Nightmares, Demons, and Slaves

Exploring the Painful Metaphors of Workplace Bullying

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Although considerable research has linked workplace bullying with psychosocial and physical costs, the stories and conceptualizations of mistreatment by those targeted are largely untold. This study uses metaphor analysis to articulate and explore the emotional pain of workplace bullying and, in doing so, helps to translate its devastation and encourage change. Based on qualitative data gathered from focus groups, narrative interviews, and target drawings, the analysis describes how bullying can feel like a battle, water torture, nightmare, or noxious substance. Abused workers frame bullies as narcissistic dictators, two-faced actors, and devil figures. Employees targeted with workplace bullying liken themselves to vulnerable children, slaves, prisoners, animals, and heartbroken lovers. These metaphors highlight and delimit possibilities for agency and action. Furthermore, they may serve as diagnostic cues, providing shorthand necessary for early intervention.

Keywords: *workplace bullying; emotion; metaphor analysis; work feelings; harassment*

So many people have told me, "Oh, just let it go. Just let it go." What's interesting is people really don't understand or comprehend the depths of the bully's evilness until it's done to them. Then they're shocked. I had people

come up to me at work and say, "Bob, we thought that it was just a personality conflict between you and so-and-so but now we understand." And it's very hard for somebody looking from the outside in to try to resolve the situation or totally understand it.

Bob, city engineer[1]

When abused workers try to describe the pain they suffer at the hands of workplace bullies, listeners are often dubious. Even when we, as researchers who study the phenomenon, talk to professionals, journalists, and other scholars about the issue, people often say things such as "This is the real world, not school, and these people should just toughen up," and "Are you sure they're not just problem employees?" or "Is it really *that bad?*" As illustrated in the opening quote, employees who are targeted admit that bullying can sound unbelievable. Indeed, Amy, an employee in the sports fishing industry, explained that the bullying at her office was so strange that when new people applied for jobs, "I withheld the truth because the truth seemed surreal. . . . To tell anybody the truth in 15 minutes—they would look at me and say, 'She's just a disgruntled employee. It can't be.'" However, bullying should not be disregarded as a childish problem or simply a manifestation of overly sensitive workers. From 25% to 30% of U.S. employees are bullied and emotionally abused sometime during their work histories—10% at any given time (Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2005). If 1 in 10 workers currently suffer at the hands of workplace bullies, then bullying is a pervasive problem and not just the rare experience of a few "thin-skinned" employees.

Increasingly, organizations are beginning to recognize and analyze the distinct costs associated with stress, burnout, and depression at work. Research on health and wellness in organizations establishes that workplace stress has significant deleterious effects, resulting in poor mental and physical health and increased employee use of sick days, workers' compensation claims, and decreased productivity (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005). Furthermore, workplace stress is connected to psychological strain (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001; Tattersall & Farmer, 1995) and to social health, described as "the quality of an individual's network of professional and personal relationships" (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005, p. 549). Workplace bullying is linked to a host of physical, psychological, organizational, and social costs. Negative effects include psychosomatic illness (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2004), increased medical expenses, (Bassman, 1992), and reduced productivity (Hoel, Einarsen, & Cooper, 2003). Better understanding employees' emotions about workplace bullying is an

important part of attending to its negative effects on personal and organizational wellness.

In this study, we analyze abused workers' naturally occurring metaphors to better explicate the costs and feelings associated with workplace bullying in a U.S. worker cohort. Metaphors compare unlike things (e.g., workplace bullying) to better understood or known entities (e.g., war, nightmares; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and provide verbal images of emotional experiences (Morgan, 2003). This compact, vivid shorthand (Ortony, 1975) has the power to translate the meaning and feeling of abuse to a range of American stakeholders (scholars, laypeople, managers, policy makers) who are familiar with sexual harassment and discrimination but largely unacquainted with adult bullying.

The majority of bullying research is internationally situated, survey based, and authored by management or psychology scholars (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003a; Hoel et al., 2003; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). However, scholars in the United States have begun entering the dialogue from the fields of organizational communication (Alberts, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Tracy, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2005; Meares, Oetzel, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004), law (Yamada, 2000, 2005), management (Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Neuman, 2004), and psychology (Keashly, 1998, 2001; Namie, 2003). This body of work convincingly links the consequences of bullying to serious harm for targeted workers, nontargeted coworkers, and organizations (Bassman, 1992; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Hirigoyen, 1998; Leymann, 1990; Vartia, 1996; Yamada, 2000).

Identifying the material effects of adult bullying is an important step in persuading organizational policy makers to pay attention to the phenomenon. However, little research qualitatively develops the emotional aspects of bullying or answers questions such as "What does it feel like to be bullied?" and "Is it really that bad?" Answering such questions is both theoretically and practically vital. Practically speaking, even the strongest argument based on measurable costs of bullying is not likely to move people to action without an engagement of emotion (Aristotle, 1954; Cialdini, 1984; Planalp, 1993). Understanding what bullying feels like, therefore, is necessary for motivating change (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Furthermore, employee emotion serves an important signal function (Freud, 1926; Hochschild, 1983); the emotion of fear signals danger, which in turn leads to action (e.g., a fearful person is likely to be moved to take safety precautions). Emotion can serve as a warning sign that organizational interaction is askew. Thus, uncovering and publicizing the emotional pain of

bullying may be a precursor for organizational intervention, change, and prevention.

Our study expands current knowledge about workplace bullying by exploring, from a communicative and interpretive perspective, the emotional experiences of those targeted with abuse. Although popular books include anecdotes describing devastating bullying experiences (e.g., Adams & Crawford, 1992; Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 2002; Field, 1996; Namie & Namie, 2000a; Randall, 2001), abused workers' emotional stories are essentially missing in most academic research. This is, in part, due to traditional writing styles and scientific rationalities that typically "write out" emotion (Fineman, 1996; Tracy, 2004); however, an appreciation of abused workers' subjective experiences is integral to understanding how and why bullying is so costly to individuals and organizations. The article opens with a review of the definitions, characteristics, and costs of workplace bullying. We then discuss our grounded analysis of focus groups, interviews, and participant drawings and describe how metaphor analysis emerged as an appropriate avenue through which to make sense of the data. The heart of the article details the metaphors used by targets to conceive of and frame bullying, abusers, and themselves. The article concludes with practical and theoretical implications, limitations, and future directions for research.

Workplace Bullying: Terminology, Characteristics, and Costs

The range of terms used in U.S. research to describe persistent abuse at work is difficult to differentiate, even for academics (see Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Common names include workplace bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003b), mobbing (Leymann, 1990), emotional abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003), social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), generalized workplace abuse (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty, & Freels, 2001), work harassment (Björkqvist, Osterman, & Hjelt-Back, 1994; Brodsky, 1976), and workplace mistreatment (Meares et al., 2004). Although abuse at work can certainly be gendered (Lee, 2002) or raced (Schneider, Hitlan, & Radhakrishnan, 2000), workplace bullying, by definition, is not explicitly connected to demographic markers such as sex or ethnicity.

Although the term *workplace bullying* is similar to a wide array of behavior, subsumed under a number of labels, we use *workplace bullying* for several reasons. First, the label *workplace bullying* appears to be more

practical and accessible to the working public than academically framed terms. As researchers, we were overwhelmed with the media interest and participant response to our research.[2] Second, abused workers identify with the term. As researchers noted in a study of women's bullying experiences, "naming experiences as *bullying* [italics added] was important. . . . [I]dentifying an external problem may have enabled them to maintain or recover a sense of their own value and competence" (S. E. Lewis & Orford, 2005, p. 40). Indeed, the term highlights the perpetrator's role in aggression (the bully). Relatedly, we often refer to abused workers as "targets." As one of our participants said, "I saw myself as a victim of verbal abuse. When [a friend] said, 'You're not a victim, you're a target' . . . talk about self-esteem! Suddenly, there was this change of 'Dadgonit, I'm a target.'" In short, the terms *bullying* and *target* appear to be useful to the broader public and help affected workers name and make sense of their experiences in preferred ways. In using these terms, we follow the lead of international researchers who are aiming toward a common language (Einarsen et al., 2003a).

So what does workplace bullying look like? Adult bullying at work is perpetrated through a variety of tactics or negative acts that can be verbal, nonverbal, and physical (Baron & Neuman, 1998; Einarsen et al., 2003b). In contrast to workplace incivility, which is defined as "low intensity deviant . . . behaviors [that] are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457), workplace bullying is escalated and can include screaming, cursing, spreading vicious rumors, destroying the target's property or work product, excessive criticism, and sometimes hitting, slapping, and shoving (Zapf et al., 2003). Bullying is not limited to active communication but is also perpetrated through passive, nonacts of social ostracism (Williams & Sommer, 1997) that harm or stigmatize through the "silent treatment," exclusion from meetings and gatherings, or ignoring of requests (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002). Most often, workplace bullying is a combination of tactics in which numerous types of hostile communication and behavior are used.

Bullying is characterized by several features: repetition, duration, escalation, power disparity, and attributed intent (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). Adult bullying at work involves situations in which employees are subjected to repeated, persistent negative acts that are intimidating, malicious, and stigmatizing (Einarsen et al., 2003b; Rayner & Hoel, 1997). It is also enduring, lasting over an extended period of time (e.g., 6 months; Einarsen, 1999). Therefore, if someone experiences one hostile interaction—regardless of how disturbing—this does not equate to bullying. The persistent character of bullying at work is also linked to escalated aggression; the intensity of

hostility and toxic effects increase when bullying is left unchecked (Harlos & Pinder, 2000; Leymann, 1996; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Power disparity is another hallmark feature of bullying; power can be position based or emerge from informal sources (e.g., charisma, social networks, communication skills). Targeted workers usually report being unable to stop the abuse once it has become an established mode of interaction (Leymann, 1990; Rayner et al., 2002). Furthermore, attributed intent is central to workers' judgment that they have been bullied (Adams & Crawford, 1992; Keashly, 1998; Rayner et al., 2002); bullied workers typically perceive abuse as intentional efforts to harm, control, or drive them from the workplace (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005).

Understanding bullying at work is crucial considering its devastation to individuals' physical and psychological health and to organizational productivity. Bullying terrorizes, humiliates, dehumanizes, and isolates those targeted and is linked to serious health risks for bullied workers (Leymann, 1990; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996). Repeated abuse can result in emotional responses such as helplessness, anger, despair, and shock (Janus-Bulman, 1992) and health problems such as musculoskeletal complaints (Einarsen, Raknes, & Mattheisen, 1994), sleep problems, chronic fatigue, and loss of strength (Brodsky, 1976). Adult bullying at work also has a measurable negative impact on organizations. Direct costs include increased disability and workers' compensation claims, increased medical costs (Bassman, 1992), and risk of wrongful discharge (Yamada, 2000) or constructive discharge lawsuits (Matusewitch, 1996). Indirect costs include low-quality work, reduced productivity, high staff turnover, increased absenteeism, and deteriorated customer relationships and public image (Hoel et al., 2003; Keashly & Neuman, 2005). These costs should not be surprising; heightened emotional states—especially those that are negatively valenced—draw attention and energy away from and can interfere with task completion (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

The existing research links bullying to organizational costs and professional diagnoses of harm and, in doing so, substantiates abused workers' stories through rational, expert verification of problematic effects. However, just as much research about emotion in organizations is nonemotional (Tracy, 2004), most research that pinpoints the costs of bullying glosses over the emotional pain of abuse. Several factors contribute to this. First, collecting and analyzing victim narratives can be emotionally exhausting and time intensive. Furthermore, abused people often have trouble telling their stories and making sense of what has happened in the form of efficient narratives. Relatedly, ideological discourses discourage stories of victimization

and weakness (Deetz, 1992). Similar to victims of domestic violence (Ferraro, 1996) and sexual harassment (Clair, 1993), individuals often blame themselves for being targeted and have trouble creating coherent story lines that persuasively and succinctly convey their situation.

Nevertheless, quantifying abused workers' emotional experiences using rational yardsticks of prevalence, antecedents, and effects provides only part of the picture regarding their pain and the effect of bullying on organizations. In this study, we turn our attention to what bullying feels like. Examining targets' emotional experiences illuminates what occurs between the onset of bullying and the measurement of costs associated with it. Such an approach examines how targeted persons make sense of being badgered and humiliated at work and why they react the way they do. We entered the study with the following research question:

Research Question: What does workplace bullying feel like?

Method

The data for this study were drawn from 10 in-depth interviews and two focus groups with 9 and 8 participants, respectively. Participants self-identified as targets and were determined by the authors through pre–data collection consultations to fit the characteristics of bullied workers.

Participants

We recruited participants through a series of media releases and a link on the Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute Web site (www.bullyinginstitute.org). The overall sample is similar to other studies examining bullying in professional worker cohorts (D. Lewis, 1999; Salin, 2001), and sex, ethnicity, and age were similar across the focus groups and interviews. Of the 27 participants, 17 were women and 10 were men. The ethnic diversity was similarly homogeneous to past studies of workplace bullying (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Rayner & Cooper, 1997; Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996), with 24 participants being White, 2 Hispanic, and 1 who described herself as White and African American. Participants' mean age at the time of bullying was 45.3 years (range of 26 to 72). Together, the participants reported the following industries as the site of abuse: education (7), services and sales (7), local and state government (6), professional and technical fields (3), mental and medical health (2), construction (1), and recreation (1).

The primary demographic dissimilarity between the focus group and interview participants was that only 4 focus group participants were being bullied in their current job, whereas 13 reported bullying in a past job. For those interviewed, however, half (5) were still working in the abusive context. This difference is most likely because, although we could promise confidentiality for interviewees, we advised potential focus group participants that we could not promise confidentiality on behalf of other group participants. Employees bullied in their current jobs may have felt more comfortable in a one-on-one interview than in a group interview. Despite this difference, we found that the emotional pain reported and metaphorical language used across the two samples were remarkably similar. Although more focus group members were removed from the abusive working situation, research suggests that decades after experiencing abuse at work, people still vividly recall the painful, oftentimes shattering and life-changing, experience (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Rayner et al., 2002; M. J. Scott & Stradling, 2001).

Data Collection Procedures

Focus groups are well poised to explore the emotional experience of bullying for several reasons. First, the power of focus groups is similar to that of therapy groups; a synergy occurs when participants hear others' verbalized experiences that, in turn, stimulate memories, ideas, and experiences in themselves. This is known as the *group effect* (Carey, 1994) in which participants engage in "a kind of 'chaining' or 'cascading' effect; talk links to, or tumbles out of, the topics and expressions preceding it" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 182). Second, bullied workers discover a common language to describe similar experiences and use a form of "native language" unique to the experience. This is especially relevant for issues that blame the victim (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, workplace bullying) and topics that are in a state of linguistic "denotative hesitancy" (Clair, 1993), in which there has yet to be developed an agreed-on language to describe the experience. Third, focus groups provide an opportunity for disclosure among similar others in a setting where abused workers are validated, have voice, and learn they are not alone. Given participants' lack of voice in the bullying situation, their feelings of isolation, and their missing stories from current research, we believed focus groups to be not only an efficacious but also an ethical venue for collecting data.

Focus groups, which were facilitated by the first two authors and conducted in a university focus group room, lasted from 10 a.m. to about 2:15 p.m.,

included two breaks and lunch (equaling about 30 minutes that were not part of the data analyzed), and were videotaped and audiotaped for later transcription. Following Lawler's (2002) suggestion, we attempted to "set in place the conditions in which people are likely to produce narratives" (p. 253) by providing an informal environment with food and conversation. An interview guide structured the focus groups and included questions such as "When did you first know something was wrong?" "What did a single bullying situation look like?" and "How has this affected you, the organization, and your family?"

We also employed creative drawing—an approach that can be restorative for people experiencing trauma or pain (Liebermann, 1991). Creative drawing evokes emotions and provides an outlet for expressing complex and subtle information that is difficult to verbalize (Meyer, 1991). Zuboff (1988), for instance, asked employees to draw pictures indicating how they felt about a new organizational technology and argued that the drawings helped staff to identify and discuss emotions that were difficult to define. Similarly, in a study of emotions and organizational change, Vince and Broussine (1996) used drawings to "act as a catalyst for members of teams to 'say the unsaid' both on an emotional / psychological and on a political level" (p. 9). Finally, drawing analysis methods fit into collaborative, action research, allowing the researcher to work with the participants rather than on them (Reason, 1994; Sarri & Sarri, 1992). During the creative drawing exercise, we asked participants to visualize a bullying episode, particularly how they felt during the experience. Participants then drew pictures that expressed these feelings—a scene, a face, an abstract object or design—and wrote 5 to 10 words or phrases they felt described the drawing. Participants then presented drawings to the group.

In addition to the focus groups, we conducted 10 in-depth interviews. Doing so helped to ensure that we heard from participants who might have been reticent about focus group participation. Furthermore, during the focus groups, despite efforts to direct abused workers' conversation toward specific topics—bullying incidents, coworker responses, emotional reactions—participants wanted to historically contextualize their experiences. The interviews provided a space where participants could narrate their experiences in an uninterrupted manner "from the beginning."

The second author conducted the interviews, each of which lasted 1 to 3 hours (56 to 180 minutes) and together equaled 27.5 hours. The interviews were loosely structured, allowing the stories to spontaneously unfold (Mischler, 1986). They began with a "grand tour" question (Spradley, 1979) such as "Why don't you begin by telling me where you work, what kind

work you do, and when you started noticing that things weren't quite right."
Interviewees needed little prompting and proceeded to narrate their experiences in a mostly chronological manner. Interview probes asked about coworker and supervisor reactions, how abuse affected work tasks, and specific instances of general claims.

The focus groups were professionally transcribed, resulting in 103 pages of single-spaced typewritten data. Transcripts included interactive discussions and the creative-drawing dialogue. Interviews were transcribed by the second author and resulted in 201 single-spaced typed pages. A research team member reviewed the recordings and occasionally corrected transcripts for accuracy.

Grounded Metaphor Analysis

During the early stages of analysis, we found that we had much difficulty trying to sum up the intense emotional pain experienced by bullied workers into short vignettes. Even when we edited and attempted to connect participants' stories coherently, most were much too long to report in a journal-length article. This perhaps should not have been surprising, given that victims of tragedy and sexual harassment often face difficulty in neatly emplotting their narratives (Ferraro, 1996). Thus, we were challenged with how to feasibly attend to our research question, stay true to the data, and do so in an efficient manner. Throughout these early readings, we found that participants often spoke metaphorically. Therefore, we turned to the literature to explore the appropriateness of metaphor analysis.

In short, we found that metaphor analysis would provide a promising avenue for understanding the ways abused employees frame and make sense of the complex, confusing feelings associated with abuse at work. Metaphors provide people with a way to "express aspects both of themselves and of situations about which they may not be consciously aware, nor be able to express analytically and/or literally" (Marshak, 1996, p. 156). As such, metaphor analysis is especially worthwhile when used to examine topics, such as adult bullying, that are in a state of "denotative hesitancy" (Clair, 1993). Metaphors that emerge in everyday talk provide a vivid "way of thinking and seeing" (G. Morgan, 1997) and serve as "linguistic steering devices that guide both thinking and actions" (Kirby & Harter, 2003, p. 33). For instance, understanding conflict metaphors (e.g., war or impotence; Buzzanell & Burrell, 1997) says much about how people frame and react to conflict. Metaphors do not just rhetorically "dress up" speech but fundamentally guide how people experience their world (Deetz, 1984).

The current metaphor literature, coupled with the emotional tenor and length and complexity of participant stories, suggested the appropriateness of metaphor analysis to explore and understand the intense feelings associated with adult bullying. Using a grounded approach, we re-entered the data analysis with the revised guiding research question:

Revised Research Question: What types of metaphorical language do participants use to describe the emotional experience of bullying?

We examined the data and created several descriptive analysis matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) summarizing metaphorical themes in both the words and drawings of participants. We subsequently used InVivo qualitative data analysis software to reduce and unitize the data. In this advanced analysis stage, we identified and isolated metaphorical data related to bullying from the rest of the transcribed data. This resulted in 37 pages of single-spaced metaphor data (or about 15% of the interview and focus group data). We found that metaphors about the feelings of workplace bullying emerged as being grouped around metaphors that described the bullying process, the bully, and abused workers. Using open coding and the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we ultimately analyzed the unitized data line by line with the guiding statements of "bullying feels like . . . , the bully feels like . . . , and being a target of bullying feels like . . . .

We then looked for patterns among coded metaphors, how they were embedded within participants' stories and drawings, and how they logically and semantically cohered. Some metaphors presented a continuum (e.g., bullying as "game" was similar to but less intense than bullying as "war"), whereas others were topically connected (e.g., feeling like a "child," a "slave," or "chattel" all expressed diminished humanity or agency). During multiple meetings, the research team discussed metaphorical meanings and constructed core metaphor categories that best characterized the feelings of adult bullying.

What Bullying Feels Like: Metaphors of Bullying, Bullies, and Targeted Workers

With several exceptions, including comments such as "I was fearful, vulnerable, isolated" and "This is emotional shit," participants used few explicit emotional terms to describe bullying. However, their emotions were vividly

Table 1
What Does Workplace Bullying Feel Like?
Central Metaphorical Themes

Category	Themes and Examples
Bullying process as	Game or battle: Bullies "play dirty" and "make their own rules."
	Nightmare: "It's the Matrix. We live in two different worlds."
	Water torture: It is a "hammering away," "drum beat," or "pressure screw."
	Noxious substance: "It just kind of drips on down, just festers." (He would) "feed us a whole line of garbage."
The bully as	Narcissistic dictator or royalty: "You literally have a Hitler running around down there."
	Two-faced actor: Bullies put on "a good show for the boss," or they would "be real sweet one time one day, and the next day . . . very evil, conniving."
	Evil or demon: Bullies were "evil," "devils," "witches," "demons," and "Jekyll and Hyde."
The target as	Slave or animal: "You're a personal servant to the owner and his will;" "He considers you his property."
	Prisoner: "I feel like I'm doing time." "I felt like I had a prison record."
	Child: "I felt like a little girl." (It) is like having an abusive father."
	Heartbroken lover: "My heart was broken." (I felt) "sad, confused, exposed, unworthy and broken hearted."

apparent in their metaphorical language and creative drawings. In the following, and as summarized in Table 1, we discuss the metaphors targeted employees used to characterize their feelings about the bullying process, the bully, and being a target.

Metaphors of the Bullying Process

As illustrated in the following discussion, participants likened the bullying process to a game or battle, nightmare, water torture, and managing a noxious substance (e.g., "being fed garbage").

Game or battle. More than any other metaphor, narratives and drawings characterized bullying as a contest or battle. This metaphor continuum ranged from playing a game to outright war, including killing and death. On the less destructive end of the spectrum, those targeted described feeling as

though bullying was a matching of wits with an opponent who played unfairly. Participants spoke in terms of bullying as strategic attack, defense, and a set of shifting rules saying, for instance, that bullying was "playing a game," "playing their game," and "I had no rights . . . and they played on that." Dale, who worked in a security business, said the bully was "up to his old tricks." These metaphors of play and game suggest a less-than-serious issue and something that all members ostensibly should also be able to negotiate. However, as illustrated below, targets viewed the rules of the game as unfair and playing the game as dangerous and threatening.

Targeted workers characterized the contest as fixed or unfairly weighted in the bully's favor. They said bullies created the rules, changed them without notice or input and, as an aircraft mechanic named Ben explained, did so "behind closed doors." Dolly, a dental office administrative assistant, noted that bullies "make their own rules." Stephanie, a call-center employee, said that the only way the bully would win was "to play dirty," whereas Jack, the director of an online university program, said that bullying "really has to do with making up the rules as you go along." Sadly, this metaphor of a game that is difficult to win extended to targets' seeking external help through the courts. Going to court was a gamble and "a crap shoot." Furthermore, in this "game," abused workers could see themselves as the prey of the hunt; Dale explained, "everybody's fair game" for bullying. Hunting, of course, can result in significant and even lethal injury.

Indeed, participant narratives were saturated with metaphors of beating, physical abuse, and death. Wendy, a religious educator, said, "I have been maimed. . . . I've been character assassinated." Others expressed feeling "beaten," "abused," "ripped," "broken," "scarred," and "eviscerated." The battle metaphor is perhaps most complexly illustrated in a drawing by Stephanie (Figure 1). Stephanie's picture depicts a professional wrestling match in which she is a champion wrestler fighting her manager—the "heel" or "bad guy who pulls tricks." Her manager and the company's vice president are shown holding her down and taking jabs at her face. She portrays a disloyal employee as a small dog biting at her leg and the human resources (HR) manager as a blindfolded referee. As such, Stephanie depicts HR as "in on the game" and in fact prolonging the abuse by appearing to intervene but actually turning a blind eye to the situation. She also includes two signs: one that reads, "Will her posse come to help?" and another that says, "Kill." These signs reflect Stephanie's feeling that coworkers refused to come to her aid and actually turned on her when it became clear that she was losing the fight.

Figure 1

Drawing by Stephanie responding to "What does bullying feel like?"
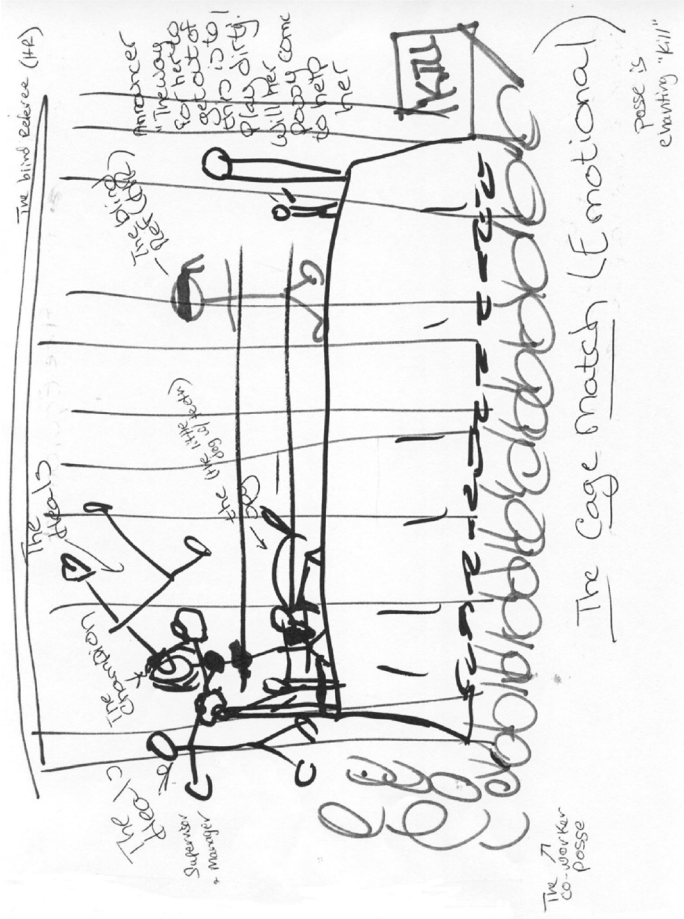
When bullying is viewed as a fight in which the target can be "killed," "destroyed," and "annihilated," it becomes clear why abused employees characterized their defensive discursive and nondiscursive behavior in fighting terms such as "I'm gonna stick to my guns." Whereas the bully's actions were viewed as deceitful and underhanded, many targeted employees framed fighting back as a "righteous battle" and "standing up for what's right." Diane, a children's hospital nurse, said she stayed because "I have a mission that I want to make this right. This is wrong."

In standing up for their rights, abused workers also report feelings of anger, extreme injustice, and wanting revenge. However, targets' efforts to fight back often fail and reinforce the unfairly matched competition. Abby, a postsecondary school librarian, told us,

> The other librarian . . . [quit], but I was gonna stay and fight it out. I said, "This isn't right," so, I went to the new dean and the new HR person. . . . Not only weren't they helpful, the HR person . . . helped to sabotage me. I eventually lost my job. I had been there 6 years.

Laura, a state employee, said, "You get so exhausted with the fight . . . it's not worth the time or the energy to go on [to] . . . make the wrong a right." Indeed, some targets became so exhausted and overwhelmed with the fight that they viewed bullying as an uncontrollable nightmare.

Nightmare. Similar to a nightmare from which one cannot awake, many participants described how their work worlds did not make sense. There was a feeling of instability and "crazy making"—targets of abuse felt as though something "real" would happen in the organization (e.g., their supplies would disappear, they would be excluded from a crucial meeting, or the bully would scream and rage)—and the bully would deny its occurrence. Lydia, an electrical sales accountant, said that it was so difficult for others to believe her that she almost did not believe herself: "It's so crazy I don't know if I can tell you all these details. . . . I almost thought I was going crazy. I taped one conversation just to show my husband I wasn't making it up." Similarly, Terry, employed in an education training firm, exclaimed,

> She literally made me feel like I was *going crazy*! She would tell you to do things. She would tell you that she didn't say what she just said. She would write me notes. She would tell me one thing, then she would tell me something else, then she would question what I was doing.

By likening bullying to a waking nightmare, we can begin to understand the complete lack of control targeted workers feel they have in changing the situation. Indeed, Wendy said that she finally was only able to make sense of the experience by equating it to the movie "The Matrix," in which the main character lived in a dream world that was distinct from the real world where his oppressors lived. In comparing her experience to the hero of "The Matrix," she explained,

> It [the movie] was like an epiphany. . . . It's the Matrix. We live in two different worlds. Two different understandings. Two different world views. For the most part, that helped, but again, you've seen my vulnerability. I need to watch the movie again. The Matrix has really helped me to understand. I'm not nuts. He doesn't think he's nuts. We're just in two different worlds.

For Wendy, framing the bullying process as part of a different alien world appeared to make her feel better about her inability to change the situation. However, many abused workers felt trapped in a torturous experience from which they could not escape.

Water torture. Many participants had difficulty picking out one incident, on its own, that was egregious or ultimately typified their bullying experience. Rather, they described it as "hammering away," a "drum beat," being "under the gun," and "Chinese water torture"—a means of driving a prisoner mad through the practice of dripping water, little by little, on the captive's forehead. (The actual practice is traced to 16th-century Italy; Innes, 1998). As such, bullying often feels like a never-ending process that gradually intimidates and wears down the target. These metaphors underscore the nature of bullying; it usually consists of numerous, seemingly nonserious negative acts that comprise a relentless pattern (Keashly & Neuman, 2005). Moreover, the wearing-down process often accounts for the emergence of power disparity between actors (Einarsen et al., 2003b; Keashly & Nowell, 2003; Leymann, 1996).

On the milder end of the spectrum, respondents likened bullying to being picked on, saying, "Anything they could find to pick on, they would write it up;" "It's like . . . kids decide to pick on so and so;" and "do I set myself up to get picked on?" The word "picking" refers to tearing off bit by bit, such as one might do meat from a bone. This metaphor illustrates how and why bullying is so difficult to identify, especially in its early stages (Adams & Crawford, 1992). The metaphor also summons feelings of childhood and vulnerability. Skyler, a sales consultant, described his picture by saying, "Like I tried to draw myself bigger like the Hulk. I think it's

all. . . . It dates back to high school. My last name is Bird so everybody is like 'Big Bird' whatever, picking on me."

This juvenile "picking on" then became code for describing grown-up, relentless abuse. Bullied participants explained, "He would always come by my desk and hound me and hound me" and "It's stuff that chips away and chips away." Kristie, in a state department of labor, described the relentless nature of the attack as "gouging me about another project . . . she was just really gouging me, gouging me, gouging me." Many comments, such as these, indicate the linguistic form of "reduplication" in which individuals repeat certain words or phrases (e.g., hound me and hound me). As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, "more of form stands for more of content" (p. 127). Therefore, it is not by happenstance that bullied persons use repetitive phrases to describe bullying. The existence of reduplication indicates that targets view bullying as chronic and relentless.

For some abused workers, repetition was akin to torture. Greg, a police officer, suggested that bullying was like "pulling the wings off a fly." Brad, in a nonprofit substance abuse treatment center, described the constant criticism as "Chinese water torture." This suggests that each act of bullying could be as harmless as a drop of water dripped on the forehead but added together, it was enough to drive him insane. Targets described ongoing pressure, like a "pressure screw" and slowly ticking "time bomb." It is difficult to believe that workers in these environments were producing at their highest level and finding satisfaction at their jobs. Most likely, they were merely surviving.

A sense of inescapability marked abused workers' stories. Stephanie disturbingly portrayed how she felt when experiencing the repeated infliction of pain, inability to escape, and resulting numbness:

> You're with a serial rapist. You know, you're clinching your teeth. So I just sat there and I took it and then when we were done, I just got up, because . . . I was just in a zone somewhere. I just kind of numbed myself so I wouldn't react to them.

Similar to a victim of torture, Stephanie felt as though her best defense was tuning out, which appears to be a common response to workplace bullying that helps the target to manage in the short term. Elizabeth, a school teacher, described being "just like a zombie." However, becoming numb in the long term may serve as a barrier to overcoming workplace bullying, an issue to which we return in the implications.

The "water torture" metaphor speaks to the difficulty targeted workers (or researchers) have in succinctly answering the question "What is bullying?"

Brad explained how he kept notes and said, "When I look over some of the stuff, I'd say to myself, 'that in and of itself isn't that big of a deal.' It's when you start putting all the stuff together that you start saying, 'okay that was kind of crazy.'" Single horrific events are rare; rather, bullying is often perpetrated through many small discursive and nondiscursive acts.

Noxious substance. Last, abused employees characterized bullying as a rotten, corrupt substance they were forced to "suck up" at work and "get out" to heal and move forward. This metaphor is orientational and ontological (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) as it describes bullying as a material, toxic matter that makes its way into or out of the person. As such, the noxious material metaphor highlights how targets feel that bullying can suffocate, smother, foul, or obstruct them. Comments include "Here I have been through 2 years of this shit"; "[The bully] would sit there and feed us a whole line of garbage"; and "It just kind of drips on down, just festers." These images present bullying as a form of excrement that rots with time.

Participant language characterizes bullying as a harmful substance that is forced into them against their will. They spoke of having to "take it," a metaphor that has sexually violent undertones. Participants said, "It's just force feeding, and that's a form of abuse"; "He was being the aggressor, and I'm just kind of sucking it all up like a sponge until finally I can't take it anymore" and "You don't want to dare to let them see you cry, so you're just sitting there holding everything in and you're shaking inside." Holding in the toxicity of workplace bullying, however, did not come without a price. Being fed "shit" and "garbage," understandably not only leaves, as Dale noted, "an awfully bad taste in my mouth," but can lead to myriad emotional and physical illnesses as well (Brodsky, 1976; Djurkovic et al., 2004; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). A mining equipment operator named Tim compared bullying to a malignancy, suggesting that "organizations should cut [bullies] right out and just get rid of them . . . because some cancers are incurable."

Abused workers describe coping with bullying as a noxious substance by "getting it out." Some reported taking years to heal from and "get over" their bullying experience. However, targets often feel constrained from letting it out until they are outside organizational boundaries; this unfortunately does little to break the escalation of bullying. Participants also spoke of trying to "let it out" through venting with family members. This process can amplify the negative effects of bullying by bringing the "shit" and "trash" to other areas of life. When abused workers can only "empty the garbage" of workplace bullying when they go home, it can and does negatively affect family life (Davenport et al., 2002; Wyatt & Hare, 1997). It was only those

who had left the bullying workplace that spoke of trying to "close the door on" and "get over" bullying. Although leaving the organization does not necessarily lead to instant happiness (Alberts et al., 2005), in the long run, exit is often the most efficacious path back to emotional and physical health (Namie & Namie, 2000b; Rayner et al., 2002).

As illustrated, our analysis suggests that bullying can feel like a fight or battle, a nightmare, water torture, and a noxious substance. These metaphors serve to sum up conceptualizations of bullying as an active process apart from specific actors. Nevertheless, they also begin to hint at the most common metaphors used to describe bullies.

Metaphors of the Bully

The three central metaphors that emerged for describing the bully were "narcissistic dictator or royalty" "two-faced actor," and "evil or demon." Together, these represent a continuum that included viewing bullies as self-centered crowned heads, duplicitous actors, and outright devil figures.

Narcissistic dictators or royalty. First, abused workers discussed bullies in terms of privileged crowned heads. They said, for instance, that bullies "lord" over meetings like "knights at the roundtable" and use meetings for "public floggings." Jack drew picture in which the bully was wearing a crown and giving the thumbs down sign to a small, confused-looking man confined in a straight jacket (Jack). These images suggest that targeted workers perceive bullies as thinking of themselves as better, greater, and more important than others. Those targeted felt undeniably trapped and threatened by bullies who were compared to evil dictators; Ted said, "You literally have a Hitler running around down there who's a mile away from the management who can't see it." As with the Hitler metaphor, it becomes clear that an additional dynamic were bullies' duplicitous performances.

Two-faced actors. Targets felt frustrated in their attempts to report bullying because the perpetrators were skilled performers, who were excellent at "acting" nice when doing so would advantage them or impress organizational superiors. Lynn, a senior accountant for a defense contractor, said, "She could be real sweet one time one day and the next day . . . she was very evil, conniving," whereas others explained that bullies could put on a "good show" for the bosses. For example, Diane described the bully as a manager who screamed at people so close that "her spit would hit you in the face." However, in a meeting with doctors, the bully was "kissing the floor . . . and

kissing the guy's [doctor's] feet. . . . It's like the Emperor has no clothes." Marilyn, a corporate IT manager, drew the bully as "Superman," because, when the bosses were around, he would come in with his cape on "to save the day." These metaphors vividly illustrate the sentiment that abused workers view their oppressors as powerful (if fake), and as such, feel frustrated trying to convince others of their plight or successfully defend themselves.

Evil demons. Identifying bullies as evil demons corresponds to the nightmare metaphors used to describe bullying. Participants described perpetrators as "evil," "devils," "witches," and "demons." Bob, the city engineer, even referred to the bully's children as "the devil's spawn; they are just evil, evil children." Marla, a sales administrator for an industrial corporation, drew pictures of the bully with demon horns. Cheryl, a university secretary, drew a devil with a pitchfork and explained, "It felt like the devil was sticking the fork into me." During a particularly volatile incident, a male bully reportedly "threw his chair back and his whole face contorted, his body was contorted. It was like he was going through this epileptic seizure of some sort." Marla recounted an experience when the bully's "eyeballs looked like they were going to bulge out. His face contorted, and he starts screaming at the top of his lungs. . . . I mean he even flung the chair back, and he was like a demon." Characters framed as being from the "dark" side provide clues to targets' difficulty explaining and understanding bully behavior. Wendy likened the bully to a Jekyll and Hyde character who was extremely unpredictable and against whom she had little defense.

Characterizing bullies as deluded narcissists, possessed of evil spirits, and cunning actors suggests that targeted persons frame bullies and their behavior as surreal, shocking, bizarre, and inexplicable. Metaphors of the bully portray aggressors who feel superior to others, possess dark powers, and convincingly shape-shift into whatever façade is necessary given the audience. Such mythic characters are impossible for mere mortals to engage with and emerge triumphant.

Metaphors of Targets

Last, we explored the feelings of being a target of workplace bullying. Our analysis found that abused workers feel like slaves and animals, prisoners, children, and heartbroken lovers.

Slaves or animals. At the more extreme end of the dehumanized spectrum, abused workers invoked feeling as though they were "a piece of property,"

"slaves," and "chattel." Participants explained that "He treats you just like slaves"; "She acts like she owns me"; "You're a personal servant to the owner and his will"; and "He considers you his property 24 hours a day, seven days a week." Similarly, participants invoked feeling objectified and degraded as insects, animals, and beasts of burden. As noted, Greg characterized bullying as "pulling the wings off of flies." Lynn explained that the bullying, "kept on and on and I felt like dirt; I felt like a dog." Bob said he felt like "a caged animal" and Dale indicated that the bully "treats us like his personal chattel." As such, Dale was referring to a common American meaning of chattel—a type of slavery defined as the absolute legal ownership of a person (O'Rourke, 2004).

Targets also used mixed animal metaphors describing themselves in relation to the bully. In doing so, they characterized the bullying situation as dehumanizing. Wendy suggested that targeted workers were like llamas that had to protect each other from the wolves. Amy and her coworkers labeled an unfortunately mild-mannered newcomer as the bully's future "chew toy." These comments paint bullies as ruthless animals and targets as defenseless prey in one-down situations—whether as the bully's entertainment (chew toy) or quarry. As such, these metaphors accentuate feelings of vulnerability and degradation.

Prisoner. Many participants reported feeling as though they were imprisoned in their jobs and cut off from important networks with friends and family. Abby explained, "I felt disconnected; disconnected from my job, disconnected from my life," whereas Laura summed it up, saying, "I've been blackballed." Respondents invoked the metaphor of "doing time" to describe feeling trapped. Captive metaphors included "I feel like I'm doing time for the next 3 months," "I felt like I had a prison record," and "I was so tied to my job." Indeed, bullying could result in the horror of feeling forever isolated and ensnared. Abused workers said they felt "alone," "black," "empty," and "suffocated." Stephanie explained, "I had a lot of people who supported me, but when things started happening, all of a sudden, they backed away and denied everything."

Isolation can serve as a punishment and further complicate targets' efforts at collective resistance (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005); however, isolation is also paradoxical. It oppresses targeted workers by disconnecting them from others but simultaneously may shield them from continued abuse. Bob's statement encompasses this paradox: "It's a trap. A caged animal trapped-type feeling. Because a lot of times you just want to hide." Indeed,

targets repeatedly discussed how they would often purposefully isolate themselves to try to avoid negative attention. They spoke of trying "to fly under the radar" and "not to fly too close to the sun." This desire to hide is also vividly illustrated in the next metaphor.

Child. Numerous respondents indicated that they felt treated like a child. Several described feeling "scolded," "shrinking," and "small" when bullied. Terry likened her bullying boss to a "baby-sitter." Lynn drew a picture in which she was much smaller than the bully and explained, "I felt like a little girl and [the bully] was up higher, she was working on a stepladder. She was shouting down, 'Now, be sure to do this.'" Being treated like a child reflects the bully's dismissal of targets' adult status and, for some targets, brought back painful childhood memories. Lothar, a flight technician, explained,

> When I was kid, my old man was a little hard on me. This guy reminds me so much of my old man, it starts dragging up crap from when I was a kid, and I'm sitting there going, "I've got to feel like 10 years old again."

In response, the abused workers felt righteous anger, as illustrated in Bob's comment, "I'm a 40-year-old man, you don't scold a 40-year-old man. It's just ridiculous!"

Some participants expressed feeling like the unpopular kid at school, being targeted by numbers of "nameless" tormentors and trying to avoid bullying "like when you're a kid on the schoolyard." Abby, trying to hold back her embarrassment, said, "It sounds totally silly but the two people involved would whisper. It sounds like junior high school." Feeling this way led to mistrust and humiliation. Bob said he felt as though someone taped a "kick me" sign to his back.

Others said they felt like a child in an abusive family, saying, "I thought this woman was going to hurt me. The way I felt at the time—it was very— it pushed me into a role of being a child." The following comment from Amy vividly captures this sentiment:

> Working for Hal is like having an abusive father and all the children—when they're dressed up on Sunday afternoon and guests come visiting to the house—everything is wonderful and perfect, and we have this deep dark secret about the abusive father that nobody will tell about.

Like children in abusive families, bullied workers felt depressed and sad, explaining that they cried, experienced extreme dread, and at times

screamed and wailed when they considered their situations. They also felt ambivalent emotions; they were angry about being treated as an incompetent and shameful that they allowed bullies to push them into a child role. Furthermore they felt confused—wondering what they had done to bring bullying on themselves. As with abused children, many admitted to a fleeting sense of relief when someone else was targeted. However, relief was coupled with guilt, both for feeling the relief and failing to defend an abused colleague. Some characterized the inevitability of being targeted and thus the pointlessness of intervening on another's behalf. Dale frankly noted that when someone was bullied, "It was just your turn in the barrel." However, most still felt as if they were somehow to blame and that they should have done something different to prevent the abuse. Some targeted workers expressed worry about whether they were bullied because they failed to speak up for themselves soon enough; other abused workers stated concern about whether they were too quick to respond to the abuse and therefore were at fault for further aggravating the bully.

Heartbroken lover. Last, a number of our female participants described feeling betrayed and brokenhearted by their experience. The loss of a job they loved was paramount in their stories. Terry poignantly described how much she loved her work before the bully drove her from the job:

> What bothered me the most out of all of this, I loved my job. I could not wait to get to work in the morning, and I hated to go home at night. I loved everyday; I loved every minute. It was so enjoyable for me. I liked what I did; it made me feel good; it made me want to get up in the morning. That's really hard to find, and I just keep looking at it, and I keep thinking *why*? *Why* did that happen? *Why*? *Why* did it have to happen? Why was someone so deceitful that she wanted this to come down? I mean, I did nothing but make her look good, so why?

Terry's description is similar to how one might discuss a lost love affair and echoes the vital importance of work both to identity and social relations (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003). Other women noted similar sentiments about their work, stating, "I loved that job," "I loved those people I worked with," "I actually loved the job and everybody else there," "I loved the company; I loved the work," "I enjoyed the people in that company. I enjoyed my job. I loved it." It is not surprising, then that they also connected bullying with broken hearts and betrayal.

Three pictures, each drawn by women, prominently featured their damaged "hearts." Wendy actually ripped her paper, showing the heart torn

apart and explained, "My heart was broken." Laura drew three figures, each progressively more upset and confused, the last with a large "X" scrawled through the red heart. She described her feelings as "sad, confused, exposed, unworthy and broken-hearted." Similarly, Mandy, a school media specialist, drew a series of stick figures, each one smaller than the last, but each with a bigger, blue heart. She said, "I'm a small person with a heavy heart." The heart has long been thought to be the center of emotion. Our heart "skips a beat" when we are excited and in love, and we get a pang in our heart or feel heartbroken when we're sad. This imagery illustrates how abused workers feel the weight, scarring, and betrayal of abuse, and the loss of a beloved job, to their very core.

Discussion

In sum, participants compared bullying to a game or battle, a nightmare, water torture, and a noxious substance. Bullies were framed as narcissistic dictators or royalty, two-faced actors, and evil demons. Targeted workers likened themselves to abused children, slaves, animals, prisoners, and heartbroken lovers. As such, through an analysis of the metaphors used to describe the bullying process, the bully and the target of abuse, the article provides qualitative evidence that helps to answer the questions "What does bullying feel like?" Providing an answer to this question is theoretically and practically significant.

Theoretical Implications

Metaphorical language provides linguistic shorthand to describe long, difficult-to-articulate, and devastatingly painful feelings associated with workplace bullying. This is an important step for better explicating a phenomenon such as workplace bullying that is in a state of denotative hesitancy (Clair, 1993). Knowing these stories is integral because, as Lawler (2002) notes, "it is through such stories that we make sense of the world, of our relationship to that world, and of the relationship between ourselves and other selves" (p. 249). Understanding what the bullying process feels like serves to contextualize, enrich, and augment the current survey-based research that statistically links bullying and negative outcomes (Djurkovic et al., 2004; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996).

In highlighting abused workers' metaphors about bullying, this analysis also uncovers the frames within which targets place themselves, providing

insight not only into individuals' communicative construction of their experience but also into their cognitive processes (Fraser, 1993; Hart, 2003). These interpretations play a role in future interaction and point out the range of difficulties targeted workers encounter when trying to name, describe, and manage their situation. In short, the metaphors analyzed graphically suggest why bullying feels so devastating and why targets believe there is little they can do to change their situation. Although these consequences were largely teased out within the previous section, here we review the implications of several metaphors in detail.

First, let us consider the implications of viewing oneself as a child. Children who are abused day after day, by a parent or by mobs of other students, are likely to try to isolate themselves, try to be invisible, and if visible, be ingratiating. Doing so might decrease the abuse, but it is also likely to serve as a stumbling block if targets want to increase their status in organizational settings. Certainly, fleeing a bully may assist small children from being hit. However, if a person consistently escapes interactions with a workplace bully, then the target may decrease his or her own options for organizational advancement. In short, the child metaphor fleshes out a sense of powerlessness in alleviating the maltreatment. Targeted workers can try to be good, try to fit in, but most often avoid abuse by escaping the situation.

Likewise, a tortured prisoner has limited options for changing or feeling better within the circumstances. Someone who is tortured or imprisoned can try to black out or become numb, both of which participants said they felt. This lack of focus, although it may ease the torture, is likely to have problematic ramifications in the workplace. Becoming emotionally numb effectively prevents an important way of knowing the world (Freud, 1926; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

If bullying is viewed as a nightmare, complete with uncontrollable plot lines and perpetrators from the dark side, efforts to control the situation are usually perceived as fruitless. Those who view themselves in a nightmare are likely frightened and, as identified through a number of metaphors, feel as though they have little control over the circumstances or actions of their evil oppressor(s). As such, they may try to focus on the very small parts of the situation that they can control. Or they may become withdrawn and disengaged, feeling as though there is nothing that can be done. Again, this may help the abused worker (having the nightmare) feel better, but ultimately, the most efficacious way to change the situation is probably to wake up and escape the scene.

The most common metaphor, that bullying feels like a game or battle, is perhaps the most liberating, because a fighter has some control over the

outcome of a battle. Soldiers can psyche themselves up to fight hard, do more damage to the bully or enemy than the bully does to them, feign an injury to save themselves from further pain, and at least "go down swinging." Targets often report that the decision to fight back is a turning point at which they begin to feel better (Namie & Namie, 2000a). However, the outcome of fighting back can lead to retribution, and targeted persons can quickly become so damaged that they are no longer good to anyone. Indeed, although many participants talked about fighting back, none said he or she won the fight. Furthermore, the more employees are abused, the more they resist, both constructively and destructively (Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001). This has foreboding implications. As Waldron (2000) suggests from hundreds of interviews with abused employees, "the resulting desire for revenge and the potential for physical violence . . . is alarming" (p. 79). And of course, in a workplace setting, a subordinate "fighter" is also akin to "problem employee" or "troublemaker" (p. 79).

When we consider these and the other metaphors through which targets frame their experience, it helps flesh out why scholars and practitioners suggest that once workplace bullying has become an entrenched pattern of negative interaction, it can be difficult or impossible to disrupt (Rayner et al., 2002; Zapf & Gross, 2001). A target's best recourse may be quitting the job and moving on. Metaphors also explain why employees feel such significant pain and despair. They feel suffocated by a toxic substance that is difficult to manage, powerless to control nightmarish evil-doers, and "crazy" because of two-faced performances. At the same time, they fear being trapped and feel lonely, isolated, desperate, and broken hearted about their disconnection from important others at work.

Focusing on the subjective experiences of bullied workers spotlights the way targets, themselves, struggle to make sense of their abuse. This is in contrast to the rather large body of bullying literature that has focused on delineating academic definitions over what counts as workplace bullying, aggression, or discrimination (Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith, & Pereira, 2002). As reviewed earlier, the range of terms used to describe workplace injustice is dizzying and difficult to differentiate (see Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Targeted persons' metaphorical images of bullying notably shift the focus from how researchers label workplace abuse to how those targeted perceive and make sense of abuse and its impacts. We believe the latter to be a fundamentally crucial issue for attention.

In addition, the analysis extends research on the role metaphoric analyses can play in examining employees' experiences at work, especially bullying. Past organizational research has been critiqued for its neglect of

analyzing spontaneous emergent metaphors in organizational talk (Grant & Oswick, 1996b)—although communication scholars offer some important exceptions (e.g., Koch & Deetz, 1981; J. M. Morgan, 2003; Smith & Tuner, 1995). Indeed, previous work analyzing bullying targets' metaphors is limited because of a "forced metaphor" approach. Sheenan, Barker, and McCarthy (2004) relied on a method that specifically asked targets to describe their bullying experiences in metaphorical terms. Despite expecting rich metaphorical data, Sheenan et al. found that their respondents were unclear about what metaphors actually were and that their data produced "less valuable information with respect to metaphors than was expected" (p. 30).

In contrast to instructing participants to respond in metaphorical language or to ranking a priori metaphors (Grant & Oswick, 1996b), the current analysis was idiographic and inductive and found a wealth of organically occurring metaphors. As such, the research aligned with some findings from Sheenan et al.'s (2004) forced metaphor approach; their participants also described the bully as insincere and two-faced, characterized their own feelings as trapped and vulnerable, and described the organization as blind to the bullying situation. However, our study provides many more examples of these feelings and additionally uncovered a number of other complex and less obvious metaphors for the bully process (e.g., bullying as noxious substance), some of which grouped together as a range (e.g., from "picking on" to "torture"). As such, this analysis suggests that an inductive approach is especially worthwhile for making sense of messy interactive processes, such as bullying, that have no definite "face." Such an analysis serves to name and make tangible a process that can be invisible.

Practical Applications

Our analysis suggests that abused workers could profit from identifying and reflecting on the metaphors they use to frame the bullying experience. The mere recognition and identification of metaphors in use allows individuals to better understand how they are framing and thus limiting and constraining their viewpoint on a situation (Marshak, 1996). At the same time, metaphors also can have a "generative quality" (Schön, 1993); they create new meaning and, as such, can be liberating—allowing individuals to learn and see the world anew (Grant & Oswick, 1996a). Our grounded analysis uncovered outlying metaphors for making sense of bullying that are more hopeful than the primary ones explored here. For instance, Laura explained that when she thought about leaving, her colleagues said, "No, be our Rosa Parks, please stay here. Things are gonna be better." This

metaphor, of target as survivor or hero figure, was not as common in our data. However, it suggests the possibility that targeted workers could choose to frame themselves in different ways—perhaps as survivors of a shipwreck, revolutionaries, war veterans, or "the resistance." Each of these metaphors, albeit in different ways, highlights more promising ways for framing and perhaps transforming the bullying experience.

In differentiation from the self-help thrust of most popular press books about workplace bullying,[3] our study aims to underscore the emotional experiences of targets so that managers, colleagues, and other laypeople can "feel their pain." As such, various stakeholders may be more inclined to believe abused workers' stories and perhaps be moved to prevention and intervention. Studies that engage emotion are fundamental to motivating ethical change (Aristotle, 1954; Cialdini, 1984). Understanding the emotional pain of workplace bullying can serve as a warning device for managers and potential bullies alike, identifying the onset of problematic interaction and providing a window for early intervention.

As reviewed, adult bullying results in significant employee and organizational costs. One of the key ways to avoid such costs is early intervention before the bullying escalates into an established pattern (Rayner et al., 2002). Unfortunately, as it stands, most workplace bullying interventions are reactive if existent at all. For instance, European health professionals have founded specialized clinics to treat the injuries resulting from bullying at work (Crawford, 2001; Zapf et al., 2003). Although such clinics may be ameliorative, workplace wellness research suggests organizational social health may be most dependent on employees' perceptions of camaraderie and communication with peers, supervisors, and family (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005)—all issues that must be proactively maintained and protected through everyday practices.

Of course, a difficulty in early intervention is that most subordinate voice—resistance and complaint in particular—occurs in hidden transcripts away from the view of powerholders (J. C. Scott, 1990). Explicit stories of pain and victimization are particularly likely to happen behind closed doors (Deetz, 1992). Metaphors, though, are more subtle. And because metaphors express issues about which individuals may not be consciously aware (Marshak, 1996), metaphorical language is likely to seep into both the public and private talk of employees. In our ongoing informal participation with bullied employees, we find their talk to be peppered with many of the metaphors noted herein. Although our picture-drawing exercise was designed specifically to get at the emotional pain of workplace bullying, the nondirective questions in our research, such as "tell us about your bullying experience"

are not unlike those that might be posed by HR professionals, colleagues, or family and friends. Employee emotion expressed metaphorically can provide a signal to managers for the need of organizational involvement and change. An audience member who listened to a presentation of this research, for instance, was able to identify her own bullying behavior in light of these metaphors because she remembered how her target looked and behaved like a "frightened child" in their interactions.

Understanding targets' metaphors can also assist organizational policy makers and human relations professionals specifically to identify links between negative social interaction at work and the powerful effects such behavior can have on individuals. These metaphors not only graphically detail the pain that abused workers endure but also point to two specific types of workplace stress and illness as identified by Farrell and Geist-Martin (2005). Namely, these metaphors reveal that targets experience deep psychological pain (they must live in a world that is unstable and crazy making, they experience psychological torture, and they are heartbroken) and a loss of important social networks (they lose beloved friends when they are driven from their jobs, their work feels like a dysfunctional family, and they experience guilt over their inability to defend coworkers).

Abuse, in turn, leads to costly organizational repercussions. Bullying destroys productive networks of communication (Lockhart, 1997) and increases the likelihood of nontargeted coworkers' departure (Vartia, 1996). Even less tangible negative effects are "opportunity costs of lowered employee commitment, such as lack of discretionary effort, commitments outside the job, time spent talking about the problem rather than working, and loss of creativity" (Bassman, 1992, p. 137). Finally, although there is scant evidence in the bullying literature (or our data) regarding the potential for bullied workers to respond with violence, workplace aggression research suggests active revenge could be a very real possibility. Perceptions and reports of unfair treatment are common precursors of workplace aggression, violence, and sabotage (Analoui, 1995; Hoad, 1993; Neuman & Baron, 2003). Certainly, if feeling like the unpopular kid at school is one factor leading to bloodshed among children (Garbarino & deLara, 2002), it is not unthinkable that a worker who feels continually abused, tortured, and isolated in an organization might respond with aggression.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions

We as researchers noted that participants appeared to have difficulty narrowing down and articulating their experience succinctly in the focus group

format. We therefore complemented focus group data with more open-ended interviews in which participants controlled the pace and development of their story. Although focus groups may have curbed narrative development to some extent, we wonder whether the data produced through them were telling of some of the prohibitive structures that employees likely also encounter when voicing problems in the workplace setting. Specifically, in both focus group and organizational venues, employees have voice only among a cacophony of other voices, competing demands, and within short windows of time. Therefore, future research that combines focus group and participant observation data might examine how much the focus group structure provides a unique view into the difficulty employees have in articulating their story to organizational superiors, coworkers, or HR personnel.

Given the difficulty bullied workers illustrate in succinctly translating their experiences into words, future research would also do well to conduct a close narrative analysis of various target stories—both coherent narratives and those marked by hypertext—nonlinear discourse made up of pieces or fragments of information (Nelson, 1983). Such an analysis could examine the ways targeted persons frame themselves, their bullies, and witnessing coworkers, and the ways they define personal identities through the emplotment of their experience (Lawler, 2002). Furthermore, a close discourse analysis could compare stories told by those who are currently experiencing bullying and contrast them with stories told by those who have moved on. Doing so might serve to pinpoint junctures in which articulation of the experience is especially trying and difficult for targets and provide recommendations for the most effective ways to communicate complaints of workplace abuse.

Third, alternative representation practices could further develop the emotions associated with workplace bullying. Although metaphorical imagery is a powerful tool for analyzing the emotion of work life, the vividness of understanding emotion is limited by the printed page. During focus groups and interviews, we witnessed nonverbal facial expressions, changes in pitch, shortness of breath, and spontaneous weeping that intensely illustrated participants' depth of pain. To get at this feeling, future analyses should entertain various representational options, including performance and creative writing (Richardson, 2000; Tracy, 2004).

Last, we believe that future research should analyze the interweavings of race, gender, and age with workplace bullying. The similarities among workers' emotional experiences in this study are notable, despite differences

that we often believe "make a difference." Participants ranged from a 26-year-old male to a woman in her 70s. Education ranged from a high school diploma to graduate degrees. Industries included service and sales persons, educators, engineers, and government workers. Both men and women participated. Even with this wide range of participants, group interactions were marked by multiple signs of agreement such as head nodding, murmured concurrence, and cascading stories in which one person's experience evoked, "yes, that's what happened to me." This suggests that the emotional experience of workplace bullying can be similar across workgroups, age, and sex. However, our sample, like that of most workplace-bullying research, was racially homogenous, and so future research should do more to analyze the ways that bullying and racial discrimination may be connected. Furthermore, although demographic differences did not emerge as salient factors in our study, past critical organizational communication research would certainly suggest that workplace mistreatment is affected by larger discourses of gender and race (Allen, 2001).

In conclusion, this study provides an important step in understanding the emotion and pain associated with workplace bullying. Whether empowering or disempowering, the metaphors pinpointed through this analysis provide targets with words to explain their situation to others—an important move considering that one of the main problems targeted employees face is that their plight is largely invisible. Similar to how the term *sexual harassment* allowed recipients of the behavior to better make sense of their situation (Kramarae, 1981), we learned that our respondents appreciated the terms *bully* and *target* in helping them to make sense of a situation for which many had previously found no words to adequately describe. People understand their lives through the language available to them (Kay & Kempton, 1984). Therefore, it is important for researchers to provide venues in which abused workers can make meaning of their experience and engage in analysis practices that articulate the devastating effects of bullying. Indeed, "people make sense of their lives through the stories that are available to them and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories" (Richardson, 1995, p. 213). Metaphors act as mini stories and thus "act as a compass, which serves to orient us" (Hart, 2003, p. 1). Attending to the metaphors of abused workers serves not only to lay bare the feelings associated with workplace bullying but also to diagnose current interpretations and provide cues for potential intervention and change.

Notes

1. Names used throughout the article are pseudonyms, and several identifying details of participants have been modified.

2. Within 5 months of beginning the data gathering for this project, we had been contacted by more than 15 journalists and included in 12 media stories on the topic. Furthermore, within 2 weeks of placing an advertisement calling for persons bullied at work, we received 20 telephone calls and more than 200 e-mails.

3. Self-help books include *The Bully at Work* (Namie & Namie, 2000a); *Brutal Bosses* (Hornstein, 1996); *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace* (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 2002); *Work Abuse: How to Recognize It and Survive It* (Wyatt & Hare, 1997); *Stalking the Soul* (Hirigoyen, 1998); *Bullying in Adulthood* (Randall, 2001), and *You Don't Have to Take It: A Woman's Guide to Confronting Emotional Abuse at Work* (NiCarthy, Gottlieb, & Coffman, 1993)**.**

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