide insight into how bystanders pay attention to certain emotional and environmental factors as they make sense of witnessing workplace bullying issues. The retrospective and prospective nature of sensemaking processes are captured in narrative form, often using specific framing languages.

Targets make sense of workplace bullying through unique framing vocabularies to describe their experiences (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). In their study, targets depicted an all-powerful management and power-hungry workplace bullies. Targets also used terms such as hammering or water torture to describe the repetitive nature of their experiences (Tracy et al., 2006). These studies illustrate how duration, repetition, and power differential unique to workplace bullying become inter-subjectively woven into organizational members' social and historical meaning systems. Comparison of bystander framing language is necessary to elucidate a three-dimensional picture of workplace bullying processes from multiple perspectives.

Aims & Objectives

Areas warranting research attention are the roles of self- and social-emotional perception essential to sensemaking processes, the processual nature of workplace bullying from a bystander perspective, how bystanders make sense of their role, and the unique framing vocabularies that bystanders use to convey their perspective. These four needs in the research literature support this project's purpose: to elucidate how workplace bullying bystanders experience and construct meaning based upon their unique perspective. Previous research has focused on predicting bystander behavior (Ng et al., 2019), bystanders' communication goals (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013), and the roles bystanders enact during these processes (Paull

et al. 2012). This study takes an interpretive perspective by examining how bystanders narrate their perspectives and make sense of their own experiences.

The interpretive approach allows researchers to understand the processual nature of human experience (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). As a process, workplace bullying compounds and changes over time (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). Workplace bullying is often difficult to initially detect (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), emotional experiences inform the initial sensemaking process for targets (Tracy et al., 2006), and supportive communication attenuates over time (see Cowan & Toth, 2018 for a review). “By putting together descriptions of complicated processes,” retrospective in-depth interviews within the interpretive philosophical paradigm are designed to capture key events most salient in the sensemaking process and how these events unfold over time (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3). This study asks the following research questions.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do bystanders come to label an experience as workplace bullying?

RQ2: How does emotion inform the sensemaking process for bystanders?

RQ3: How do people come to label their role as bystanders throughout workplace bullying processes?

RQ4: What does it feel like to be a workplace bullying bystander?

RQ5: How does a person’s rank within the organizational hierarchy play a role in workplace bullying sensemaking processes?

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach highlights how individuals experience their lifeworld and symbolically co-construct meaning from their own perspectives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). An alternative to naturalistic scientific inquiry, qualitative research makes neither assumptions, nor predictions, about participants' behaviors because the focus places human interpretation of experience at the core of observation (Christians & Carey, 1989) while bringing to light how implicit meanings and cultural values shape the participants' lived experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Because many individuals struggle with explicit meanings to describe workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005), a qualitative approach elucidates how bystanders use their personal vernacular to shape their perceptions and make sense of these experiences. Therefore, this study is primed to develop a deeper understanding and idiographic explanations of how individuals can experience their role as bystanders to workplace bullying.

Meta-theoretical Framework: Interpretive Philosophy

Based upon Immanuel Kant's philosophy, the interpretive paradigm assumes reality is experienced subjectively in research participants' minds. Kant specified that our ideas of reality, space, and time are mere perceptions that exist in human consciousness, shaped by labeling and structuring experience. Therefore, reality becomes a co-constructed phenomenon that comes into being through communication (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Interpretive researchers commit to actively engaging with the study population to elucidate such experiences and render them understandable.

Epistemologically, the interpretive paradigm acknowledges that the nature of knowing cannot be separated from the knower (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). There is merit in not only acknowledging this facet of human endeavor, but also using this perspective to our advantage as

researchers. Research can become a co-construction of knowledge generated between researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2014). Rather than reacting mechanically to stimuli, people intentionally experience their lives. Research becomes a process giving participants the opportunity to construct their experiences, think reflexively about the significant events in their lives, and communicate their internal sensemaking process to others. Workplace bullying is fundamentally processual in nature (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009), marked by significant emotion (Tracy et al., 2006) and highly ambiguous events (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008); sensemaking theory allows researchers to elucidate how organizational members assign meaning during these processes (Weick et al. 2005). Therefore, the interpretive perspective is primed to answer the research questions surrounding how bystanders make sense of their perspective during workplace bullying processes.

Interpretive research is committed to discovering explanatory schemes rooted in the research participants' communication, behaviors, values, attitudes, and beliefs (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Here, theories are constructed from the participants', rather than the observers', viewpoints and assumptions (Burrell & Morgan, 1985). Because much bystander research assumes a predictive trajectory for bystander behavior (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013; Ng et al., 2019), and may implicitly assume passivity in the lexical term bystander, this approach's perspective highlights how bystanders label their experiences of workplace bullying events.

Organizational Context

Workplace bullying occurs at higher rates for academic institutions; targets often feel they have little authority to report their situations (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Many colleges and universities also lack policies and procedures to handle workplace bullying while

simultaneously touting civility and inclusion (Smith & Coel, 2018). Academic culture often encourages competition, criticism, power displays, and “publish or perish” mentalities that become a catalyst for bullying behavior (Farley & Sprigg, 2014).

Bullying in higher education may be unique in that multiple power dynamics are involved in these processes (e.g., administration, faculty, staff, and students), aside from a typical hierarchical model present in most other organizational sectors. Academia is unique in that this space is highly bureaucratized and bullying statistically occurs at higher rates for junior faculty, staff, and students (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Additionally, academia holds implications for what is expected behavior and what is inappropriate conduct that may become normalized in a publish or perish culture (Keashly, 2021). Thus, workplace bullying becomes more complex within this environment. Bullying in higher education can take on a variety of forms, such as *positional* bullying (e.g., when bullies are in official positions of power over targets), *counter-positional* bullying (e.g., when bullies are in an official lower-power status and bully on the basis of age, race, sexual orientation, or gender), and *conspirative-positional* bullying (e.g., multiple bullies occupying multiple power dynamics bully targets on the basis of age, race, sexual orientation, or gender) (Misawa, 2015). For example, gay male faculty of color may experience bullying from multiple power dynamics (i.e., administrators, department chairs, and students) due to the intersection of their race, gender identity/expression, and sexual orientation (Misawa, 2015).

Faculty are not the only organizational members experiencing bullying in higher education: Hollis (2015) reported that 62% of university administrators (e.g., student services, athletics, academic affairs, etc. personnel) were either targets or witnesses of bullying and 28% of participants witnessed *vicarious* bullying (e.g., bullying enacted through henchmen).

Participants in the Hollis (2015) study reported higher rates of organizational disengagement and productivity loss as a result of bullying. Faculty and staff currently employed within the U.S. college and university system are a prime research population. The variety of perspectives in faculty and staff viewpoints also provides an array of insights into how power dynamics may play a role in sensemaking processes for bystanders.

Working adults currently employed in the U.S. college and university system as faculty (including adjuncts, lecturers, as well as assistant, associate, and full professors) and staff (including clerical and administrative roles) comprise the study's sample. These individuals self-identify as having recently (e.g., within the past 6 months to a year), or are currently, witnessing workplace bullying. First-hand witnesses, known as bystanders, are individuals who hear and/or see events they interpret as bullying. Those with whom targets, or bullies communicate (e.g., coworkers or personal support networks) after the fact are not considered bystanders (Pouwelse et al., 2018) and therefore not included in this study.

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, I first used personal contacts with numerous individuals employed within two Southern United States universities. Snowball sampling was used to gain access to more participants currently employed within a higher education setting across the United States. Advertisements were released on the CommNotes (Communication discipline) listserv. Social media groups such as The Workplace Bullying Institute, Workplace Bullying in Higher Education, and Workplace Bullying Prevention Center were also used to advertise (with moderator permission) for participants. In general, participants were asked about the key points they label as workplace bullying, perceptions of their own and others' emotions, access to personal support networks, and how these communication processes change over time.

Procedures

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study as UTK IRB-20-05873-XP on July 21, 2020. Recruitment for participants began the following day via the approved media outlets and personal contacts through email. Interviews were conducted between August 12, 2020 and November 24, 2020 via Zoom or telephone due to the revised COVID-19 IRB guidelines. Informed consent forms were distributed to each participant (Appendix A). These forms also included counseling services information should participants need access after the interview because workplace bullying situations may be difficult for some participants to discuss (Tracy et al., 2006). I answered any preliminary questions prior to the consented recorded interview to ease any tensions or inquiries by participants. Interviews were recorded via Zoom software or my personal recording device (if interviews were conducted via telephone) and transcribed via Otter AI software. No compensation was given to participants in this study. Three-hundred thirty-four (334) pages of single-spaced textual data were captured for the study. Continued IRB approval was granted on July 8, 2021.

Participant Demographics

A total of 38 interviews were conducted. One interview narrative centered around experiences of sexual harassment rather than bullying. This interview was not included in the data analysis. Therefore, a total of 37 interviews were analyzed for this study. Nineteen (51%) participants held staff positions (including director, coordinator, academic advisor, and administrative assistant, etc.) in areas of athletics, humanities & fine arts departments, STEM departments, student services (e.g., recruitment/retention, academic advising, etc.), and university libraries/bookstores. Eighteen (49%) participants held faculty positions (including adjunct, lecturer, assistant, associate, and full professor) in areas of Business, Education, Fine

Arts, Nursing, Social Sciences (Communication, Journalism/Mass Media Studies, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, etc.), and STEM fields. On average, participants had 11 years' experience in higher education. Twenty-seven females (73%), nine males (24%), and one person identifying as non-binary (2.7%) participated in the study. One participant identified as Asian (2.7%), two participants identified as Black/African-American (5.4%), two participants identified as Hispanic (5.4%), and 32 (86%) participants identified as white. During the interviews, two participants disclosed that they identified as queer (5.4%) and two disclosed they were gay (5.4%).

Data Collection

In-depth qualitative interviews are the optimal method to uncover how witnesses intentionally engage in communication processes to understand and characterize their perspective as bystanders. In general, qualitative interviewing allows researchers to construct “portraits of complicated processes” (p. 3) and explore the nuances of difficult decisions individuals need to make (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Because workplace bullying bystanders can take on destructive roles (Paull et al., 2012), in-depth interviews can elucidate the sensemaking processes underlying decisions to remain silent or inadvertently exacerbate hostile workplace communication. In-depth interviews can also illuminate the sensemaking processes for prosocial bystander roles, which are often motivated by social justice goals (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). Lastly, interviewing allows participants to construct their own reality, using their own words, to convey meaning to others (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019), a fundamental interpretive approach assumption.

In-depth interviews elucidate richly expressive data often not observable to the outside world (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Because much of the sensemaking process occurs within the

individual's mind (Weick et al. 2005), qualitative interviewing's structure brings to light the sensemaking processes' meaningful moments (Rubin & Rubin, 2017). In general, interviews allow researchers to develop a trusting, open relationship that leads to a conversational space in which participants become comfortable sharing their lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2017). A semi-structured interview guide has the capacity to explore unanticipated statements or topics, define properties of key phenomena, and elicit content that explicates components of the bystanders' sensemaking process (Charmaz, 2014). This format allows researchers to explore nuances of key turning points, emotion-perception, as well as cultural and organizational contextual factors that influence bystander sensemaking processes.

Interview Guide

Semi-structured interview questions (Appendix B) often begin with a *general tour*, which acclimates researchers to the participants' daily life (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) as well as builds trust/rapport and eases any nerves (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Because workplace bullying issues are often difficult to discuss (Tracy et al., 2006), general tour questions help ease tensions, a necessary starting point. These questions also help researchers understand the participant's organizational environment. Answers to these questions may become salient as the participants walk through other questions about workplace bullying, emotion, and bystander sensemaking.

Main questions are posed to answer the research question and *follow-up questions* are asked to gain a depth of knowledge about the concepts at hand (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Because the main scope of this study is how bystanders make sense of their experiences, main and follow-up questions are centered around a general understanding of what constitutes workplace bullying, understandings of what the term bystander means to participants, how they identify with their role, as well as retrospective and prospective sensemaking questions. Asking questions

centered on participants' conceptual understandings of what constitutes bullying as well as the term bystander creates "the building blocks of meaning that reflect how [the participants] see their world" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 117).

Questions following a general interview guide were geared toward each research question. *RQ1: How do bystanders come to label an experience as workplace bullying?* These questions helped me understand what became most salient for bystanders as they witnessed workplace bullying processes and how they constituted and labeled workplace bullying. Also, these questions helped to get to the processual nature of workplace bullying from the bystanders' perspective. *RQ2: How does emotion inform the sensemaking process for bystanders?* These questions helped me to understand the role of emotion during bystanders' sensemaking narratives and how self- and social-emotion perception may play a role in bystander experiences. *RQ3: How do people come to label their role as bystanders throughout workplace bullying processes?* These questions helped me understand how participants understood their role in workplace bullying processes, how being a witness impacted their identity, and how communication with others may inform bystander narrative. *RQ4: What does it feel like to be a workplace bullying bystander?* I was able to understand metaphors and unique framing language for bystanders that may be similar to, or different from, how targets illustrate their points of view.

The semi-structured nature of qualitative interviewing can encompass specific topics of the study while also accounting for possible deviations and areas of interest that become most salient to the participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As areas became prime topics of discussion that may have fallen outside of the interview guide, I entered those conversations at the participants'

lead. If topics began to fall too far outside of the scope of the interview, I gently guided into other questions within the scope of the study.

Throughout each interview, I asked participants to tell me a story or provide an example about their bullying experience. This was not prompted by any specific question from the guide. However, as topics from the interview guide became salient to participants during their stories, probing questions were asked about these areas. I engaged in active listening and probed where appropriate to understand the meaning behind what the participants were communicating throughout their narratives. Their perspectives and stories were the highlight of each semi-structured interview. Thus, specific questions from the interview guide sometimes took a back seat when in the middle of an in-depth conversation about participants' lived experiences.

This method of interviewing proved fruitful in that participants had the freedom to describe their own worlds while also remaining within the broad scope of the research study. Follow-ups were conducted at times via email at the participants' discretion if they chose to add clarification or other points to their narrative. All relevant communication in that regard was accounted for during data analysis. No casual conversation via follow-up email without the participants' explicit permission was included in the study.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory data analysis methods "consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for...analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves." (Charmaz, 2014, p. 1). Theory develops from the data generated by participants (those experiencing and having first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon in question) rather than outside sources, such as other theories or the researcher's own assumptions. Because the process of bystanding to workplace

bullying is often understood through a post-positivist lens, this study's iterative approach provides a conceptual understanding of how bystanders construct their own understanding.

In the beginning stages of qualitative research, I must *bracket* my prior personal experiences, theoretical knowledge, and personal judgement of workplace bullying processes. The words, experiences, decisions, and perspectives of the participants take precedence. Bracket notes were kept throughout the interview process, re-listening to audio, re-watching video recordings, and re-reading interview transcripts so I could become immersed in the participants' lifeworld of workplace bullying experience. I, like many, often understood the role of bystander to be a separate unit of analysis juxtaposed against others involved in workplace bullying processes (e.g., targets, bullies, supervisors, etc.). I initially began the study thinking the experience of this role would be delineated from others.

Throughout most of the bystander literature, researchers are also perplexed at why bystanders do not act in a prosocial way. Due to this assumption, I found myself at times feeling judgment about a person's decisions to remain silent, offer limited support, or not make the same decisions I would have made. Reflexivity about these preconceived bystander experience notions helped me to elucidate how bystanders experienced and made sense of their own role in workplace bullying processes.

Memo-writing is a pivotal step after data collection and throughout the data analysis process (Charmaz, 2014). I first engaged in memo-writing immediately afterward or within 24 hours of concluding each in-depth interview to capture my initial thoughts from the conversations, muse about possible theoretical underpinnings, develop connections and differences among participants, as well as crystallize other questions to ask in future interviews. No new memos, theoretical possibilities, topics of conversation, nor new probing questions were

generated after the 33rd interview, which took place on November 11, 2020. Five additional interviews were conducted to ensure saturation (Charmaz, 2014) among memos, themes, interview questions, subtopics, and probing questions. Interviews were concluded and no new categories were generated after the 38th interview on November 24, 2020.

The first step in grounded theory data analysis is *initial coding* (Charmaz, 2014). Here, I developed general categories and themes for each research question, which was asked independently while reviewing the entire data set. As many ideas and themes as possible (Charmaz, 2014) were generated during this phase for each research question. Each general category was constantly compared to others to ensure exclusivity from one theme to the next. Charmaz (2014) iterates that the initial coding phase can often be marked by verbs. Therefore, during this phase, I sifted through the data with how participants go about '*labeling*,' '*experiencing emotion*,' '*experiencing identity*,' and '*feeling*' regarding the research questions.

Next, Charmaz (2014) illustrates that *focused coding* is used to “define the most useful initial codes and...test them against extensive data.” (p. 138). Specific themes were generated from the vast array of general codes in the initial round. The most common patterns among themes, noting negative and variant cases, were appropriated for each research question. Also, using Strauss & Corbin’s (as discussed in Charmaz, 2014) strategy for axial coding, I examined the thematic data *conditions* in which the structure of workplace bullying was experienced, the *actions/interactions* of participants as they responded to workplace bullying events, and the *outcomes* of their decisions as bystanders to workplace bullying. These ways of examining the data helped me to understand the processual nature of labeling, experiencing emotion, identifying with, feeling, and understanding organizational roles workplace bullying processes from a bystander perspective.

Finally, codes were reviewed with the theory of sensemaking in organizations (Weick et al., 2005) framework specifically related to cue extraction, identity, and emotion. Using this theoretical framework to examine the focused codes allowed me to ensure theoretical rigor and clarity in understanding bystanders' experiences during workplace bullying processes. After data analysis was accomplished through initial coding, focused and axial coding, and theoretical overview; saturation emerged when no new properties of each theme were generated (Charmaz, 2014). Additional second and third waves were conducted within each theme to generate negative or comparative cases and subthemes.

Lindlof & Taylor (2019) explain that *member-checks* are integral to the ethical rigor and validity of qualitative study. Here, my findings were returned to participants to check for plausibility and accuracy. Once thematic analyses were concluded, I conducted member-checks with every participant whose narratives were direct quoted in the study. Member-checks were conducted with 26 participants between August 9, 2021 and September 3, 2021. General questions were asked of participants, which centered around: 1) *Are these statements and my understandings true to your experience?* 2) *Is there anything you feel is missing or inaccurate to your narrative?* and 3) *Are you comfortable with the narrative as presented to be released in the dissertation study?* Direct quotes, theoretical support, and explanations were confirmed by participants included in the study and their permission was granted to include excerpts as depicted.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

Data from this study yielded five major themes – shattered dreams, occupational identity, backstage sensemaking, thrownness, and toxic environment. The *shattered dreams* theme centered on how expectations for working in academia were either violated or confirmed. Many participants voiced a threat to their *occupational identity* while discussing their experiences with workplace bullying. As participants continued their narratives, they often engaged in *backstage sensemaking* to find ways of coping and making sense of bullying experiences. Many participants often voiced that they felt a sense of *thrownness* where they often voiced feeling caught off-guard and thrust into bullying situations. Finally, participants described an overall feeling of living in a *toxic atmosphere* and the repercussions such as hypervigilance and loss of trust. As this dissertation discusses the term bullying experiences, this term encompasses both the target and bystander roles. Some narratives pointed out when a person experiences being the target and when they experience being the bystander. For the most part, many characterizations in participant narratives encompassed an enmeshment of target and bystander perspectives.

Shattered Dreams

The first major theme generated from interview data was *shattered dreams*. Participants, both faculty and staff, had high hopes of working in higher education. To them, this was a place of academic freedom, on the cusp of generating knowledge, and a respectful work environment. Participants described how their dreams of being in the academic world were shattered when they experienced bullying in the workplace. Participants also came into their careers with archetypes in mind that were crushed when they experienced a bullying environment. Other cases indicated that some participants were prepared for bullying in the academic world, often experiencing it during graduate school. This theme uses comparative cases for expectations

because both expectancy violation and confirmation appear relatively equally throughout many participant narratives. A strong representation of expectancy violation and expectancy confirmation were seen throughout this theme. These narratives illustrate how expectations (both violation and confirmation) become integral for participants as they discuss their workplace bullying experiences.

Holly, a new assistant professor in English, had recently graduated from doctoral school and landed her first teaching role at her university. She described being excited to start her new journey as an assistant professor, moving from student to colleague. This dream of being an academic was shattered when she was a target of, and witnessed, bullying in her departmental unit.

And I think for me, because I had recently done my PhD...I was in such a bubble. We were all doing critical work...I just thought that's how everybody thought...but, it was like a 'mean girls' thing...we're PhDs, I just thought we would be just together saving the world. So, I was facing my naiveté. – Holly

She quickly found out that many of her colleagues who bullied others were not living up to her expectations as academics (i.e., “together saving the world”) She goes on to describe her expectancy violation in terms of shattering an illusion.

And so, when I got into the job when I moved from PhD state to, you know, colleague. I was like, “Wow, they're years behind where I'm studying.” And I think I went through a lot of disillusionment. I would say a lot of disillusionment. – Holly

After Holly experienced shattered dreams, she began to disconnect from her situation as well as experience confusion for the future. “For me, I felt like I was on the outside looking in. I know I signed up to do this work, but how do you maintain sanity?” The disillusionment left Holly with

more confusion wondering how she would be able to cope with the bullying environment in academia.

Bobby, an assistant professor in the medical field with 7 years' experience in academia recalled his standpoint as a bystander to workplace bullying. He described his hopes of research, generating knowledge, and the intellectual world were shattered as he made sense of an academic environment riddled with bullying. His dreams of philosophical debate and intellectual conversations turned into a curse when he witnessed bullying early in his academic career. He described this violation in terms of misfortune.

But it definitely illustrated a side of academia that I didn't know existed. I guess it made academia, a less beautiful place. I probably went into it thinking, "Oh, boy, these are the people that form the intellectual fabric of society. And we're going to sit at lunch and talk about Aristotle and Socrates and philosophical discussions, and then tiptoe through the tulips." And apparently, that's not how it was. Now, it's a curse. – Bobby

Bobby goes on to explain feeling cursed because he was stuck in an environment where leadership became complicit with bullying.

There was no leadership action taken...and that was unfortunate. It almost felt as if the inaction made these people kind of complicit ...but they weren't going to do anything to mitigate...and how unfortunate... [they weren't] actually trying to correct this problem or mitigate the toxicity. – Bobby

Bobby also illustrated a period of disconnection and further confusion after his dreams were shattered. "I feel like I'm watching a movie or something. These are supposed to be the people who make up the intellectual fabric of our society, why are they behaving like little kids?"

Bobby described his dreams of what academia should be, felt his dreams shatter, and disconnected from his standpoint as a target and witness to workplace bullying.

Many other participants also made sense of the bullying through the lens of their archetypes for academia. They often would describe how an academic should behave in the workplace and what a higher education institution stood for. Sonya, an associate professor with 10 years' experience in the STEM field, described her prior experiences with a good working environment and leadership. She retrospectively formed an archetype for academia based on her prior work experience. Her chair began to micro-manage her and other female colleagues. When her expectations for a good leader were not met, she described the bullying as inappropriate, and the bully as entitled. She simultaneously recollects her merit as a professor and what should come first in academia. However, she was forced into the bullying situations. Sonya goes on to explain that her hopes were wrecked after she witnessed the same bullying happen to her colleagues. The meaning that she derived as her dreams were shattered was one likened to rubble.

I know what good leadership feels like. So, he was inserting himself in some of my processes, similar processes as far as teaching, and clearly feeling that he was entitled to do so. I've been teaching at a university for five years. You put the academic freedom in front. That is what's appropriate. And in the scope of the class, your opinions [sic] about how I teach is not really relevant. And he tried to strong arm and that was about the worst of it... And it's hurtful in the end, because he was someone that I looked up to. I have fond memories of [the University] and working with him and this completely wrecked it.

— Sonya

After Sonya's dreams were shattered, akin to wreckage in a ship like the Titanic sinking, she also experienced disconnection. "I'm definitely jaded to my department..." Sonya, just like Bobby and Holly, experienced a disconnection and further confusion for the unknown as she made sense of a bullying environment.

Joon Jae, an associate professor in Fine Arts with 8 years' experience, described how he still holds out hope that academia will meet his ideal. However, the process of disenchantment set in as he recalled his experiences as a target and bystander to workplace bullying. Simultaneously, he talked about his sadness in possibly finding another university, how his hopes were shattered, and his continued confusion with his expectation violations.

Well, if I get another job offer, I'm not sticking around. I mean, I hate to leave this place.

I think I fell in love with the idea of the school, and that it's a sleeping giant that will eventually get there. But, um, when you're constantly being taken advantage of...I'm being underpaid...the workload isn't sustainable...I advise more students...Spanish is my first language, [when he was conversing with a colleague from South America] I was told to "Speak English!" while they banged their hand on the desk in a shouting voice.

And again, I don't understand that kind of thing. – Joon Jae

While Joon Jae's expectations were altered over time, he still held out a small expectation that his university would come around and do the right thing. He, as well as the others, likened their experiences to a great purpose, "a sleeping giant," and a philosophical safe haven. Joon Jae goes on to explain how his continued confusion manifested as self-doubt. "I give everything to this job, everything. And all [they've] managed to do is to create and sow doubt of my abilities."

Comparative cases were also recorded for this theme of shattered dreams. Many participants came into academia with the expectation that bullying would be prevalent. These

participants recalled learning about this possibility in graduate school. For others, their bullying experiences began during graduate school. They came into their professions with expectations of bullying based upon prior experiences. Still, they experienced a form of expectancy violation or confirmation.

Patty, a librarian with 5 years' experience, made sense of the bullying retrospectively while thinking back to her experiences in graduate school. While she did not experience bullying in graduate school, her mentors prepared her for the prevalence of bullying in academia. She finally understood that advice after witnessing workplace bullying in her current position.

I will say that when I was going through graduate school, we were prepared for this like this was actually something that was told to me that before you get tenure, expect there to be some classism. I think they tried to make it seem not like Middle School, right. But that was the word I had heard, classism and the hierarchy. Be mindful that you're going to be victim to that. And I didn't really know what that meant until coming here. – Patty

Patty went on to say that the bullying amplified other issues she was going through. “I think as a woman, there is already this sense in academia of deep imposter syndrome... And the bullying just amplifies that. It truly makes you feel like you're incompetent and you don't belong.” While her expectations were not violated, Patty still retroactively made sense of her expectations when they were confirmed.

Bill is a full professor in the STEM field with 28 years' experience and is nearing retirement. He recalled an entire career spanning decades that was riddled with bullying. When I asked him about when the bullying started for him, he immediately went to his experiences as a graduate student. While these experiences formed his expectations as an academic, they left a

lasting impression on him decades later. That initial expectancy violation of shock carried over into his entire career as a professor.

And to me, it all goes back to graduate school. I was abused in graduate school, not physically; verbally, mentally. I was shocked at the abuse that went on when I was there. So, it all started for me there. I got stories that make your hair curl that went on in graduate school. – Bill

When asked about what happened in graduate school, Bill explained that professors would “[make] graduate students stay in a room all night taking an exam...saying inappropriate language...throwing stuff in your face...having to sit on the floor in front of a mathematics professor while they sat in their chair during the exam...it’s a little bit like boot camp...” At this point, Bill mentioned that “you’re starting to bring out some deep scars” and we decided to change the focus of the interview because it became difficult for Bill to recall his experiences as a target and witness to bullying during graduate school.

Bill went on to explain how his expectations were crushed as a graduate student. “I know for me, I went to university as a young person, as a graduate student, very idealistic. It crushed me. It crushed me mentally.” While he went into his career with the expectation that bullying is prevalent in academia, he still recalled the crushing of his dreams early on.

Participants also made sense of the bullying over time, often learning to change their expectations for the academic work environment. Nick, who is an assistant professor in the social sciences and has 20 years’ experience in academia, also talked about his experiences with academic bullying spanning decades. His expectations have changed over the years due to the repetitive aspect of bullying. The process of disenchantment has spanned decades for Nick as well. So much so, that when he finally earned tenure, he likened his experience to being lifeless.

What once was a vibrant and positive expectation for being an academic was slowly beaten down over time. His expectation now is that bullying is just a part of academia.

[Bullying] comes with the territory because of the tenure system. For this crazy system, for six years, you have to watch what you say and be afraid of offending people and never speak up. What kind of a job is that? And by the time you get tenure, you're so beaten down, that all the soul has been sucked out of you in some respect, especially if you're in an unhealthy place. – Nick

This expectation was taken into prospective accounts for participants as they thought about their future careers and other job opportunities. The weariness that Nick described can be echoed in Sonya's account as she thinks about her future. She talked about revising her expectations for new employment. For many participants, hesitancy crept in as new expectations were formed. For Sonya, this hesitancy took place when prospectively making sense of the future of her department as well as the possibilities for new employment.

Given the previous five years, it's just strange that you turn on a dime, you know like that. That's hard to understand. That makes me question my future with this department. Honestly. It's scary because you don't you know. When you're changing jobs, you don't know what you're walking into. It could be the same or worse. – Sonya

Some participants lived out this scenario of changing jobs as they were able to get out of their environment where the bullying occurred. Even still, their expectations were also laden with hesitancy. Their shattered dreams lingered into new working environments as they tried to adjust and acclimate to a new position. Lucy, an administrative assistant with 5 years' experience in higher education, described finally getting out of her situation where her boss bullied her and her coworkers. When she experienced a positive work environment, Lucy told her new boss and

coworkers that she was never leaving. Lucy described the good working experience as something precious to hold onto. She expressed the hesitancy of entering a new environment and the relief that her new department was a positive one.

I've told the other people that I work with, like, I'm not leaving. I'm finally in a good place and y'all are stuck with me. I'm not leaving, you can't get rid of me. I'm not going to let it happen. Because it was so intense. And you never know what the job will be, going from that job to this one, if it was going to be any better. So, you never know, when you're changing jobs, what you're getting into, because you assume that everybody's putting on their perfect face for your interview. – Lucy

Lucy's expectations were taken into her new working environment, which caused hesitancy until positive experiences began to occur. In her narrative, these experiences took the form of a listening and attentive director who knew about her prior bullying experience (both as a witness and target). It was after experiencing a respectful working environment free from bullying that Lucy began to see her new work situation as something precious to hold onto. "I'm actually in a good place now. I'm not going anywhere. You're stuck [with me]."

Samantha, an assistant director with 8 years' experience in higher education, talked about her regret for not keeping prior expectations for bullying when she entered a new position. Throughout her interview, she described working in two academic environments in which she experienced bullying. She recalled her transition from one space to her current position. When she experienced bullying again in her new position, she often compared the similarities with her previous experience. She expressed disappointment at not noticing the red flags for her new boss and wishing she would have kept the expectations and hesitancies for her new position.

I'm laughing because I didn't learn. I found myself in a job here that there were so many similarities between my old and my new boss. I was just like, "How the heck did I manage to do this again?" I didn't spot red flags that I later think I should have. Um, but in a way, I almost didn't bring it with me. In the beginning, I think the way I brought it with me I was actually looking for more of closer relationships with my coworkers. —
Samantha

Samantha went on to explain that she offered support to colleagues as a bystander by sharing her expectations for a professional work environment. "I have been through this before, and it is not okay. I was like, it is not supposed to be like this. This is not how bosses are supposed to treat you...this is not what it's supposed to feel like." Samantha went through two bullying environments in academia, expressed regret at not holding her expectations for the second position, and still held out hope that bosses should not treat employees in a demeaning, bullying way.

Theoretical Explanation

Many individuals have expectations for their careers and their work environments (Weick, 1995). An understanding of shattered dreams is bolstered by Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT; Burgoon, 1978). EVT explains that people enter an arousal state when their expectations for communication are violated. These violations can take the form of either positive valence (communication positively exceeded expectations) or negative valence (communication negatively did not meet expectations). Expectancies, what a person anticipates will happen in any given interaction, are formed over time as individuals increase their experiences with any given phenomenon (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993).

The process of having high hopes for academia (i.e., together saving the world, intellectual fabric of society, a sleeping giant) turned into shattered dreams (e.g., disillusionment, a curse, wreckage, [being] crushed, etc.) From here, disconnection began to happen for participants (e.g., outside looking in, watching a movie, jaded). Afterward, hesitancy was experienced for many participants over time as they witnessed the process of workplace bullying (e.g., you never know). While EVT is predictive for snapshot occurrences, the findings of this qualitative study are able to highlight how expectations and meaning change over time.

EVT also explains that communicator reward valence plays an integral role in predicting the intensity of the violation (Burgoon, 1978). Communicator reward is understood to be positive attributes of the communication partner, such as prestige, ability, or power. Both Holly and Bobby explained that they thought highly of their colleagues at first. Then, they experienced a negative valence violation when they were witness to, and targets, of bullying. Sonya and Samantha understood their current experiences with bullying against their ideal archetype of a good boss (e.g., knowing good leadership, not what this is supposed to feel like).

Comparative cases where participants knew they would be met with bullying were described in terms of expectancy confirmation. Patty found meaning in the advice she received in graduate school when her expectations were confirmed for bullying in academia. Nick explained how his expectations changed into a state of lifelessness over time through decades of bullying experiences. Therefore, the meaning participants derived during the initial stages of making sense of workplace bullying were *shattered dreams*.

Theoretical Connections

Keashly (2021) proposed that academia is often framed as spaces for freedom of thought, responsible for generating knowledge, and act in the public good. As such, Keashly (2021)

explained that some competitive, aggressive, or confrontational communication styles may become the norm within an environment that celebrates debate, which the author referred to as “reasonable hostility” (p. 6). However, these norms for communication within academia may manifest out of control without organizational oversight or constraints. This may prime organizational members within academia to come into this space with preconceived beliefs only to be met with normalized bullying behaviors. What is missing from this literature, however, is the effect that expectancy violation or even confirmation can have on those experiencing bullying (e.g., both targets and witnesses).

This theme echoes the premises outlined by Keashly (2021) as well as adds some insight into how these norms are experienced in the face of bullying. Some participants in the comparative cases of this theme did voice that they knew the norms of aggressive behavior in academia, often learning them in graduate school. While their expectations were affirmed, they still voiced a clear understanding of the distinction between workplace bullying and typical competitive communication within academia. Many of these participants voiced feeling the life sucked out of them over time. Other participants expressed they felt their dreams shatter. Their expectations for academia were likened to a sleeping giant and the intellectual fabric of society. However, their norm violation turned into a wreckage, disillusionment, and a curse. While the intensity of the expectancy violation or confirmation was not quantitatively measured, the narrative accounts of this aspect of workplace bullying point to the intensity behind these initial experiences.

Occupational Identity

In addition to archetypes about the academic environment, participants also held ideals about their role as teachers, directors, or coordinators in higher education. For many, they made

sense of the bullying events through their disruption to *occupational identity*. During their narratives, once the initial shock of the negative valence expectancy violation set in, participants would attempt to prove their worth and experience a struggle to be productive. As the bullying went on, participants would engage in self-preservation and made efforts to reclaim identity.

Betty, a director for student services with 10 years' experience in higher education, described how she made sense of being a target as well as witnessing the bullying. Throughout her story, she described the pride she took in doing her job well and had a great relationship with her previous boss. However, her experience took a turn when her boss retired, and a new supervisor took the position. "He started by questioning my judgment, my decision on things...said I lacked communication skills...I was suddenly thrust into a situation where every step that I took had to be managed and controlled." From there, Betty would reiterate "I was completely thrown for a loop because if I have a strong point, it's communication. I'm articulate, I'm intelligent, I'm well educated." Due to Betty's experiences as a target, she expressed self-doubt and a disruption to her identity as a good employee.

It sounds to me when I say it out loud, very childish, to say you were bullied, or that someone purposely usurped your authority and just intervened in your everyday actions. [It] makes you either feel or look incompetent or even unsure of yourself. That's really what began to happen. And I've watched him bully other employees and professors especially. – Betty

The disruption to her occupational identity occurred for Betty as she witnessed bullying happen to others as well. Witnessing her supervisor bully others in her department at first gave clarity to her experiences as a target. "It wasn't until it began to happen to [my coworker] that I realized really, what was happening to me...like a lightbulb went off." While Betty experienced the threat

to her occupational identity as a target, being a bystander helped her make sense of the situation with her supervisor bullying others. While witnessing the bullying happen to others, Betty thought about the occupational identity for herself and other targets.

Now all of the sudden and watching this happen to [my coworker] too. I thought, we aren't doing what we're supposed to be doing. I'm failing at this somehow. And he told me I had gotten too big for my britches. Like a child. I felt reprimanded. Childlike.

– Betty

Additionally, retrospective sensemaking processes for Betty included how she saw her role in workplace bullying situations that also disrupted her occupational identity, sense of purpose for the organization, and her goals of becoming a professional. Betty identified her position through a sense of loss and mourning. This sentiment is even carried into the new occupation she landed after she was able to get out of the workplace bullying situation.

And you mourn. I mean, I did plan on retiring from that job, you mourn what you were able to accomplish what you didn't get to accomplish. You mourn that self you feel you've lost. And then when you go back to a job, I still I find myself questioning whether I am the employee I think I am. – Betty

Elyse, a new adjunct lecturer in English with 2 years' experience, just came out of graduate school with many of her new colleagues. She described her unit as “a pretty cohesive family and [we got] along really well.” She talked at length about her aspirations to be a teacher. “I really wanted to be a teacher. I spent so much of my life denying that my English major was because I wanted to teach. [*laughs*]” However, her identity as a teacher shifted while working with a co-teacher from her time teaching in Slovakia and she became the target of bullying. The co-teacher would undermine her in the classroom, telling her students that she “wasn’t their real

teacher.” When this occurred and Elyse attempted to make sense of the bully’s actions, she immediately went to the disruption to her occupational identity as a teacher. “It was really hard to develop my teaching persona, develop that confidence in myself as a teacher, because I had a co-teacher, I worked really closely with [who] didn't believe in me.”

Elyse also witnessed bullying of her current unit coworkers as well as experienced being the target. The director of another center on campus would undermine their work. “[They would] tell us that we were doing our jobs wrong...talking down to us and critiquing us.” After sharing this story, she immediately went to justifying the occupational identity for herself and her colleagues. “When that happened, I'm like it's not like I'm Teacher of the Year or anything... we make jokes of our own accolades, which it really depressed me.” In the same conversation, Elyse talked about the accomplishments for her coworkers who were bullied as well while she made sense of the experience. “but they’re established scholars...they know what they’re doing.”

Even still, Elyse felt very much that her occupational identity was disrupted as she experienced being the target and witness to bullying in her workplace. Within the same sentiment of her confidence in herself and her accomplishments, she still felt that disruption to her occupational identity as she tried to make sense of her bullying experiences. Throughout her narrative, constantly proving herself (e.g., her awards, confidence in her teaching, workshop training, etc.) was intertwined with her disruption to her occupational identity during workplace bullying events.

I still, as much as I want to say that I'm confident as a teacher and I feel like I have my teaching persona, I still very much on the inside feel expendable as an instructor. You know, even though I have a teaching award, and I have specific training that other instructors don't, I still very much view myself as expendable. – Elyse

Corinna, an assistant professor/research assistant in STEM with 10 years' experience, remembered a bullying situation occurred when she made a mistake while training a new lab assistant. Her boss, the research director, "[sent] this really long email about how I was a bad leader....and how horrible it was that I wasted all this money, and it's all my fault." After explaining the situation, Corinna immediately questioned her career plans.

When this person did that to me, the first time around, I was like, "Oh this is really bad, and I don't know if this is the environment, I want to work in." Like, it definitely affects whether or not I want to continue working and research. – Corinna

Corinna went on to discuss that she was a bystander to the same treatment of other employees and graduate students dished out by the research director. She noted their response to the bullying as well. "I have seen from this lab, a lot of people on the lower levels and graduate students...not really continue on...they really get upset and you know, anxious and nervous...[they're] kind of shut down." Corinna went on to question her occupational identity from working in this environment riddled with bullying. "So, it definitely affected I think my research in the end by limiting the projects that I was going to be involved on." Corinna explained that the constant "aggression and yelling" dished out from her boss, caused her a loss to productivity in her research. "I just feel like there was an element of creativity that's lost... [there's a] fear of creativity... because you know, you are part of the machine and you have to crank, crank, crank."

Corinna then began to prospectively talk about her position as a research advisor working with graduate students. She references her experiences with her current bully while making plans for her occupational identity in the future.

I think it affects me a lot. I'm not going to ever yell at a grad student...I do not want to be like that. So, it's something that's affected me. And actually, if I feel like I am getting frustrated with a student or something, I take a step back. Am I being like him? And I want to make it almost like a checkpoint, you know. I've never yelled but still like, it's always in the back of my mind. – Corinna

Throughout many narratives, participants would describe how they found ways to cope mostly by engaging in self-preservation to protect their occupational identity. Henry, a full professor with leadership experience in the social sciences has been in higher education for 30 years. He first recalled his experiences as a witness to bullying of staff by a faculty member. “I've seen those situations where faculty attack staff are just kind of condescending... [the bully would] berate that person in front of everybody.” He immediately went to the possibilities of the occupational identity for typical staff positions as he made sense of witnessing their situation.

I remember one vivid memory of [them] crying, coming into my office, this is a staff person, who just, was just beside herself... made to feel like she had done something wrong...it could be a gender issue because many staff are female... the staff person felt so undervalued...it's this pecking order. – Henry

Henry also explained that he was eventually a target and witness to bullying. “We had a former dean that ran our unit, in a way that just was so mean, we were still suffering from trauma.” The former dean would “give certain people privileges and were rewarded...playing favorites” and punish others who did not support the dean, “there was no equity.” This caused a sense of trepidation and fear among the unit. “The culture to me is that kind of where people are intimidated or afraid of speaking up.”

Henry went on to clarify the unit began to engage in self-preservation that lingered even after the former dean moved on to another position.

I don't think people have recovered. We lived under this former dean for quite a number of years. And I mean, everybody I talked to [said] "I'm still kind of laying low. I'm afraid, you know, because I lived with it for years." I was kind of surprised by that...But I think the trauma that's associated with years of that sort of living in fear of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, laying low, staying off the radar, trying to figure out how to survive in an environment where these issues were never really discussed openly. –

Henry

Henry finished up his interview explaining that his unit has been trying to move forward with a new dean. However, there were lingering trauma responses from those around him as they attempt to create a new faculty and staff culture in his college. "I think it's much improved...we have a new dean...and a new sense of us all working together...I'm sure there's remnants...new people coming in without that history helped a lot. Moving forward, but it takes, it takes years."

Revisiting Joon Jae's narrative, once he came to terms that academia is not the "sleeping giant that will eventually get there," he began to engage in self-preservation as well. He told the story of an administrator pointing to their newly built offices and to keep in mind who paid for it. Joon-Jae immediately went into self-preservation mode. For him, self-preservation came in the form of playing along with the bully's need for power.

I knew what he was doing. I felt like he was trying to tell me know your place. Fall in line. And don't say anything. Oh, and I turned to him, and I was like, "You're right. That is a wonderful building. I am so blessed." And I played the game, I played the game. –

Joon Jae

Over time, though, participants would develop ways to reclaim or reconstruct their identity in light of workplace bullying situations. Participants saw ways they could find dignity and pride in their work and use their previous experiences to identify the importance of their role as bystanders for future bullying events. Mostly, for those in the target-bystander position, the identity work went inward. They were able to reclaim their purpose for being an academic and put their efforts into the rewarding parts of the job as a way to cope through their workplace bullying situations.

Molly, an assistant professor in Education with 6 years' experience, talked about her encounters with bullying right out of graduate school. She began in her department as a lecturer with the hopes of landing a tenure-track position soon thereafter. She had high hopes of joining them as colleagues. Her occupational identity was in the early stages of formation. "I was fresh out of grad school; I had no idea what to expect...instead of seeing my coworkers as colleagues, I kind of looked up to them because they were the professors... I was pretty happy with the job" She was placed with a faculty mentor who recommended that she get involved with many projects "even though things were not required." Molly went on to clarify why she took on extra projects as a non-tenure-track lecturer for four years. "I thought, well, maybe if I can make myself valuable to the university, I can one day move into a tenure-track position." However, her hopes for moving into a tenure-track position were crushed when she applied for a position and did not get an interview. Her mentor confronted Molly in a condescending way after that moment. "She said, 'I guess you've figured it out by now' [*sarcasm*]." At that moment during her story, Molly explained she felt that hit to her occupational identity and, like Elyse, was always trying to prove her worth to her organization and colleagues.

It was just like, being smacked in the face. Because for real, this job felt like it was meant for me. I hit a really bad place in my life wondering, like, is this what I meant to be doing? Do I not understand myself? Do I not understand my program? And that I was being really taken advantage of...I was constantly trying to prove my worth to these people...because they were taking advantage of that, of my drive to prove my worth.

– Molly

Molly then began to have clarity about the treatment of others after her experience as a target. “I started paying attention to the way that my other coworkers, especially [the mentor], talked poorly about [another professor] behind her back, and realize that they’re probably doing the same thing to me.” Molly and the other professor formed a bond through their trauma of bullying experiences and would often get together to vent and work on projects together.

After years of experiencing and witnessing bullying dished out by her faculty mentor, Molly knew it was time to finally leave her University. For her, the act of applying and interviewing for other jobs helped to restore her occupational identity.

I applied to a bunch of jobs, I got four or five interviews, two on-campus visits; both on-campus visits resulted in job offers. And it was funny because as soon as I stepped foot on campus, I knew this was where I wanted to be. My heart, weirdly felt at home. And I felt like I was most myself during that interview. – Molly

Molly went on to say that her new department had restored her faith in herself and her abilities. “People seem to really value myself and who I was, and what I was bringing with me instead of just, like expecting to mold me into what they wanted me to be.” However, she met this newfound positive experience with trepidation. She experienced an interwoven process of threats

to her occupational identity, relief at the possibility of reclaiming her worth as a professor, and the lingering effects of a bullying environment.

I cried so much. Like that relief it's finally happened... And I also just cried because I felt like I was mourning. What I had thought was my career path at [the previous university]. It was also sad crying and terrified crying of what if [the university] was right, and I can't do this. – Molly

Molly concluded her interview with profound advice based on her experiences that were heavily rooted in one's occupational identity. She now had a heightened sense of how she wanted to experience her identity as a professor in academia. "One of the biggest things is that loyalty to a university should not come at the cost of losing yourself...one of the biggest things I work on now is not letting my identity be defined by this job."

Going back to Nick's story, after he experienced decades of bullying, his way of coping was to find dignity in his work again. He found ways to recover his identity, both inside and outside of the organization. He likens his newfound reclaim to identity as a chant – something he can always reiterate to himself to get through a bullying work environment.

And so, I came to the conclusion. So, here's, here's my little mantra. I came to [the] conclusion that I have a job. I have a steady income. I have benefits. I have a house. I have a family. I have friends. I have my health. And my students like me, and so that's a full basket. – Nick

Another way the participants identified their role as a bystander is by handling new workplace bullying situations from their lens as previous targets. They could have a fuller sense of identifying their role as bystanders and be in a position to actively help in the situation. This process helped participants like Bill reclaim his sense of occupational identity, identify the

importance of his role as a bystander, and give a sense of meaning to his previous workplace bullying experiences. Throughout Bill's interview, as previously discussed, he always went back to his traumatic experiences in graduate school. He began to use his story to help current graduate students who were bullied by faculty. This gave his story a sense of purpose.

It really helped in a way, it really made me aware... [Seeing other graduate students bullied] it hurts my heart...And I tell them a little bit about my stories. I've had professors like that. And look at me today, you know, not that I'm bragging. But I'm saying I got through it all, and it's hurtful. But try to ignore it the best you can. And any advice there [was] greatly appreciated.... I know it's helped me to get their mind off [the bullying] a little bit. – Bill

Theoretical Explanation

Occupational identity is the way people make sense of themselves with others within organizational life (Kenny et al., 2011). An individual does not have a sense of identity alone. Identity is always understood through and because of communication. Within organizational life, occupational identity is one's co-constructed sense of meaning about their work. Many organizational members develop ideals of becoming professionals as well (Kenny et al., 2011). Participants in the current study would often prospectively make sense of the life of academics informed by a sense of dignity in their work. Betty had confidence in her communication skills and Elyse always had dreams of becoming a teacher.

Organizational members' sense of occupational identity comes from their sense of what is good work. "The worth of a job depends on how the person doing the job relates it to their sense of identity" (Kenny et al., 2011, p. 72). For both Nick and Molly, they developed ways to reclaim their worth inside and outside the academic organization. Nick discovered newfound

hope in his students (within his occupation) as well as outside the workplace (home, friends, family). Molly, as well, cautiously reclaimed her identity when her new colleagues affirmed her good work and allowed her to establish her own identity within the department.

Because workplace bullying is known to be a very confusing experience (Tracy et al., 2006), confusion arose for participants in the current study as they questioned their sense of purpose for the organization and their ability to do good work. Bullying, for them, disrupted their sense of occupational identity, both for themselves and perception of others. Our current workplace bullying research understands the disruption to identity for targets (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Identity work for targets occurs in stages, “first-and second-level stabilizing, sensemaking, reconciling, repairing, grieving and restructuring” (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008, p. 97). Throughout these phases, participants engaged in communication processes that included: assessing the validity of self, highlighting past success, convincing others of one’s identity, rebuilding one’s sense of self, and grieving the identity once had (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008).

Theoretical Connections

Zabrodska et al. (2016) also used the framework of sensemaking theory to understand workplace bullying events. The authors examined targets and perpetrators’ retrospective biographical accounts. The first theme generated from the Zabrodska et al. (2016) study was a destabilization of identity for targets, which became the catalyst of their workplace bullying narratives. Granted, confusion and emotional turmoil also showed up during this stage in the Zabrodska et al. (2016) study. However, retrospective sensemaking allowed the authors to pinpoint a clear beginning to workplace bullying processes that occurred in the early stages marked by threats to identity.

Sensemaking processes during workplace bullying events in academia have both target and actor (e.g., often referred to as the bully) narratives; destabilization of occupational identity was the first phase to occur during sensemaking of workplace bullying processes for targets (Zabrodska et al., 2016). This was experienced at a more intense level for participants because “[they] were all academics strongly invested in [their] identity as competent and virtuous employees” (Zabrodska et al., 2016, p. 143). The current theme, Occupational Identity, also found a destabilization of identity during participant narratives as they shared their experiences as both targets and bystanders (e.g., mourning the professional they could have become).

Backstage Sensemaking

After the initial expectancy violation and threat to occupational identity, many participants sought help from others to make sense of their experiences with workplace bullying. This often took place with coworkers or personal contacts (e.g., friends and family) through support-seeking strategies behind closed doors such as a private office or outside of the work environment. However, some participants were not able to find a support system. These were coded as comparative cases because these experiences were represented relatively equally to those who did have support. Many participants often described having to put on a show for others, such as during a department meeting throughout this theme. This was contrasted with seeking or providing support away from the presence of coworkers. This theme was labeled *backstage sensemaking*. A frontstage versus backstage communication pattern emerged as participants sought out strategies to make sense of and manage their workplace bullying experiences (Goffman, 1956).

Erin, an assistant professor in the social sciences with 9 years’ experience in higher education, was first a witness to bullying in her workplace and later experienced being the target.

She began her story with describing the type of bullying behaviors she witnessed in her workplace. “So, the normal communication...can be very pleasant, but then it’s psychological in a sense, like being praised for something but then also having it taken away from you at the same time.” Erin went on to discuss that much of the bullying she witnessed was in the form of emotional abuse (e.g., gaslighting, manipulation, gossip, etc.). “We were told certain things about other people, but in reality, it was because they were trying to...further their own agenda. I find out later it’s because they wanted more information...and [they were] spreading lies.”

However, the bullying escalated to outward criticism, psychological manipulation, and even physical assault. It was here that Erin began to take notice that only women in her unit were being targeted by a particular male coworker. “He would come in the office and yell at her [the target] and tell her how much of a terrible coworker she was. And would also then simultaneously like the same day, flirt with her.” Later on, another coworker was physically assaulted. “He yelled at her...and then shoved her.” Things took a devastating turn when Erin’s coworker attempted to report her situation. “She tried to report that and then she was told they couldn’t do anything.” This took a toll on Erin as she tried to make sense of the bullying in addition to the lack of support by her chair and dean. “They don’t help anyone but protect the person that’s praised...that’s what sparked ‘these people are bullies here’...it was very discouraging...I can’t talk about anything...you’re higher in the system, you’re protected versus if you’re lower, you’re told not to say anything.”

It was after the report that Erin began to experience bullying directed at herself as well as witnessing others. “My office was broken into...I taught more classes, but I wasn’t promoted...and I told my chair, and he said, ‘Well, if anything else happens, we’ll [report] it.’” Erin did not report her bullying situations any further. It was at this point that Erin began to reach

out to other colleagues for support. She was met with complete astonishment by her male coworkers that anything was even happening. Erin was in a close-knit friend group with one other female (Jenny) and two other male (Jason and Nathan) colleagues. Erin and Jenny disclosed to Jason and Nathan what was happening.

[Jason and Nathan] didn't know; they had no idea what was going on. They didn't experience any of it. They didn't see what we were seeing. Luckily, they were able to be our confidants. But they didn't witness any of it and didn't experience any of it. Instead, they were given raises and moved up into positions. – Erin

The reaction from her male colleagues was disbelief at first. In their reaction, a frontstage persona of the bully emerged as Jason and Nathan made sense of Erin and Jenny's account. "And they said, 'I can't believe that happened. It just doesn't seem like him.' That was like a shock to them. They were floored that would happen based on their experiences with him." Even still, Erin continuously expressed gratitude for her friends. Even if they did not realize what was going on and did not perceive the bully the way she did, they still stayed late at work with her, monitored her exchanges with the bully, and were supportive people she could rely on. "Well, I was lucky enough within all of this chaos and terrible environment. Us four were like thick as thieves. So, we were lucky to have that environment. We were so close. Yeah, we're great." Even still, the disbelief expressed by Nathan had an impact on her disclosure of bullying events in private. Erin prospectively made plans to determine to whom to disclose her experiences.

[Jason] was very supportive... he's also someone that is a huge proponent for women's rights and equal treatment in the workplace...he doesn't believe in victim blaming...but it took a second for [Nathan] to understand...Going forward I was more willing to disclose things to [Jason] and limited things to [Nathan]. – Erin

After the backstage conversations occurred and she began to label the exchanges between her coworkers as bullying, Erin went on to say that she offered support to Jenny. It was during these moments that Erin was able to gain clarity as they collectively tried to make sense of the situation.

I was jaded about it at first...[then] we got really close to each other. And she started disclosing this. I then witnessed and heard some of the exchanges between the male faculty member and her... [She told Jenny], "I'll come over and get groceries and make food for you and your kids, so you could just relax." Trying to be there as a good friend.

Some type of support. She did the same for me. – Erin

Because Jenny was also experiencing bullying, Erin described the ease in which they could confide in one another. "It was just so much easier to talk to her than anyone else because she was directly experiencing it... It was hard to talk to other people because they didn't know the information." Erin explained how their backstage conversations became a space of relief for them. "[It was] very helpful because you keep all that inside it just turns into resentment and anger like, 'How could you be treated like this?'...it helped her and also helped me in a sense... You can empathize with each other."

Erin finished up her interview with advice for anyone currently facing bullying as either a witness or target. She emphasized the importance of finding a confidant when going through such a toxic and turbulent experience. "When it comes down to it, and there's nothing you can do and no one to talk to, being able to take time for yourself and make sure you're reaching out...because sometimes you can get in your head a lot."

Many times, participants would not realize their experiences were bullying until they engaged in backstage conversations with bystanders. Natalie, a coordinator for student services

with 6 years' experience was very excited to land her dream job in her area of expertise.

However, her perception of her new boss quickly changed when she started her position. "We just really hit it off during my interview. I was really excited about the role; she was excited about my potential contribution...but there were some behaviors that were really shocking to me." Natalie explained that her boss would often be quick to anger and lash out with harsh criticism in front of others. In one instance, Natalie explained the criticism she and her team received. "She refused to speak to us...and we finally have a staff meeting and she just explodes on us." Natalie went on to explain that these instances occurred often.

Natalie faced a lot of confusion concerning her boss's behaviors until a new coordinator witnessed the events.

And I think it was only really brought to light when our second coordinator was hired, and she started pointing things out and saying like, "You know, that's not normal, what she's doing, like, that's not okay" ... And so, it was just a lot of her learning the behaviors of my boss and saying to me, "That's not normal. That's not how people behave normally." And it's funny because it wasn't. – Natalie

Natalie and her team would often get into cycles of debriefing the behaviors afterward in a backstage space such as a closed office. Here, they prospectively made plans on how to handle future frontstage events.

And so, it was like this boiling point where it was just so wildly inappropriate that the three of us went back to my office afterwards. And we were just like, "Oh, hell no. Like, that's not going to fly, that's not going to fly." And then we talked about it. And we're like, 'We need to say something, like, we can't be treated like that. And so, the next day,

my coworkers looked at me as a leader since I had been there the longest...I said, "I'll go talk to her." – Natalie

After that conversation, Natalie confronted their boss. "I just said, 'you know what, that behavior was not appropriate.'" Natalie explained that it took a lot for her to confront their boss. "It was so upsetting because I'm also not a very confrontational person. So, having these kinds of difficult conversations is very stressful for me." However, her boss pushed back and denied her wrongdoing and called an emergency meeting. Natalie's boss requested that the team collectively voice their concerns. "We basically went through our list of things that have been bothering us for a while, like her aggressive communication, the scolding that she does, like her unclear communication, she's also a micromanager... in the most polite way possible." Instead of being open to their concerns, Natalie's boss engaged in retaliation. "She doesn't take responsibility at all...she made us account for all 40 hours of our workweek, hour by hour... she took away programming that we enjoy doing."

As the bullying continued, Natalie explained how the frontstage conversations were stressful and exhausting. This stress carried over into their backstage sensemaking processes at first. After a while, these backstage conversations became constructive. The constant berating, harsh criticism, and yelling from their boss did not stop in the frontstage. "It's just someone telling you how it's going to be and it's very exhausting. And it was that in combination with hour-long unit meetings...I was exhausted, I was upset, I was annoyed." This stress initially carried over into the backstage conversations that Natalie had with her team.

It was a lot of venting and a lot of frustration, and it didn't feel like productive conversation. And it was just this, cyclical pattern of our boss doing something, us

getting really mad, us talking too much about it, and us getting madder and more upset.

– Natalie

After a while, though, Natalie and her team realized that their backstage conversations were unproductive. “We were not being supportive of each other...all we do is complain about our boss. And that just takes up so much emotional energy. We need to do something else about it besides complain to one another.” Natalie and her team devised a plan to be productive during their debriefing sessions. “I shared [a workplace bullying video] with my coworkers...And then my coworker was like, ‘Oh, that's the problem. Now that you see it, like written out and explicitly word for word. That was what my boss was doing.’”

After the intentional decision to be productive in their backstage sensemaking, Natalie and her team were able to make efforts to counteract the bullying in the frontstage.

We made a really conscious effort when we were in a staff meeting together to support one another. So, we would say, “Oh, you know, I know [Karen] did this” ...And so, we really tried to build each other up when we were in meetings and tried to do the best that we could to support one another from our boss. – Natalie

Natalie finished up her interview reiterating how much her team counted on one another to get through the bullying events with their boss. “But we certainly really, really relied on one another...I'm starting to learn how to cope with it.” Like Erin, Natalie also reiterated the importance of finding a support system to cope with bullying situations. “You should talk to somebody who is equipped to have conversations like that about it and have someone who can really help you...it's not until you finally get out of your bubble, that you're able to get some perspective.”

Gary, an associate professor in the social sciences with 16 years' experience, recalled the differences between his frontstage and backstage interactions. In describing his department, he talked about the façade that was often enacted in front of others in the campus community. "These people keep repeating incessantly, that everything is fine...we're a supportive department...even when things were like very obviously not fine. And I think that concealing the backstage is a central priority in these kinds of toxic environments."

This concealment of the backstage is what allowed bullying to become pervasive over many years for Gary. The bullies in Gary's story would dish out "threats, violence, intimidation, systematic abuse...and coercion, manipulation, gaslighting." Gary went on to describe how the bullies in his department were often bolstered and enabled by others.

The truth is that those men were enabled...by women, white women who classically enable abusive white men, even when they're not being abused themselves. I mean, victims don't enable their abusers, but sometimes bystanders do right, enable others to be abused. – Gary

An example of this bully-enabler issue arose in Gary's story. One bully engaged in sexual misconduct. "One of the guys was like, systematically sleeping with all of his students...and white women in my department have defended that man up until very recently." The enablers in Gary's narrative expressed shock when allegations came forward. "[They were] in tears, like, effectively lecturing me about how no one could have seen it coming." This caused destabilization for Gary. He confided to his husband about the work environment riddled with bullying and enabling behaviors. "What they did really effectively that did affect me, was destabilize any sense of trust in the unit. So, when you are working with crazy people who are abusive and toxic, nobody trusts each other...there's no camaraderie beyond rhetoric."

When the bullying began to happen to Gary, he thought he could confide in other targets. However, this did not happen. “I’ll have allies among the people who, you know, don’t align with them [the bullies and enablers]. And that couldn’t have been like farther from the case.” One colleague began to bully Gary through manipulation and gaslighting. “[They were] humiliating me and making me feel insignificant, stupid, unqualified for my job.” One other coworker “was more willing to believe me publicly. But nonetheless, like both of them were very effective at undermining me.” Due to a public display of support coupled with a private display of manipulation, these events began to affect Gary. “The extent to which I internalized the abuse was astonishing, like I’m still working through it. I think I always will, it was traumatizing.”

As the bullying went on for Gary, he confided in his faculty mentor. “She was really surprised. She had every reason to be surprised.” Gary rationalized this reaction through his archetype of typical behavior in academia. “I think it’s baked into academia that we are obsessed with performing competency. I was spending a ton of time being like, ‘Look at me. I promise everything’s fine. I’m doing really well, everything is fine,’ but I was miserable.” Unfortunately, Gary’s situation worsened. He had the inclination that his faculty mentor may have disclosed his concerns to his bully because his mentor “happen[ed] to be very close friends with the person I identified as my primary abuser.”

Gary began to go inward. “I was alone, totally isolated. It was exactly what I needed. Honestly, like, I mean, there was no, there was no way to solve what was going on in the department...I just minded my own business.” However, Gary was able to provide support when he saw a new faculty member become the target of bullying. “The junior faculty member... became the target of just absolutely deranged scoldings [and] lectures.” Gary was able to find

solace as he engaged in backstage sensemaking as a bystander. He viewed the current situation through his previous experiences as a target.

And what are you going to do? You know? I think when you watch someone else going through what you've gone through you, if you have the emotional stamina...what I was able to do was kind of be like, "Whatever, I got tenure, I don't need to worry about my abuser anymore, my abuser is never going to stop." Now, I just want to support this other person. Which is what I've tried to do since then. And I think it's brought all of us closer together. – Gary

This process helped Gary retrospectively make sense of his previous experiences as a target, provide clarity to his role as a bystander, and become a relief for all involved. While Gary still expressed trauma associated with his experiences as a target, he was able to finally find a reprieve in the backstage conversations as a bystander. "I think it's been really helpful to be able to...marry what we've all gone through. I think I was helpful to her, but I think she was also helpful to me." This was a way for Gary to get out of his isolation chamber that he experienced as a target. "And so, when you're isolated, you talk yourself into deserving, you know, the abuse...And it's again, like sort of breaking that isolation, having someone say, I see what's happening, you didn't do this, you didn't cause this."

While backstage sensemaking processes provided a place for clarity and solace, some participants did not have a support system. These were coded as comparative cases in this theme. As evidenced in Gary's story, when there was no backstage support present, people tended to go inward in a self-accusatory manner often believing they or others deserved the abuse. Lauren, a director in STEM working in a Dean's Office with 10 years' experience in higher education, talked about how she and some others were on the receiving end of supervisory bullying by a

coordinator in her unit. The coordinator “was doing a lot of behind my back things. And so, I would not get the information I needed to be effective.” Other times, the coordinator would “yell and scream” during department meetings. “She was yelling so much like you could see the spit coming onto her computer. One of the other admins excused herself from the meeting, she was so uncomfortable.”

Because the coordinator had a relationship with the Assistant Dean and other directors, Lauren was afraid to seek support from anyone else. “I didn't communicate with anyone...I think there was a fear factor there of what will happen if I say something to the wrong person. I think at that point you don't know who you can and can't trust.” As the bullying went on, Lauren felt more and more isolated. She wrestled with doing a job she loved while also feeling mistreated and neglected.

And, I, every time I shut my office door, I felt like I just burst into tears because I felt like not only was there isolation, but I felt like I didn't trust anyone around me...I mean, I spend 50 plus hours of my life doing this, and then to spend those 50 plus hours feeling like you're alone on an island, and no one's there to rescue you. That's really stressful. –
Lauren

The situation for Lauren had toned down a bit in recent months. She was able to prospectively understand her position as a possible bystander from her experiences as a target. Recently, a new coordinator was hired in her unit and has been learning a challenging job. Lauren expressed a protective instinct over the new employee in case a bullying situation were to arise. While Lauren did not have a support system for herself, she looked forward to being a support for others.

And I'm extremely protective of her and you know, faculty can be pretty tough. And that's not to say that I dislike faculty. I love my faculty that I work with. But I also will not allow them to do the blame game. And especially when she's been here five months, and she's still learning a very difficult job. And so, I will not leave her, you know, standing there feeling isolated and alone and abandoned. So, I'm very quick. – Lauren

Lauren finished up her interview reiterating the importance of leadership that is concerned over employees' wellbeing. "As leaders...How are you asking questions? How are you coming across to people? How sincere are you being received? How well are you assessing the pulse of the room, people around you?" It was her hope that her leadership style was improved by her experiences as a target and newfound perception as a bystander.

Stacy, an administrative assistant with her campus bookstore for the past 5 years, was able to use her perspective to help a target of bullying. Everyone in Stacy's department got along well. Stacy and the bully (Wanda) in her story were friends at first. However, the relationship took a negative turn. "[We] became immediate friends when I started going through a rough time...And we were really, really close friends for a while. And then I just got to feeling like, I'm starting to feel this is one sided." Once Stacy tried to distance herself, Wanda engaged in gossip about Stacy with other workers in the store, which Stacy later found out. "She was talking to her student workers. And she was bashing me...I'm thinking is that what people really think of me? I just became furious. I just went back to my desk, and I was just furious."

The constant negativity and gossip from Wanda continued for months. When Stacy didn't have any support, she began to isolate. "I just sat at my desk. I didn't socialize very much. And I'm a people person. But I just sat at my desk, and I just did my job. And, you know, I kept to myself." As things went on, Stacy was able to at least smooth some things over with Wanda.

While this took the target off of Stacy, “[Wanda] hadn’t stopped a bit” and began to target her student workers.

Not too long ago, we had a student worker that she just didn't care for. The student worker quit, and she said, “Well, I got rid of that one.” I mean, it's awful. She's very happy to be known as the mean one. – Stacy

Stacy was able to see the bullying happen to others with heightened clarity and offer support to them. “I have the student workers come to me constantly, and they don't want to work for her.” She reported their situation to the director to no avail. The student workers were too afraid to do so. “I had told [the director] that a couple people had come up to me having issues. And he said, “I can't do anything about it. Unless they come to me.” The issue remained unreported.

Stacy saw her position as a bystander as a protector. She wrestled with her involvement but was quick to offer the support that she did not have.

I'm like a mother figure for them. So, it's just, it's hard because you care about them. You don't want to get involved. But yet, you don't want them to feel like they're alone, either. I'm the one that doesn't stand up for myself. But if you hurt my family, or my friends, That’s a different story. I’m mama bear. – Stacy

Stacy was able to intervene when she could. Over time, Stacy was able to call Wanda out when she mistreated student workers, regain her strength in the situation, and stand up for targets. “If I hear her getting on somebody, then I'll say something to her. I mean, like, ‘No, [Wanda], come on that was harsh’...I'm not about to let any of the student workers get bullied as much as I can.”

Theoretical Explanation

The process of communication, according to Goffman (1956), relies more in putting on a face or performance in the presence of others. Individuals in frontstage interaction are attempting

to guide impressions of others through their communication (Goffman, 1956). This was evidenced by Erin's account of the bully in her story. Her other male coworkers expressed astonishment at the bully's true character. Her coworkers only knew the frontstage performance of the actors involved in the bullying situation.

Additionally, the need for impression management stems from the avoidance of embarrassment in the presence of others. This was illustrated in Gary's story with how he explained his frontstage persona with his coworkers. He put on the show that everything was fine, and he was in a supportive department even though that was far from the case. Using theatrical metaphors such as front space, back space, audience, character, and performance, Goffman (1956) proposed the connection to the types of actions done during a play and the actions performed during communication with others.

During communication, such as during a play, there exists a frontstage and a backstage (Goffman, 1956). The frontstage space holds any forms of acceptable behaviors, communicative actions, and physical presentations all guided by social norms. These performances are enacted to influence others within the frontstage social world. Additionally, many people occupying the frontstage can coordinate their performance as one unit, or team (Goffman, 1956). Natalie exhibited this action during her story. Her coworkers would 'write out their play' so to speak in the backstage and perform it in front of their boss. They collectively made the conscious decision to enact a certain communication style in front of their bully.

The audience places judgement on others as they witness the play. Additionally, people can modify their character role by distancing themselves from the expectations of others (Goffman, 1956). However, this purposeful distancing is yet still an act of impression management. This was seen when participants would go inward by means of distancing or

detaching from the situation. Gary talked about how he internalized his abuse. Lauren felt like she was alone on an island. Stacy remained isolated in her office to avoid embarrassment.

The backstage area, on the other hand, encompasses a different sphere of existence. Here, people remove the costumes of everyday life and enact communication that is outside of their frontstage performance. The backstage area is the space in which a person is free to choose their props, performances, or scripts (Goffman, 1956). The privacy of this space is held sacred and becomes a violation if disrupted. Erin described the camaraderie she felt with her friends as they supported one another in their bullying experiences and felt thick as thieves. Gary noted that he felt a closeness to those he could support in the backstage.

The privacy of the backstage also allowed participants to collectively enact coping strategies, cognitive and behavioral actions taken to manage overwhelming external stimuli (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies utilize three methods: problem-centered, emotion-centered, and appraisal-centered (Folkman et al., 1986). During their narratives, most participants who were targets without a support system often went inward. Lauren felt like she was on an island awaiting rescue. However, it was their position as bystanders that brought them outward to enact coping strategies with others during backstage conversations. Gary felt isolated until he witnessed another colleague become the target of the bullies in his department. Here, he expressed a reappraisal of his own situation while prospectively wanting to support his coworker. His main goal was to provide support to the target and momentarily disregard his own situation. Other coping strategies enacted behind the scenes were centered around emotion. Erin offered to take Jenny's mind off of things and relax. Natalie and her coworkers vented to one another at first. Afterward, Natalie and her team were able to figure out problem-centered coping strategies by sharing a workplace bullying video.

The framework of sensemaking theory explains that organizational members do not react to stimuli alone. The dance between action and interpretation is a central proposition of sensemaking theory. Reality is produced from interpretation rather than raw events (Weick, 1995). This was seen when participants perceived their role as bystanders as a protector over others. Once Gary was able to reframe his experience that his abuser will never stop, he was in a position to offer support to his colleague. Stacy was able to confront the bully because she felt the mama bear instinct over the student workers. Lauren decided to finally put her foot down for the sake of the new coordinator and was protective over her.

Theoretical Connections

Tye-Williams & Krone (2014) examined how backstage support throughout workplace bullying processes impacted target narratives. They reported that targets who did not have coworker support likened their experiences to chaos. In chaos narratives, targets saw bystanders who were unwilling to help as chameleons, the ever-changing façade in the face of bullying. When some bystander support was present, targets narrated factual reports of their experiences. They framed their coworkers as fellow comrades offering help where they could. Finally, some participants in the Tye-Williams & Krone (2014) study voiced their workplace bullying experiences as if they were on a great quest. Quest narratives framed supportive bystanders as cheering on the heroic efforts of the target fighting a great battle.

This theme supports some parallels to this literature. Participants in this theme often expressed that they felt alone on a desert island when they did not have support. However, as time went on, many participants took on the role of protector. Stacy became mama bear. Lauren became the ever-vigilant guard. Gary placed himself in the brunt of bullying to protect a coworker. Even as a co-construction of meaning in the backstage, Erin described her experiences

as being thick as thieves. Natalie became the planner and spokesperson for her group. Therefore, this theme took on a quest-type characterization as well when targets and bystanders discussed how backstage sensemaking can affect workplace bullying events.

Thrownness

Participants in this study often described their position as feeling thrown into the process. They felt caught off guard, thrust into the middle, or forced into bullying circumstances. After this occurred, many participants also felt stuck or were unsure of what to do. This theme was coded as *thrownness*. As participants felt this sense of thrownness, they also expressed wanting to push away or disengage from the situation.

Joe, a director for student services with 10 years' experience in higher education, described his perspective as a bystander constantly feeling thrown into the middle. Throughout his narrative, he stated that he had no experience as a target of bullying. He was strictly a bystander. He prided himself on being someone who got along well with everyone at work. One director, Karen, exhibited a "very assertive, slightly aggressive communication style. However, when it comes to conflict, she's very passive aggressive... she's very tactical of using the grapevine to passively aggressively attack people or to build coalitions against people." Retrospectively making sense of this behavior, Joe thought back to his initial impressions during his interview for his director position. The bully in his narrative was "asking questions...smiling" while another member, Brenda, "had a hoodie pulled over [her]...she was very, very quiet, meek."

As time went on, Joe began to understand this tension in more detail. "It came down to she was trying to push her out. She didn't like her for a variety of reasons... [Karen] was trying

to get other people in our VP's umbrella to turn against and diminish anything [Brenda] does.”

Joe began to notice his position was thrust into the middle of their dynamic.

The biggest thing is watching how [Karen] basically have zero respect for [Brenda] and how she has bullied that person to the point. Where at one point I even said, “you need to go talk to HR.” I'm, as a bystander, witnessing what's going on. And I actually was hearing it from both parties. And like in the middle of it, because I was this, this third person. – Joe

This continued to the point that Karen would try to wrangle Joe into her coalition against Brenda.

“They started talking to me and they were like, ‘I know so and so doesn't pull their weight, right?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, I don't know. I haven't seen it yet.’” Joe went on to describe his position in the situation. “And then trying to get me to be on her team to create this, united ‘let's get rid of this, this person.’ ...I like to not have drama, I see drama. I'm like, ‘Hey, man, let's all just smile a little bit and kind of like go from there.’”

These issues came to a head at one fateful department meeting. “[We] are there as well as a few other people... [Brenda] had asked me what she should do because of all of this conflict that was happening. And I said, ‘stand up for yourself.’” As the meeting progressed, Karen engaged in her usual negative talk toward Brenda. “And then [Brenda] basically responded, ‘why do you always do that to me?’ That's all she said. Then [Karen] slams her hands down and says, ‘Well, this is just not going anywhere.’ And...[Karen] walked out of the meeting.” Joe described his bewilderment at what just occurred. “You know, and I'm just like, sitting there and I'm like, ‘How did this happen?’” After that situation, Joe immediately assessed Brenda's work abilities as well as his position as a witness thrown into the mix. “I don't think [Brenda's] the greatest

employee...but it's not my job to coach her. It's not my job to develop her, that's my boss's job, right?"

Witnessing these situations caused alertness for Joe. Because Joe experienced thrownness as bystander (e.g., "in the middle"), this metaphor carried over into his anxiety of becoming a possible target.

I'm just waiting for her to, like, "you know what I want a little bit more of what [Joe's] doing or what [Joe's] in," and if I'm getting gaslighted. Am I getting set up to have the rug pulled out? – Joe

It was at this point that Joe began to feel a sense of disengagement and desire to push away from the situation. He likened his experiences of just wanting to fade away.

There were times that I would take on that defeating feeling...And then when you even have those thoughts, "is this really worth it?" ...There's a meme of Homer Simpson and he like disappears into a bush [*hands up, pushing gesture*]. Really, there's a lot of times that all this is going on, but I just want to do that right? I just, like disappear into that.

– Joe

Joe understood his position of bystander through his proximity to the bullying process. "I think a bystander...is even closer to the situation. They can hear, see, smell, understand. If I witness something, that's one thing. A bystander to me is one that has background information, you know, is seeing the whole thing unfold."

Wallace is an assistant professor in Education with 17 years' experience. He, akin to Joe's perspective, identified his concept of thrownness as having the rug pulled out from under him. For Wallace's story, bullying situations began to occur surrounding tenure and promotion.

“The department was primarily junior faculty, so mostly all tenure track...And then, after a critical mass of the junior faculty got tenure and promotion, the atmosphere shifted drastically.”

After the majority of their faculty received tenure and promotion, the power dynamics shifted among the tenured and non-tenured faculty. “It went from a very collegial working environment to kind of need to watch your back working environment.” The influx of tenured faculty made it challenging for others to earn tenure and promotion. “They kind of made it more difficult to get where they were.” A colleague whom Wallace was close to, almost did not earn tenure and was initially denied promotion. The tenured faculty drastically changed the policy as she was submitting her materials. “They started nitpicking on things that I know for a fact that some of them were not held at the same standard that she was... and just kind of, you know, office gossip. It was a very contentious process.”

Wallace recalled his position as a bystander witnessing his colleague be bullied by the tenure and promotion committee, which was comprised of their newly tenured coworkers. He described his standpoint as being forced into working with his colleagues even though he was not part of the bullying situation. He expressed feeling forced to put on the show.

And it was, you know, hurtful and hard to get through because it was not targeted at her work at all. [She was] targeted as a person...it was a pretty stressful situation...I was really mad, but also had to try and work with these people and that made it very difficult to do. It's hard because you kind of have to put on that smiling face, like nothing's going on. And then you're just like, “Hey, you just basically stabbed us in the back” ...it was just, it was just kind of rough. – Wallace

As Wallace was explaining the issues over tenure and promotion for his colleague, he often recalled his experiences in graduate school and dreams of being an academic. He first

mentioned how much of a dream it was for his colleague to become a tenured professor in higher education. “She’s really wanted this for a long time....it should be a very joyous time when you’re getting tenure. But it was not. Because, you know, it’d be one thing to get tenure, but not be recommended for promotion.” He thought back to graduate school. He mentioned that his professor “was at the receiving end of not being allowed advancement because [she] was not in the best graces of the chancellor. [Wallace] saw that very difficult thing for her to go through. She handled it with such grace.”

While he thought back over his time as an academic, Wallace began to see patterns in this type of environment. “I feel like most of what we kind of know in higher ed, especially graduate study, is essentially academic hazing...And the only reason they’re doing that is because it was done to them.” At the same time, though, he felt that he was stuck in this environment. “When you’re that close to something that you’ve wanted so badly...you just to kind of grit your teeth...we’ve been working for 17-18 years in higher ed...you do have to kind of sit there and take it.”

Ultimately, Wallace talked about what it was like working in an atmosphere where essentially your job (e.g., tenure and promotion) was held over your head. He was always waiting for the next moment where he could be thrown into the situation.

I mean, we just saw it. It was like, you felt like you were in a good spot, you felt like you’re in a collegial atmosphere, and then the rug gets pulled out from under you. That’s kind of what that was. We did not see a gradual progression, that it was going to be an issue until it was an issue. – Wallace

Wallace finished up his interview reiterating that he does not want to see others thrown into the situation. He prospectively made plans on how to handle tenure and promotion for others when it

is his turn to serve on the committee. He mentioned that he is up for this process within the year. Because Wallace saw his colleague go through bullying to get tenured and promoted, they collectively decided what to do in the future. “She’s made a conscious effort, ‘If I have to...go to bat for somebody, I’m going to do it’... [and] I’m going to offer that [too] in the future because I don’t want somebody to be that stressed out.”

Dana, an administrative assistant in STEM with 13 years’ experience in academia, talked about how her boss would often drag her into bullying situations. When she first started her position, it was a positive experience. “And when I first started, I thought everything was wonderful, awesome. I was so excited about the opportunity to work, you know, in the [STEM] department, and it was it was a pay bump for me.” However, Dana’s perception of the workplace changed when her boss would wrangle her into bullying other coworkers.

My supervisor will vent to me. And that's completely inappropriate. I don't want to know about my coworker and everything that's going on in your managerial decisions and how you're going to discipline my coworkers...I don't feel like I can set a boundary there. I've tried. I've tried to say I don't want to talk about [our coworkers]. I've tried to say that's not really my place. But it doesn't matter, it just continues. – Dana

Dana went on to explain that she felt caught in the tension between one of her coworkers and her boss.

I'll say something to [my coworker], “Hey, I noticed that the spreadsheet wasn't updated.” Then she'll say, “I'm doing the best I can.” Like, she'll take it offensively. So, you have to tread lightly with her. Like, you have to say “Okay, I'm not trying to threaten you in any way. I just want to do my job.” – Dana

Dana went on to say that she tried to open up to colleagues but was just too unsure of who to talk to. “I started to talk with them early on about what I was seeing...But then the other coworkers would tell [the boss] what I said, so I didn't feel like at that point that I can trust [them].” She began to push against the situation by looking for avenues out of the job. All the while, she still felt stuck in her situation. “I've been trying to look for different jobs for forever, and I just can't find anything. So, I'll probably just stick it out...until I finish my degree... I've tried to set boundaries...I can't do anything but just comply.”

Dana finished her story by detailing how staff are often stuck in their positions against the demands of administration, faculty, and students. She felt that was her experience as an administrative assistant caught in her boss's whims. “Every other opportunity that I've tried to set boundaries doesn't work...the power differential is really hard to navigate, and I don't feel like it's safe to set boundaries...I feel held hostage to my supervisor's emotion.” This feeling of being held hostage carried over to wanting to remain in her boss's good graces. “And I think being on her good side is the one thing that's like helping me survive...after witnessing what my other coworker has gone through from her bullying...It's just not safe. I mean, it's not safe to report [the situations].”

Dana insisted that other organizational members in higher education should be more aware of how staff are often caught in power differentials, during situations of bullying and making reports. “I mean, it's your word against somebody who's a world-renowned researcher, and they're going to take their word because they make the university money... there needs to be more done to protect staff...I always felt like a subpar employee.” Dana stressed the importance of finding a supportive outlet for anyone experiencing bullying on any level (e.g., target or bystander). Her advice reiterated thrownness in the sense that many cannot choose who they

work with. “Find safe space... keep pushing for that positive environment...be happy for yourself. And then you'll find that you naturally gravitate towards healthier people. As far as a workplace, it's really hard, you can't choose, you really can't choose them.”

Linda, an associate professor in STEM with 8 years' experience, often felt sucked into bullying situations. She was part of a large research endeavor with over 500 other scientists around the world. Her position as a female in a male-dominated industry played a role in her experiences as both a target and witness to bullying situations over the years. “The entire field is about 20% female for the last 20 years...There's a lot of co-mingling between cultural differences, cultural issues, and gender dynamics and not always in a productive way.” These collaborations with her research institute would often become chaotic. “They would schedule these awful meetings. Everybody would be scheduled for 15 minutes, and everybody's talk would take an hour. It was just insane...There's a huge bureaucracy.”

She first recalled her experiences as a graduate student and would often witness bullying by one faculty member. “He would call their work garbage and attack them in meetings.” While she was recalling this story, she mentioned that it is often difficult in academia to determine what is bullying as opposed to constructive criticism of work.

I think it gets really hard. So always to define what is bullying? And I think that part of the problem is that I think our training normalizes [it]. We're trained to think that things that are actually bullying are okay, right? One of the things you do [as a graduate student], you present your work at a meeting. Well, so, the entire point of the meeting is for people to pick at your work and tell you where you need to improve. And it's tricky, because this is actually really important. – Linda

Linda recalled one instance in particular where a fellow graduate student, Adam, was essentially bullied out of their program by another graduate student, Mark. “And [Mark] had decided that [Adam] was not a good [student] and screwed everything up...so [Mark] ran around, telling everybody [Adam] is a screw up and trying to get everybody on board with this.” Even years later, Mark would gossip and make fun of the graduate student who left the program. Linda recollected her position throughout this reoccurring situation. “But this guy, [Mark] was then making him the butt of jokes about how incompetent he was. And [my advisors] were joining in on the jokes. I was then in this position. I mean, it wasn't even funny.”

Linda went on to explain that in the STEM environment one is often met with harsh criticism in front of others, especially when presenting research. She recalled a few situations when she was presenting at conferences that another professor would berate her work in front of her audience during her presentation. “Every time I have spoken at a conference, he took up all of the discussion session when I was speaking to explain why I was wrong. It was not a question, but it was just a soliloquy.” These types of interactions became the norm for Linda and other colleagues. “Now, it's tricky, because there's no formal rule against bullying... And he does not call me names, this much is true. But I think that everything short of calling people names, [bullying is] acceptable. It's just crazy.” Linda often talked about how she felt constantly thrown into this bullying environment due to the nature of STEM.

A couple of the people who were some of the founding members [of the research lab] were some of the worst offenders. So, and it's tricky, because you find yourself sucked into this as well. Like, “I'm in a meeting, I have to show how smart I am.” This is what gets you, what makes people think you're smart. – Linda

It was in this publish or perish environment, that Linda often grappled with reporting the situations that she experienced and witnessed. “This is an uphill battle. People view anything on this as taking time and energy away from doing science. You might win in the end, but you have now devoted all of your energy to this fight.” The constant harsh criticism often led to delays for research, which only exacerbated issues for targets of the bullying. “I think there's an immense amount of pressure on the people who are targets of it to just eat it...they put you through this extra set of hurdles, they make you jump over everything.”

This environment led Linda to question if she was sucked into exhibiting the same behaviors. However, as a female, she felt the pressure to “handle it with perfect poise” during bullying situations. “I will admit something. Because that's what you see happening, you mirror it. And then like, ‘Why is it okay if he asks aggressive questions? But if I do it then all of a sudden, I'm evil and unworthy?’” With her students, on the other hand, Linda was able to use her prior experiences to help female targets of bullying.

I had a student, actually...And she emailed me, “this guy just wasn't listening to me. I don't know what to do.” First of all, “I believe you. I've been a woman in [STEM] for a very long time.” Like just having someone validate her experience, I think [it made] a world of difference. – Linda

Theoretical Explanation

Martin Heidegger (1927) described the experience of *thrownness* as the process of being thrust into human existence. He explained thrownness as being propelled into events from whence the person existed previously in reality. In other words, we are being thrown from one human experience to the next. Incorporating the concept of Dasein (the act of becoming aware), Heidegger (1927) illustrated three phases of human experience – state of mind, mood, and

thrownness. State of mind is finding oneself in human existence. Mood is one's attunement to the event or experiences. Finally, thrownness is the awareness that we are experiencing the world shared with others and others' actions. The suddenness of thrownness was illustrated in bystanders' characterization of being stuck in the middle, sucked into it, or having the rug pulled out.

The act of thrownness can often initially cause anxiety or apprehension (Heidegger, 1927). This apprehension arises because it is without forewarning that we are thrust into events of everyday life, which often present as ambiguous. Therefore, we often feel alienated or not at 'home' in our human experience as we interpret ambiguous events. This feeling of uneasiness is often brushed aside as we make efforts to return to the mundane activities of everyday life (e.g., work routines, normal activities, what is familiar etc.). As participants felt the sense of thrownness throughout their narratives, it was often followed by a characterization of their uncomfortableness and pushing away (e.g., just wanting to disappear into a bush).

When events finally come to the forefront of conscious awareness, we are already experiencing it, known as being thrown into the world (Heidegger, 1927). Heidegger (1927) explained that once we become consciously aware of existence and human events, we realize that there is no escape. Many participants in this study also expressed a feeling of being forced into their positions (e.g., having to sit there and take it or feeling held hostage).

The anxiety of our forced perspective often causes us to dismiss our role in our own reality (Heidegger, 1927). In the quest to downplay anxiety and return to what is familiar (e.g., everyday mundane activities), we promote shallow interpretations of ourselves. We present a façade in the face of ambiguous, anxiety-inducing events to be able to face up to our agonizing situation, which is simply events without meaning. Participants in this theme also expressed that

it wasn't their job and had to put on a smiling face to get through the initial experiences of bullying.

After conscious awareness of our thrownness occurs, our mood attunes us to the significance of the events. It is at this point that we make sense of experience through assigning meaning (Weick, 1995). Moods are key to self-perception and interpretation of events (Heidegger, 1927). In retrospectively assigning the significance to events, we envision a life worth living, a life worth telling a story about. Participants in this theme often prospectively made plans to ease the uncomfortableness or stress for someone else who may experience bullying in the future. Through this prospective account, participants assigned meaning to their own experiences (e.g., going to bat for someone else or validating someone else's experience).

Theoretical Connections

Tracy et al.'s (2006) foundational study specifically examined targets' experiences. Participants in their study likened experiences to feeling stuck or forced as well. The authors of that study asked, "what does workplace bullying feel like?" (Tracy, et al., 2006, p. 154) and examined the metaphorical language that targets used to describe their experiences. Some participants in their study described workplace bullying as being force-fed poison or garbage. Other participants characterized their experiences likened to being caged up with animals, a slave to the bullying, or a prisoner. Additionally, participants in their study expressed wanting to run and hide away. Finally, targets who voiced their experiences to non-bullied bystanders or family members were met with unemotional or uncaring reactions, which only served to exacerbate their pain and feelings of guilt.

This theme echoes the sentiments voiced by targets in the Tracy et al. (2006) study. Participants in this study were waiting for the rug to be pulled out, felt held hostage to the bully's

whims, felt an uncomfortable closeness to the situation, and wanted to push way and disappear into a bush. This theme, in addition to the theoretical parallels from the Tracy et al. (2006) study, illustrates how much control workplace bullying can have on many organizational members experiencing this process (e.g., namely targets and bystanders). Additionally, these parallels provide a vivid picture of how this loss of control can manifest from multiple perspectives. These connections add value to the shared experiences that many organizational members can have during workplace bullying events.

Toxic Atmosphere

Many participants expressed how toxic the environment had become due to repeated bullying behaviors over the years. This environment began to take a toll on participants, causing stress symptoms such as depression, feelings of helplessness, and separation from the work environment. Later, this stress often manifested as entering a state of hypervigilance where participants would express worry at what would happen next. Also, a betrayal of trust was seen in the narratives that expressed living in a *toxic atmosphere*. Many were hesitant about who to trust in their current workplace as well as possible other work environments. In previous themes, some participants expressed having trust issues or hesitation when engaging support-seeking strategies. While trust was somewhat mentioned during those times, participants expressed a more profound loss of trust during conversations that centered on how toxic the work environment had become and the toll this took on their mental and physical well-being. Therefore, betrayal of trust was included here as it occurred most often within this theme.

Sherry is an associate professor in Nursing with 13 years' experience in academia. Sherry described that many times she and some of her colleagues were bullied by their administration. Sherry and her team often were part of student-led fundraising activities. However, these events

were often met with contention. She expressed a feeling of helplessness after constant bullying from her administrators.

I was in charge of students doing fundraisers. And we had problems [in] our division. And so, we had to get permission to do the fundraisers... I just felt like there's always something, there was always something that you can never quite get it right. – Sherry

These instances of constant criticism went on for many years. Sherry and her students began to sense the toxic atmosphere. The supervisor in her unit would often demean students. “There were situations where she would say stuff to students, and they [the students] felt as if they were not important...It wasn't an inviting situation.” Sherry began to feel the stress of the toxic atmosphere as she experienced and witnessed bullying. This took a toll on her physical and mental well-being. “Whenever I had to have any encounter with her, it kind of erupted...it was not good for my health...I wasn't the victim as the time went by. But it angered me to see how other people were being treated.”

Sherry and her colleagues would often try to report their situations to no avail. “We knew that the supervisor, and her supervisor’s supervisor, the three of them are all friends...and so that bothered me. And the people above her or her supervisors, were not responsive to our complaints.” As time went on, nothing was done about bullying, Sherry knew the toxicity went all the way to the top and felt a sense of helplessness about her situation. “To some degree, [I felt] a sense of betrayal...you have my Dean...the Vice President, and then the [University] President...those were the three layers...and they were friends, and we knew they were friends...there wasn't anything that we could have done.”

Fortunately, Sherry was able to find support with her colleagues. “We ended up bonding...we went to lunch from time to time... our conversations centered around comparing

notes...like, ‘What was your experience?’ That kind of thing, which it kind of consumed us...we just got through it.” While Sherry was able to briefly find a respite with her colleagues, she mostly expressed how the toxic environment took a toll on her. She experienced a state of feeling helpless for her colleagues. Sherry said that she felt the weight of hearing her colleagues’ stories and, at times, witnessing them in bullying situations. “I felt a burden, I felt paralyzed. And I felt like my hands were tied because I couldn’t do anything to help them.”

After a while, Sherry finally determined that she had to leave the toxic situation. It was a difficult decision for her to make because she felt a sense of camaraderie with her colleagues.

I just had to get out. I felt like I was treading water not getting anywhere. So, I left, and I told my colleagues, “Hey, guys, you know what, if I had finished my degree, I was going to stay on and fight with you guys. I can’t fight anymore. I apologize. But I’ve got to cut and run” ...it was definitely self-preservation. – Sherry

It took a while for Sherry to recover from nearly a decade in the toxic atmosphere. As she discussed what life is like after this situation, Sherry mentioned that “It’s like reclaiming myself. What happened to me? Where did I go?” She now faces the lingering effects of her traumatic experiences. These manifested as a sense of hypervigilance and reoccurring trust issues. “I’m cautious about trusting. And that could be a good thing and a bad thing. Like we would say ‘stay woke [and] alert’... it might cause me to be judgmental to some degree.”

Elena, an associate professor in STEM with 15 years’ experience, also discussed a toxic workplace atmosphere. She talked about an office manager who would bully her, students, and colleagues. She started off her interview recalling an incident that occurred about a year ago. Elena filed some paperwork incorrectly. “I had to go to the office...and that completely enraged

this person... [she was] yelling at me at the top of her lungs...I was in complete shock. Because up until this point, I hadn't known this person to behave this way.”

This moment caused quite a bit of tension for Elena and the office manager. She also noticed when the office manager would yell at her student workers. “Now, with me seeing her yelling at the other staff members who are below her. So, she's like, their supervisor. So, she does that now. She thinks it's okay to do that in front of me.” Elena went on to describe the toxic work environment the office manager caused for her colleagues. “They've known and they've experienced it as well. And so, she definitely has her favorites. And then if you are no longer her favorite, then she makes your life miserable.”

Elena’s colleagues shared how they developed a sense of learned helplessness about the situation. “You know, asking them, ‘Is this something? Do I need to report this? What do I do?’ And basically, the advice they gave me was to let it go...and so it was their way of looking out for me.” Elena also expressed uncertainty and feelings of helplessness herself. “I felt a little bit stuck... I don't know what to do about the other staff, you know, the staff that are having to work with her... that is troubling to me.” The collective feeling of helplessness stemmed from the chair of the department not taking action to mitigate the bullying situations among the office manager and the department. “I've witnessed her yelling at the other staff. He's there. So, he knows, and he doesn't do anything about it.”

Elena also discussed how the constant uncertainty and feelings of helplessness took a toll on her well-being.

I spent a lot of time thinking about it, I spent a lot of time interacting with other people, asking them, “What should I do?” So, it was one of these things, that it's not just the

emotional toll that it takes, you know. It forces, it takes time from you; it forces you to have to deal with it somehow. – Elena

Elena went on to explain that she was initially taken by surprise at the office manager's toxic behavior. She did not realize the bullying until it happened to her. "I was blindsided...until it happened to me, I really didn't. I didn't think about it. You know, it wasn't on my radar." From there, she was hypervigilant in noticing it happen to others. This caused her to question her ability to trust others as well. "It made me question my ability to judge character to judge people's character...when I think back on that, is there something I'm missing when I'm interacting with people, you know?"

Elena described how the toxic workplace atmosphere not only impacted how she perceived others, but also her productivity as an educator and researcher.

I think one thing is people don't realize how these situations, how this toxic environment impacts productivity in a negative way. Because, you know, part of our job as faculties is to bring in as much money as we can for a research project. And so, when the person who's holding my purse strings, you know, that has an impact. – Elena

Elena went on to describe how tied she was to her job as a faculty member. "In that, you know, in academia, as a faculty member, my personal life and my professional life, are very much intertwined. I spend a lot of time on my work." However, it's the toxic atmosphere that takes away from Elena's lifework. "And so, if you want me to be a contributing member, it'd be nice to not have to waste so much time."

In closing our interview, Elena still expressed hesitancy in trusting colleagues, just like Sherry. She mentioned that if she left her position, it would be an added difficulty. "You have to

learn a whole other structure. But also, thrown into a completely new environment with brand new people...then it's also having to learn the dynamics, and who to trust and who not to trust.”

Revisiting Patty’s story, even though her mentors prepared her for bullying in academia, she still talked about the toxic atmosphere she faced as a librarian. She mentioned that two bullies in her department would manipulate and undermine her and her colleagues’ work. “They tried to sabotage [our] use of extended days for professional development opportunities...tried very hard to make it, so [Patty’s colleagues were] unable to get tenure... [and telling us] how we were being a burden to our department.” As issues like this were happening over the course of a year, Patty began to notice uneasiness in the atmosphere. “There's this tension. And it's very apparent in the department meetings where the untenured colleagues and I are just waiting for the next thing to happen. And then, that's just what it is now. That's the culture of the department.”

At first, Patty began to blame herself as she tried to make sense of the bullying behaviors toward her and her colleagues. “So, in the beginning, I think it was a lot of confusion, and also just self-doubt. I thought I did something wrong... And then it just got to every department meeting, just anxiety like, ‘Oh gosh, what now?’” Patty then noticed that others felt uneasy in departmental meetings as well.

And you could feel the tension in the room. Like, “Who's going to say what?”...But there's that anticipation...Anytime I have to bring anything up or even anytime I have to open my mouth to say anything in a department meeting. It's like constant like self-checking. And with a little bit of shame too. I'm having to change who I am to appease you. And it's just not healthy. Oh, it doesn't feel good. – Patty

Patty noted one particular colleague, who was often the target, experienced a heightened state of anxiety before department meetings. “She was so scared going into department meetings that she had to do a meditation before she could even go because she was just so nervous. And me and my other untenured colleague, we feel like we're walking on eggshells.”

While Patty witnessed the bullying happen to her coworkers, she also expressed a sense of helplessness.

There's like first this initial disbelief that it's even happening like “Did I really just see what I saw?” ... and I'm [a] pretty empathetic person. So, I feel that like when I know, my colleague being told she's a burden... [she was] just like taking this abuse. You're just watching it and you think you're kind of powerless to help. – Patty

Later on, Patty expressed regret for freezing in fear. “I am unique because I don't have tenure. So, I didn't feel like I could stand up, which is ridiculous. Like, I should have just done it.”

Sophie, an academic advisor for student services with 10 years' experience, also expressed a disruption of trust and hypervigilance from the toxic atmosphere they were in for many years. Sophie identified as a non-binary person and was involved with the campus' LGBTQ+ organization. They would often face opposition by their supervisor after placing an inclusive sign on their office door. “I got my little ALL sticker. And I put it up on my door, so that the students...are welcome here. It was just a challenging of an inclusive sign on my part. And like he would do this constantly.” Sophie also faced push back for student-led events for the LGBTQ+ office. Sophie explained the response from campus administration. “[They said] ‘Oh well, you know, tough.’ And we were like, ‘No, this is something that's really important.’ And we didn't have a lot of support there.” Sophie also noticed that bullying would happen to their colleagues as well. They noticed that the only black woman in their department was often

targeted. This shifted Sophie's narrative to sense the toxicity in the workplace environment.

"And so, it was very clear that there was a, um, insidious kind of, um, bias against that woman.

And it made it difficult to get our work done."

Sophie expressed relief when their unit hired a new director due to a recent reorganization. The new director took initiative concerning various micro-aggressive communication behaviors previously enacted in Sophie's workplace.

So, he was very proactive when he came in saying, "I know that this has been kind of a toxic place for a while. And I know that some of it has been resolved. And some of it has not. And so please come to me if you have any concerns." I felt fantastic. – Sophie

In the same conversation, Sophie also expressed hesitancy about the new director's trajectory to curtail bullying situations. "From his reputation, I felt like I could believe that. But at the same time, I'm not sure. I'm still feeling it out."

Sophie also expressed a sense of hypervigilance and lack of trust moving forward. While the director of Sophie's unit was understanding of possible bullying situations, Sophie and another supervisor in their unit experienced tension. "I'd say, 'good morning' and wave to her from my office. And she would just turn and look at me and keep walking. I feel very clearly that she does not like me." Sophie explained another incident where they were encouraged by their direct supervisor to apply for two other jobs in the unit and ended up not getting them. At that point, Sophie felt a betrayal of trust. "I really felt gaslighted. But I also felt like it completely tracks. I don't really trust her." Later on, Sophie developed a sense of hypervigilance after working in a tense and toxic atmosphere over the years.

Because I mean, I spend my time watching. Yeah. I mean, I have my guard up, right? I am paying attention to everything, looking for threats. And that's not, that's not okay. I

should be able to go into any space in my working day and not have to proactively prepare for problems. – Sophie

Like Sophie, April, a coordinator for student recruitment with 3 years' experience, also expressed a sense of hypervigilance as a bystander. April mentioned that their departmental supervisor was the main office bully. "In my opinion, she's like the nice bully someone that plays it off and was like, 'Oh, my gosh, I'm so sorry. I didn't know that that would upset you.' That kind of person." One coordinator in particular, Ariana, received the brunt of the bullying and would receive harsh criticism in front of coworkers. "Anytime there's an issue, they belittle her like she doesn't know how to do her job." April would often try to support Ariana. "And I told her that like I will always stick up for her... I'm not going to let her take the flack for [mistakes]." Nonetheless, witnessing this harsh interaction took a toll on April.

I am on the verge of wanting to leave, I think that the environment has become somewhat toxic. I love the people I work with, for the most part, but I think as a whole office, there are just a lot of things that aren't done correctly. There is a lack of support from the supervisors that we should have. I do have it from the work friendships that I've built, though. – April

This toxic atmosphere began to impact April's interactions with others in the office as well. "I don't even walk by their [the bully] office, because I don't even have time to start a fake conversation of being friendly with them...they try to undermine not only [Ariana], but other people in the office too."

April began to feel a sense of helplessness to report their supervisor. "I have tried to step up, but I'm a small frog in a big pond. My opinion doesn't always matter in these situations. I think that's something that's been awful because we've let that environment happen."

Nonetheless, April and her coworkers were able to support one another as the bullying occurred over the years. “Many of us have really struggled with everything going on...it's become more of that toxic work environment. I think the thing that makes it manageable is having this group of close-knit friends that I can lean on.” While April briefly mentioned her support, she immediately revisited the effects that a workplace bullying environment had on her and her colleagues.

Witnessing the repeated hostile communication started to take a toll on April. Living in the constantly toxic atmosphere caused by one person in her office began to have an effect for April and her coworkers.

But I think a lot of us have started to suffer from like, have anxiety or even like starting to dabble in depression, just because of how everything has started happening and that how toxic it's become and even though I feel like I have not been directly affected, um, or at least not as bad as others. I am definitely an empath. Like I feel that I hate that it's become toxic for other people that I care about. I care too much about that. I hate that it's toxic for them that it makes it toxic for me. – April

This perception of toxicity continued into the campus setting as well. “And I think it's a campus wide, toxic environment, it's not one office. I think it's that campus wide. Because, again, we have so many people set in their ways that aren't open to change.”

Theoretical Explanation

Exposure to traumatic events may often lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and symptoms may include intrusive thoughts, mental or physical stress, or event amnesia, which generally begin within three months of a single traumatic event (see Bryant, 2019 for a review). When the trauma is prolonged over a longer period of time, such as with bullying, complex post-

traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) may manifest (Herman, 1997). C-PTSD is unique in that this type of trauma may manifest with symptoms such as feelings of worthlessness or self-blame, inability to exhibit emotional regulation, a state of hypervigilance, feelings of dissociation or depersonalization, changes in self-perception such as feelings of helplessness, or a loss of self.

In this study, symptoms of hypervigilance, feelings of helplessness, and betrayal of trust were mostly seen as interwoven in the participants' narratives as they relate to the constant exposure to a toxic work atmosphere. Hypervigilance is a known outcome of C-PTSD and manifests as an enhanced state of sensing one's environment (Kardiner & Spiegel, 1947). Due to the constant sensory perception for threats, hypervigilance may also cause emotional exhaustion and difficulties in social relationships, especially for marginalized individuals such as the LGBTQ+ community (Rostosky et al., 2021). If one is hypervigilant over a long period of time, this may cause anxiety disorders such as paranoia or panic attacks to manifest. April mentioned that she and her team were dabbling in depression. Constant and prolonged exposure to trauma causes individuals to develop a heightened state of responsiveness to stimuli and constantly scanning the environment for possible threats. Patty felt as if she was constantly walking on eggshells. Sophie expressed that they constantly had to have their guard up, pay close attention to everything, and always look for threats.

Martin Seligman (1972) developed the concept of learned helplessness while studying depression. Like hypervigilance, feelings of helplessness often manifest after repeated exposure to negative stimuli. Once people realize that negative traumatic events are beyond their control, a sense of lowered self-efficacy may be exhibited (Seligman, 1972). Once feelings of powerlessness, or lack of control, set in, people may also discontinue their efforts to relieve the situation (e.g., reporting bullying). Learned helplessness is often then followed by feelings of

anxiety, depression, or self-blame (Peterson et al., 1995). Feelings of helplessness may manifest after prolonged exposure to workplace bullying situations even when subjects exhibited a high ability to defend themselves earlier on during the bullying process (Nielsen et al., 2017). Results from their study indicated that the longer one is exposed to workplace bullying, one's positive self-regard decreases over time and can cause "pervasive feeling[s] of dissonance" (p.7). While the authors did not name learned helplessness directly, it does provide evidence for how those who live in a toxic work environment develop lowered self-efficacy for constructively mitigating workplace bullying situations. Sherry felt burdened, paralyzed, and as if her hands were tied. April felt like a small frog in a big pond and that her voice doesn't matter. Patty expressed regret for freezing in fear.

Prolonged exposure to trauma such as workplace bullying has also been shown to deplete a person's ability to trust others (Hauge et al., 2010). Symptoms of trust issues include feelings of betrayal, social distancing from others, and sentiments of depression. Trust is generally understood as the process of giving control of any given situation over to another person. Because C-PTSD symptoms often manifest due to a lack of control, it would follow suit that a betrayal of trust would often occur as a result. Trust is a correlating variable between PTSD and several health outcomes, such as depression or anxiety, for combat veterans experiencing PTSD (Kopacz et al., 2018). Even when Sophie's experience improved with a good boss, they still expressed a loss of trust in positive experiences. Elena mentioned that she would have to learn who to trust in a potential new work environment.

Revisiting the framework of sensemaking in organizations (Weick, 1995), organizational members often take cues from their work environment to create intersubjective meaning. Extracted cues "are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger

sense of what may be occurring" (Weick, 1995, p. 50). Sensemaking is most often focused on the outcomes or products of making sense rather than the process itself. To focus on the *how* of sensemaking, researchers should focus on how people deal with ongoing dilemmas. Workplace bullying situations occurring over a period of many years may cause both targets and bystanders to develop a heightened state of detecting cues from the environment.

Theoretical Connections

D'Cruz & Noronha (2011) also mentioned learned helplessness for bystanders. They stated that bystanders "realised in hindsight that their helplessness arose from a perceived lack of choice" (p. 281). Participants in their study felt they did not have a choice in limiting their support for targets. The authors pointed to perceptions of self- and target-efficacy as reasoning behind feelings of helplessness and lack of choice. D'Cruz & Noronha (2011) also pointed to trauma-related responses for bystanders. The bystanders' physical and mental health were affected by witnessing workplace bullying. In their study, bystanders' feelings of helplessness arose because they were close friends to the targets. These feelings of closeness were also brought on by shared bullying experiences for both the targets and bystanders (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011). Guilt over their inability to help their close friends who were targets brought about psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety. However, the authors noted that psychological symptoms could also manifest from other factors regardless of target and bystander relationship.

Emdad et al. (2013) also reported that bystanders experienced symptoms of depression as a long-term effect of witnessing workplace bullying events, which caused lowered productivity levels as well as leaving their jobs altogether. Also, Emdad et al. (2013) found that depressive symptoms arose from feelings of guilt in not helping the target, decreased levels of role clarity

for bystanders, and constant fear of disrupting the bully. Even still, the authors acknowledged that sentiments of depression were reported as symptoms and that other factors could lead to these outcomes outside of their findings.

The feelings of lowered productivity as well as sentiments for leaving one's job were also present in this study. As the toxic atmosphere began to take a toll on participants, they expressed they could not stay and fight anymore. Within this theme, learned helplessness manifested from prolonged exposure to traumatic events. Learned helplessness may also manifest from repeated attempts to mitigate toxic situations to no avail. Bystanders, regardless of relationship to targets, also exhibited C-PTSD symptoms such as a lack of trust and hypervigilance, in addition to learned helplessness.

Summary

Five major themes were garnered from participant narratives in the current study. Participants began describing the first workplace bullying experiences through the lens of expectations for academia. They often expressed feeling their dreams shatter, feeling cursed, or caught in a wreckage. Others, who had expectations for bullying in academia, expressed feelings of lifelessness as they experienced bullying over time. Participants also felt threats to their occupational identity. Here, they expressed feeling a loss to their productivity as an academic, engaged in self-preservation strategies, and made efforts to reclaim their sense of occupational identity where they could. Another way participants made sense of their workplace bullying experiences over time was to engage in backstage sensemaking. Here, they engaged in support-seeking strategies for their own experiences as well as provided support to others. When participants expressed that they did not have support for themselves, they would attempt to provide support for other targets or made prospective plans to do so. Next, participants felt

thrown into their situations either as a bystander or target. This was described as having the rug pulled out or forced into their situations. Finally, many participants talked about how pervasive the toxic atmosphere became for them over time. Here, they expressed trauma-related symptoms such as hypervigilance, loss of trust, and feelings of helplessness. These five major themes may provide evidence for the central research questions to this study, address gaps in theoretical understanding, and aid in developing workplace bullying intervention programs.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

This study sought to understand workplace bullying bystanders' perspective and sensemaking processes through an interpretive philosophical paradigm. I set out to conduct in-depth interviews where participants retrospectively recalled their narratives of workplace bullying experiences, how they made sense of their lifeworld, and what became most salient to them as they came to understand their experiences surrounding bullying processes over time. Overall, five themes were identified throughout participants' narratives that essentially captured how bystanders make sense of workplace bullying – shattered dreams, occupational identity, backstage sensemaking, thrownness, and toxic atmosphere.

I quickly found after the first few interviews that many participants often crossed the boundaries of target and bystander when narrating their experiences of workplace bullying. As appropriate, probing interview questions were added to inquire when a participant felt they were the target of bullying as well as their sensemaking processes when witnessing bullying. This study found that many individuals would move along a target-bystander spectrum when recalling how bullying events unfolded over time. Six participants were mainly targets, 13 participants were target-bystanders, 12 participants were bystander-targets, and six participants were mainly bystanders. Therefore, prior experiences as targets or bystanders worked to aid sensemaking processes as participants crossed these boundaries within the target-bystander spectrum. The target-bystander spectrum can be found in Appendix C.

Mainly targets talked about their experiences and sensemaking processes most often as the target of bullying, describing how they perceived others (bystanders) from their perspective as targets, and rarely mentioned that they themselves saw the bullying happen to others. **Target-bystanders** were individuals who, when chronologically recalling the bullying events, discussed

that they first were the targets of bullying, often experiencing isolation (thinking that they were the only ones experiencing the bullying), and later saw/heard bullying happen to others.

Bystander-targets mostly expressed their experiences as first being a witness to bullying, hoping it would not happen to them, and later experiencing being the target of bullying. Finally, **mainly bystanders** were participants who reported they received bullying directed at them rarely, if at all. Their main narratives and sensemaking processes centered on witnessing the bullying happening to others. Many of these mainly bystander participants also occupied directorial or higher-level administrative roles within their departments/organizations.

Recalling chronologically during interviews allowed me to build a timeline of retrospective sensemaking for participants. **Shattered Dreams.** At first, participants felt a sense of expectancy violation often characterizing the first moments of workplace bullying as shattered dreams. Participants often talked about their lifelong aspirations and goals for working in academia. This dream of being “together to save the world,” according to Holly, was shattered when met with experiences of workplace bullying. However, other participants felt they were prepared for bullying in academia, often citing their experiences during graduate school.

Occupational Identity. Shortly afterward, participants focused their sensemaking inward toward their own abilities to do good work in the education context. Threats to their occupational identity were followed by an attempt to prove their worth to the organization and a struggle to be productive. Later within this phase, participants made efforts to preserve their sense of self and reclaim their occupational identity. **Backstage Sensemaking.** Next, some participants reached out to others to engage in backstage sensemaking while others, unfortunately, were not able to do so. The frontstage versus backstage dynamic played a key role during workplace bullying processes; participants often had to put on a show in the frontstage, while simultaneously seeking

or providing help and clarity in the backstage. **Thrownness.** Overall, many participants felt thrown into their situations as bystanders to workplace bullying. After this moment set in, bystanders wanted to distance or disengage from the situation altogether. **Toxic Atmosphere.** Finally, participants explained their viewpoint of the toxicity in the work environment throughout workplace bullying processes. Over time, many participants began to develop symptoms of trauma-related responses, such as a betrayal of trust and hypervigilance. These sentiments persisted even after many were able to leave their situations. These themes and examples can be found in Appendix D.

Research Question 1

RQ1 asked: *How do bystanders come to label an experience as workplace bullying?* A key component of sensemaking in organizations (Weick, 1995) is to understand how organizational members assign meaning to their experiences, especially during disruptive events. A shared conundrum among workplace bullying researchers is finding an agreed-upon definition of workplace bullying between scholars and practitioners (Cowan, 2012). Participants expressed what communication behaviors were present (e.g., verbal aggression, harsh criticism in front of others, gossip, etc.) throughout their narratives. Because communication research points to denotative hesitancy (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005) among many participants, it is helpful to understand *how* they come to their understanding of workplace bullying processes. In doing so, they can structure, understand, and act upon these highly emotional, disruptive experiences in the workplace.

This process of labeling helped the participants find clarity and understanding of their experiences. In these processes, they were able to place meaning, act upon, and engage in the outcomes of their communicative actions surrounding workplace bullying. The act of taking cues

from the organizational environment (Weick, 1995) was also salient to both faculty and staff across the target-bystander spectrum as they understood and labeled their experiences of workplace bullying.

The most helpful themes poised to provide answers for this research question were shattered dreams and backstage sensemaking. During the participants' interviews and after general tour questions, I asked about the first moments that participants noticed bullying going on and what were the catalysts in labeling their experiences as bullying. After explaining the situations, participants were asked to retrospectively recall their feelings surrounding those moments when they began to label and understand these encounters as bullying.

Expectations

During these conversations, participants talked about their expectations either as affirmed or violated. When expectations were violated, participants described the process in how they came to label their experiences of bullying as “a curse” (Bobby), “disillusionment” (Nora), or “completely wrecked” (Sonya). This type of expectancy violation, while talking about workplace bullying, was held for participants who characterized their expectations for academia as “the intellectual fabric of society” (Bobby) or “a sleeping giant” (Joon Jae). While the quantitative intensity of these expectancy violations was not measured, these narratives provided evidence for *how* people come to label their experiences as bullying. The data from this study highlighted the stark contrast of expectations for academia and the intensity of the violation. Participants who held high standards for academia (e.g., “the intellectual fabric of society”) expressed the most intense expectancy violations (e.g., “a curse”) as they spoke about their first experiences with bullying in academia. These moments became key in understanding what workplace bullying means to them.

Expectations Comparative Cases

Following suit with expectations for workplace behavior in academia, it is important to locate the point at which labeling experiences as bullying affirms participants' expectations. When the affirmation occurred, participants began to label their experiences as bullying. Patty described her expectancy confirmation as "falling victim." Nick also described how his expectations changed over time throughout his experiences: "having the soul sucked out of you." While the expectations for bullying were affirmed for some comparative cases, participants came to understand what workplace bullying meant to them through the lens of their expectations generated over time.

Expectations for workplace bullying spanned job changes for many participants. Sonya described how she became hesitant for possible new positions and that it could be "the same or worse." Even when expectations for workplace bullying behaviors were positively violated (e.g., workplace bullying did not exist in a new position), Lucy was still hesitant until a "good" amount of time into her new job. Therefore, *how* people come to their definition of workplace bullying may be heavily influenced by their previous experiences as a target and/or bystander outside the current organization. Expectations for workplace bullying may change over time the more one encounters these experiences; new expectations impact *how* a person comes to label their experiences as bullying. Keashly (2021) also reported that expectations for academia may be higher than in other job sectors. During the author's review of workplace bullying in academia literature, they also characterized higher education as the free market of ideas and generating knowledge. However, Keashly (2021) does not mention how intense these expectations can become, especially in the wake of bullying events over time.

Backstage Sensemaking

While it is important to understand how participants label what workplace bullying is in their own words, we must also understand the spaces where this meaning may be created with others. Participants' backstage sensemaking also played a large role in how people came to understand their experiences and used the label "bullying." Many participants neither understood nor used the definition of workplace bullying until they talked it out with others. The second theme of backstage sensemaking occurred most often for those crossing the target-bystander spectrum (e.g., participants describing their viewpoints as target and bystander over time). Participants would not be able to make sense of the highly emotional event of bullying until it was discussed with other bystanders or other targets.

In the backstage, many organizational members made sense of, and labeled, their experiences as bullying. They engaged in casual and relaxed conversation (free from organizational pressures and constraints) with one another and compared notes, experiences, and understood workplace bullying. Erin found a space where she and her colleagues could converse about the covert and overt abuse they witnessed. While Erin's male coworkers were unaware that bullying was even occurring, they understood it as such after the backstage conversations occurred. Likewise, Erin came to understand her experiences as bullying after the conversation with her female colleague. She was "jaded at first" and then began to witness bullying occur in the frontstage after these conversations. Later, Erin and her female colleague were able to use their backstage supportive encounters to help each other understand their individual experiences as both targets and witnesses.

In the backstage sensemaking processes, participants like Natalie were able to then understand bullying as an issue to be tackled. At first, Natalie was confused about her

experiences because she had not yet labeled the issues with her boss as bullying. It was “only really brought to light when [their] second coordinator was hired, and she started pointing things out.” Later, Natalie and her colleagues began to initiate backstage conversations in which they would develop a gameplan for handling workplace bullying. On the other hand, Gary was not able to find a support network of colleagues when he was a target. This caused him to understand bullying as something that is inescapable, “there was no way to solve what was going on.” The backstage sensemaking process emerged for Gary when he experienced being a bystander to someone else on the receiving end of bullying in his department. It was in those moments that Gary was able to provide support and clarity for his colleague, but also these conversations helped to clarify and give meaning to his experiences as a target to workplace bullying. “I think it's been really helpful to be able to...marry what we've all gone through. I think I was helpful to her, but I think she was also helpful to me.”

Backstage Sensemaking Comparative Cases

The comparative cases in this theme provided the possibilities for someone who does not have backstage support, as in Gary's experience. For these participants, bullying was understood as something to be dreadfully fearful of. Lauren did not have backstage support when she was a target. When feelings of fear and isolation set in, it was during those points in Lauren's narrative that she came to understand her bullying experiences likened to being alone on a deserted island. Through this experience as a target, though, Lauren was able to understand bullying with a heightened sense as a bystander. She was quicker to label bullying for her new colleague starting a challenging job. Lauren said, “I will not leave her, you know, standing there feeling isolated and alone and abandoned. So, I'm very quick.” Stacy, like Lauren, also labeled her bullying as something that pushed her to isolation. What first began as a fight between friends turned into

repetitive gossip behind Stacy's back. Stacy's narrative quickly shifted to isolation; in the moment, she described the communication as bullying. Likewise, Stacy used her prior understanding of bullying to help future targets. Stacy mentioned, "I'm the one that doesn't stand up for myself. But if you hurt my family, or my friends, that's a different story. I'm mama bear."

Erin and Natalie, who were able to find backstage support, came to understand their experiences as bullying earlier. They understood bullying as something they can fight against together. What first started out as jaded or confused about their experiences with bullying became clearly labeled and understood as bullying after their supportive conversations with coworkers. From there, both Erin and Natalie were able to support targets as well as develop a gameplan to stand up against their collective bullying situations. Gary, Stacy, and Lauren, who were without backstage support, initially understood workplace bullying as something to isolate from, and avoid, whenever possible. However, in using their prior experiences of bullying, they were able to add clarity to their understanding of workplace bullying as they entered the role of bystander. This evidence is echoed in the Tye-Williams & Krone (2015) study of target narratives. When backstage support was present, their participants likened their experiences to a great quest or heroic journey alongside comrades. When backstage support was not present, participants in the Tye-Williams & Krone (2015) study characterized their experiences as chaotic and unknown.

Overall, participants came to understand their experiences as bullying when they talked about their expectations for working in academia. Some participants described their high hopes for becoming part of the "intellectual fabric of society" or academia was "a sleeping giant" and they would be "together saving the world." However, as these participants who held high expectations began to experience bullying, they understood this experience as "a curse," "a

wreckage,” or went through a state of “disillusionment.” Other participants also labeled bullying through their lens of expectation. This time, it was confirming their expectations. They described “being prepared for bullying in academia” and likened this experience to “middle school” bullying. Over time, many of these participants mentioned that they felt “having the life sucked out of them” as the bullying went on for many years as well as constantly “falling victim” to bullying in academia. Therefore, participants labeled their bullying experiences through the lens of their expectations.

Additionally, participants came to use the label of bullying through supportive conversations with others. In the backstage, many participants were able to seek and provide help to others as they collectively understood and labeled their experiences as bullying. For participants who had support, they characterized this experience as being “thick as thieves” or as an issue to be understood and tackled. Erin mentioned that she was “completely jaded” until her coworker, who was a fellow target, labeled their experience as bullying. Natalie vented with her colleagues, shared a workplace bullying video, and eventually made plans for how to handle their bully. For participants who did not have backstage support, they labeled bullying as something to isolate from and felt like they were “alone on a deserted island.”

Research Question 2

RQ2 asked: *How does emotion inform the sensemaking process for bystanders?* Emotion is a large part of organizational life (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006), an impetus to sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995). Our workplace bullying literature often points to the emotional impact and outcomes of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). While workplace bullying is riddled with intense emotion throughout the process (Tye-Williams & Ruble, 2017), the space where emotion showed up the most during participants’ narratives was

discussing the toxic atmosphere that workplace bullying created for them. This theme is best poised to provide insight into this research question. Evidence from this study pointed to the most salient of emotional responses – hypervigilance, learned helplessness, and distrust. The same emotions that were expressed in the narratives in this study—powerlessness (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011) and the intensity of psychological trauma (Tracy et al, 2006)—have been found previously.

As organizational members move through the sensemaking process, emotional responses manifested in participant narratives the most after having experienced workplace bullying for a prolonged period (often spanning many years). Placing these emotional responses in the context of Weick’s (1995) sensemaking in organizations process, hypervigilance and distrust were not only prospectively considered when thinking about leaving the current organization, but also it took time to deconstruct those feelings after entering a new organizational environment. Therefore, as organizational members made sense of their current and possible new workplaces, the emotional outcomes of their trauma from bullying were brought into these processes.

Toxic Atmosphere

Intense emotion began to show up during participant narratives when they mentioned how the workplace atmosphere became unwelcoming and uninviting. Sherry began this portion of her story by describing her workplace with feelings of uncertainty: “there was always something that you can never quite get it right.” This quickly morphed into sentiments of toxicity in her work environment. Sherry mentioned that “it wasn’t an inviting situation.” Once participants mentioned the toxic atmosphere that bullying caused for both them and others, the emotional toll it took was also discussed. April illustrated how the intensity of prolonged trauma can manifest into outcomes such as depression or anxiety: “I think a lot of us have started to

suffer...I hate that it's toxic for them, that makes it toxic for me.” Notably, April expressed that she was mainly a bystander in her situation. Yet, she expressed the same psychological effects originating from C-PTSD (Herman, 1997).

Hypervigilance

As trauma-related emotional responses began to emerge during participant narratives, they also mentioned constantly being on high alert throughout the bullying process. Bystanders take cues from their environment during a situation (Latane & Darley, 1970) and constantly surveying a prolonged toxic environment may lead to trauma-related symptoms over time (Kardiner & Spiegel, 1947). Sherry mentioned that she would always “stay woke and alert” and April mentioned that she experienced heightened fear when walking by the bully’s office. These emotional responses to bullying over time took on a pattern described as hypervigilance.

During the sensemaking process, Weick (1995) illustrated that people often take cues from their organizational environment. Workplace bullying experiences caused participants to become hypervigilant as they often expressed worry for the next bullying incident. Patty’s story illustrated how this trauma response was experienced collectively. As she tried to make sense of her situation, Patty noticed the hypervigilance expressed by her and her coworkers. “The untenured colleagues and I are just waiting for the next thing to happen.” This prolonged feeling of hypervigilance was experienced by everyone in Patty’s unit as “you could feel the tension in the room.”

Elena also mentioned that she experienced hypervigilance concerning her office bully; “I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about it” and she often asked her coworkers what to do about the situation. Sophie’s narrative described the work environment as threatening; “I spend my time watching. I have my guard up...I am paying attention to everything, looking for threats.”

After constantly surveying for threats in their work environments, participants also expressed feeling helpless over time.

Learned Helplessness

A prolonged state of trauma may often lead to responses such as learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972). Feelings of powerlessness have arisen in other workplace bullying studies as well (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). Sentiments coded as learned helplessness were expressed alongside feelings of hypervigilance and distrust, which are emotional trauma responses often experienced together (Herman, 1997). For Sherry, after all avenues were fruitless in reporting the bullying situations, the feeling of helplessness finally set in; “there wasn’t anything that we could have done.” Sherry went on to describe how feelings of helplessness manifested for her; “I felt a burden, I felt paralyzed”; these emotions also informed her prospective sensemaking process as she hoped to find a new organizational environment. Elena also saw how learned helplessness manifested for her colleagues as she sought help for her situation. She mentioned they told her to just “let it go” and it “was their way for looking out.” Elena began to mirror this sentiment expressed by her coworkers; “I felt a little bit stuck.” April also felt helpless in doing something about the bullying she witnessed happening to her coworker; “I’m a small frog in a big pond. My opinion doesn’t always matter.” Patty also expressed this feeling of helplessness as a bystander; “you’re just watching it and you think you’re powerless to help.” These emotional responses also impacted prospective accounts for leaving the organization and joining a new workspace, which often manifested as distrust.

Distrust

Another emotional response stemming from C-PTSD is a loss of trust in others (Hauge et al., 2010). For many participants, a sense of distrust followed them into new organizational

spaces. Sherry explained what it may be like entering a new position as she made plans to leave her current toxic environment, “I’m cautious about trusting... it might cause me to be judgmental to some degree.” Elena’s feelings of distrust also impacted how she prospectively thought about possibilities for leaving her position. It was during this point that feelings of distrust were expressed. “It’s also having to learn the dynamics, and who to trust and who not to trust.”

For many participants, disruptions of organizational trust lingered well after the bullying stopped or they were able to escape their situations. These emotional responses to prolonged trauma informed the prospective sensemaking processes as participants joined new organizational spaces. Revisiting Betty’s narrative, she described how her loss of trust was carried over into a new organization. Betty explained, “I find the ramifications of having been bullied followed me. I find it very hard to trust in my coworkers...and this probably hurts me the most; it’s very easy for me to feel threatened now.” Just like in Sherry’s and Elena’s stories, the emotions of distrust greatly informed their prospective accounts of what they may encounter in a new organization. This highlights the deep rifts that can happen for individuals who are both witnesses and targets of workplace bullying, especially when carried into new organizational spaces.

Lingering Trauma

Many participants were able to leave their bullying environments and enter a new workplace not riddled with toxicity. During these moments in the conversation, participants still expressed a distrust in others, even in positive workspaces where bullying is not present. Sophie’s narrative showed how her sensemaking processes were disrupted even after new leadership was brought into her department. After constantly experiencing bullying as both a target and bystander for many years, Sophie expressed various forms of hesitancy when

navigating the relationship with a new director. At first, Sophie said they “felt fantastic” that the new leader was aware of, and wanted to mitigate, bullying experiences for the department. Sophie also expressed continued feelings of distrust with her new boss. “I felt like I could believe that. But at the same time, I'm not sure. I'm still feeling it out.”

While previous workplace bullying research has examined the intense emotion surrounding the first stages of bullying (Tracy et al, 2006), it is also important to understand how emotion can change over time, especially during organizational sensemaking processes. Evidence from this study highlighted how emotion after a prolonged period mirror what has been found in C-PTSD studies (Hauge et al., 2010; Herman, 1997), which was hypervigilance, learned helplessness, and distrust. In the context of organizational sensemaking processes, these emotional responses permeated prospective accounts and were also brought into new organizational environments. Thus, organizational members may bring in trauma-related emotional responses into new workspaces stemming from workplace bullying experiences as they make sense of their surroundings, regardless of a positive new workplace environment.

Research Question 3

RQ3 asked: *How do people come to label their role as bystanders throughout workplace bullying processes?* Individuals take on many roles within the social fabric of any given organization (Weick, 1995). Once organizational members take on roles, their individual identity becomes merged with the collective. In other words, “the self gets transformed from ‘I’ to ‘we’” (Weick, 1995, p. 71). Kenny et al. (2011) also explained that identity is the way people make sense of themselves with others. An individual does not have a sense of identity alone. Identity is always understood through, and because of, communication. Within organizational life, occupational identity is members’ co-constructed sense of meaning about their professional

worth (Kenny et al., 2011). However, during disruptive organizational events, such as workplace bullying, a member's identity may become threatened. Previous workplace bullying research has found a significant disruption to targets' identity (Tracy et al., 2006). It is also important to understand how bystanders' identity is affected as well as how they see their role within these processes.

The theme best suited to provide answers to this research question is occupational identity. As this theme discussed, participants at first went inward with their sensemaking processes. They experienced a threat to their work abilities and struggled to be productive. During this stage, they often expressed a loss of occupational identity. They also made attempts to prove themselves to others in the organization. As bullying progressed over time, participants engaged in self-preservation and made attempts to reclaim their sense of identity.

One significant way participants made efforts to reclaim their identity is through their position as bystander. Many participants crossed the roles of target and bystander throughout their narratives. This dynamic can add insights for this research question as well. Participants did not perceive the significance of their role as bystanders until they constructed meaning surrounding this position. Most often, this meaning manifested to make sense of their role as previous targets. As workplace bullying continued for extended periods of time (often many years), participants also prospectively made plans for their role as bystanders. Participants uniquely framed their bystander language as they labeled their own roles.

Loss of Identity

In the early stages of their narratives, participants often expressed a disruption to their occupational identity. Because workplace bullying is known to be a very confusing experience (Tracy et al., 2006), this confusion arose for participants as they questioned their sense of

purpose for the organization. Bullying, for them, disrupted their sense of occupational identity during their perceived role as a target. Betty identified her position through a sense of loss and mourning. “You mourn that self you feel you've lost. And then when you go back to a job, I still, I find myself questioning whether I'm who I am, the employee I think I am.” The same occurred throughout Molly’s narrative. She often questioned her worth as a professional. “Is this what I meant to be doing? Do I not understand myself? Do I not understand my program?” Revisiting Patty’s story, she also described her experiences as being the outcast, not living up to the organization’s expectations, and questioning her occupational identity within academia when she was a target. “You feel like you are inadequate. I’ve questioned my choice of being in academia so much.” Nick pointed to disruption of his occupational ideals. He immediately went to his ability to be a worthy professional. “I want to come back and do this again and not go into this profession. Sorry.” Questioning their occupational worth often lead to a loss in their ability to do good work.

Loss of Productivity

As bullying went on, participants struggled to maintain productivity. Organizational members’ sense of occupational identity comes from their understanding of what is good work: “The worth of a job depends on how the person doing the job relates it to their sense of identity” (Kenny et al., 2011, p. 72). Hollis (2015) also reported that many workplace bullying targets disengaged from work processes, often causing a detriment to organizational functioning and amplification to organizational costs. Corinna, just like Betty, Molly, and Nick, also experienced a depleted self-worth and questioned her occupational identity. “It definitely affects whether or not I want to continue working and research.” Corinna was able to articulate her role through her need to be productive. She constantly saw others berated. This, in turn, took a toll on her. “So, it

definitely affected, I think, my research in the end by limiting the projects that I was going to be involved on.” Betty echoed this sentiment in her narrative; “It sounds to me when I say it out loud, very childish, to say you were bullied...and make you either feel or look incompetent or even unsure of yourself.” After many participants experienced a loss of productivity, they often engaged in ways to preserve their sense of occupational identity with their work.

Preserving Identity

Participants often expressed ways they engaged in self-preservation for both themselves and with others. Henry expressed wanting to “lay low” and Joon-Jae mentioned that he plays the bully’s game; “fall in line and don't say anything.” During Elyse’s narrative, both she and her colleagues would attempt to preserve their sense of occupational identity together. She and her colleagues did so by proving their worth to the organization. She mentioned, “[they would] make jokes of [their] own accolades, which it really depressed [her].” She also reaffirmed the occupational identity of the targets whose bullying she witnessed. She identified her bystander role through her understanding of occupational identity for herself and other targets. “They’re established scholars...they know what they’re doing.” Elyse’s narrative stops at the point where she is still struggling with her occupational identity. “I still very much on the inside feel expendable as an instructor.” Others, however, were able to make tangible efforts to reclaim their sense of occupational identity.

Reclaim Identity

Over time, participants would develop ways to reclaim or reconstruct their identity throughout their workplace bullying situations. Participants saw ways they could find dignity and pride in their work. The identity work went inward at first. They were able to reclaim their purpose for being an academic and put their efforts into the rewarding parts of the job to cope

with their workplace bullying situations. Revisiting Nick's narrative, he was able to reclaim his sense of occupational identity through his own self-preservation. "And so, I came to the conclusion. I have a job. I have a steady income, I have benefits...And my students like me, and so that's a full basket."

Participants would also reclaim their identity alongside others. This occurred mostly as participants engaged their role as a bystander and helping targets with their situations. They would use their previous experiences to identify the importance of their role as bystanders for future bullying events. Thus, their identity as a bystander became a co-constructed process with workplace bullying targets. Throughout most of these narratives, they took on the role of protector.

This process of seeing their role as a protector helped participants reclaim their sense of occupational identity, identify the importance of their role as a bystander, and give a sense of meaning to their previous workplace bullying experiences. "It really helped in a way, it really made me aware. It hurts my heart [seeing graduate students bullied] ...one thing I can do is be on your committee. I can confront their major professor mentor" (Bill). Because becoming the target of bullying previously as a student, Corinna was on high alert concerning both her own and others' communication with her department's graduate students. "I think it affects me a lot. I'm not going to ever yell at a grad student." Revisiting Gary's narrative, he "just wanted to support [the target] ...and it brought [them] closer together." April told the target that she "will always stick up for her." Stacy mentioned that she's "mama bear" in looking out for others who are at the brunt of the bully's wrath. Lauren expressed that she was "on high alert" in looking out for her colleague.

Throughout their narratives, participants expressed a depleted sense of occupational identity. As they moved through the bullying process, participants struggled to be productive or tried to prove themselves to the organization. As time went on, however, targets moved into the bystander role by engaging others in meaning-making processes. They engaged in self-preservation with others and reclaimed their sense of identity. Participants did so by prospectively making plans for their role as bystander. As participants entered the bystander role, they identified the significance of this role and felt as if they could protect others from bullying.

Research Question 4

RQ4 asked: *What does it feel like to be a workplace bullying bystander?* This question has previously been asked of targets (Tracy et al., 2006) who often characterize this feeling as a nightmare (bullying as a process), facing a demon (bully characterization), and becoming a prisoner (target characterization). Additionally, targets have characterized bystanders as comrades on a quest if the bystanders were supportive during their workplace bullying experiences (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). An integral component to the metaphorical language of the workplace bullying paradigm is the perspective of bystanders. The theme best prepared to answer this research question is thrownness.

A key aspect of bystanders' experiences was feeling thrust into workplace bullying events. As bystanders narrated their point of view, they often described feeling abruptly forced into their situations. To them, they had no control over their positions as bystanders. As their narratives progressed, participants often described feeling stuck and unsure of what to do next. While stuck, participants also expressed an uncomfortable closeness to the situations and wanting to push away or disengage from their perspectives to return to the mundane activities of organizational life. Overall, bystanders could sense the tension surrounding workplace bullying

processes from within the organizational environment. Here, they often felt as if they had to proceed with caution, such as “walking on eggshells” (Patty) and felt the repetitive nature of workplace bullying processes.

Thrown

Participants often described their experience of the bystander role in terms of being thrown into the workplace bullying situations. They felt thrust into the middle of a bully and target dynamic against their will. For example, Joe was recruited by the bully in his narrative to become a henchman. He felt thrust into the middle of a bully and target dynamic against his will. He mentioned it was like “waiting for the rug to be pulled out.” Wallace, like Joe, also identified the abruptness of being thrown into his position using the same metaphorical language; “you felt like you were in a good spot, and you felt like you're in a collegial atmosphere, and then the rug gets pulled out from under you.” This offers a new perspective of metaphorical language for workplace bullying processes.

The thrownness theme contradicts our previously understood notions of workplace bullying processes. Communication research presents bullying as a gradual progression (Lutgen-Sandvik et al, 2009). However, as Wallace recalled his feelings during the bullying process, he described the abruptness of his situation. “We did not see a gradual progression, that it was going to be an issue until it was an issue.” Once the rug was pulled out from under many participants, they had to make sense of their new positions as bystanders.

Forced

Many participants also expressed feeling forced into their perspective as workplace bullying bystanders. After they oriented to their position, they felt unable to escape the grasp of bullying processes. Wallace described his standpoint as a bystander to bullying as being forced

to work with bullies. “I was really mad, but also had to try and work with these people and that made it very difficult to do.” Dana mentioned that she felt held hostage to her boss’s whims. She described feeling forced and unable to set a boundary. “I’ve tried to say I don’t want to talk about [our coworkers]. I’ve tried to say that’s not really my place.” After she came to terms that she was forced into her position as a bystander, Dana expressed feeling stuck and unable to change her situation. “I’ll probably just stick it out...until I finish my degree...I’ve tried to set boundaries...I can’t do anything but just comply...I feel held hostage to my supervisor’s emotion.” Linda described being “sucked into” and “forced in the position” during her workplace bullying situations. For many bystanders, they often described being thrown “in the middle” (Joe) of their workplace bullying issues. This perspective conveyed a closeness to the dynamic nature of the relationship between the bully and target.

Closeness

Bystanders also experienced feeling close to the workplace bullying process. Their feelings emerged from not only being thrown into a situation in which they felt stuck, but also they experienced a closer look into the process than others. This could offer evidence for how a bystander may experience the same psychological effects as targets (Emdad et al., 2013) due to the close nature of their perspectives and positions within workplace bullying processes. Joe described what he feels in his perspective as mainly a witness to the workplace bullying experiences; “I think a bystander...is even closer to the situation. They can hear, see, smell, understand...a bystander to me is one that has like background information, you know, is seeing the whole thing unfold.”

Bystanders may feel a sense of closeness to workplace bullying processes than previously understood (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Another participant, Mike (a full professor in

English with 34 years' experience), described being unable to escape the closeness to his situation as being caged up with other wild animals. Here, you can see the feelings of constraint in his experiences as a target and bystander. "I suddenly noticed that I was inside a cage, and someone had just locked the door. And so, suddenly, when the door is locked, it looks way smaller than you thought. And you don't trust the other creatures in the cage as much as you did when the door was open." Linda also felt the closeness of her situation as a target and bystander to bullying; over the years, it began to permeate into her own communication style. "I will admit something. Because [if] that's what you see happening, you mirror it." Linda expressed always being on guard against being caught up in the bullying among others in her field. For many participants, they wanted to find ways to escape the closeness to bullying situations.

Disengagement

Hollis (2015) reported that both targets and bystanders experience higher rates of organizational disengagement in the face of workplace bullying in academia; often creating a substantial cost for the institution. Evidence from the thrownness theme and answering this research question can extend insight into feelings of disengagement. Participants in this study also experienced wanting to push away or disengage from their situations. This feeling often followed their narratives surrounding feeling thrown, forced, and uncomfortably close to bullying events. This process was central to their experiences as bystanders. Joe used the analogy of wanting to disappear, remain out of sight and, thus, out of mind of the bully. He didn't want to deal with the stress that comes along to bullying and remain unseen. "There's a meme of Homer Simpson and he like disappears into a bush. Really, there's a lot of times that all this is going on, but I just want to do that, right? I just, like disappear into that." He described his reasoning for feeling this way. At first, he wanted to disengage because he did not like tense situations at work.

He prided himself as someone who could work well with anyone. “I like to not have drama.”

These issues culminated in Joe’s expression for wanting to disengage from workplace bullying issues he was facing. He also perceived his role as trying to help initially yet taking a toll on him after a while. This caused Joe to want to leave the organization. “And then when you even have those thoughts, ‘is this really worth it?’” Nick also expressed feeling disengaged. “Don’t think about it as a as a career but as a job, go to work, do the best you can, put your students first to be a good teacher and then get the heck out of there.”

Some participants, as they narrated their experiences as targets, also saw the feelings of disengagement in physical form. During a department meeting, when Mike experienced being the target of workplace bullying, seeing others physically disengage from the event, he came to the conclusion that the witnesses were not going to speak up. “When you’re in a room and you watch this happen and you see everybody do that thing. **gestures: pushes back from the table** Have you seen this? And you know they’re not speaking up.”

Uneasiness

Finally, participants also likened their situations to walking on eggshells and the repetitious nature of workplace bullying. Many metaphors previously used by targets allow researchers to understand the repetitious and durational (e.g., chipping away, hammering, water torture; Tracy et al., 2006) nature of workplace bullying.

Revisiting Patty’s narrative, she described the uneasiness of her situations as a bystander and target. There was a constant struggle to remain under the radar, remain unseen, and a general feeling of anxiety. There is constant pressure to not disrupt the bully in their path. “And, you know, me and my other untenured colleague, like I said, we feel like we’re walking on eggshells. So, we truly are in these department meetings, just trying to, like not make, not give them

anything.” Revisiting April’s experience as a bystander, she likened her viewpoint of workplace bullying situations as sensing its repetitive nature. April’s experience as mainly a bystander revealed sentiments expressed by others in the departmental environment. Even here, the repetitive nature of workplace bullying impacted those around the bully and target. While the target felt the constant sting of bullying, bystanders also felt the repetitive nature. In her narrative, April described how this felt: “It’s like, where people make little jabs...it seems like little mosquito bites, and how eventually they’ll add up and add up and out and out till it’s so bad.”

Overall, bystanders felt a sense of being abruptly thrown into workplace bullying situations. Participants often described feeling forced or held hostage to the events. As they came to understand their role in workplace bullying, they felt a sense of uneasiness and uncomfortable closeness to the situations. As bullying processes lasted over time, many participants expressed wanting to hide away or disengage from their situations. Finally, even bystanders could feel the repetitive nature of workplace bullying processes, also likening their experiences as “mosquito bites” (April).

Research Question 5

RQ5 asked: *How does a person’s rank within the organizational hierarchy play a role in workplace bullying sensemaking processes?* This question allowed me to think critically about the implications of various organizational roles in how workplace bullying is experienced over time. Recruiting for this study included both faculty (18) and staff (19) within the higher education context. Staff positions included various levels within an organizational hierarchy (e.g., administrative assistant, coordinator, or director). Faculty positions included junior and senior-level faculty (e.g., adjunct, lecturer, as well as assistant, associate, or full professor).

Narratives from all organizational levels were present throughout the five themes presented in the findings section. I revisited the data to gain insights into how a participant's organizational role and/or rank may have played a role in the sensemaking processes during workplace bullying events.

Participants who held staff positions leaned into the backstage sensemaking and toxic atmosphere themes the most throughout their narratives. The shattered dreams and occupational identity themes showed up the most throughout faculty narratives. An equal representation of the thrownness theme occurred throughout both faculty and staff experiences. Nuances of faculty and staff positions within each theme emerged alongside their understandings of the organizational hierarchy. Faculty mostly expressed their understanding of the tenure process and staff mostly expressed their positionality alongside university faculty or administration (e.g., Dean, Provost, etc.).

Within the backstage sensemaking theme, all faculty and staff participants engaged in seeking or providing support. Erin, an assistant professor, and Natalie, a coordinator, were able to find support with coworkers throughout their narratives. Natalie mentioned that they, “certainly really, really relied on one another.” Erin felt “thick as thieves” alongside her other untenured colleagues. Erin also mentioned her understanding of their rank within the university hierarchy regarding the tenure process for faculty. “You’re higher in the system, you’re protected versus if you’re lower, you’re told not to say anything.”

Lauren, Gary, and Stacy turned into protectors who did not initially have support. Lauren, a director who initially experienced supervisory bullying, mentioned that she is “extremely protective of her [lower-level coworker] and you know, faculty can be pretty tough.” Stacy mentioned that she developed the mother instinct over student workers who were the targets of

bullying. “I’m like a mother figure for them. So, it’s just, it’s hard because you care about them.”

Gary, an associate professor, understood his role as a protector also through the lens of the tenure system for faculty. He mentioned that while he did not have support for his bullying experiences, he was quick to help a junior-level faculty member. Gary’s tenure was also a way that he could understand his self-efficacy in the wake of bullying events. “Whatever, I got tenure, I don’t need to worry about my abuser anymore, my abuser is never going to stop. Now, I just want to support this other person.” Lauren, Stacy, and Gary were all able to embody the protector role. However, it manifested differently through their positions as tenured faculty (Gary) and staff (Lauren and Stacy) protecting those at lower levels.

Within the toxic atmosphere theme, April and Sophie (both coordinators) experienced bullying from their supervisors. In both narratives, they expressed the outcomes of the toxic atmosphere (mostly hypervigilance and distrust) alongside their sentiments of lack of support from administration. Sophie mentioned that their LGBTQ+ organization “didn’t have a lot of support” when constantly receiving pushback for their programming. April also expressed that her distress came from lack of supervisory support as well. “I think as a whole office, there are just a lot of things that aren’t done correctly. There is a lack of support from the supervisors that we should have.” Likewise, Sherry (an associate professor) expressed her sense of betrayal through a lack of support from her campus administration. “[I felt] a sense of betrayal...you have my Dean...the Vice President, and then the [University] President...those were the three layers...and they were friends, and we knew they were friends...there wasn’t anything that we could have done.”

On the other hand, Elena (an associate professor) talked about her role as a faculty member working in a toxic environment. “In that, you know, in academia, as a faculty member,

my personal life and my professional life, are very much intertwined. I spend a lot of time on my work.” Patty, a librarian, also understood her rank within the tenure process as she expressed sentiments of learned helplessness. “I am unique because I don't have tenure. So, I didn't feel like I could stand up, which is ridiculous. Like, I should have just done it [standing up for a colleague].”

Within the shattered dreams theme, the majority of expectancy violation was expressed by faculty participants. Here, faculty understood bullying through the lens of their hopes for academia. Joon Jae, an associate professor, mentioned, “I think I fell in love with the idea of the school, and that it's a sleeping giant that will eventually get there.” Sonya, an associate professor as well, also understood her expectations for the academic environment, “You put the academic freedom in front. That is what's appropriate.” Bobby and Holly, both assistant professors, were contending with their high expectations of academia as they were relatively fresh into their first academic positions. Holly mentioned her aspirations from graduate school, “We were all doing critical work...I just thought that's how everybody thought.” Bobby thought of academia as the “intellectual fabric of society” and pictured himself holding philosophical discussions with colleagues.

On the other hand, junior-faculty and staff participants' expectancy confirmations were expressed through their knowledge of the organizational hierarchy. Patty, a librarian, mentioned that she was told, “I had heard, classism and the hierarchy. Be mindful that you're going to be victim to that.” Nick, who is an untenured assistant professor, understood the pecking order for those operating within academia. For him, the tenure process became the most salient. “[Bullying] comes with the territory because of the tenure system. For this crazy system, for six years, you have to watch what you say and be afraid of offending people and never speak up.”

Within the occupational identity theme, both faculty and staff participants expressed their understanding of the organizational hierarchy in academia as they discussed their bullying experiences. Betty, who is a director, talked about her rank and abilities in her administrative position. “Someone purposely usurped your authority and just intervened in your everyday actions. [It] makes you either feel or look incompetent or even unsure of yourself.” Likewise, Molly (a new assistant professor) explained how taken aback she was that bullying was dished out from senior-level faculty. She also thought of ways to protect and reclaim her occupational identity through the tenure system. “I kind of looked up to them because they were the professors. I thought, well, maybe if I can make myself valuable to the university, I can one day move into a tenure-track position.” Henry, a full professor and administrator, saw the disconnect between faculty and staff as he witnessed many staff members becoming the targets of bullying by faculty. “I’ve seen those situations where faculty attack staff, are just kind of condescending. it could be a gender issue because many staff are female... the staff person felt so undervalued...it’s this pecking order.”

Within the thrownness theme, faculty and staff both experienced feeling thrown into their perspectives as bystanders. However, some differences emerged within the thrownness theme regarding how a participant felt thrown, stuck, and disengaged from their perspective as bystanders to workplace bullying. First, Dana understood her feelings of being held hostage through her lens as an administrative assistant. “I mean, it’s your word against somebody who’s a world-renowned researcher, and they’re going to take their word because they make the university money... there needs to be more done to protect staff...I always felt like a subpar employee.” Wallace, an assistant professor, understood the pecking order through the tenure process for faculty. “After a critical mass of the junior faculty got tenure and promotion, the

atmosphere shifted drastically...I feel like...higher ed is essentially academic hazing...And the only reason they're doing that is because it was done to them.”

Overall, participants’ rank within the organization did play a role in their workplace bullying narratives. They simultaneously talked about their position in the hierarchy alongside holding expectations, having aspirations for their occupation, engaging in backstage supportive conversations, feeling thrown into their situations, and experiencing the outcomes of living in a toxic atmosphere. Notably, faculty mentioned the tenure process the most as they made sense of their bullying experiences. Staff most often talked about their positions as lower, or less than, faculty or other administration as they made sense of their bullying experiences.

Faculty. Many faculty members in higher education are required to produce output for the university. These requirements could include research, teaching, or service commitments, with many faculty members under great pressure to produce publishable research (Keashly & Neuman, 2010) to attain tenure. Academic tenure is a permanence position or an indefinite appointment of one’s organizational role within the higher-education system. Typically, faculty work for a six-year period to earn tenure, and usually promotion to a higher rank. Once tenure is granted, only extenuating circumstances can result in an employee’s job loss. The tenure process is an additional space of stress, feelings of injustice, and aggression (Keashly, 2021; Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Many faculty members feel the tenure process is like gambling, pledging a fraternity, and contracting a disease (Phinney, 2009).

The requirements to achieve tenure (research, teaching, and service) are often done to the benefit of the university rather than the faculty member (Phaney, 2009). Therefore, the faculty member gambles their career on being able to produce for the “house” (e.g., the institution that controls the odds), a type of hazing process that can occur as faculty seek tenure (Phinney,

2009). Once tenured, they are keen on dishing out the same abuses they endured, which upholds the established disconnect between tenured and untenured faculty. Finally, many faculty experience hypertension, heart disease, and obesity as a result of producing for the university in the quest for tenure (Phinney, 2009). Therefore, when faculty do earn tenure, their mental and physical capacity is weakened due to the need to outpace the tenure clock as well as endure hostile behaviors for years.

Staff. This study recruited primarily clerical and administrative staff (e.g., administrative assistant, student services, academic advising, libraries, coordinators, or directors). Staff positions within the higher education system are generally understood to occupy areas such as clerical/office (e.g., administrative assistant, records clerk, etc.), service/maintenance (e.g., custodial, food service, etc.), technical (e.g., IT professionals, paralegal, medical, etc.), skilled crafts (e.g., carpentry, electrical, etc.) (Nadel-Hawthorne et al., 2021), or professional staff (e.g., supervisory, administrative, libraries, etc.) (Bossu & Brown, 2018). Staff positions make up roughly 57% or more of total personnel in academia (Norton and Cakitaki 2016). Staff are integral for university functioning and are often characterized as “assets that hold much of the systemic knowledge and intellectual capital [that is] required to ensure the functioning of the university” (Graham 2012, p. 439).

Administrative assistants, specifically, have been referred to as female ghetto occupations (Truss et al., 2013). A female ghetto occupation is understood to have lower pay and resources, extra job duties often reserved for women (e.g., laundry, cleaning, meal planning, etc.), a lack of decision-making power or autonomy, and decreased upward mobility or training opportunities (Truss et al., 2013). However, many administrative assistants find value and satisfaction within their role, despite these misperceptions from the organization (Seeley, 2017). This prior research

and findings from the current study indicate a disconnect between research and practice as well as the need to highlight these often-overlooked voices.

Only recently have researchers examined the perceptions and experiences of these roles within academia. Divides between faculty and staff within many universities negatively “affect[ed] group legitimacy and visibility as some groups are privileged over others” (Botterill, 2018, p. 93). Their participants expressed the belief that faculty roles are more highly valued than staff roles and many staff participants felt invisible to the university. Staff members are experiencing increased burnout and emotional exhaustion at higher rates, stemming from the COVID-19 global health pandemic because they had to “maintain a facade of calm, confidence, grace, and patience” in the face of frustrated faculty and students, and often expressed the need for increased administrative support (Bessette, 2020, para. 3). Staff report needing trust, acknowledgement, appropriate staffing, access to resources, increased voice in university governance, and equitable compensation (Bessette, 2020). University staff, a majority of whom are women, experienced workplace aggression at higher rates than faculty (Fratzl & McKay, 2013), which caused increased vulnerability for many staff members as they do not have academic freedom protections historically only afforded to faculty. Yet, staff roles remain underrepresented in workplace bullying in academia research.

Theoretical Implications

This study focused on the experiences of bystanders to workplace bullying. The purpose of examining how bystanders experience and make sense of their lifeworld during workplace bullying events has shed light into the phenomenon of this perspective over time. The implications for theory gathered from this study assist in understanding the bystander effect, workplace bullying processes over time, sensemaking in organizations, and organizational

socialization processes. The emergent themes generated from this study can extend theoretical knowledge and research endeavors in these areas.

Workplace Bullying Bystanders

This study examined bystanders and the bystander effect through an interpretive philosophical paradigm, a new approach to the bystander phenomenon. Decades of research has understood bystanders from a post-positivist perspective (Latané & Darley, 1970; Ng et al., 2019) through the development of sensemaking models. Communication research has examined the possible roles, informed by goals for communication, that bystanders may exhibit (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). However, much knowledge about bystanders, especially during workplace bullying events, has attempted to predict how a bystander will respond (see Pouwelse, 2018 for a review). This study addressed a knowledge gap by examining how bystanders communicate their narratives from their own perspective, how they make sense of their roles, and how they create meaning over time throughout workplace bullying processes.

Conceptualization

This study calls for a reconceptualization of the bystander role. Delineation of roles and specific explication is important in research. It is equally important to understand how multiple roles often blend and become heavily interwoven over time, especially throughout workplace bullying processes. To understand bystanders solely as non-bullied witnesses (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013) is a miscalculation of the dynamics and possibilities of this role. The data presented in this study indicate a strong majority of organizational members may experience multiple roles over time as workplace bullying issues unfold. Additionally, a blending of multiple roles has implications for sensemaking processes (e.g., April felt targeted alongside others at times and Stacy became mama bear because she personally understood target

experiences) as well as bystander actions impacting the trajectory of workplace bullying events (e.g., Natalie and her fellow-bullied coworkers collectively made plans on how to handle their situation). Therefore, a new conceptualization of bystanders must include target-bystanders, a new role found in this study, which launches research possibilities for understanding the dynamics and sensemaking processes of targets, bystanders, and the blending of these roles over time.

Sensemaking Models

This study yields an additional stage of bystander sensemaking processes throughout workplace bullying events over time. In their foundational work, Latané & Darley (1970) proposed that bystanders take notice of the situation, interpret the causes, determine levels of responsibility, form an action plan, and implement behaviors. This study extends our knowledge of the bystander sensemaking process (Latané & Darley, 1970) through data gathered from the thrownness theme. Participants often felt as if they were thrown into the middle of the situation against their will. As participants talked about how they noticed the workplace bullying events, they simultaneously expressed the feeling of being thrown into their existence as bystanders.

During participant narratives, this orientation took the form of feeling the rug pulled out, thrust in the middle, put in a position, and feeling sucked in. After the initial shock of being thrust into their positions as bystanders, their narratives turned to how they attuned to the new reality of their role, essentially their human experience as bystander. Bystanders often characterized their position as feeling stuck, forced, or held hostage to the workplace bullying processes they experienced. This sheds light into how bystanders may come to terms with, and understand, their role during disruptive events. Therefore, thrownness must be included as an additional sensemaking process that builds from the framework outlined by Latané & Darley

(1970). This evidence extends how the bystander effect can also stem from feeling thrown into, orienting to, and wanting to push against the role of bystander. Evidence from this study also extends current cognitive sensemaking models.

Ng, et al. (2019) extended the cognitive sensemaking process for workplace bullying bystanders by adding perceptions of bullying severity, target fault, self-efficacy, moral obligation, and social contextual factors. Specifically, they posited that bystanders may withdraw their support over time as they view their self-efficacy with depleted worth if their actions cannot mitigate bullying. This study partially reinforces this proposition. Most notably, data presented here also contradict this notion. This study was able to uncover, through an interpretive philosophical framework, that bystanders' self-efficacy may *increase* over time throughout bullying experiences, especially if they are members of the target-bystander role where they can rebuild their self-efficacy as they help others cope with and address workplace bullying incidents.

Evidence from this study partially supports the decreased self-efficacy proposition. Many bystanders reported feelings of learned helplessness over time and thus began to withhold proactive behaviors. April eventually expressed feeling like a small frog in a big pond while still wanting to support her coworkers. Sherry felt that there was nothing else she could do about her bullying situation. However, other evidence in this study contrasts with this proposition outlined by Ng, et al. (2019). Over time, many participants sought to add value to their previous experiences as a target and eventually took on a protector role for others. Gary mentioned that he no longer cared about the consequences of his prosocial action and was only concerned about the target's wellbeing. Stacy became mama bear. Lauren was quick to notice bullying of others. Wallace mentioned that he would go to bat for anyone in his previous situation. Over time, the

self-efficacy of bystanders increased if they experienced a target's perspective, and it was a way to make sense of those prior experiences. Many of these participants also prospectively thought about how they would be an active and prosocial bystander in future situations. Therefore, prospective self-efficacy is a possibility for bystanders as they make sense of their experiences over time. This evidence adds additional components to the sensemaking model that can account for how this dynamic may unfold over time, often crossing the roles of target and bystander.

Ng, et al. (2019) called for qualitative studies to “follow the development of bullying in situ to understand its changing nature and how it affects bystander perceptions and responses” (p. 24). Also, Ng, et al. (2019) only considered snapshot occurrences with one bystander role that is separated from other roles throughout the workplace bullying process over time. As evidenced in this study, bystanders may be more likely to take a prosocial action if they have prior experiences as a target, which were the majority of participants. The path to increased self-efficacy as well as prospective self-efficacy, especially in the wake of hurtful experiences, is an area not realized in workplace bullying bystander literature previously. This study also provides further evidence for understanding the various roles bystanders take on as they move through their experiences with workplace bullying over time.

Bystander Roles

Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher (2013) pointed to how bystanders take on various roles motivated by their goals for communication. In their case study, three bystander roles included bully ally (acting as a henchmen or siding with the bully and motivated by wanting to remain in the good graces of the bully), target ally (bystanders help the target either through support or actively intervening and motivated by a sense of fairness), or silent bystander (ignoring the situation and motivated by wanting to keep one's job). In sum, their study highlighted a pattern

of motivations and roles for workplace bullying bystanders and the authors called for research examining these experiences over time.

The evidence gathered from this study enhances bystander role and motivation reported in the Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher (2013) case study. Participants voiced that they had previously experienced being a target and this prior experience helped in understanding their role as a bystander. Participants even prospectively made plans on what to do if they witnessed someone as a target of bullying. They did so to make sense of why they experienced being a target previously. They characterized this motivation as going to bat for the target, validating someone else's experience, becoming mama bear, and not letting the target feel abandoned. While bystanders may be motivated by a sense of fairness in enacting prosocial communication, they may also be motivated to add meaning to their previous roles as targets. Therefore, this study calls for an additional role and motivation for communication in our current conceptualization of bystander roles. A target-bystander has prior target experience and may also be motivated to reclaim their social identity and use the bystander role to do so.

This study increases our knowledge about workplace bullying narratives from a bystander perspective. Other communication studies have illuminated how targets perceive bystanders within their own narrative. Tye-Williams & Krone (2015) found that targets who did not receive bystander support likened their experiences as chaotic. However, some targets in the Tye-Williams & Krone (2015) study framed bystanders as comrades on a quest when they did receive support.

This study also highlights how bystanders see their own role in a similar way, especially if they have experienced the target role before. Participants in this study understood their role as a bystander well before confronted with witnessing bullying. They also likened their future or

current role as a bystander to a great epoch. They characterized their backstage supportive conversations as being “thick as thieves” (Erin), collectively planning for confrontation, or becoming the protector. This study calls for future research to encompass prior experiences of bystanders when examining motivations and tactics for their communication. Evidence from this study captures the rarely seen processes of how bystanders engage in this construction of meaning about their role, which can greatly impact the trajectory of workplace bullying processes over time.

Workplace Bullying

Another goal of this research study was to examine how workplace bullying unfolds over time from multiple perspectives throughout this process. Fundamentally, workplace bullying as a process has been largely characterized by its durational nature (Einarsen et al., 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). It has been understood as gradual and evolving over time, including aspects such as repetition, duration, and escalation (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). The early stages of workplace bullying, often according to target perspectives, have been identified as “subtle and often disguised forms of mistreatment” (Hauge et al., 2010, p. 307). PTSD symptoms have manifested toward the latter end of the bullying process due to long-term exposure to traumatic events (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). This current understanding of workplace bullying should also account for how these processes become dynamic and change over time.

Beginning Stages

This study extends our currently understood conceptualization of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). First, reflective sensemaking narratives can add clarity regarding how targets and bystanders experience the process of workplace bullying in hindsight. The first theme, shattered dreams, illustrated that expectations were also a catalyst for

the first moments of workplace bullying. Even when expectations for bullying were affirmed, the expectancy confirmation was still salient in the early stages of retrospective accounts for the current study participants. These expectations were marked with precision and clarity when recalling the point at which workplace bullying was initiated.

In retrospect, workplace bullying storytelling started well before the actual bullying events began. During the early stage of workplace bullying narratives, as evidenced in this study, participants characterized their expectations for working in academia as a sleeping giant, together saving the world, and the intellectual fabric of society. Other comparative cases characterized these expectations as being prepared for bullying, likened to experiences in middle school, to occur in academia. The first moments when bullying happened were marked by distinct expectancy violation or confirmation for participants.

These findings point to a new conceptualization that, in hindsight, workplace bullying issues arise with a suddenness and clarity. While this may not be the case for those currently going through the early stages of workplace bullying situations (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), retrospective sensemaking may remove some of the initial confusion and emotional turmoil. In doing so, a distinct beginning moment may be garnered from reflective accounts. These findings add an additional layer of complexity to workplace bullying processes. As people are experiencing bullying over time, research has understood that it is not until bullying has gone on for a duration that people label the experiences as bullying (Hauge et al., 2010). However, using the framework of retrospective sensemaking, findings from this study can point to a clear beginning of workplace bullying processes marked by expectations for both targets and bystanders. This becomes beneficial to spur future research to examine workplace bullying from a temporal perspective.

Ending Stages

As researchers are measuring the intensity of workplace bullying experiences from our previously understood definition (Einarsen et al., 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009), we must also include expectations for bullying after these events as well. This study adds an additional stage of workplace bullying processes. In addition to an escalation stage (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005), researchers must also account for de-escalation and reformation periods. As evidenced in the toxic atmosphere theme, many participants began to alter their expectations after bullying events. On the latter end of their narratives, and after bullying had occurred for a long period of time (often many years), participants described how their feelings of helplessness and distrust followed them. This occurred two ways. Even prospective accounts, when participants wondered what life without bullying would be like, were met with cautiousness. Also, when participants were able to escape the bullying, trepidation and distrust followed them into positive environments. Therefore, this study extends our conceptualization of workplace bullying processes by accounting for expectations both before and after bullying events. This provides a broader scope of possibilities to examine how workplace bullying becomes dynamic over time.

It is also important to account for workplace bullying as a multi-dimensional communication process that is “talked into being” (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012, p. 10). This study provides evidence that many targets and bystanders can collectively engage sensemaking processes when labeling events as bullying. The backstage sensemaking theme extends the evidence that clarity about workplace bullying experiences arises from supportive communication processes (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). Also, the backstage sensemaking theme provides insight into how people seek, provide, or have no support throughout the workplace bullying process over time.

Supportive Communication

This study also becomes beneficial in the research area of supportive communication surrounding workplace bullying events. Fundamentally, people may face difficulties when making sense of the traumatic events of bullying alone (Tracy et al., 2006). That is evidenced in the current study when some participants voiced that they did not have a support system when going through bullying at work. They characterized this experience as isolated on a deserted island waiting to be rescued. On the other hand, when supportive communication was present, people were able to find clarity in their experiences through the many ways of coping. This evidence is echoed in other studies from the targets' perspective (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). We must also examine possible complexities within supportive communication processes during workplace bullying.

Bystanders as Protectors

This study's findings add another layer of complexity to the supportive communication process as former targets may take prosocial measures as bystanders, which adds value to their previous traumatic experiences. The role of supportive bystander may add meaning in more than just helping behaviors for targets (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). For example, Gary was able to make sense of his experiences as a target when he provided support as a bystander. Lauren became hypervigilant over a new employee who was susceptible to bullying. Stacy felt a mother instinct over younger employees who became targets. It was their prior experiences as targets that spurred these bystanders to take on the prosocial bystander role. They were able to embody this role as the backstage supporter and protector. Therefore, supportive communication was a way that participants created meaning about their roles as targets and bystanders.

However, researchers must also be mindful of possible caveats when examining backstage support.

Paradoxes

Some supportive communication, such as advice, may become paradoxical during workplace bullying events (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2017). The authors found that workplace bullying advice becomes paradoxical because it may not acknowledge the intense emotion nor complex circumstances of targets' experiences. The authors pointed out that advice exacerbated the emotional turmoil for many of their participants, such as downplaying emotion or causing further stress. Particularly, Tye-Williams & Krone's (2017) participants mentioned that individual strategies to mitigate bullying were largely ineffective and may have been reasons for the paradox. The authors pointed to the need for many people who surround workplace bullying processes to come together in a united front using supportive communication channels to do so.

The theme of backstage sensemaking illustrates new complexities of how supportive communication throughout workplace bullying processes manifests over time and where these areas may become beneficial or unhelpful to workplace bullying events. Some participants used the backstage supportive system to engage in various coping strategies (e.g., venting, cooking a meal, planning how to handle bullying, etc.). The early stages of supportive communication were often marked by what the participants viewed as unhelpful. For example, Natalie remarked that she and her coworkers would vent their frustrations with one another and finally realized it was an unhealthy thing to do. After the initial venting stage was over, many participants were able to form an action plan alongside coworkers. Natalie was able to share a workplace bullying video with her colleagues, made the decision to proactively mitigate their situation, and formed an action plan. Backstage sensemaking processes became a rich area where participants would

engage in meaning-making to not only support others, but also to provide a space where targets and bystander found clarity about their experiences.

Clarity

It is also important to note that some participants did not realize their experiences were bullying until the backstage conversations occurred with coworkers. For example, Erin expressed that she was jaded about her experiences until she witnessed a coworker as the target of the same bullying she experienced previously. Once they compared notes in the backstage, they collectively realized the experience was bullying. The backstage space can also add clarity to workplace bullying experiences as both targets and bystanders engage in supportive communication. Evidence from this study combined with findings from the Tye-Williams & Krone (2017) study point to cycles of supportive communication throughout workplace bullying events. There may be moments where support is perceived as unhelpful and some moments where clarity, meaning, and tangible proactive plans are made. Examination of these cycles within workplace bullying contexts may add complexity to how these processes unfold over time.

The theme of backstage sensemaking also highlights the frontstage versus backstage nature of workplace bullying processes. This extends our workplace bullying conceptualization into a more multifaceted and dynamic process. Where the frontstage encompassed putting on the show or being forced to grin and bear it, the backstage was the space where participants could debrief with others. This adds evidence that direct comparison points of the frontstage and backstage communication throughout the bullying process would be beneficial to the literature. The spaces where people view their support as helpful or unhelpful across time and how this impacts frontstage communication during workplace bullying processes is a rich area of research

focus as well. This study provides additional evidence to extend the cycles of supportive communication (e.g., moving from venting to forming an action plan). What is initially perceived as unhelpful may ultimately lead to the quest to make sense of workplace bullying issues.

Sensemaking in Organizations

This study used the framework of Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking in organizations to examine how workplace bullying processes for bystanders occurred over time. Sensemaking theory is concerned with how organizational members understand and assign meaning to deviations from everyday predictable work processes (Weick, 1995). The meaning that is interpreted from events is then acted upon to preserve meaning systems and predict future deviations. Weick et al. (2005) explained that sensemaking is a nonlinear process that involves retrospection and prospection as well. Therefore, sensemaking becomes an interactive, dynamic, and reflexive process (Weick et al., 2005). This study focused on the properties of identity, enactment, and emotion. Most notably, the findings from this study adds new dimensions to sensemaking theory and point to how workplace bullying becomes destructive for one's occupational identity, causes hypervigilance in extracting cues from the organizational environment, extends into dynamic enactment processes, and leads to prolonged detrimental emotional responses.

Identity

The themes of occupational identity and toxic atmosphere are best poised to add value into the sensemaking in organizations theoretical framework (Weick et al., 2005). First, "identities are constituted out of the process of interaction" (Weick, 1995, p. 20). The sensemaker attempts to put the pieces of the puzzle together in the process of generating one's

identity. Weick (1995) explained that one's sense of self is generated from three fundamental needs: self-enhancement (maintaining positive self-regard), self-efficacy (desire to be seen as competent), and self-consistency (the need for continuity across contexts). This process of identity creation and maintenance becomes complex when disruptive events in the workplace impede pursuit of these needs.

Throughout the occupational identity theme, the destabilization of participants' identity was most salient in the early stages of workplace bullying processes. Participants often began their narratives talking about how their competencies and perceptions of self-worth were threatened when experiencing workplace bullying. Betty expressed that she was thrown for a loop. Elyse talked about how her lifelong goal of becoming a teacher was crushed when she felt expendable. After participants experienced the threat to their occupational identity, they began to make efforts to preserve their sense of self. They would characterize this as laying low or playing the game. Many participants within this theme also expressed an attempt to reclaim their identities and prove their worth to the organization. They often talked about how they were good at their jobs, won awards, or began seeking employment elsewhere.

Attempting to reconstruct occupational identity was a difficult process for many participants, even if they were able to join new organizational environments. For example, Molly finally found an organizational space free from the toxicity of her previous experience. It was met with trepidation. While she was simultaneously mourning the self she was, Molly also expressed continued self-doubt in her new organization. Weick (1995) explained that new identities are formed as people make sense of previous interactions. This study's findings also extend this complexity of identity formation. Occupational identity construction and reformation after traumatic events in the workplace may take longer than previously discussed in our

literature (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). While some participants in the current study expressed joy at finally finding an accepting and bullying-free workspace (often likening their experiences as a blessing), they still expressed hesitancy in restoring their sense of self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency. This points research in the direction to ask how long destabilization of identity may last in the wake of workplace bullying events.

Enactment

Identity creation and maintenance is also enacted within the organization. Weick (1995) explained that organizational members actively embody roles that produce and are produced by their environment. Evidence from this study illustrates how researchers can extend this premise within organizational sensemaking processes. In the face of disruptive events, participants were able to embody multiple roles over time, each of which gave meaning to the next. For example, Natalie first began her narrative occupying the role of target, often feeling isolated. It wasn't until she was able to express her role as a bystander, developing a plan of action for her and her team, that she was able to give meaning to her experiences as a target. The same occurred for many others as they prospectively thought about other roles they would occupy. Stacy thought of herself as mama bear, Lauren mentioned that she would be quick to defend a lower-level colleague. In this study, multiple roles were enacted within the organizational environment in the face of the toxic environment riddled with workplace bullying issues. These roles became intertwined and dynamic over time as participants made sense of their experiences.

The toxic atmosphere theme also helps us to understand sensemaking processes as it relates to enactment and emotional responses. Participants in the current study felt a sense of helplessness when they collectively and repeatedly reported their situations. For example, Sherry felt betrayal by her university administration and learned there was not anything she could do.

April felt like a small frog in a big pond and learned over time that her opinion does not matter to supervisors. This provides additional evidence as to why people often experience PTSD symptoms toward the end of workplace bullying processes. For many participants, these feelings of learned helplessness and hypervigilance, in addition to destabilized identities, continued well after workplace bullying situations were alleviated.

Environmental Cues

The process of taking cues from the environment is one of the central tenets of sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). Using the theme toxic atmosphere to understand how people take cues from their environment during prolonged workplace bullying events helps to extend this aspect of sensemaking theory. A state of hypervigilance was expressed as participants experienced both the target and bystander roles. Sherry felt consumed by bullying in her department. Patty expressed that everyone was constantly walking on eggshells, always waiting for the next outburst to happen. This evidence extends sensemaking theory to account for the deleterious effects that a hyper-extraction of environmental cues can have on organizational members during turbulent events, such as workplace bullying.

Emotion

As discussed during the toxic atmosphere theme, prolonged hypervigilance may lead to detrimental emotional responses, such as a lowered sense of trust. Sensemaking in organizations (Weick et al., 2005) posited that a new organizational experience is seen through the lens of previous experiences. While emotion becomes the impetus to sensemaking, long-term emotional responses may be carried from one organization to another, especially after traumatic experiences. Evidenced in the study, Elena prospectively thought about what it would be like to join a new university. The normal thoughts about getting to know colleagues came up in addition

to lingering trust issues. Sophie was also hesitant to trust a new boss who attempted to mitigate workplace bullying situations. This loss of trust was compounded with the depletion of occupational identity. It is also important to know how new organizational members make sense of their new environment, especially after previous detrimental experiences.

Organizational Socialization

Organizational socialization is defined as “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 211). Akin to socialization, organizational assimilation is known as the process of transformation for organizational members from outsider to insider (see Kramer & Miller, 2013 for a review). Throughout the assimilation process, newcomers anticipate what work life is going to be like well before they join the organization (known as anticipatory socialization). New experiences at work are often measured against a new employee’s expectations, which are shaped from prior experiences (Kramer & Miller, 2013).

This study provides evidence that new organizational members may be entering and exiting organizations with lingering issues, especially stemming from a toxic work environment riddled with bullying. Issues such as expectations, hypervigilance, learned helplessness, and loss of trust may impede organizational assimilation processes, add another layer of uncertainty for newcomers, become barriers to organizational metamorphosis, or linger well after organizational exit has taken place. The first phase of assimilation, anticipatory socialization, was evidenced in this study. Participants wondered what a new organization might be like that is not riddled with bullying. Elena often wondered what it would be like assimilating into a new organization. However, she also expressed a state of hypervigilance and distrust while engaging in anticipatory socialization.

The encounter phase may also hold added complexities for new organizational members coming from abusive workspaces. Sophie was hesitant and untrusting of a positive encounter when a new leader took over their department. They still expressed a continued state of hypervigilance even after feeling relief when new leadership expressed a desire to mitigate bullying issues. The metamorphosis phase may come equipped with added difficulties for organizational members with abusive past experiences. Sherry was cautious about trusting potential new colleagues. In addition to trying to find her sense of self again, she also expressed that she may have become judgmental of new colleagues so far throughout her metamorphosis journey in a new organizational space. Finally, the process of organizational exit was experienced for some participants. They often characterized their leaving with a sense of loss and mourning over what they could have accomplished and who they could have been as professionals. The sentiments from their organizational exit have lingered into new spaces for many participants.

Organizational socialization research may benefit from the findings in this study by acknowledging the possible emotional turmoil, such as PTSD symptoms, hypervigilance, loss of trust that new employees may be bringing into their organizations. New research can examine how long it may take and what communication strategies may be required to fully integrate a newcomer coming from a bullying environment. These people may be coming in with added stress or a depleted sense of occupational identity stemming from a previous toxic workplace. Organizational training programs can keep these considerations in mind when examining their newcomer assimilation processes as well as attempts to mitigate bullying issues.

Applied Implications

Findings from this study are also beneficial to various organizational practitioners. The insights garnered from the themes and theoretical implications may help trainers develop bystander intervention programs, aid human resource (HR) professionals and supervisors in mitigating workplace bullying issues, as well as add insights into new-member socialization methods. This study may help bridge a gap between target and bystander experiences and how organizations may address workplace bullying.

Intervention Training Programs

Many bystander intervention training programs have been implemented across multiple business sectors tackling several issues (e.g., workplace bullying, harassment, hostile work environment, etc.). Experts in the field of workplace interpersonal violence, which included bullying, identified three critical factors when conducting bystander intervention training programs— committed leadership, protections for both targets and bystanders, and confidentiality (Lassiter et al., 2021). Specifically, the workplace bullying category included the need for an open and safe environment for workplace bullying discussion, awareness training defining the types of behaviors that apply, and the need for leadership to constantly reiterate the importance of a bullying-free work environment (Lassiter et al, 2021). This study addresses these needs.

Awareness Training

This study provides evidence for the benefits of support groups for both targets and bystanders, and how these sessions could unfold. Considering the theme of backstage sensemaking, the role of bystander could add meaning to someone's previous experiences as a target. This has been echoed in other studies from the target perspective as well (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). When some participants in the current study did not have a supportive

communication network, they expressed feelings of isolation. It was not until they were made aware of someone else's experience as a target that they decided they could help by providing targets with ways to cope (e.g., cooking a meal, venting, watching an informative video, etc.). A support group may be an optimal space for both targets and bystanders to exchange perspectives and stories about their experiences as well as prime future bystanders for prosocial helping behaviors.

Support groups also may become helpful for bystanders who have not had prior experiences as targets, as evidenced by some participants in the current study. While bystanders go through their own stressors because of their role, it is important to understand where prior experiences inform sensemaking and where they may be lacking. Allowing bystanders to join a support group helps them gain target perspectives. Considering the social-emotion perception scholarship (Van Boven et al., 2013), bystanders may be more likely to understand a target's perspective if they have previously experienced the same standpoint during workplace bullying situations. Bystanders who do not have prior experiences as targets may reap benefits from engaging in support-group communication with targets to gain insights into that perspective. Support groups that contain both bystanders and targets, regardless of prior background, may also help prime bystanders for prosocial reactions in the face of workplace bullying situations. Dialogue with targets and their first-hand experiences may help to close the empathy gap for bystanders ahead of possible, or ongoing, workplace bullying situations. This would allow targets and bystanders to collectively define the types of behaviors that apply as workplace bullying during support group encounters, a need outlined in the Lassiter et al. (2021) study.

Open and Safe Environment

As evidenced in the current study, supportive communication in the backstage may be able to go from a place where bystanders and targets vent their frustrations and make sense of their experiences to a place where they find ways to cope and move into planning prosocial action together. Supportive communication is a dynamic process that unfolds over multiple interactions (MacGeorge et al, 2011). Traditionally, supportive communication has been understood from a support-seeker and support-provider dynamic that occurs over time through four key phases (Jefferson, 1988). The first phase consists of messages that orient the seeker and provider, often consisting of many topics other than the problem, such as venting or emotional coping. The support-seeker voices the problems during the second phase. The third phase consists of seekers and providers making sense of the problem collectively. Communication partners transition away from the problem during the fourth and final phase (Rains et al, 2021). Narrative storytelling, as described in this study, during workplace bullying experiences may be optimal to give space to the cycle of supportive communication (venting, coping, educating, sensemaking, and action) during support-group communication.

Other supportive communication, such as advice, that is captured in a one-time occurrence may indeed become paradoxical and ultimately unhelpful (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2017). However, if workplace bullying advice is allowed to evolve in a safe and open environment, such as during support group sessions, it may become beneficial to ultimately lead to mitigating workplace bullying issues. It is important for training specialists to reiterate the need for supervisors and organizations to provide a safe and supportive space to do so. This would also satisfy a best practice need outlined in the Lassiter et al (2021) study – the need for a safe and open support environment.

Another area from this study that may prove helpful in crafting optimal bystander intervention training is the theme of thrownness. Throughout bystander intervention training efforts, it is important to understand the bystander perspective as well as the accompanying psychological stressors. Previous bystander intervention training programs have focused on mitigating the diffusion of responsibility or feelings of insufficient self-efficacy that may occur. For example, the *Green Dot* campaign aimed at bystander intervention during sexual violence situations was developed to mitigate self-efficacy issues (Coker et al., 2018). Also, the *It's Your Place* campaign focused on easing the effects of diffusion of responsibility for bystanders to sexual assault situations (Sundstrom et al., 2018). While these previous training programs have garnered success, they have not been able to fully acknowledge the multifaceted bystander experience. Evidence from this study can develop a training program that highlights the complex perspective of bystanders.

It is important to acknowledge other facets of the bystander experience with the goals of producing a more well-rounded program that can also tackle psychological issues not previously addressed in other training efforts. Bystanders may feel thrown into their situations, feel stuck in their positions, and desire to return to normal work life. In addition to messaging about bystander responsibility and self-efficacy, it is also beneficial to discuss these unique perspectives and psychological experiences during training sessions to help bystanders know that their psychological responses are shared by others.

Bystanders experience psychological effects akin to targets, such as a depleted self-worth (Emdad et al., 2013), learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972), and hypervigilance (Herman, 1997), as also evidenced by this study. If training programs can acknowledge that bystanders and targets go through many shared experiences and feelings, it may be mutually beneficial to

connect bystander and target experiences as well as illustrate that bullying affects more organizational members than just the target. Bringing bystander experiences to the forefront may help reduce the stigma (Pouwelse et al., 2018) bystanders feel in their positions. Incorporating these components may provide pathways to prosocial bystander action.

Implementation

A few caveats should be addressed while crafting bystander intervention training programs. Before the aforementioned phases of support (Rains et al, 2021) can be implemented in a support group protocol, research should examine the effects of backstage support and frontstage communication. Tracking the types of backstage support (e.g., venting, emotional support, forming an action plan, etc.) and how it manifests in frontstage communication in the face of bullying is important to understand before these training protocols are implemented. This would mitigate possible situations where bullying is inadvertently exacerbated from improper planning and use of support groups as well as bullies taking advantage of this sacred space.

Additionally, trainers must be very careful in how the target-bystander spectrum, support communication phases, and shared psychological experiences are implemented in support-group sessions. There may be risk in allowing the multiple phases of supportive communication cycles to function during support groups. There could be potentially more unhelpful aspects, such as venting, to devolve into a toxic space or accidentally exacerbate issues for targets and bystanders. Trainers, and those running support-group sessions, should be aware that support groups may need moments to vent, but it is important to keep participants on track toward healing and possibly reporting issues as a group. Messaging can move participants into the next phases by providing an educational video or developing other ways of emotional coping (e.g., cooking a meal, etc.) if the conversations become derailed.

While highlighting bystander experiences would be beneficial, the goal is to help targets. Bystander stories may overshadow or become competitive with target experiences. If these issues should occur, trainers can focus the conversation on how bystanders and targets can collectively mitigate the bullying situations, work together toward healing, and bond over shared experience. Because both targets and bystanders experience wanting to disconnect and leave the organization altogether, support groups should not be a coalition-building effort that accidentally leads to a mass exodus from the organization, unnecessarily. Optimal training efforts and support groups should also be accompanied by proactive administration that takes target and bystander accounts seriously.

Implications for Practitioners

Findings from this study may also prove beneficial to other organizational practitioners, such as human resource (HR) professionals or supervisors. Previous research has examined the sensemaking processes for HR professionals during workplace bullying events (Cowan, 2012); HR professionals and targets identified similar key areas when defining the types of workplace bullying communication (e.g., verbal/nonverbal cues, repetition, and power disparity). Cowan (2012) also found differences in target and HR professionals' definitions of bully intent and bullying severity. The results from the Cowan (2012) study pointed to possible problematic issues that could arise when addressing bullying situations, such as misinterpreting bully intentions and misattributing target fault. These misinterpretations arose from HR professionals not understanding the sensemaking process for targets (Cowan, 2012).

Other areas of research have also examined the difficulties in understanding target narratives. Tye-Williams & Ruble (2017) examined emotionality and coherence during target sensemaking narratives. When targets narrated their experiences with clarity and moderate

emotions, it was seen positively. Negative attributions, such as target fault or blame, were made when high emotions and confusion were expressed during narratives. HR professionals must understand how target and bystander narratives and sensemaking processes may unfold over time. Various psychological disruptions for targets and bystanders may become a barrier to understanding bullying experiences.

Due to the durational nature of workplace bullying, reports may not be made in the early stages (Lutgen-Sandvik et al, 2009). Delayed reporting may exacerbate attribution errors, such as target fault. Retrospective sensemaking when assessing target and bystander reports becomes important because pinpointing a clear beginning to workplace bullying situations while still going through the first stages may be difficult. In this study, participants were able to pinpoint clear early defining moments with heightened clarity *after* they retrospectively made sense of their situations. Additionally, retrospective sensemaking allowed participants to add meaning to their experiences as both targets and bystanders. The emotionality in their retrospective narratives shifted from feelings of isolation and confusion to protector and confidant as some participants were able to cross the target-bystander spectrum.

If HR professionals can keep these caveats in mind (emotional turmoil, retrospective sensemaking, etc.), they may be able to avoid misinterpreting target and bystander narratives. This would help key organizational position members, such as HR professionals, take target and bystander narratives seriously. HR professionals can be mindful of how the confusion level and emotionality may change over the course of target and bystander narratives. Situations may become clearer as time goes on, while these individuals collectively make sense of their experiences. HR professionals should note that if bullying is reported at a time removed from the event(s), time for retrospective sensemaking may be a reason. HR professionals should keep in

mind that many targets and bystanders may need time to process their experiences and make sense of bullying over time, rather than immediately after the behaviors happen.

Findings from this study are also helpful to supervisors who wish to address workplace bullying issues. The toxic atmosphere theme provides insights into how bullying may manifest over time for both targets and bystanders. It was not enough for supervisors to simply state that they had no tolerance for bullying. Actions to accompany those words were critical. Even with strong actions and zero tolerance, many participants still expressed feelings of hypervigilance, loss of trust, helplessness, and threats to their occupational identity after bullying was eradicated.

Supervisors should be mindful of these areas when trying to create a bullying-free organizational culture. Reiterating the bullying policy is not sufficient; supervisors should understand the lingering effects that bullying can have on an entire organization. While training programs outweighed upper-level support when predicting bystander helping behaviors, a combination of both facets are necessary in developing the optimal environment to mitigate bullying issues (Sundstrom et al., 2018). Supervisors must be explicit in rebuilding employees' loss of occupational identity, developing ways to rebuild trust, engaging in open and honest conversations where employees can vent about past experiences when appropriate, and proactively mitigating unforeseen bullying situations due to possible learned helplessness from the workforce. This would satisfy the Lassiter et al. (2021) call for supervisors to constantly reiterate the need for a bullying-free work environment.

Organizational Socialization Methods

Supervisors and those who are tasked with orienting new organizational members must also be mindful of possible traumas employees may be experiencing from previous workplaces. The shattered dreams and toxic atmosphere themes indicate that expectations for professional life

may be more complex than previously understood (Kramer, 2010). As it relates to a professional space, a person's identity may be heavily involved in their work (e.g., education, medicine, social services, etc.; Kenny et al., 2011). New member orientations should keep in mind that many members hold high expectations for their careers and roles within the organization. This adds an additional layer of complexity if these expectations are negatively violated, such as during workplace bullying events.

Organizational socialization professionals (e.g., trainers, supervisors) should engage in open dialogue concerning new employees' expectations for the workplace. The benefits of this are two-fold. As evidenced in the current study, some participants had very high hopes for their professional life in academia. This caused an intense expectancy violation likened to a curse, a wreckage, or disillusionment when bullying was encountered. On the other hand, some new employees may bring expectations for bullying into the organization. Participants in the current study remained hypervigilant and were slow to trust in their new organizational environments. Open dialogue in the early stages of socialization as it relates to expectations, and especially expectations for workplace bullying, may highlight some key areas to be addressed during the crucial first stages of organizational socialization processes.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study contributes to theoretical and applied conversations within the communication discipline, it is not without limitations. These limitations serve as a catalyst to continue the important work that examines and addresses key issues surrounding workplace bullying. This study presents limitations and future directions regarding participant demographics, timelines for retrospective narrative accounts, research context, data analysis, implementation of training programs, and world events that may have impacted its contributions.

Directions for future research previously mentioned throughout the thematic findings, research questions, theoretical implications, and applied implications are reviewed as well.

Participant Demographics

The participants' racial, gender, and sexuality demographics fell short of adequate representation from the general United States population. The National Communication Association calls to ensure equal representation of marginalized voices in our research (Griffin, et al 2020). Only 21% of participants identified as a person who, during their narratives, expressed experiences with marginalization or discrimination due to their social identity as an interwoven process to interpersonal and institutional bullying in academia.

Future research should pay special attention to the narratives of historically marginalized populations, especially surrounding workplace bullying issues. Previous work has highlighted that these individuals experience being the target of bullying at higher rates in academia (Misawa, 2015), which may be a reason why workplace bullying bystander recruitment yielded a homogenous participant pool. If marginalized individuals are more likely to be a target and already underrepresented in academia, then they may be less likely to be a bystander. Future research should examine why marginalized individuals may or may not cross into a bystander role. Researchers should also continue examining the unique complexities and cognitive sensemaking processes for organizational members who experience marginalization and discrimination in addition to bullying in the workplace.

Time Horizon

It is important for research to examine how workplace bullying processes unfold over time, from a longitudinal perspective. Recruitment for the current study delineated workplace bullying experiences within one year or less. Participants' retrospective accounts were at most

one year from their most recent experience. Others recalled experiences less than a year or were currently experiencing bullying. Some participants were able to leave their situations, yet it was a year or less when they were able to do so. Participants who were able to leave their situations still expressed loss of trust, hypervigilance, loss of occupational identity, and hesitancy in their new workplaces. Therefore, many participants were still amid their sensemaking processes.

A future research endeavor should tackle workplace bullying as sensemaking more than a year out from bullying experiences. Tracking how people make sense of their previous situations in hindsight, rebuild trust, and reclaim their identities over time is a fruitful area to examine. Specific research questions could ask: *How do organizational members rebuild trust and identity in the wake of bullying?* or *What messages from administration become most beneficial as workplace bullying issues are mitigated?* Future research may also benefit from examining multiple perspectives over time throughout workplace bullying situations (e.g., staff, administration, etc.). Specifically, Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT; Burgoon, 1978) is an optimal framework to use for these future studies to track how expectations are formed during and after workplace bullying experiences. Evidence from this study indicates that expectations are pivotal during sensemaking processes for workplace bullying. Therefore, using EVT as a stand-alone framework is a necessary next step in workplace bullying research.

Research Context

Academia is a unique space and the findings from this study may not be replicated in other professional sectors. Other professional sectors, such as blue-collar work, may have different assumptions of what constitutes bullying and what constitutes everyday talk (Goodboy et al., 2017). The findings from this study were often tied to expectations for working in academia, such as the shattered dreams and occupational identity themes. It may be possible

these themes do not show up in other professional business sectors. It is a fruitful research area to examine how expectations for work may present a strong or weak indication for how organizational members make sense of bullying issues in their workplace that is dependent on the professional context.

Data Analysis

Participant narratives most often encompassed both experiences of target and bystander roles. Therefore, viewpoints from multiple perspectives became interwoven within participant narratives and, at times, it was difficult to parcel into two distinct sensemaking processes. Throughout the coding process, I paid attention when a participant talked about their experiences as a target and as a bystander. However, the target-bystander spectrum narrative in the current study became heavily intertwined during the overall thematic coding analysis.

While data analysis in the current study was able to parcel through somewhat when participants experienced being a target or being a bystander, it is important for future research to continue looking into multiple perspectives throughout bullying processes. It was rare in the current study for participants to experience only the bystander role over time (six participants total were mainly bystanders). An overwhelming majority of participants experienced both the target and bystander perspectives. Future research should recruit only bystanders to reach saturation of this role and compare themes within those narratives juxtaposed against those who have experienced both target and bystander perspectives, or only target perspectives as well. Specific research questions in this area include: *What are similarities and/or differences in target and bystander sensemaking processes?* or *How do target-bystander narratives become interwoven over time as workplace bullying is experienced?*

Training Programs

It is also difficult to generalize findings solely from this study for development of an all-encompassing bystander intervention training program. A bystander intervention training program that includes both target and bystander support groups requires special attention and delicate tactics as to not accidentally exacerbate issues. While the applied implications from this study are worthy of additional research and conversation, it is not appropriate to begin incorporating these themes just yet in an intervention or support group training program. Implementing suggestions from this study too soon could have possible deleterious outcomes.

Future research requires further examination of these findings, outcomes of target-bystander support groups, and possible threats to implementing the suggestions from this study. Future research can test the outlined support group communication facets in a controlled environment, such as a lab setting, before they are implemented in a real-world program. Future endeavors should also reframe the bystander role as a shared experience alongside targets, which may lessen a stigma or judgment for bystanders. This may become beneficial for training programs and priming for prosocial bystander support. Further examination of the cycles of support, helpful and unhelpful moments, and the perpetuation of bullying over time is a fruitful area of inquiry in this regard.

World Events

Data collection for this study was conducted during the first wave of the COVID-19 global health pandemic (August-November 2020). Many participants expressed how their experiences with bullying over the past year were impacted by COVID-19 (e.g., quarantine, department meetings over Zoom or telephone, etc.). Participants often voiced that they received a respite from bullying during quarantine. However, when department meetings and work began to ramp back up via electronic communication (Zoom, phone, email), the bullying experiences

resumed. These conversations were not included in the scope of the current study. An optimal study that stems from the data collected here, should examine how destructive organizational processes may manifest for participants through key world events, such as COVID-19, or structural changes, such as working from home or engaging in electronic formats.

Hierarchy in Academia

This study examined how an organizational member's position in the hierarchy plays a role in sensemaking processes during workplace bullying experiences. Data indicated that faculty often understood bullying through their position within the tenure process. Junior-level faculty voiced feelings of vulnerability due to their lack of tenure as they wanted to report their situations to administration, which often lead to feeling helpless. Staff participants saw their role within the organizational hierarchy as Dana mentioned, "like a subpar employee" or as Henry mentioned, "undervalued... [and caught in] the pecking order" as they made sense of bullying. These findings contribute to the need for further examination of these often overlooked and undervalued roles, especially within academic settings.

An optimal future research project should examine lower-level employees' (e.g., junior faculty, clerical, or maintenance staff) experiences in academia. This role is currently underrepresented in our research literature, especially from a communication perspective. Specifically, the administrative assistant role has previously been characterized as the female ghetto while these organizational members do not perceive their own role in this way (Seeley, 2017; Truss et al., 2013). A future study should use the framework of Symbolic Interactionism to examine how organizational members occupying these roles perceive themselves, understand how they are perceived by others, and how they communicate meaning regarding their role or

rank within the organizational hierarchy (Blumer, 1980; Mead, 1934). It is important to continue highlighting these often-overlooked voices in our research literature.

Contributions

Overall, this study highlights how bystanders experience multiple roles throughout workplace bullying processes over time and narrate their points of view. The thematic findings also spur conversations within many areas surrounding workplace bullying issues, such as target and bystander roles, workplace bullying sensemaking, support networks, expectations for bullying, and organizational socialization processes. Applied implications for bystander training programs, human resource professionals, supervisors, and organizational socialization assimilation methods are also highlighted.

Workplace Bullying Bystanders

Rather than attempting to predict bystander communication and behaviors, this study revealed insights into how bystanders narrate their own perspectives. This novel research approach to bystanders generated a new bystander role (target-bystanders) by accounting for how prior experiences of bystanders (namely target experiences) greatly influenced their sensemaking processes and, thus, role enactment during workplace bullying events (e.g., target-bystanders becoming protectors). Therefore, a reconceptualization of the bystander experience is necessary to capture these types of nuances as we paint a more complete picture of workplace bullying processes.

The evidence presented in this study added another phase to the original bystander effect process outlined by Latané & Darley (1970). It was through an interpretive lens that this study was able to capture that bystanders often feel thrown into their roles. Throughout participant narratives, they voiced feeling the rug pulled out, feeling stuck or held hostage, and wanting to

push away or disengage from their viewpoint as bystanders. This is an aspect not captured before with post-positive studies. Additionally, our current sensemaking model (Ng. et al., 2019) assumes that bystander self-efficacy is depleted over time. While this was partially supported with the current evidence, this study was also able to highlight how bystanders may use a prosocial role, such as protector, to add clarity and meaning to their previous experiences as targets. This study was able to capture how bystanders may embody multiple roles during workplace bullying processes and how these roles may unfold over time. As such, this study provides evidence that bystander self-efficacy may decrease, or even increase, over time considering their circumstances and roles they occupy.

Our research literature has often framed the bystander role as a separate entity from other roles, such as targets (Lutgen-Sandvik & Fletcher, 2013). Evidence from this study has extended roles for bystanders to include target-bystander. The target-bystander experience becomes heavily interwoven within retrospective narratives and sensemaking processes, where participants report often oscillating between these two roles (e.g., target-bystander and bystander-target). Target-bystanders (e.g., those who oscillate between roles) may have different motivations and goals for communication with their role as bystander (e.g., a protector reclaiming lost identity to add meaning to their target experiences). These new roles and motivational factors may greatly influence how workplace bullying processes unfold over time.

Workplace Bullying

This study was also able to extend our currently understood conceptualization of workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). Retrospective workplace bullying accounts can pinpoint with precision and accuracy when these processes began. Evidence from this study pointed research to a suddenness and clarity marked by expectancy violation (e.g., the sleeping

giant turned into a wreckage) or expectancy confirmation (e.g., middle school is reaffirmed and morphs into feelings of lifelessness). This points research to examine workplace bullying from a temporal perspective that may include expectations both before and after the actual processes begin and end. Thus, evidence from this study also extends the stages of workplace bullying processes.

This study was able to add an additional phase to our currently understood definition (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009) as well. While workplace bullying is understood to encompass duration, escalation, and repetition (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005) characteristics, this study also accounted for the necessary de-escalation and reformation stages after bullying may end. Current study participants likened this process as lingering trust issues and wanting to reclaim their sense of self. Those sentiments remained well after workplace bullying had subsided. Therefore, the workplace bullying process may not be complete even after the events cease.

In addition to extending the conceptualization and stages of workplace bullying, this study was also able to capture how this process becomes multi-dimensional. Through the backstage sensemaking theme, participants engaged in support-seeking and support-providing strategies as both targets and bystanders. However, throughout many narratives, they were able to compare what frontstage communication was like as backstage support unfolded over time. Research must also account for these comparison points as workplace bullying processes progress over time and where these areas become helpful or unhelpful.

While Tye-Williams & Krone (2017) were able to capture when supportive communication, such as advice, was unhelpful, this study offered an extension of this understanding. As participants engaged in venting, or other things they ultimately deemed as unhealthy, they eventually moved to more productive ways of coping (e.g., cooking a meal,

providing an informative video, or forming an action plan). Evidence from this study illustrated how backstage support can be dynamic over time and it may be necessary to move through more unhelpful moments, such as venting, to get to more productive ways of support. These became moments where participants made sense of their experiences with one another.

Sensemaking Theory

This study extended the theoretical framework of sensemaking in organizations (Weick, 1995) to encompass new phases of identity formation, extraction of environmental cues, and emotion. First, sensemaking theory assumes organizational members engage in self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency when forming their occupational identities. This study provided evidence to extend these processes to include self-mourning and self-reclamation. Throughout participant narratives, they felt the pain of a lost identity (e.g., Betty mourned the professional she could have been). This lingering loss of identity was carried into new spaces where participants began to restore their sense of self-enhancement (e.g., Holly talked about the accolades of her and her colleagues), self-efficacy (e.g., Gary took on the role of protector and did not care about the repercussions of supporting fellow target), and self-consistency (e.g., Sherry asked why she was different than her previous self; “where did I go?”). In this sense, identity formation in the face of bullying may require additional stages, such as self-mourning and self-reclamation. Indeed, workplace bullying experiences cause many deleterious effects for organizational members, which often lead to heightened states of cue extraction.

An additional complexity that this study was able to capture within the framework of sensemaking theory was hypervigilance of environmental cues. Weick (1995) posited that environmental cues help organizational members make sense of their experiences. Moreover, Weick (1995) assumed extracted cues are “simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which

people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring” (p. 50). However, this proposition does not account for the possibilities that everything is unfamiliar and terrifying in the face of bullying. This study added a new dimension to this proposition by accounting for hyper-extraction of cues and what this may cause for organizational members experiencing bullying. Patty mentioned that she was always walking on eggshells and Sophie always had her guard up. Indeed, this hypervigilance often led to lingering emotional responses, such as distrust, that followed participants for a prolonged period, often entering new organizational spaces.

Organizational Socialization Processes

This study was able to add complexities to our current understanding of the organizational socialization process. Our previously understood conceptualization includes anticipatory socialization, encounters, metamorphosis, and organizational exit (Kramer & Miller, 2013). This study added insight into how organizational members with lingering trauma experience this process. Elena often engaged in anticipatory socialization wondering what life without bullying would be like. However, her narrative was also accompanied by feelings of trepidation. Even after organizational exit, it took many participants time to recover their lost sense of self and begin trusting others again. Even in the face of a positive encounter, Sophie was still untrusting of a new boss for a while. This evidence can extend the socialization processes to account for lingering effects that prior organizational experiences can have for newcomers as well as those who exit the organization. These insights have implications for how practitioners can put this knowledge into practice.

Applied Contributions

The fortunate aspect of communication research is the applicability of findings. This study has added benefits for organizational practitioners in multiple ways. Reframing how

organizations and key players (e.g., trainers, supervisors, HR professionals, etc.) talk about workplace bullying issues is a step toward mitigating such deleterious and hostile ways of communicating. Practitioners can now take away a heightened understanding of target and bystander experiences, the need for explicit dialogue concerning the effects of bullying, and consideration of lingering trauma responses for many organizational newcomers.

Garnered from the benefits of this study, intervention trainers can now acknowledge the shared experiences of targets and bystanders as well as provide a supportive space to share these narratives. This may be a way that bystanders are primed to take on more prosocial roles. Here, bystander perspectives are acknowledged alongside targets, especially if bystanders may have prior target experiences. If bystanders do not have prior target experiences, an open and safe space to listen to target perspectives is an optimal area to do so. As evidenced in the backstage sensemaking theme, many targets and bystanders in this study were able to cope alongside one another in ways that added meaning to their individual experiences.

Other organizational practitioners, such as HR professionals and supervisors, now have increased knowledge of the many complex issues that workplace bullying can cause employees. Retrospective accounts in terms of expectations became a key component of workplace bullying storytelling. This study points our knowledge to account for time between events and reports where backstage supportive processes and retrospective sensemaking must first take place before many members voice their experiences with key organizational figures. This is especially true if targets and bystanders make reports with clarity and marked by a clear beginning to bullying events. Practitioners should keep these caveats in mind when receiving reports of workplace bullying well after the events occurred.

Those tasked with new member orientations can now consider the trauma responses that some new organizational members may bring with them. Some participants carried these lingering psychological effects into their new workplaces. It is important for both researchers and practitioners to give attention to how these trauma responses impact new member socialization. Explicit communication that serves to reaffirm occupational identity, rebuild trust, and live up to positive expectations becomes imperative when ushering in new employees. It is a never-ending quest to mitigate workplace bullying issues both from a theoretical and applied perspective. With the findings from this study, both our research literature and practitioners can come away with new understandings of this complex and chaotic process.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Informed Consent

Informed Consent Statement

An Interpretive Approach to Workplace Bullying Bystanders

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a research study. The objective of the study is to research how people make sense of witnessing workplace bullying.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

A minimum of 45 minutes and an anticipated maximum of an hour interview will be conducted at the time and location at your convenience and preference. The interview will be audio recorded. Each participant will be given a pseudonym and any identifying information (work location, coworkers names, etc) will also be given a pseudonym. Once the transcripts are recorded and verified, the audio recording will be deleted. Unless you give permission to be contacted again, your participation in this study will only involve this single interview. **RISKS** Most research involves some risk to confidentiality, and it is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but the investigators believe this risk is unlikely because of the procedures we will use to protect your information. It may become emotional for some participants to discuss stressful/hurtful situations in the workplace.

Counseling services information will be provided should they be needed during the interview.

National resources may be found at:

<https://www.workplacebullying.org/individuals/solutions/wbi-action-plan/> or

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml> or by calling 1-866-615-6464. Local resources for the University of Tennessee, Knoxville may be found at: The Office of Title IX - phone: 865-974-9600; email: titleix@utk.edu; website: <https://titleix.utk.edu/>; location: 1817 Melrose Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996 or The Office of Equity & Diversity - phone: 865-974-2498; website: <https://oed.utk.edu/>; location: 1840 Melrose Avenue Knoxville, Tennessee 37996.

BENEFITS

Workplace bullying affects over 60% of working adults in the United States alone. People who witness workplace bullying situations are an important perspective to understand. This study seeks to understand how people who witness workplace bullying make sense of their situations. Some participants may also benefit from being able to talk about the situation.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records of the study will be kept in the researcher's possession at all times under password protection. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link participants to the study. All potentially identifying information will be replaced with pseudonyms for people and places.

COMPENSATION

No compensation will be given for this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, [Jenilee Williams], at [jwill366@vols.utk.edu] or faculty advisor Dr. Michelle Violanti at violanti@utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee IRB Compliance Officer at utkirb@utk.edu or (865) 974-7697.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, you may choose whether you would prefer and non, some, or all of your data be used in the study.

FUTURE RESEARCH

We will not keep your information to use for future research once the transcripts have been created and verified unless you give us permission to contact you again. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will never be stored with the audio recordings or transcripts.

CONSENT

I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. I understand that I am agreeing to be in this study. I can keep a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I do not need to do anything else.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your University, department, the people you work with.
 - a. What is it like to work at your University, department?
 - b. In general, how do coworkers communicate with each other?
2. What are the roles like at your University, department?
 - a. Who has influence over others? Why?
 - b. Do you feel like you can influence others? Why, why not?
3. How do people generally handle conflict/disagreements?
 - a. Can you tell me a story about a conflict/disagreement that you have witnessed?
4. What do you understand about workplace bullying? How would you define it?
 - a. Is this something that goes on in your University, department? If so, tell me about it. Specific examples?
 - b. What aspects did you notice that lead to your conclusion that this situation (the example provided) was workplace bullying?
5. Workplace bullying is defined as repeated, hostile communication occurring over time that causes targets to feel less powerful and bullies more powerful.
 - a. What areas do you agree with this definition? Why?
 - b. What areas of the definition would you disagree? Why?
 - b. Is that what you believe you witnessed? Why, why not?
 - c. What aspects of the definition are significant to you as you observed bullying?
6. We understand that bullying can range from verbal aggression or harsh criticism to gossip or leaving someone out at work.
 - a. How would you characterize these messages?
 - b. How did you witness these messages? (e.g., a few, all, only one etc.)
7. Tell me about the situation(s) at work where you saw/heard someone being bullied.
 - a. What was it about the situation that you would describe/label as bullying?
 - b. What did you think about? For example, the people involved, yourself, others?
 - c. Was this out of the ordinary or expected?
8. If you experienced being the target of workplace bullying before, tell me about that experience.
 - a. Did that influence how you saw the situation just described?
 - b. If so, could you compare the two situations? If not, how are they different?
 - c. What is similar or different about being a target and witnessing these situations?
9. Did the workplace bullying repeat?
 - a. If so, how were they the same or different than the last?
 - b. How long did these things go on?
 - c. If not, why do you think it was a one-time occurrence?
10. What was the next interaction like between you and the people involved (e.g., you talked to the people who engaged/experienced the bullying afterward)?
 - a. Did you explicitly talk about the issue? Why, why not?
 - b. What emotions did you feel toward the people involved?
11. The next time you witnessed, how was the next interaction (or non-interaction) like between the people involved in the workplace bullying?
 - a. How were things similar or different?

12. *If the situation ended, how did things resolve? How did you feel when they did?*
 - a. *If the situation is still going on, how do you think things might resolve?*
13. *How do you think this experience will impact how you perceive similar situations in the future?*
 - a. *What would be significant to you about possible future events?*
 - b. *What would you do similarly, differently?*
14. *When you noticed the bullying, what did you think about doing during the situation?*
 - a. *What emotions did you feel?*
 - b. *Did you display any of the emotion that you felt? Why, why not?*
15. *What did you think about after the situation?*
 - a. *What emotions did you feel?*
 - b. *Did you display any of the emotion that you felt? Why, why not?*
16. *What emotions did you perceive the target(s) to feel?*
 - a. *How did they look/act that lead you to perceive them experiencing the emotion(s)?*
 - b. *Did you think that was an appropriate or inappropriate response? Why?*
17. *What emotions did you perceive the bully(ies) to feel?*
 - a. *How did they look/act that lead you to perceive them experiencing the emotion(s)?*
 - b. *Did you think that was an appropriate or inappropriate response? Why?*
18. *Did witnessing the emotion of others influence how you felt?*
 - a. *If so, how did seeing their emotion influence how you felt?*
 - b. *If not, describe the differences in your emotion(s) and their emotion(s).*
19. *Would there be a word or phrase that describes your perspective in workplace bullying situations?*
 - a. *What do you understand about the term bystander?*
 - b. *Is that a term you would/wouldn't use? Why, why not?*
 - c. *Are there other terms that you think would better describe your experiences? What might they be?*
20. *Did you talk to anyone at work or outside of work about the situation?*
 - a. *Tell me about those conversations.*
 - b. *If so, what prompted you to talk to someone? If not, why not?*
 - c. *When did you talk to someone (right after, waited a while, etc)?*
 - d. *Was talking to someone helpful or not? Why, why not?*
21. *Thinking back, were there moments you started to feel differently about your position in the situation?*
 - a. *If so, what happened during those moments when things changed?*
 - b. *For example, you went from being afraid to angry or sad.*
22. *Have you talked to anyone else who has witnessed workplace bullying?*
 - a. *If not, why?*
 - b. *If so, tell me about those conversations. How does their story compare to yours? Situations, thoughts, emotions, similarities, differences, etc?*
23. *Imagine that you are seeing yourself during the situation, describe what you see.*
 - a. *How do you see your role in this situation?*
 - b. *How do you see yourself now? (differences, similarities)*
24. *What is it like to be in your position as a witness to workplace bullying?*

- a. Can you describe how you felt at first, afterward, now?*
 - b. How did you perceived others to feel (the bully, target, other witnesses)?*
- 25. If you were a target before, how did that situation feel?*
 - a. Did that experience feel the same or different than being a witness?*
- 26. What else do I need to know to better understand your experiences?*
 - a. What have I not asked that you expected me to ask?*
 - b. What have we not talked about that we should talk about?*
- 27. Could I contact you again if I have any further questions about this interview?*
 - a. If so, what is the best way to reach you?*

Appendix C: Target-Bystander Spectrum

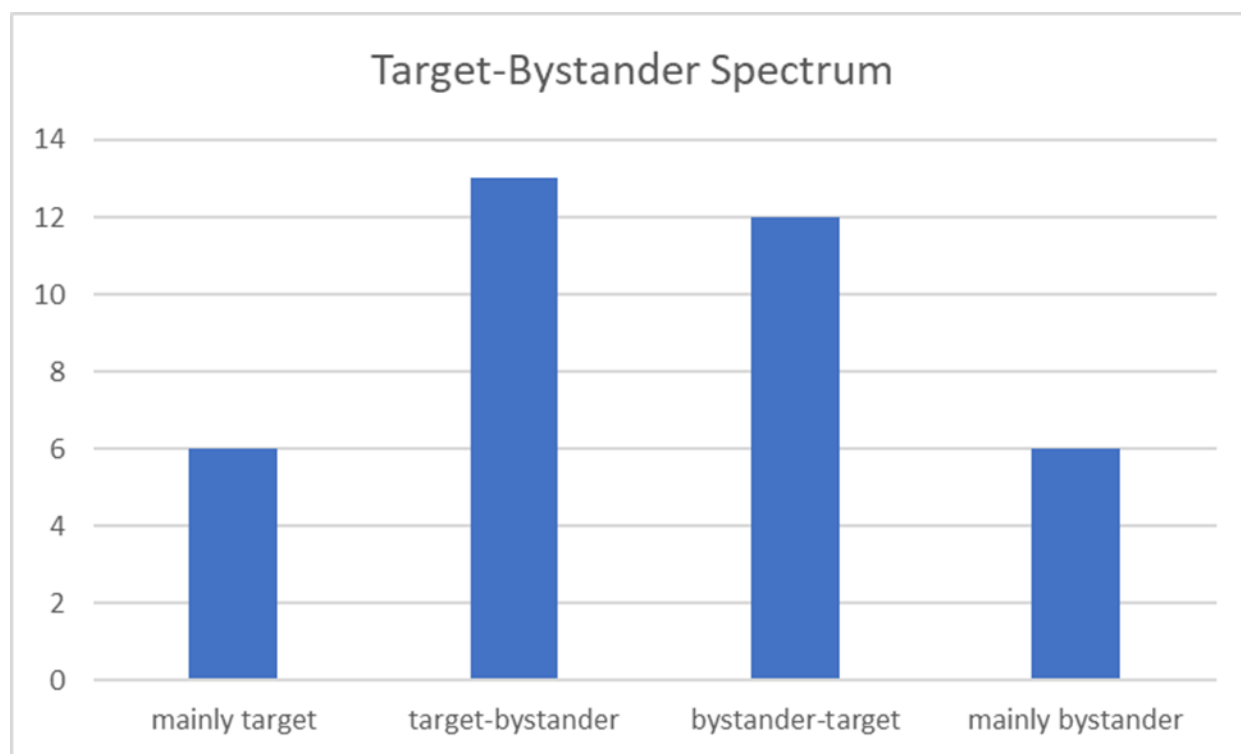


Figure 1: Target-Bystander Spectrum

Appendix D: Themes and Examples

Table 1: Themes and Examples

Themes	Examples
Shattered Dreams	Violation: “intellectual fabric of society turned into a curse” “together saving the world became disillusionment” Confirmation: “middle school” “be mindful of falling victim” “feeling lifeless”
Occupational Identity	Loss of Self: “mourning the professional I could have become” Preserve Identity: “play the game” “lay low” Prove Worth: “teacher of the year” “established scholars” Reclaim Identity: “mantra” “a full basket”
Backstage Sensemaking	No Support: “alone on a deserted island waiting to be rescued” “isolation” Support: “thick as thieves” Protectors: “whatever, I have tenure” “mama bear”
Thrownness	Thrust: “having the rug pulled out” Caught/Stuck: “forced in the middle” “held hostage” Disengagement: “disappear into a bush”
Toxic Atmosphere	Hypervigilance: “always have my guard up” “walking on eggshells” Learned Helplessness: “small frog in a big pond” “can’t fight anymore” Distrust: “still feeling it out” “who to trust and not to trust”

VITA

Jenilee Crutcher Williams was born in Murray, KY to Randy and Janice Crutcher and grew up in Paris, TN. She attended Henry County High School ('99) where she met her now husband, Nathan Williams. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Union University in 2003. Nathan and Jenilee were married on the island of Maui, HI on August 16th, 2005. She began working for the Department of Organizational Communication at Murray State University in October 2006 as their administrative assistant and began their Master of Science in Organizational Communication program in August 2009, which she successfully completed in May 2012. After 11 years with the Organizational Communication Department, she began the Doctor of Philosophy in Communication and Information program at the University of Tennessee in August 2017. This dissertation represents the culmination of that journey with her doctoral degree being granted in December 2021. At the University of Tennessee, she taught Organizational Communication, Interpersonal Communication, and pursued workplace bullying research. In August 2021, she returned to the Department of Organizational Communication at Murray State University as a tenure-track Assistant Professor. She currently teaches Organizational Communication, Communication Skills for Professionals, and is scheduled to teach her first graduate-level course, Organizational Training & Development, in the Spring 2022 semester. Nathan and Jenilee currently live in Paris, TN with their cat LeeLoo.