A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF YOUNG PROFESSIONALS COPING WITH BEING THE TARGET OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

by

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Abstract

This study utilized a constructivist grounded theory approach to answer the research question: How do young professionals describe their process of coping with being the target of workplace bullying? This topic was selected due to a gap in the literature regarding young professionals, under age 35, who have experienced workplace bullying. An analysis of interviews resulted in a process that starts with awareness of bullying and then involves emotion-focused coping tactics of avoidance and seeking social support. However, as the duration and severity of bullying increases, targets switch to problem-focused coping tactics by reporting the bullying to human resources. If they feel supported by the organization, they continued to use problem-focused coping methods. However, if the targeted worker feels unsupported, they turn inward to manage stress with less focus on their work performance, and more of their own wellbeing. Results of the study also showed that when the organizational leaders responded supportively to human resource reports, participants experienced an increased sense of confidence. But in most cases the organizations did not offer support to the targets, and participants experienced disillusionment, increased stress, and reduced performance in the workplace, with resulting potential negative impact on the organization. Implications from the study relate to Millennial generation workers and their coping abilities, with ideas for psychology practitioners, organizational leaders and young professionals who are targets of bullying.

Dedication

There are many people who touched my life during my academic journey. But I must start with my husband Victor, who has been by my side and has unconditionally supported every whim I've had (however unrealistic) in the time that we've been married. Victor, I knew there was something about you the moment I met you. You are my soul mate and I wouldn't be having the success I am today if it wasn't for you. There are not enough words to properly thank you for everything you've done.

I wouldn't have been able to complete this journey without the kittens (you know who you are). After my experience with being the target of workplace bullying, it was the kittens who had my back, immediately and unconditionally. They were my friends, my confidants, my support system. For a long time, they were the only people I trusted…and they have never let me down. Ladies, I don't know if you ever truly knew how much that meant to me. I love you all dearly.

And then there's Joshua. Joshua, it is not an exaggeration to say that you have changed my life, and you've done it in ways I never would have anticipated. Because of you, I'm a better coach, a stronger person, and I believe in my ability to achieve the impact I want to have on the world (even if it sometimes takes me longer than I'd like!). Thank you for opening my eyes to so many things. I'm happier than I've ever been in my life and it's because of you.

I would be remiss if I didn't thank the targets of workplace bullying who bravely shared their stories with me. Each of your contributions impacted this work and will hopefully help others who are going through a similar ordeal.

And believe it or not, a small sliver of this project must go to the people who targeted me

when I experienced workplace bullying, along with those who supported them. Really. You see, I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't experienced ordeals like the stories contained in this dissertation for myself. In many respects, these experiences opened my eyes to how organizations really work and were the wakeup call that pushed me towards the work I was meant to do. So to Seth, Steve, Paul, Nancy, Betsy, Laurie – I sincerely hope that each of you finds the perspective to know that treating another human being like I was treated by you or under your watch is never ok. Years later, I can forgive you. But I truly feel sorry for you.

Finally, this work is dedicated to anyone who might be reading this while experiencing their own ordeal with being the target of workplace bullying, young professional or not. I hope the stories in these pages give you some comfort. You're not alone, you're not crazy, and this experience does not have to define you. Love yourself enough to stand up for yourself. If your organization doesn't support you, go find one that will allow you to thrive.

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This dissertation would not have been completed without one person: Dr. Deborah Vogele Welch. There were times during the process when I fell off the map, primarily due to the bullying I was experiencing in my own professional life as I was collecting data for this dissertation. Deborah checked in consistently, was always there for ongoing support and, in many respects, pulled this dissertation out of me. She was there when I didn't believe it was possible to finish and never made me feel like I couldn't do it. Her feedback always pushed the work past where I would have taken it on my own and supported me in looking at the data in new ways. Deborah, your support is the model that I will look back to for the rest of my career. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

When one hears the word bullying, the image of children in grade school may immediately come to mind. However for some, bullying does not end when they leave the schoolhouse playground – it can follow them into their professional careers. According to a 2014 national study conducted by Zogby International in conjunction with the Workplace Bullying Institute, 27% of Americans have been the targets of bullying at work. That amounts to approximately 37 million people in the United States alone (Namie, 2014).

Being a target has emotional, physical, and professional consequences. Individuals experience a variety of health problems related to stress, depression, and anxiety such as decreased self-confidence, stress headaches, migraines, disrupted sleep, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), high blood pressure, and ulcers (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2004; Lee, 2000; Namie, 2012; Wiedmer, 2010).

Oftentimes once the bullying begins, there is little light at the end of the tunnel. When the bullying is reported to the organization by the target, management or human resources will only take steps to help the target 18% of the time. More often they either do nothing, or they come to the aid of the perpetrator, leaving the target without support (Namie, 2014). Most of the time, the end of the bullying comes when the target leaves their position, either by quitting, getting fired, or transferring into a new position (Namie & Namie, 2009). And though they rarely come to the aid of the target, organizations also experience repercussions when bullying occurs, including

reductions in productivity, increased absenteeism, increased turnover, poor customer relations experiences, increased health costs, impacts on organizational culture, harm to reputation, and the threat of lawsuits (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Gardner & Johnson, 2001). When workplace bullying is not addressed by organizational leadership, the emotional impact of it has also been shown to spread throughout the organization, increasing the impact and the likelihood that other employees will become targets (Godkin, 2015).

This research examines the specific phenomena of how young professionals, those ages 35-years-old and under, cope with being the target of workplace bullying. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) established much of the foundation of coping theory as it applies in this case. They found that how individuals cope with a given stressor is dependent on whether they view the situation as a changeable one. If the person feels the problem they are facing may be solvable, they are more likely to engage in problem-focused coping to attempt to remove the stressor. If the person feels the problem cannot be solved, they are more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping to mitigate the impact of the stressor, but do not work to remove it. Generally, problem-focused coping is necessary to bring about an end to the situation.

Need for the Study

This study explores how young professionals cope with being the target of workplace bullying. Young professionals were selected as an audience of focus for two reasons. First, a thorough literature review indicates that young professionals in the United States are a segment that has not been specifically examined in regards to their experiences coping with being the target of workplace bullying, leaving a gap in the research pertaining to how this population responds to toxic treatment in the workplace.

Secondly, young professionals are one and a half times more likely to be a target of workplace bullying than the standard population. As a point of reference, that is greater than the differential between genders, with men being 1.33 times more likely to be bullied than women, even though women as targets have been the focus of a large amount of workplace bullying research (Notelaers, Vermunt, Baillien, Einarsen, & De Witte, 2011).

How individuals cope with being a target of workplace bullying has been previously explored from a generalized perspective, without focusing on age. Research has shown that it is not uncommon for a target to change coping strategies several times throughout the ordeal, though the most common final move is to leave the situation altogether. Most of the time this move is voluntary on the part of the target by quitting or requesting a transfer to a different part of the organization (Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004). This will be discussed further in Chapter 2. However, what is unknown is whether young professionals specifically follow this pattern. Since they are new to the workforce, it cannot be assumed that they are equipped with the experience or knowledge to proactively and productively cope with being a target through problem-focused strategies. This study seeks to provide the foundational insights that will bridge the knowledge gap regarding the population of young professionals. It is particularly important because they are at higher risk than other age groups of being targeted for bullying, yet may not possess the experience or the awareness to proactively deal with the situation they have found themselves in.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to describe how young professionals cope with being the target of workplace bullying. Specifically, a constructivist grounded theory approach, advanced by Charmaz (2006), was utilized to develop a theory that cuts to the core of

the experience of a young professional coping with being the target of workplace bullying by synthesizing both the fundamentals and abstractions of that experience.

Significance of the Study

This research is designed to aid individuals in a position to help young professionals proactively cope with what is happening to them at work by providing a greater understanding of the thought process by which they approach identifying and problem-solving the situation. This population is significant since, per the Bureau of Labor Statistics, it makes up just under one-third of the American workforce (United States Department of Labor, 2016).

This study has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study will add to the knowledge base regarding coping theory, and expand on the research conducted by Olafsson and Johannsdottir (2004), which examined how individuals of different age groups in Iceland coped with being targeted. It will be the first time this topic has been broached, however, in regards to this age group in the United States.

Practically speaking, the timing of this study coincides with the push for the passage of the Healthy Workplace Bill across the United States, which seeks to protect employees from abusive work environments, and hold organizations accountable for preventing bullying from occurring at work (The Healthy Workplace Campaign, 2017). This study equips industrial/organizational psychology professionals with foundational knowledge to help combat workplace bullying in organizations, and to better help young professionals targeted by abusive behavior.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study is the following: How do young professionals describe their process of coping with being the target of workplace bullying?

Definition of Terms

For this research, the terms are defined as the following.

Theory

A *theory* is defined as a discussion of how and why participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations, and cuts to the core of the experience (Charmaz, 2006).

Coping

Coping is defined as the "thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful" (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 745).

Workplace bullying

Workplace bullying is defined as the experience of repeated and unwelcomed negative acts such as criticism and humiliation, occurring at a place of employment, that are intended to cause fear, distress, or harm to the target from one or more individuals in any source of power over the target, where the target has difficulties defending him or herself (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011).

Target

A *target* is defined as the individual at whom workplace bullying is directed by one or more individuals (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011).

Young professional

A *young professional* is defined as an individual age of 35-years-old or younger who was in the first ten years of their professional career when the bullying occurred.

Research Design

This study utilizes the constructivist grounded theory approach advanced by Charmaz (2006). The constructivist approach is fundamentally different than the traditional approach to grounded theory. Not only does it offer a much greater degree of flexibility, it also takes the researcher out of the role of objective observer and integrates him or her as a subjective participant in the process. Additionally, it acknowledges that multiple realities exist in the world and that it is important to situate research within its specific context. This allows for comparisons of the nuances between studies.

Charmaz (2006) advocates for the collection of rich data from participants that reveals their feelings, intentions and actions, and the context and structures in which they occurred. The goal is to collect sufficient data to give a full picture of the experience and the individual's interpretation of that experience. Experiences were analyzed on an ongoing basis as they are gathered per Charmaz's approach (described subsequently), rather than analyzed as a whole following data collection. This is one differentiator of this methodology from other qualitative methodologies.

It is important to note that the process Charmaz (2006) advances is not a linear one. That is, the researcher does not move from step to step in a systematic fashion. Rather, the researcher may be conducting multiple steps at once, and may move back and forth through the process until they feel confident in the direction of the research and the soundness of the data collected. The flexibility of this process allows the researcher to progressively evolve their focus, including refining and reshaping data collection methods. The process concludes with construction of the grounded theory, which Charmaz (2006) defines as reaching "down to the fundamentals, up to

the abstractions, and probe into the experience" (p. 135), the content of which cuts to the core of the area under examination.

Assumptions and Limitations

The following assumptions and limitations were made in conducting the study.

Assumptions

1. All participants were truthful in their pre-screening.
2. All participants had been the target of workplace bullying when they were 35-years-old or younger.
3. The participants accurately recounted the events surrounding their experience with workplace bullying during the interview.
4. The researcher accurately captured the data during the interviews.
5. The researcher accurately analyzed the data following the interviews.
6. The sample size resulted in data saturation.

Limitations

1. The participants recounted their experience of workplace bullying as they perceived it. Data was not collected from the perspective of the bullies, any colleagues who witnessed the bullying, or from others in the organization in which it occurred.
2. The participants were limited to those who were aware that they had been the target of workplace bullying, and acknowledge such to enter the pre-screening process. Therefore, the sample did not include those who experienced the phenomenon but did not acknowledge it as workplace bullying.

Expected Findings

It was expected that this research would identify the process by which a young professional copes with being the target of workplace bullying is distinct from individuals that were targeted when they had more experience under their belt. For example, given the previous findings of Olafsson and Johannsdottir (2004), which indicate that targets of workplace bullying in Iceland switched back and forth between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, it was expected that the data would indicate a waffling back and forth between the two strategies. However, given the age and lack of professional experience of the sample, it was hypothesized that the participants would place a stronger emphasis on emotion-focused strategies in their coping process.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter 1 of the study introduced the background of the problem of workplace bullying in general, and specifically in regard to young professionals, including the purpose of the research, its significance, the research design, how each term is defined, and the assumptions and limitations made.

Chapter 2 delves into a review of the existing literature on workplace bullying, coping theory, and brings the two together with a general discussion of how targets of workplace bullying tend to cope.

Chapter 3 details the constructivist grounded theory qualitative approach utilized in the research, including the research design, the method of selection, details about the participants, procedures used in the data collection, the interview questions, and the analysis.

Chapter 4 provides the analysis of the data collected, as well as the theory developed.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the results, the implications of it, and provides recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The topics of both workplace bullying and coping have been the subject of scholarly investigation for decades. This literature review will introduce each topic, and a summary of the literature most relevant to the current investigation.

Theoretical Orientation for the Study

When it comes to work, employees experience stress when there's an imbalance between what the individual needs to accomplish and the resources he or she has to get the job done. If that imbalance exists to a significant degree over an extended period, the individual will start to experience reduced personal well-being and potential health problems (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

This may seem like common sense today, but how emotional stress impacted the physical body was not always understood. Selye was one of the first researchers to tackle the concept of stress and did so from a medical perspective, defining stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand" (Selye, 1976, p. 53). From there, he developed the concept of the general adaptation syndrome, outlining the process the body goes through under stress. It consists of three phases: the alarm reaction when the body recognizes that it is under stress, resistance when it attempts to adapt to the new demands being placed on it, and exhaustion when all the body's adaptive energy is depleted. It is in the exhaustion stage that the body could start succumbing to diseases of adaptation and an individual may start to experience physical manifestations of that

stress in the form of unpredictable types of illness (Selye, 1950). In other words, if individuals are under stress long enough without reprieve, they are going to get physically sick. This is observed in targets of workplace bullying who endure toxic treatment for an extended period of time, discussed subsequently in this literature review.

Selye (1950) makes a few other interesting points about the possible reactions to stress that are applicable to this research. First, he notes that many of the physical symptoms of stress may disappear during the resistance stage only to reappear during the exhaustion stage, suggesting that human beings have a finite ability to adapt to their situation. Additionally, he points out that what may cause general adaptation syndrome (i.e. a response to a stressor) in one individual may not cause it in another. Finally, he notes that exposure to the same stressor several times by the same individual may produce qualitatively different results that are dependent on the context of the situation it occurs in. In a later review of Selye's work, Viner (1999) noted that he "believed himself to have discovered a universal truth regarding the relationships of organisms with their environment, a truth he would sell to whoever would listen" (p. 394).

Selye's research was based on the physiological reactions of the body under stress. Though he never used the word coping, he was essentially saying that the body is in one of two states when experiencing stress – it is either attempting to actively fight against it or it is trying to retreat and simply find a way to live with it. Undoubtedly, this inspired Richard Lazarus when he began studying coping from a pathological point of view in the 1960s, and eventually moved on to assessing a wider array of cognitive and behavioral responses to the everyday stresses of normal life. His method places a strong emphasis on how an individual assesses a situation to determine what coping strategies they would use to combat it (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) built on this work when they developed their comprehensive theory of stress and coping to explain the transactional process between experiencing stressful events and how individuals choose to cope with those events. It was in this work that the terms problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping were coined. Problem-focused coping concentrates efforts on fixing the problem and eliminating the stressor, while emotion-focused coping emphasizes efforts that mitigate the impacts of the stressor while not actually fixing the problem.

Lazarus and Folkman's research (1984) established how individuals selected one strategy – problem or emotion-focused coping – over another. The ties between how an individual appraises the situation and the type of coping mechanisms employed are direct, and largely depend on the context of the situation. Emotion-focused coping is more likely to occur when an individual has decided that the situation is out of their control, and that nothing can be done to change the conditions they are facing. On the other hand, problem-focused coping occurs when an individual feels that a situation is still open to change. Appraisals are ongoing, and the coping strategy may change based on the results of each appraisal of the situation. This harkens back to Selye's (1950) research noting that the same stressor will impact two people differently, and that the same person experiencing the same stressor may have different results over time.

Endler and Parker (1990) specifically note that "if there is a consensus in the coping literature, it is the important distinction between emotion-focused and problem-focused coping" (p. 876), with problem-focused coping referring to task orientation and emotion-focused coping referring to a person orientation. The following sections explore these individual theories and research that is associated with them.

Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping strategies are used with the goal of reducing the effects of the stressor causing the strain and generally involve cognitive, behavioral, and affective coping activities focused on solving the problem. Affective responses may be key in successful problem-focused coping, as they provide the individuals with clues regarding why the problem exists, what is influencing its perception, and what progress has been made toward solving it (Heppner, Cook, Wright, & Johnson, 1995; Herman & Tetrick, 2009). Problem-focused strategies have typically been associated with lower-levels of emotional strain than emotion-focused strategies, primarily because they are not focused on the emotional ramifications caused by the stressors (Boyd, Lewin, & Sager, 2009).

Heppner et al. (1995) conducted multiple studies of problem-focused coping strategies with the goal of assessing what types of activities either facilitate or inhibit progress toward resolving problems causing stress. Specifically, they examined three factors – reflective, suppressive and reactive styles. Reflective styles examine the problem in a pragmatic way, looking at causal relationships and planning multiple ways to tackle the stressor. Reactive styles want to address the problem, but may do so in a way that is not well thought out, impulsive, and tends to distort the problem as a result of emotional responses to it. Finally, suppressive styles tend to avoid the problem, may become frustrated easily when a solution doesn't work right away, and may not sustain their actions long enough to solve the problem.

Not surprisingly, they found reflective activities tend to contribute to solving the problem while reactive and suppressive activities tend to distort the problem-solving activities or disengage with it entirely.

An example of problem-focused coping strategies in practice comes from Crooks, Stone, and Owen (2011), who interviewed 45 college professors with multiple sclerosis to find how they coped with their problem to enable their teaching. They identified three broad strategies: organizational strategies, before and after strategies, and during strategies. Organizational strategies focused on the more administrative aspects of the job, including additional support from assistants or requesting a schedule focused on specific times of day. Before and after strategies focused primarily on activities surrounding the day they would teach, such as preparing a PowerPoint so they did not have to write on the board and planning time to get rest into their schedule. During activities referred to activities specifically during teaching, such as lecturing from a sitting position or being open with students regarding why they may be hanging onto a surface for balance. These findings align with the Heppner et al. (1995) findings regarding reflective styles enabling problem-focused coping – most of the activities these academics undertook were in preparation, outside of the central teaching of their job.

Connecting this back to workplace bullying and the inquiry at hand, we will see that problem-focused strategies may take many forms, and those forms may shift throughout the target's experience in the organization, depending on their perception of their current context. This will be explored more in-depth in this literature review.

Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping strategies attempt to address the emotions that result from the stressors, but do not generally attempt to alter the primary causes (Herman & Tetrick, 2009). In other words, they do not address the problem – they address the consequences of the experience. For example, a very common type of emotion-focused coping is avoidance or withdrawal coping, in which individuals distance themselves from the stressful situation, or disengages with

the problem entirely to seek relief (Uy, Foo, & Song, 2012). Other types may include seeking social support from family and friends, engaging more often in exercise, or attempting to maintain a work-life balance. All of these actions do not speak directly to the problem at hand, and instead try to mitigate the resulting stress.

Generally speaking, emotion-focused coping is thought to be less effective than problem-focused coping, even to the point of being associated with depression and psychological distress (Sabina & Tindale, 2008). However, the broad nature of the concept – including denial, venting emotions, positive reinterpretation of events, and social support – suggest that the context of the situation is a critical component regarding success or failure of any coping strategy. For instance, individuals who are less emotionally open have been found to benefit from expressing their emotions via writing exercises, more so than individuals who have a greater amount of emotional sensitively (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007).

Additionally, emotion-focused coping may be valuable in managing failed attempts at problem-focused coping. This is particularly true when it is not possible, or highly difficult, to change the context of the situation (Lilly & Graham-Bermann, 2010). For example, in the case of women in abusive relationships, problem-focused coping may not always be an option. In those cases, emotion-focused coping has been found to help to alleviate the mental distress caused by the strain of the situation. Hage (2006) found that abuse survivors who were not able to leave the relationship were able to utilize emotion-focused coping to develop the self-agency and survival skills necessary until they obtained the resources to move onto problem-focused coping and leave the relationship. These strategies have also been found to be a moderating factor in posttraumatic stress disorder among victims of domestic violence (Lilly & Graham-Bermann, 2010).

Finally, a more contemporary area where emotion-focused coping strategies have found prevalence is in high school cyberbullying, with the popularity of social networking sites ushering in a new form of victimization. Parris, Varjas, Meyers, and Cutts (2012) found that oftentimes student targets of bullying fear being viewed as a tattle tale and will thus resort to emotion-focused coping strategies such as avoidance, acceptance, justification, and seeking social support from friends. A significant number of these students also noted that they did not view any way to prevent the bullying, illustrating the Lazarus and Folkman (1984) theory that individuals will veer toward emotion-focused strategies when they perceive that a situation is not going to change.

Utilizing Multiple Coping Methods

Research has also supported the use of multiple-coping strategies to be effective, while emphasizing the necessity of problem-focused strategies for overall well-being. For example, in their study of the joint effects of start-up experience and coping strategies on entrepreneurs' psychological well-being, Uy et al. (2012) found overwhelming support that the combined use of both active (problem-focused) and avoidance (emotion-focused) coping was positively related to the positive well-being of the individuals they studied over an extended period. The researchers also suggest that the use of emotion-focused coping over an extended period would likely only relate to positive well-being if the individual also engaged in problem-focused coping strategies. If they did not, over time their positive well-being decreased.

A second example of the non-exclusivity of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping comes from Gupta, Paterson, Lysaght, and von Zweck (2012) when studying coping strategies utilized to combat burnout among occupational therapists. They found that the coping strategies ranked as extremely important by study participants were the following: spending time

with family, maintaining a balance between professional and personal lives, maintaining a sense of control over work and responsibilities, and maintaining a sense of humor. The only problem-focused item on the list referred to maintaining a sense of control over their work, while the rest focused on the emotional side of the problem. It was through a combination of the two tactics that they found success.

Tying these findings back to workplace bullying, this work supports the findings of Olafsson and Johannsdottir (2004), which indicate that a waffling between the two types of coping strategies typically occurs while a person is being targeted for workplace bullying. Additionally, Namie's findings (2012) support that problem-focused coping in the form of a target moving on from their job is typically the action that will cause the bullying to cease.

The Impact of Age

There is some evidence to indicate that the age of the individual does impact their method of coping tendencies. Hansen and Ghafoori (2016) investigated the direct and moderating effects of age on coping preferences for psychological distress among trauma-exposed adults, finding a significant association of age and coping preferences. As age increased, so did preference for utilizing problem-focused coping techniques. Additionally, they found that when younger-aged adults utilized problem-focused coping techniques, they maintained lower levels of stress than those who did not. This finding was consistent with previous mental health literature – the older the individuals, the more likely they are to engage in problem-focused coping methods and to recommend those methods (Siu, Spector, Cooper, & Donald, 2001).

When applied specifically to the workplace, the pattern holds true. Hertel, Rauschenbach, Thielgen, and Krumm (2015) found that older workers had specific strengths in managing stress at work by engaging in more active problem-focused coping techniques. Additionally, they

found job control was a factor, with younger workers being much more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping techniques when their job control was low. Specifically, they tended towards avoidance. The authors credited this finding with older workers having higher job-related skills and self-management resources, allowing them to more productively cope with the demands of the workplace. Because they were more likely to engage in problem-focused coping methods, they had less need for emotion-focused strategies.

Review of the Literature

It is acknowledged that a significant number of American adults in the workforce have been the target of workplace bullying. However, estimates of how many that is vary widely. One of the most commonly accepted statistics is that of Namie (2014), indicating that 27% of the workforce have been targeted at some point in their career, but some scholars have also estimated that as much as 95% of the workforce have had some exposure to bullying behaviors at work, either as a target or as a bystander (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Regardless, the impact and reach is profound. Research into the topic is critical because organizations are notoriously bad at responding proactively to stop workplace bullying, thus perpetuating the problem. When it is reported to management or human resources, most the time they will either do nothing to help the target, or blame the target for the bullying and come to the aid of the bully. In the clear majority of cases, the bullying will only end with the target quits their job, gets fired, or moves to a new position in a different part of the organization (Namie & Namie, 2009).

Workplace bullying is much more harmful than the normal things that might irk employees in the office. Human beings have an innate desire to fit in and belong as a part of a group that is fundamental to our motivation – we need consistent, positive interactions with a group of people who demonstrate care and concern for us (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As

adults, the people we work with form the social group that we most frequently interact with. Therefore, no matter how much one might assert that they are not at work to make friends, feeling like we fit in with our co-workers is important.

When a person is targeted by a bully at work, that fundamental sense of belonging to the group of people that we see most often is thwarted. That is why being a target of workplace bullying is one of the most stressful things an individual can experience in the workplace – it throws off our entire sense of balance and, as a result, has a detrimental impact on both physical and psychological health (Giorgi et al., 2016).

When compared to the average employee, targets of workplace bullying report increased symptoms of stress, reduced self-esteem, reduced self-efficacy, reduced belief in their own professional competence (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004), have higher levels of burnout, lower levels of job satisfaction (Einarsen, Matthiesen, & Skogstad, 1998), and take 42% more sick or personal days from work (Asfaw, Chang, & Ray, 2014). Being targeted also is a very strong predictor of anxiety and depression at work when compared with other job-related stressors (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010), and there are also significant correlations between being the target of workplace bullying and experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Spence Laschinger & Nosko, 2015). Symptoms of PTSD that targets may experience include avoidance, social withdrawal, irritable behavior, difficulty concentrating, and may escalate to suicidal thoughts if the individual is frequently exposed to the toxic behaviors (Balducci, Alfano, & Fraccaroli, 2009). Once a person is targeted, it is difficult to pull themselves out of it. In fact, one of the outcomes of being a target of workplace bullying is a reduction in individual ability to defend themselves against the bullying and eliminate the problem because being targeted has

been found to deplete personal energy and erode the job and personal resources required to fight (Tuckey & Neall, 2014).

Workplace bullying also costs the organization it is occurring in significantly. Hollis (2015) notes that "workplace bullying is like a petty thief, pilfering the resources of the organization. While the customary petty thief takes cash, the bully steals the productivity of the organization by causing employee disengagement" (p. 1). Predictably, because workplace bullying takes so many unique forms and is difficult to assess to its fullest extent, the estimates of those costs vary widely and are associated with lost productivity while the bullying occurs, increased costs from health-related issues caused by the bullying, employee turnover, lost opportunity costs due to turnover and decreased productivity, recruiting costs to replace open positions, and additional lost productivity costs due to new employee onboarding and training. In one of the earliest studies of workplace bullying, Leymann (1990) estimated a loss of between $30,000 and $100,000 per year per target. A British study of over 5,000 employees found that over one million workdays had been lost because of the stress resulting from being a target of workplace bullying (Keelan, 2000). Hollis (2015) studied the costs of workplace bullying at American institutions of higher education, estimating losses of anywhere from $4.5 million annually at a small college with 1,000 staff members to upwards of over $90 million annually at large institutions, basing those costs on lost productivity each week of 3.5-4.5 hours per target. Namie and Namie (2009) have estimated the costs to American organizations alone result in more than $64 billion annually. There may not be agreement on an exact number, but there is agreement that the price organizations pay for just one workplace bully on staff is significant.

Even those cost estimates cannot possibly tell the whole story, because they only include direct costs relating to the person being targeted. They do not include indirect costs - those

relating to the impact of workplace bullying on others in the organization who are witnessing the bullying, even if they are not directly targeted. However, even the act of witnessing workplace bullying has an impact, leading to decreased morale throughout the organization, and a perception of a lower rate of team success (Coyne, Craig, & Chong, 2004). Studies have found that as many as three-quarters of those who witness workplace bullying develop health problems of their own related to stress, such as lower self-esteem, sleep deprivation, depression, and anxiety (Thomas, 2005). The existence of workplace bullying can also change group norms and expectations – if others witness a bully abusing a co-worker without consequence, it can perpetuate the problem in the future and just lead to more bullying. The bully feels emboldened, as if their behavior has been blessed by management, and others witnessing it may be more likely to respond in kind since that type of behavior has been positively reinforced. This results in a spiral of incivility that keeps self-perpetuating, with one workplace bully leading to the development of more workplace bullies simply by being in proximity. (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Harvey, Treadway, & Heames, 2007; Ramsay, Troth, & Branch, 2011; Robinson & O'Leary, 1998).

What Is It? Workplace Bullying Defined

Research has offered ample definitions for workplace bullying, many with overlapping characteristics. One of the most comprehensive, and the one that will be utilized for the purpose of this study, comes from Bartlett and Bartlett (2011):

> Repeated unwelcomed negative acts which can involve criticism and humiliation, are intended to cause fear, distress, or harm the target from one or more individuals in any source of power, with the target of the bullying having difficulties defending himself or herself. (pp. 71-72)

As implied by the definition above, bullying is not a one-off or occasional phenomenon, and requires both persistence and consistency. Researchers have varied on the duration of time required to meet the definition of bullying, but consensus puts it at negative acts once or twice a week, persistent over the course of between six and twelve months (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Copper, 2011; Samnani & Singh, 2012).

Forms of Workplace Bullying

When we think of bullying in the schoolyard, behaviors such as shouting verbal insults or violence may come to mind. But adults are subtler than school children and, though violence does occur on occasion, it represents a very small percentage of the workplace bullying that occurs in the United States (Namie, 2009). More often the form that workplace bullying takes is less overt and pronounced than a punch to the face, and is distinct from a singular instance of aggression.

Research has generally broken it down into two distinct categories. The first is work-related bullying, which involves tasks an individual is required to perform on the job and their professional status. The second is person-related bullying, which relates to more personal forms of attack.

Work-related bullying. Work-related bullying focuses on elements relating to an individual's professional success, including aspects relating to their workload, work process, and evaluation. This may take the forms of an unreasonably heavy workload (Jennifer, Cowie, & Ananiadou, 2003), removing responsibilities in favor of more menial tasks, refusing administrative leave (Quine, 1999), setting unrealistic goals (Fox & Stallworth, 2006), setting up an individual for failure on a job (Rayner & Cooper, 1997), withholding information relevant to the tasks they are required to perform (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2009; Gardner

& Johnson, 2001), flaunting of professional status in relation to work processes (Fox & Stallworth, 2006; Hutchinson, Wilkes, Vickers, & Jackson, 2008), or an inappropriate evaluation with the intent of blocking targets from promotion (Randle, Stevenson, & Grayling, 2007; Rayner & Cooper, 1997).

Person-related bullying. Person-related bullying that takes the form of personal, psychological, or emotional attacks at work, and may be either indirect or direct. Direct forms may include verbal harassment, interruptions, or yelling (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2005; Fox & Stallworth, 2006; Gardner & Johnson, 2001), demeaning jokes, constant criticism, humiliation, personal intimidation and threats (Fox & Stallworth, 2006; Quine, 1999; Rayner & Cooper, 1997). Indirect attacks may include isolation or social manipulation, like the spreading of gossip and false accusations about the target with the specific intent of undermining them or damaging their friendships and social networks at work (Agervold, 2007; Fox & Stallworth, 2006; Quine, 1999; Rayner & Cooper, 1997). Indirect bullying is particularly problematic, since the target may not even be aware that it is occurring, and cannot document the experiences even if they believe that it is going on (Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith, & Pereira, 2002).

Why Workplace Bullying Occurs

The reasons that workplace bullying occurs are highly varied. However, there are some broad generalizations to be drawn from literature on the subject. Typically, there is a perceived power imbalance at play when workplace bullying occurs. However, it does not necessarily need to be hierarchical in the form of a boss harassing an employee (Namie & Namie, 2004). Hoel, Cooper, and Faragher (2001) found that 37% of targets reported being bullied by a colleague, and 7% reported bullying by a subordinate. Imbalances can occur in the forms of physical

stature, social-peer groups, low self-esteem, or shyness on the part of the target (Cowie et al., 2002).

If there is one thing that the research agrees on in regard to a typical profile of a target, it is that there is a lack of consensus regarding if a typical profile exists. Some studies cite a high level of extroversion among targets, while others cite a high level of introversion. Some cite a low level of agreeableness, while others cite low levels of self-esteem, and still others cite a low level of conscientiousness (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Some researchers assert that the conditions of the job are at play, indicating that those with a high workload and low autonomy are more likely to be targeted (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011).

Aquino and Lamertz (2004) may explain some of this disagreement by arguing that it is highly dependent on the social situation and personal goals of the individuals involved. They describe two archetypes of individuals who may be susceptible to being a target, each on the opposite end of the spectrum. The first is passive and submissive – they may be insecure, feel outside of the social order, and open themselves up to attack by being unwilling to defend themselves against it. The second is just the opposite – aggressive, hostile, or even irritating, and therefore likely to invite an attack from others whom they irk with their behavior. Regardless of the side they are on, the idea is that a target may set themselves outside of the social dynamics at play in their specific context.

As for the characteristics of the perpetrator, there is consensus that they tend to have authoritarian tendencies, consistently focused on power and status, that can direct itself at individuals who are either perceived weaker than them, or that get in their way (Ashforth, 1994; Ashforth, 1997). Aquino and Lamertz (2004), agreed with this characterization, but also offered an extreme on the other end of the spectrum – one that behaves aggressively in a reactive stance,

as a response to a threat to their identity. This is supported by research to show that some of the same situational job characteristics that lead to a person being targeted – high workload and low autonomy – can lead to bullying behaviors as well. There is also an indication that those who have been bullied in the past may be more likely to engage in bullying behaviors themselves (Baillien et al., 2011; Samnani & Singh, 2012), which would contradict a commonly held notion that the bully is engaging in such behaviors purely because they feel a threat from the target.

Finally, there is evidence to suggest that individuals may succeed at workplace bullying because they have a high level of interpersonal skill that allows them to maneuver seamlessly in the organization, strategically abuse their coworkers, and still be evaluated positively by their supervisor (Treadway, Shaughnessy, Breland, Yang, & Reeves, 2013). This is supported by the statistics stating that the organization will often take the side of the bully, and the bullying often ends only as a result of the target leaving their job and moving on (Namie, 2009).

Recognition of Workplace Bullying

Since this study focuses on how individuals cope with being a target of workplace bullying, it is important to consider how they come to that realization. The process that one goes through in recognizing they are the target of bullying is a complex one, and the situation is rarely recognized until the situation as progressed well beyond the start of the problem. Karatuna (2015) found that targets may recognize the negative acts being perpetrated by the bully but will underestimate the severity of the problem, thinking it was a temporary situation that would pass. During this time, the target may attempt to ignore the bullying or even blame themselves, thinking they had done something that caused the behavior.

This response is understandable since workplace bullying tends to start out as things the target deems trivial - moving their chair out of the office, removing or withholding information they need for work, talking over them in a meeting, or other minor infractions that are annoying but not aggressive. The target may view these behaviors as unprofessional and think that if they just focus on their work and maintain their professionalism, then either the negative behaviors will stop, or the organization will recognize what is happening (and who is responsible), and put a stop to it (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Lewis, 2006).

It is accepted that workplace bullying is more than just a one-time occurrence of negative, passive aggressive, or toxic treatment. However, where the line is drawn between behaviors that are simply irritating and when those behaviors become workplace bullying is still blurry. It is a difficult call. Branch and Murray (2015) illustrate this with the example of Dempsey and Thorne, where Dempsey files complaints against Thorne over the course of six months alleging that he opened his mail, took his lunch out of the office refrigerator, pretended to be Dempsey on the phone and telling an important customer he would not help him, moving

Dempsey's desk into the kitchen, and more. When do these acts cross the line? Do you look at each individual act or the sum of its parts? The answer is not always as black and white as one might assume the definition of workplace bullying would be.

The reality is that a great deal of workplace bullying is not overt, leaving the target to wonder if they are imaging things or if it is really happening. It flies under the radar when taken in the context of a busy workday with lots of things to get accomplished, making it easy to dismiss the small slights that seem little more than annoying when being pressed by a major project deadline. Twenty years ago, Rayner and Cooper (1997) posited that workplace bullying was easy to identify when it involved things like shouting, but far more difficult when the behaviors were disguised as mundane, routine interactions, like seeing a manager setting their employee up to fail by withholding the tools and support to do their job, constantly watching over their shoulder, or isolating them from other team members. To illustrate this, Thomas (2005) found that among support staff at institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom, the top four bullying tactics were undue pressure to produce work, undermining ability, withholding information, and shouting. Only the shouting tactic is overt bullying – the remaining three are far more subtle abuses of power. This echoes the research of Einarsen et al. (1998) with regard to nurses being targeted in Norway; the most common behaviors experienced were being slander, rumors, and silent hostility – all elements that might be characterized as meaningless office gossip. If this type of bullying occurred in school, we might be told by our parents to just ignore it and it will go away.

In fact, sometimes workplace bullying is so subtle that it may actually come down to tone, inflection, and non-verbal cues. Dzurec, Kennison, and Albataineh (2014) studied the way targets were spoken to by their respective bullies, finding that how they spoke was often more

important to the perception of a threat than what they said – the bullies communicated using subtle non-verbal gestures, purposeful intonations, or communication in public venues where co-workers were witness to it in an attempt to shame and embarrass their targets into silence.

The above illustrates why it is difficult to determine how long most incidents of workplace bullying have been occurring when they are finally reported. When happenings are more subtle and integrated with the day-to-day events in an office, it makes it more difficult for targets to identify the toxic nature of their situation. Indeed, the target may even blame themselves for the treatment if the incidents are executed in a way that is meant to shame them (Dzurec et al., 2014). The situation reflects the difference between putting a frog in a pot of boiling water and bringing it to a boil, and putting a frog directly in a pot of water that is already boiling. Do the latter, and the frog will just jump out. But slowly bring the pot to a boil while the frog is sitting in it and the frog will not recognize what is happening until it is, more or less, too late. It is only in retrospect that targets of bullying are able to identify the behaviors for what they were. Therefore, it is impossible to ascertain how long the bullying has been occurring prior to the target recognizing the extent of the problem. Prior to recognition the target is more likely to keep the information to themselves and utilize coping strategies that will mitigate their stress level, but not to solve a problem, since they have yet to identify that a true problem exists. That problem identification tends not to happen until the situation progresses beyond the trivial (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Karatuna, 2015; Lewis, 2006).

Coping and Workplace Bullying

Thus far, we have examined the literature in regard to workplace bullying, and the theoretical framework of coping. Now we will bring it together and examine research relating to what we know generally about how individuals cope with being a target of workplace bullying.

It has already been established that the coping mechanisms an individual utilizes is based on their perception of whether or not the situation is a changeable one. Problem-focused strategies may include things like seeking help or being assertive with the bully, while emotion-focused strategies might include finding more work/life balance or doing nothing and avoiding the issue, hoping that it will go away. Some strategies are more effective at dealing with bullying behaviors than others. In a study of bullying among students in Australia, Murray-Harvey, Skrzpiec, and Slee (2012) found that emotion-focused strategies were not usually effective in reducing the bullying. Problem-focused strategies, such as being assertive, were more effective unless they became overused – there was a tipping point at which a problem-focused strategy that was effective would become ineffective. Bernstein and Trimm (2016) built on this research and applied it in their study of coping with bullying in the workplace. They found that, in general, seeking help or being assertive in the face of workplace bullying moderated the psychological stress the bullying inflicted on the target, and that avoiding the problem and doing nothing made the psychological impact worse. These findings align with previous research from Zapf (1999) that individuals who engage in more emotion-focused behaviors experience higher levels and anxiety and depression, and from Dehue, Bolman, Vollink, and Pouwelse (2012) that engaging in strategies that were not designed to directly combat the problem resulted in an increase in health-related problems.

Therefore, it might be expected that targets of workplace bullying would focus on problem-focused methods of coping, since that has been shown to lead to greater levels of psychological well-being. However, the opposite tends to be true. Research shows targets are more likely than average to employ emotion-based coping strategies in general to solve the problem (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010). The severity and the duration of the bullying has also been

shown to impact the type of coping strategy selected. According to Olafsson and Johannsdottir (2004), when the target first recognizes the bullying as a problem, they are likely to begin utilizing problem-focused tactics – they go to HR, talk to their boss, or try to talk to the bully directly to sort things out. However, the longer the bullying goes on for, the more resigned the target becomes to it, relying heavily on emotion-based coping strategies. The target may do things like deny the problem, use humor, seek out social support, increase the amount of time they are exercising, utilize food, alcohol, or other substances as a distraction, or transfer their frustrations elsewhere (Stoeber & Janssen, 2011). Emotion-focused coping techniques such as avoidance and doing nothing have been shown to exacerbate the negative impact of the bullying on psychological well-being (Bernstein & Trimm, 2016). Even maintaining a positive mental attitude – a common piece of advice given to those experiencing toxic work environments – has been shown to be problematic. The differences rests in whether the target is using a positive attitude as a problem-focused strategy or an emotion-focused on. A positive attitude as a problem-focused strategy may include looking for another job and remaining optimistic that there is a nurturing environment out there, while an emotion-focused strategy might be utilizing a positive attitude to pretend that the bullying is not occurring. The former will have positive benefits for the target, the latter will lead to greater health problems (Dehue et al., 2012).

The frequent use of passive coping strategies may explain why many HR offices take a lax approach to workplace bullying – non-targets of workplace bullying generally expect targets to be more problem-focused by confronting the bully, consulting human resources, seeing union representatives, or seeking support from colleagues. When those things do not happen, it can be easy to perceive that a problem does not exist. However, HR offices may also be responsible for the target retreating to more emotion-focused behaviors. Research has consistently shown that

targets of bullying who report their experiences to HR receive little to no support, resulting in even more personal shame and self-blame as the target retreats unsuccessfully to continue to face an abusive environment with no hope of change (Bernstein & Trimm, 2016). In other words, HR offices may be actively, albeit inadvertently, encouraging emotion-focused strategies. The literature shows that when targets are engaging in problem-focused strategies by reporting the behaviors, they are not receiving support, which enhances their already high stress levels. Given that response, it follows logic that targets would re-engage with emotion-focused strategies to cope with their increased stress levels.

The experience of being a target of workplace bullying has been shown to impair the ability of the individual to cope productively with the situation, draining their personal resources and energy in a way that makes it difficult not only to fight back, but also to simply manage their day-to-day workload and job responsibilities (Leymann, 1990; Tuckey & Neall, 2014). There is some data to indicate that being a target of workplace bullying as a more long-term impact on individual health when the target is a woman rather than a man, suggesting that men and women utilize different coping strategies with greater or lesser success (Eriksen, Hogh, & Hansen, 2016).

Research from Turkey has found the targets in that country go through five distinct stages when coping with being the target of workplace bullying. First, they avoid the problem, underestimating the importance of it. Eventually they lose patience and confront the problem. In many cases, this switch to problem-focused coping aggravated the situation, leading to increased stress and health problems and causing targets to seek greater social support. As the situation continues, targets enter a period of despair, in which they are no longer able to effectively cope

with the situation. Finally, they give up and exit the situation through resignation or transfer (Karatuna, 2015).

The experience of being a target of workplace bullying can make an individual question their own competence. This has been shown to impact how they choose to cope with the situation. Stressful experiences like workplace bullying have been shown to lower self-management ability, leading to more emotion-focused responses by impairing the goal-directed parts of the brain (Arnsten, Raskind, Taylor, & Connor, 2015). However, if the target has confidence in their own abilities and contributions, this can mitigate the effect. McDaniel, Ngala, and Leonard (2015) found that if the target perceived themselves as highly competent, they were better able to cope with being bullied for two reasons: It impacted how they perceived the bullying and their ability to pull from the resources that exist in the organization to cope with the problem.

Regardless of whether a target utilizes a problem-focused strategy, an emotion-focused strategy, or a combination of the two, seeking out social support is one of the primary coping methods utilized of bullying targets. This can be both a problem-focused strategy and an emotion-focused strategy depending on the context (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Namie & Namie, 2009). Targets can also seek social support from friends and family as a form of emotion-focused coping. This is not an effort to fix the problem, but rather an attempt to mitigate its impact. However, it is not uncommon for the stress caused by workplace bullying to make its way into the personal lives of targets. Sian and Orford (2005) call this the ripple effect, when the increasing stress at work bleeds into personal relationships in a way that potentially decreases sources of social support. If outside relationships are not strong to begin with, this ordeal may very well break them and push the target into withdrawal.

Since social isolation is typically utilized as bullying behavior, it is not uncommon for social support from colleagues to be in the form of passive support at best, even if they recognized that the target is being treated unfairly. The target themselves may also inadvertently deplete their own social support by reacting to the workplace bullying in counterproductive ways. Halbesleben and Wheeler (2015) found that employees are more likely to support and invest personal resources in their co-workers when they perceive that their co-workers are investing in them. Tuckey and Neall (2014) point out that targets of workplace bullying are likely to reduce their support for others as a result of their own internal resources and energy being depleted. Thus, their co-workers' propensity to provide social support will reduce because they do not perceive it to be given in return. Additionally, some targets might become overtly aggressive towards their co-workers, an unconscious outcome of their own negative emotions and stress as the result of being targeted (Ireland & Ireland, 2000; Lee & Brotherridge, 2006).

Sometimes, the reduction in social support may not be a bad thing, since seeking social support has the potential to backfire and make the bullying situation worse. Some targets have reported that once close confidants with whom they have confided in when seeking support may report those disclosures to the bullies or have provided false statements to management (Sian & Orford, 2005). As with maintaining a positive attitude, the difference seems to rest in whether seeking social support is a problem-focused tactic, like seeking additional information to aid in reducing the bullying, or a more passive tactic like seeking emotional support. Problem-focused social support strategies are generally found to be more productive, while passive strategies exacerbate the impact of the bullying on the target's personal health (Dehue et al., 2012).

In almost every case, the final act of the target is to leave the position, either proactively by transferring or quitting the organization entirely, or reactively as a result of being fired

(Namie & Namie, 2009). Interestingly, there is some evidence that men are about twice as likely as women to leave the labor force immediately after being a target of workplace bullying (Eriksen et al., 2016). When asked about the advice they would offer to others experiencing workplace bullying, most targets note that leaving the organization entirely is the best way to solve the problem (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010).

Synthesis of the Research Findings

There is no typical account of workplace bullying. The experience of being a target has no standard composition. Instead, it is dependent on the type of bullying utilized by the perpetrators and the context in which the bullying occurs. What is clear from previous research is the impact on the personal health and the professional career of the target can be significant. How an individual copes with the bullying can be just as varied as the bullying itself, and can fluctuate over time. The perspective of the target is key in this regard – the coping mechanism utilized to deal with any stressful experience vary based on whether the individual under stress perceives the problem to be a solvable one or not.

The greater context of the situation must also be considered in determining which type of tactic the target is utilizing. Since an individual may not realize they are a target of workplace bullying until it has been going on for an extended period of time, a tactic utilized to deal with the situation may fit the mold of a problem-focused coping strategy or an emotion-focused coping strategy. Clear identification is critical to helping targets productively and proactively deal with the experience by directing their efforts toward problem-focused strategies.

Critique of Previous Research Methods

The elements that make up the experience of being a target of workplace bullying are vast and diverse. And, combined with the fact that recognition often takes place after the

targeting has occurred for an extended period of time, it is no surprise that the resulting impact of the bullying and coping mechanisms utilized are just as diverse as the experience itself. Previous research has produced a significant amount of information regarding the elements that make up the experience, the consequences of it from both individual and organizational perspectives, the external characteristics of the target and the bully, and has started to explore how individuals cope with being a target. However, much of the research has focused on the amount of bullying that occurs, the form it takes, and the consequences of it. When lines are drawn to focus more specifically, they tend to focus on demographic attributes like gender and ethnicity, on specific professions such as nursing, or have been international in focus. Thus, there remains a gap in research that is broadly generalizable in non-healthcare industries in the United States. This research fills a void in the research in regard to how age impacts the coping tactics utilized.

Summary

Overcoming the experience of workplace bullying requires a greater emphasis on problem-focused coping tactics. Understanding the cognitive process that individuals undertake in selecting coping tactics, and the elements of the experience that influence them in one direction or another, is critical to helping them deal productively with the experience and minimize the personal and professional ramifications of it. And since we know that once a person is bullied in the workplace, they may turn around and bully others as trickle-down effect, helping them to deal with it productively early on in the process will not only help that individual – it will also help whomever may have been their future targets by stopping the problem before it starts.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to describe how young professionals cope with being the target of workplace bullying. Since this population is targeted at a higher rate than other segmented populations, this research serves to understand how to identify their specific needs so that professionals may better serve and help those who find themselves in this unfortunate situation.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study is the following: How do young professionals describe their process of coping with being the target of workplace bullying?

Research Design

This study applied the constructivist grounded theory methodology advanced by Charmaz (2006). The constructivist approach is fundamentally different than the traditional approach to grounded theory. Not only does it offer a much greater degree of flexibility, it also takes the researcher out of the role of the objective observer and integrates him or her as a subjective participant in the process. Additionally, it acknowledges that multiple realities exist in the world and that it is important to situate research into its specific context. This allows for comparisons of the nuances between studies.

Charmaz (2006) advocates for a specific process in conducting constructivist grounded theory research which has an analytical edge. Rich interview data is collected from participants that reveal their feelings, intentions, and actions, and the context and structures in which they occurred. The goal is to collect sufficient data to give a full picture of the process the participants experience related to the central research question, which in this case involves the experience of bullying among young professionals. Experiences are analyzed on an ongoing basis, as the data is collected, rather than as a whole following data collection, which is distinct from other types of qualitative methodologies.

As the data is collected, it is coded through initial line-by-line coding, focused coding, axial coding, and finally theoretical coding. Initial coding involves looking at words, lines, and segments of the transcribed interviews with participants and characterizing them with a short descriptive name. Focused coding involves selecting the most useful and frequent initial codes and utilizing them to sift through large amounts of data. In this step, the researcher begins to make decisions about which initial codes make the most sense to categorize data. Axial coding relates the categories and the subcategories, and begins to give coherence to the emerging theory. Finally, theoretical coding is utilized to conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to one another to understand the relationships between the categories identified during focused coding. A constant comparative method is utilized at each stage of analysis to compare the data being analyzed with what was previously coded. Memo-writing is also utilized as a way to compare data and explore ideas throughout the research process, which allows the researcher to analyze his or her own ideas on an ongoing basis to unearth connections and look at the data in ways that had not previously been considered (Charmaz, 2006).

It is important to note that the process that Charmaz (2006) advances is not a linear one. That is, the researcher does not move from step to step in a systematic fashion. Rather, the researcher may be conducting multiple steps at once, and may move back and forth through the process until they feel confident in the direction of the research and the soundness of the data collected. Flexibility of this process allows the researcher to progressively evolve their focus, including refining and reshaping data collection methods, all the while staying open to many different analytical perspectives.

The process concludes with the construction of a grounded theory, which Charmaz (2006) defines as reaching "down to the fundamentals, up to the abstractions, and probe into the experience" (p. 135), the content of which cuts to the core of the area under examination.

Target Population and Sample

For this research, there was a target of 8-14 individuals aged 35-years-old and under, who had less than 10 years of experience in their professional career and had been the perceived target of workplace bullying. This is an appropriate sample size for the constructivist grounded theory approach. Charmaz (2006) notes that the goal when considering a sample size in constructivist grounded theory is that of saturation, rather than a large number of participants in the sample. Saturation is defined as gathering enough data to give a full picture of the topic under investigation.

Procedures

Participant Selection

Participants were recruited via social networks, both formal and informal. The study was advertised on Facebook and postings were made to Internet discussion boards (primarily via LinkedIn) directing individuals to complete a short survey with their first name, phone number,

and email address to indicate their interest. A snowball technique was also utilized, with some participants learning of the study via word of mouth and contacting the researcher directly to participate.

Protection of Participants

The researcher contacted the participant to provide additional information about the nature of the study, assure them of confidentiality, and explain that they could withdraw at any time. Potential participants were also given the chance to ask questions at this time. If they were interested in proceeding, they were asked to complete an informed consent document and return via electronic or postal mail.

Data Collection

Once informed consent was obtained, the individual was required to complete a demographic questionnaire and the Negative Acts Questionnaire - Revised (NAQ-R) to ensure they met the inclusion criteria for the study. These items were completed through a secure online survey tool that allows for the collection of confidential information. The information obtained was not utilized during data analysis.

Following confirmation that the inclusion criteria was met, the final participants were selected and moved on to the data collection stage, and participants were interviewed via phone. The confidentiality of the study was reiterated and participants were asked to be as open and transparent in their responses as they could be. They were informed that the conversation was being recorded for transcription but that their identities and the recordings would be protected.

Interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes, but lasted anywhere from 30 minutes up to 90 minutes. Charmaz (2006) notes that grounded theory utilizes an intensive interviewing process that permits in-depth exploration of the topic centered around a few broad open-ended questions

and follow-up to probe more deeply into the topic. For this study, a semi-structured interview was utilized to ensure that consistent themes were explored across the interview, but still allowing for flexibility and open discussion. The goal was to collect sufficient data to discover the process the young professionals went through when they were bullied. Participants were asked about the process they went through when they realized they were being targeted, the incidents that stood out most, and their most and least effective methods of coping with the situation. Interviews were concluded as Charmaz recommends, by allowing the participant to offer any additional information that may not have been covered in the interview. The guiding interview questions are provided in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, the recordings of the interviews were transcribed and loaded into the online tool Dedoose® for coding. Dedoose was utilized as a way of organizing the complex data in the study to efficiently allow for manual coding and analysis by the researcher. The data was coded through the four methods outlined by Charmaz (2006): initial line-by-line coding, focused coding, axial coding and theoretical coding. Following each interview, the researcher examined the transcripts through Dedoose and assigned codes to words and phrases that captured the details brought forth in the data. Each interview was grouped together by participant as the coding took place in Dedoose, allowing for code comparison between subjects. As the research progressed, focused coding was utilized to call out the most frequent and significant codes that were identified during line-by-line coding, and to begin to condense the data into a more useable way to prepare for later analysis. Next, axial coding was utilized to begin to bring the data together and develop relationships between the more focused coding. In this step, the researcher exported the focused coded data from Dedoose and manipulated it

manually utilizing a white board and sticky notes to look at the data in different ways and find connections between the codes and understand the way the categories and subcategories were interrelated. Finally, theoretical coding was utilized to integrate the data and bring more form into the codes. In this stage, the diagram in figure 1 of Chapter 4 was created as a way to visually convey how the codes identified during focused coding may relate to one another, as well as the relationships between the categories. Following the white boarding process, the researcher returned to the data in Dedoose to re-examine earlier data per Charmaz (1990), where she notes that "the grounded theory approach fosters the researcher staying on an analytical path, albeit he or she may identify a range of possible analytics paths" (p. 1166). This re-examination allowed for analysis and re-analysis in which there was confirmation of relationships between some codes. Some presumed connections were examined and found to be lacking, while others were clearly strong connections. This all developed while processing the data manually during theoretical coding.

According to Charmaz (2006), data collection is ongoing throughout the coding process, with an open possibility of collecting additional data to supplement insights discovered through a theoretical sample. Therefore, during theoretical coding an emphasis was given to examining if an additional theoretical sample was necessary to investigate new ideas that emerged from the coding process. Using the process Charmaz (2006) outlines, the researcher analyzed what comparisons existed between the data within and between the categories, what sense could be made of those comparisons and where they led, and how those comparisons illuminated the theoretical categories. Additionally, there was a focus on alternative perspectives and questioning what new conceptual relationships might exist. This process confirmed that data saturation had been achieved because the data collected no longer sparked new theoretical

insights or revealed new properties of the core theoretical categories, indicating that additional theoretical sampling was not required.

Once this was accomplished, attention turned to developing the grounded theory. The foundation provided during theoretical coding was integrated with additional memo writing to further refine the concepts, following Charmaz's (1990) analytical process regarding the research levels in the grounded theory method. The diagram, Figure 1, illustrates the process young professionals use in coping with being the target of workplace bullying.

Ethical Considerations

Several measures were taken to avoid ethical issues as the study was conducted. First, full disclosure about the research was provided to all participants, including a full description of the study, their participation in it, how the data would be managed, and emphasis that participation was voluntary and that they could opt out of participating at any time for any reason.

Additionally, to protect the participants, the exclusion criteria included that they had been removed from the workplace bullying situation for at least six months prior to being interviewed for the study.

During data analysis, all identifying factors about the participants were removed, being replaced with an alias to allow for grouping. A list of aliases was only available to the researcher. All of the electronic information gathered, including recordings and original transcripts, are stored on the researcher's computer behind a password. All electronic files were backed up on an external USB drive which was stored, along with all physical notes, memos, and consent forms, in the researcher's office in a locked filing cabinet. They will be destroyed at a later date. All of this was in compliance with and approved by Capella University's Institutional Review Board.

CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Introduction: The Study and the Researcher

This research offers a theory on how young professional cope with being a target of workplace bullying. The constructivist grounded theory approach advanced by Charmaz (2006) was utilized. Rich data was gathered from semi-structured interviews with eight participants, and analyzed utilizing the Dedoose online coding tool.

This chapter provides an overview of the researcher, including her interest in the topic of workplace bullying, the role she played in the data collection and analysis, and how she may have affected the data. Next, the sample utilized for the study and the methodology applied during analysis are discussed. Finally, the findings are presented and examined.

There was a highly personal connection between the researcher and the subject matter because the researcher was herself a target of workplace bullying as a young professional, not once but twice. The first instance came when the researcher was a doctoral student, prior to the start of the dissertation process. The bullying started, as many incidents do, with incidents that seemed so minor they barely registered on the researcher's radar. However, it escalated quickly and ended with the researcher leaving the job abruptly and in shock at what had occurred in a professional environment. The idea for this research topic was formed from a desire to understand what had happened, why, and how incidents like that could be prevented from happening to others in the future.

The second experience came during data collection for this study, which yielded both a positive and negative impact on the work. On one hand, now armed with years of research on the topic of workplace bullying, the researcher was able to quickly identify what was happening and was able to proactively plan for the moment when she would be forced out of her position either voluntarily or involuntarily, knowing that was almost always the outcome in these types of situations.

However, being a target of workplace bullying is still an extraordinarily stressful experience. Going in to work and being emotionally beaten down every day made the researcher question her own abilities. There was a very real feeling of failure as a result of finding herself in the situation again, particularly when she was in the midst of researching how to help individuals in her peer group out of exactly these types of situations. As a means of coping with the situation, the researcher made little progress on data collection for this study for some time because it was an emotional challenge to hear the stories of others in similar situations while also managing the problem personally. Ultimately, she decided to report the bullying to human resources and was subsequently forced out some months later involuntarily (though rather thankfully). The remainder of the data for the study was collected not long after this transition.

Though the researcher did fit the inclusion criteria for the study when the second incident occurred, that experience was not utilized as a part of this study. The researcher journaled throughout the experience to identify how what she was experiencing aligned with the data that had already been collected, and to identify her own inclination and bias. Though the interviews conducted following this personal experience followed the same semi-structured format as the data collected prior, it must be offered that the experience may have impacted how the researcher probed for follow-up information and how she perceived the themes and core categories during

later memo-writing and analysis. This may have been a benefit to the study, allowing for the identification of themes and categories that may have not been otherwise uncovered. However, only the transcripts from the participants were utilized to identify the themes and core categories for this study. Each theme and category was backed up directly by several of the participants, and then the analytical process of integrating insights from memos was used to further refine and develop the core categories.

Description of the Sample

A total of eight individuals participated in the study. Each individual completed a demographic questionnaire to ascertain basic information prior to being included. The average age of participants was 29-years-old at the time of the bullying incident, with the youngest being 22-years-old and the oldest being 34-years-old. Three of the participants were male, and five were female. Participants were employed in a variety of industries, though half of the participants worked for a college or university at the time of the incident. This is a reflection of how the sample evolved through snowballing – the convenience nature of the sample is not intended to reflect broader demographic realities. Table 1 outlines the demographic data for each participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participate Code	Gender	Age when bullying occurred	Primary industry	Type
1	Female	30	Information Services	For Profit
2	Female	33	Marketing	For Profit
3	Female	34	Higher Education	Nonprofit
4	Female	22	Public Radio	Nonprofit
5	Male	29	Higher Education	Nonprofit
6	Male	30	Higher Education	Nonprofit
7	Male	26	Higher Education	Nonprofit
8	Female	30	Food Services	For Profit

In addition to the information provided in the table above, each participant had earned at least a Bachelor's Degree and was a full-time employee in a professional capacity when their bullying experience occurred.

Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was carried out utilizing constructivist grounded theory as advanced by Charmaz (2006). The researcher utilized a guiding interview questionnaire to conduct semi-structured interviews with each participant to ascertain an account of their experience utilizing open-ended questions. Follow-up questions were flexible based on the responses of the participants. Participants were asked to recount their experience with workplace bullying, from the time they first recognized what was happening to them, including the memories of their experience, who they told about it, what they remember doing to cope with the

situation, what the most and least effective tactics were, how their personal and professional lives changed in the process, what they would have done differently if they were in the same situation today and what the organization should have done differently. At the end of each interview, the research concluded by asking if there were any additional questions she should have asked that she did not think to, to allow the participant an open opportunity to offer additional pertinent information.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim utilizing an external service. Transcripts were then loaded into Dedoose for coding as a way to organize the data for the coding process. The researcher proceeded through the four different types of coding described by Charmaz (2006) including initial line-by-line coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. In the initial line-by-line coding, codes were assigned to words and phrases from the transcript to note the details, actions, and meanings within the data. This stage was simply about organizing all of the data as it was presented during the interview process, without making additional determinations about the usefulness (or lack thereof) of any specific concepts. Throughout initial coding, the constant comparative method was utilized to find similarities and differences in the data by comparing each new interview to the previous interviews that had been conducted. This process kept interviews conducted over an extended period of time fresh in the mind of the researcher. Memo-writing was also utilized during this stage of coding to capture the researcher's thoughts about the data being collected, the comparisons being made, and new ideas that were coming to light. The process with memos also helped the researcher reflect to bring definition to the initial codes that were being produced, and to begin the process of raising initial codes to concepts. Memos were generally hand-written after reading each interview. Sometimes they were written spontaneously as the researcher reflected on ideas from the interviews and an

idea came to mind and other times they were written methodically as the researcher mentally processed the data in front of her. Some memos were as short as a few sentences while others were several pages in length.

Next, focused coding was utilized by selecting the more significant and/or frequent initial codes as they appeared in the initial coding, condensing the categories down, and clarifying the wording and the categorization. According to Charmaz (2006), this is the stage in which theoretical integration begins. It is when we begin to make sense of the data by scrutinizing it and defining meanings with in. Through constant comparison and memo-writing the researcher compared the data, codes, and categories across the interviews repeatedly to identify and refine the focused codes. The researcher also used memo-writing to explore the data during the process to understand the true meaning behind the ideas that were expressed by the participants, both by rereading memos that had been written after each interview during initial coding and creating new memos exploring the emerging focused codes to give them a conceptual definition and raise the code to a category, as advanced by Charmaz (2006). This resulted in 160 pages of hand-written memos between initial and focused coding. Integrating memos at this stage ensured that even if the participants were using different words during their interviews, what they were describing was a consistent experience which could be identified as a category, with sub-categories that explored the greater nuance. For example, the concept of seeking emotional support as a coping mechanism for workplace bullying began as an initial code. Through the focused coding process, it became a category with several varying codes defining the nuance of the experience of seeking emotional support, including co-workers recognizing the bullying, social support as a benefit, social support as problematic, and a lack of social support.

The result of the focused coding process was that the most significant and/or frequent categories were identified. They included job insecurity, acknowledging they are one of many individuals who have been targets, stress and burnout, creating documentation, filing a grievance, HR and leadership are unsupportive, bully as a known entity, productivity decreasing, seeking emotional support, and turning to one's own wellness and work/life balance.

Following the focused coding process, the researcher examined the data to determine if an additional theoretical sample was required to supplement the existing dataset. Charmaz (2006) states that "theoretical sampling prompts you to retrace your steps or take a new path when you have some tentative categories and emerging, but incomplete ideas" (p. 96) and it used when categories are "intriguing, but thin" (p. 96). Through analysis and memo-writing, the researcher did find that new ideas emerged during the focused coding process that are worthy of future exploration with regards to workplace bullying, its impact and outcomes, as detailed in Chapter 5. However, none of those ideas related to the research question at hand: How do young professionals describe their process of coping with being the target of workplace bullying? Instead, they related to other aspects of the bullying experience that were not directly applicable to the coping process.

In regard to the focused codes related to the description of coping, the data was clear, consistent, and substantive with at least 6 out of the 8 participants experiencing every code that was identified during the focused coding process as being frequent and/or significant. This is subsequently illustrated in Table 2. Additionally, through memo-writing the researcher followed the process outlined by Charmaz (2006) to explore the comparisons that existed in the data within and between categories, what sense could be made of them, if they led in any new and interesting directions, and what alternative perspectives and conceptual relationships might exist.

This process confirmed the data was not sparking new insights or revealing new properties of the focused codes. Instead, it was confirming what had already been found. Based on this analysis, it was determined that a theoretical sample was not required following focused coding.

Following focused coding, axial coding was applied to relate the categories into more over-arching core categories and begin to bring the data together. As applied by Charmaz (2006), axial coding is used to develop subcategories of bigger core categories and to show links between them in an effort to further explore the experiences that the categories represent and further make sense of the data. In this stage, memos written during focused coding were sorted by hand by writing the titles of each on sticky notes and plastering them on a white board to experiment with different arrangements. Ultimately, the categories identified during focused coding were grouped together into three core categories.

Theoretical coding was utilized to fully integrate the concepts and develop a deeper understanding of the core categories and relationships between these categories. According to Charmaz (2006), this is the point in which the researcher moves the analytics story in a theoretical direction. Memos that had been gathered were reviewed again with a specific focus on theoretical perspectives.

Ultimately there were three core categories, effectively creating a new core category structure with underlying subcategories. The core categories are the over-arching broad experiences each participant experienced: Acknowledgement and confirmation, seeking official support, and emotion-focused coping. Those core categories are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Core Categories

Core Categories	Participants							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Acknowledgement and Confirmation								
Job Insecurity	X		X		X	X	X	X
Acknowledging they are one of many	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Stress and burnout	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Seeking Official Support								
Creating documentation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Filing a grievance	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
HR and leadership are unsupportive	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bully a known entity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Emotion-Focused Coping								
Productivity decreases	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Seeking emotional support	X		X	X	X	X		X
Turning to work/life balance	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

It should be noted that overall, the coding process was ongoing as the interviews were being conducted. Concepts and categories were analyzed throughout the interview process, which continued until data saturation was achieved. In *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (2006*)*, Charmaz defines data saturation as "categories are 'saturated' when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories" (p. 113). In this study, data

saturation was confirmed by reviewing all major and sub-categories to ensure they were experienced by the majority of the participants in the study; and that no further themes or core concepts were being identified in the course of the interviews that necessitated further investigation in the form of an additional theoretical sample. These two factors met the data saturation threshold outlined by Charmaz.

Following theoretical coding and assurance of data saturation the next step was drafting a diagram of the process. A diagram was drafted and refined through a final analytical process. The diagram is presented in Figure 1 at the end of this chapter. This illustrates the overarching results created to sum up the process of the participants in this study in coping with being a target of workplace bullying.

Presentation of the Data and Results of the Analysis

The process that the participants went through in coping with the bullying they experienced was complex, and not always linear. However, there was consistency in parts of the experience based on the interviews: Acknowledgement and confirmation, seeking official support, and conclusion of the bullying.

Acknowledgement and Confirmation

During the acknowledgement and confirmation stage, the target recognizes the bullying behavior as out of the ordinary, begins to feel job insecurity and may experience stress and burnout. They also observe they are not the only individual being targeted, mitigating the immediate impact. Emotion-focused coping tactics such as avoidance and seeking emotional support from trusted co-workers are also utilized.

Job insecurity. The moment of recognition of workplace bullying vary by participant. However, one commonality is that recognition came when several participants experienced

insecurity about their job, worrying that their employment was in jeopardy. Said participant 1:

> We had some personality conflicts and he really sort of made me feel at all times like my job was in jeopardy...I said, "Okay, but you're restructuring and my position no longer exists. What happens if I'm not the best person for that new role that you're hiring in?" He said, "Just do what you do and that's all you need to worry about." I decided that that was basically his coming in saying he was looking for a way to fire me.

Participant 6 noted an overt threat to their job: "She outright told me she wanted me fired…We essentially yelled at each other and she point blank told me [that] the president didn't like me and didn't want me there."

Participant 7 experienced the threat even more publicly: "[There was] pretty open hostility. He stood up in front of the president of the university after I switched positions, and demanded I be fired, in public."

Other participants reported worrying about their jobs even without the direct threat of termination. Participant 5 recalls "It's like I felt like I was walking on eggshells and any little thing could have resulted in my being terminated." Participant 3 explains that worry was constant, albeit not a helpful method of coping:

> I don't think the worrying was coping or helpful but that's what I felt like I did the most. I worried about stuff. Is she mad at me? I'm going to get fired…It just fed into what she wanted to happen.

Acknowledging they're one of many. There was one common theme that existed across all eight interviews: Each target knew they were not the only ones in the organization that had experienced bullying. For Participant 3, this acknowledgement occurred almost immediately upon starting the position:

> My supervisor was very manipulative right from the get. She would play us off of each other like a bad parent. It was just really strange…One week someone was a super star and someone else was getting ridiculed then the next week it would switch. People started to say, I can't take this anymore I'm going to leave or I'm going to consult or I'm going to do whatever.

But knowing this reality, in a strange way, brought Participant 3 comfort: "Being able to talk to them and counsel them and hear what was happening and know my horribleness was slightly less than theirs was helpful."

Participant 5 had a similar experience, which allowed him to somewhat detach as the bullying occurred:

> My coworkers, I would say, all of them had experienced that. I don't think it was anything necessarily with me and her…We were in a staff meeting and she just unleashed on one of the staff members. Belittling her. She [didn't] say, "You're stupid." But it was like, "Why didn't you follow my instructions exactly? Why didn't you do it this way?" This person has records of her literally saying the exact opposite in an email. It was like she was always right and we were always wrong and if she was even contradicted, you were risking a blow up. I know for a fact it wasn't just me.

For Participant 7, the bully was such a known entity that he would make regular trips to the human resources office to account for false reports against him. The reports were so frequent and pervasive that they were just seen as part of the process:

> I was on central campus's office meeting with them a few times about reporting things that were blatantly illegal, or answering false reports against me. I wasn't at work for three weeks, and my boss was covering, and there was all kind of bullshit that he would

pull on me, and my boss. It wasn't just me. Basically anybody that he viewed as administration he was trying to bully out. I spent a lot of time dealing with various authorities and filing reports, and all that other BS.

Participant 1 may have been one of the earlier targets in her organization, but she eventually became a sounding board for others:

I think other people were having problems with him as well so when I was in the office people would come into my office and ask me. At that point I didn't care, I wanted to get fired so my response is, "Yeah, he hasn't been a great boss to me and I don't really think he's that great for the organization."

Stress and burnout. As the situations dragged on, participants reported intense feelings of stress and burnout. Some participants labeled this as shutting down. From Participant 8: "I would just shut down. I wouldn't speak, which isn't, in hindsight, the best thing to do."

Participant 1 utilized similar language:

He kept yelling at me until I was hysterical crying. And, I'm not a crier, I'm a pretty tough chick. I was hysterically crying and he ended the conversation by saying, "And I don't want to deal with any crybabies either," I kind of shut down, I didn't really know what to do.

Participant 2 reported an emotional breakdown when she reported the bullying to HR:

I think I cried. Which is not much like me usually...When I was telling her what he said, I did not make eye contact with her intentionally. I even told her, "I'm going to look over here so that I'm not saying this directly to you."

Participant 4 shared a similar experience when being confronted by the bully: "I was crying because he was so upset with me and it was really one of my first business-place

conflicts."

And multiple participants identified burnout specifically as a long-term consequence of their environment. Recalls Participant 6, "I can tell you the emotional toll was I'd go home and sometimes I'd just sleep after work. I'd be so emotionally burned out...I'd go home from work crying sometimes. I was angry all the time."

Participant 5 concurred:

> I can't tell if it was the experience with her, or just not being interested, but it makes logical sense that those things where you feel burn out in your job make your work environment way more stressful. So, you're in a trap. I would think that would contribute to the burn out.

Seeking Official Support

Once they identified the severity of their situations, every participant in the study engaged in some form of problem-focused coping. The primary methods utilized were creating documentation, going to human resources, or speaking to someone in a leadership role in the organization who outranked the bully. However, when official organizational support was sought, little help or support was provided for all but one participant.

Creating documentation. Several participants reported documenting the negative incidents as they occurred, through notes, journals, emails, and files. Said Participant 2, "I did make a report, I made a record, I kept notes on what had happened. Mostly to cover my own butt…After it happened I went and wrote it down and then I reported it."

Participant 6 was a part of the employee union, and created documentation in the event that he was let go to be able to fight the case later: "Just kept notes to the file when I was not treated well. Everything by email, record everything, just prepare for what I thought was the

inevitable time when I'd have to take them to the labor board."

Participant 5 was actually encouraged to create documentation by his human resources department:

> I actually did go to HR… maybe a year into it I think. I was told they can't do anything and that I needed to document it in case I wanted to make a legitimate big time claim against this person. So, I have extensive documentation on negative interactions that I've had with her that I would say are either bullying or just being nasty.

Filing a grievance. Participant 5 was not the only one to actively seek support from human resources. When Participant 2 reported her bully to HR, she was told the situation would be addressed: "After it happened I went and wrote it down and then I reported it. Then the HR person was very nice, in terms of, 'He should not have said that. That was inappropriate. Blah, blah, blah. We will address this.'" Participant 6 told a similar story: "I talked to a friend of mine who was working in HR at the time. He wasn't surprised because he had seen other people come to HR with similar complaints."

HR and leadership are unsupportive. However, participants were rarely satisfied with the response they received from the organization. When after Participant 2 reported her incident, she received a lackluster apology:

> A couple of weeks later she came back to me and said she had talked to some of the people in the room. I don't know if she went to all of them. Essentially they had heard the same thing and that she had also reached out to the person in question. He had written an apology. She read the apology to me and then, essentially, that was that…The apology was ridiculous, I will just as an aside add, because it was a, "I'm sorry if I upset you," kind of an apology… Given that there was no resolution from either him or the

organization, really, I guess they pursued it as they thought was appropriate so as not to get sued, but that's the extent to which they went.

Participant 7's situation was the most serious – he received a death threat in his mailbox against his wife. When the researcher asked if it was reported, he replied, "To HR and the police…nobody takes it seriously there. Everybody knew who was doing it. HR just brushed it off and said 'Don't worry about it. It's anonymous." Nobody wanted to take a look at anything that would be in union politics."

In a unique situation, Participant 6's mother was the Director of Human Resources at his organization. When the researcher asked if she knew what was going on, he replied: "Oh, no. She knew. She hated seeing it. Essentially, she had to stand by and be a professional and watch her grown child be bullied…I mean, as you know, HR works for the company, not for the employee."

There was one exception to this theme. Participant 1 reported that going to HR was the best decision she made:

> I went to HR and so HR said "the good news is…you guys are telling us the exact same story word for word so that's clearly how it happened. It's also clearly not okay." HR scheduled a meeting between him and me for an hour and a half, he sat down and apologized and gave a raise. Then he was made to receive coaching once a week from then on.

For many participants, HR was not their only stop. They also sought help from those who were higher ranked in the organization outside of HR, with lackluster results. Participant 4, whose bully was not someone who was in her direct reporting line, reported the incident to her boss:

> I went to my supervisor about it because the individual who was the supervisor of the [bully's] team at the time had reached out to her… Unfortunately, I didn't feel like she had my back…The next day we had a talk and I presented the staff manual and all these things that I felt, and she heard me for sure. But the conversation that she had initially agreed to mediate between myself and the supervisor…She ended up not mediating it, she just brought us in the room and left.

Participant 5 had a conversation with his bully's boss when the bully was out of town, and the bullying was chalked up to her simply being a little more direct than what they were used to:

> We talked for two hours in office at his desk. I think he diagnosed the meetings she had with us as "she's from New York and she has that New York brashness thing going on"....I can certainly talk to him fairly frequently so it wasn't anything like I didn't feel listened to or anything like that. I don't know if any action was taken or I haven't seen if any action was taken so that's kind of my only frustration with the conversation.

And for Participant 6, the Dean (his bully's boss), directly acknowledged the bullying but did not want to jump into a political mess: "I told the Dean. We had talked about it, and he recognized some of it. There was only so far he could go in acknowledging it politically, because he was a dean."

Bully a known entity. Ultimately, there was an acknowledgement by every participant in the study that the bully was a known entity in the organization and there had been a conscious decision made by leadership not to do anything about it. Said Participant 3:

> I know that people have left and told HR plenty of things in their exit interview. That doesn't do anything. It just seems to be typical. You're leaving so you're just

> disgruntled…They don't care. It's the whole, you're an employee at will. Take it or leave it. Somebody's going to want to work here bad enough that they're going to deal with it. I just know this is widespread issue that people know about. Like I said, people [in the organization] who you work for. [They ask] How's that going? How do you deal with that? How are you doing? People automatically know it's got to be rough for you.

Participant 4 corroborated this experience: "I also think that, sadly so, there was a lot of, 'Yeah, that's how that person is and I know because XYZ has happened to me with them, same exact behavior.'"

Participant 5 remembered that several of his co-workers reported the same person for bullying behaviors and there was a direct acknowledgement that the organization was not going to do anything to help, saying they needed to work it out for themselves:

> I know from talking to other coworkers, someone else who pursued things, that there at least three people in that office who said they tried to talk about her and some of them don't work there anymore. There was one, the one that was getting berated in that staff meeting, has reported within the last year and has told me that there was no follow up whatsoever. [Leadership] said, 'Well maybe we could have a conference." And haven't done anything since then. That same boss that had spoken with several of us said, "The reality is we're not getting rid of her or you so you all need to work this out."

This lack of action when bullying is witnessed, documented, and reported to multiple individuals in HR and leadership positions impacts the targets state of mind. Once the targets came to the realization of what was going on, many experienced a profound state of disappointment, particularly when they had once perceived their job as a long-term career option. Participant 4 reported: "I was also one of the people who came in with an expressed passion for

this nonprofit's vision and mission, as opposed to it just being a job. This was my career path and I was really, really passionate about the work…It was so depressing…Then I would say [there was] a lot of frustration and anger. A lot of it."

Participant 3 reported similar feelings:

> [A colleague and I] sat down and were like I thought I was going to be here forever but I can tell right now this is not right…From just a working environment things weren't really managed well. Then watching how people were treated it made it 10 times worse because you can deal with one or the other I think but when they're together it's really hard to stand for.

Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused strategies were utilized throughout the bullying experience to manage stress levels, but were increased for most participants after their attempts to gain help from HR and leadership were unsuccessful. Participants would employ multiple strategies simultaneously, including reducing their effort and decreasing their productivity at work, seeking social support, finding a better work/life balance.

Productivity decreases. Prior to being a target of workplace bullying, many of the participants self-reported that they were high achievers, priding themselves on their performance. However, many reported that their levels of productivity, motivation and creativity decreased as a result of the stress they were feeling in their working environment. Participant 1 reported:

> I basically didn't do my job for two months. I did it to the bare minimum and I looked for other work. I literally just shut down; thought about being a stay-at-home mom… It was very clear, my productivity, my production, there was a stark difference from the day before I shut down to the day after and that was easily seen. There was also a stark

difference starting the day he left and that was very, very clear to people around me. I'm a hard worker and I'm result oriented and I wasn't and the numbers showed it.

Participant 3 reported a similar loss in proactive strategic planning, opting instead to just do things as they came up without putting in much additional effort for long-term work:

> I stopped being proactive, I think. I knew that I wasn't going to be able to do stuff. It just became very random. The work itself…became strictly random because it was PR based and just fly by whatever's happening. Also it was like, this isn't going to be a forever place so what do I do? Do I try harder? Do I try less? Do I consider other options? What do I do? I think it definitely made me less proactive.

Several other participants reported a similar approach to their work, simply doing as they were told to keep the bullying at bay, without offering additional options or solutions. Said Participant 6: "I tried to find ways to just make it work. Give her what she wanted, nothing more, nothing less."

Participant 7 was advised to take this approach with his bully by his boss, who was aware of the situation but could not do anything about it since HR and the organization would not address it: "That was my advice by my manager, because that's what he had to do, was just stay under the radar. Don't offer to do anything extra. Just do what you're told, and disappear."

Participant 5 reported being rewarded for this type of behavior: "I basically did whatever she said. That was my survival method and here's the crazy thing, she had worked to get me promotions and I think that's the reason. She viewed me as compliant." He also reported that his creativity suffered as a result: "I think the creativity is what suffers the most whenever you feel like you're on pins and needles and everything's a catastrophe because it's just exhausting."

Seeking emotional support. Seeking emotional support was a natural activity for targets to engage in as a coping mechanism. Seeking support from their peers was something that participants engaged in throughout the ordeal, but picked up steam after it became clear that the organization would not support them.

Participant 4 reported it being one of the first things she did:

> The first thing I did to cope...there were other colleagues within the organization who I knew were positive people and supportive people. I quickly started forming a posse within the organization of people who I not only felt professionally comfortable, but felt socially comfortable with. I knew it would support me and give me that honest supportive feedback that I might need to see the situation different, a little more clearly, or from someone else's perspective.

When asked if she discussed the bullying with her co-workers, Participant 3 reported "All the time. That was my counseling. People would say, you don't get it as bad as everybody else. I'm like, that doesn't mean I don't get it and it doesn't bother me."

Participant 8 notes that her co-workers enjoyed each other's company when the boss was nowhere in sight: "Being able to still laugh and talk to my coworkers was definitely helpful, because when he wasn't there it did feel like a very safe, open environment."

However, when the social support descended into a group of people wallowing in the toxic situation, participants reported these social circles had a negative impact on their stress levels, rather than as a positive form of coping. Participant 3 reported that hearing about what was happening to other people made her want to fix it: "I've always had issues taking on other people's problems and wanting to solve other people's problems instead of just using 'I' phrases. I wanted to fix it for everyone."

Participant 4 took proactive steps not to engage in these types of discussions:

> Other things that weren't effective were bitch sessions, particularly ones that go on for a really long time behind closed doors. I actually ended up…I've never had an office with a door and I had the opportunity to get one and had some clarity about it before that and said I don't want an office door. I don't feel comfortable that people think they can come in and sit down and shut the door and just bitch for an hour. I think, ironically, that ended up being one of the best things I chose to do. There was certainly a time when I realized that going to get coffee for an hour and just complaining is not productive and is even more emotionally draining.

Participant 5 echoed this sentiment, noting that camaraderie can even have drawbacks when everyone is experiencing the same negative behaviors:

> I do think developing comradery with your other coworkers like that felt really good. We joked about that before. It is a healthy thing, but I also think looking back now…I just think that almost doesn't help. You have a comradery but it's like, going into work and complaining all day isn't really a helpful strategy. I think maybe talk about it once and let it go.

Turning to work/life balance. One of the most helpful coping measures employed by the participants was bringing more balance into their lives. Many participants sought to reduce their stress levels by setting boundaries, pursuing activities outside of work, spending more time with family, or working out. Participant 1 noted finding extra time during the day for friends: "I felt much more comfortable going out and getting lunch with my friends on certain days. So, my personal life was okay."

Participant 3 made sure to own her boundaries:

> Having my own boundaries definitely helped. When everybody's experiencing the same type of hardship then it made you feel better and being able to counsel people made me feel better because they were like, you don't get it as bad as everyone else. I was like, that's because I have boundaries. I still get it. I tried not to let it get to me as much by having the boundaries.

Participant 8 revisited teaching she had done previously as an outlet: "I sought other avenues for creativity. I was seeking out different places where I could teach people about chocolate, or, I did classes at the Y. I did volunteer stuff and I looked for more dance teaching hours so that I could fill up my free time."

And Participant 4 made sure to keep an eye on her physical health:

> I would say the last thing [I did that was helpful] was keeping my eye on the prize, in terms of my physical health. I think that is so easy to forget and taking that 15-minute walk every day or working out or eating well…it's just a really under-valued part of American culture in general. It can certainly go a long way to making a bad day a little bit less bad.

Conclusion of the Bullying

Ultimately, all of the participants in the research ended up leaving their employment with their respective organizations. Three were fired from their positions after reporting the bullying, three left voluntarily to escape the bullying, and two outlasted the bully in the organization but left at a later date (though one subsequently returned to a different job). Several participants did report their learning from the situation for next time. Said Participant 1, who felt supported when she reported her bullying to HR and outlasted her bully in the organization:

> I'm a much more confident. I think it comes with age and maturity and having been

through this situation before. I have a better understanding of my value to the company now. I know that if I were quit tomorrow, it'd be a bigger loss to the company than it would be for me at this point so I would be willing to say, “Look, the way you're treating me is not acceptable. It shouldn't be acceptable to the company, it's not acceptable to me.” I would go to HR and I would be much more willing stand up for myself from the get go.

Participant 2, who lost her job shortly after reporting the bullying, differed from this perspective:

I feel like what I learned from this instance was that HR is much more concerned about legal repercussions than the health and safety of their employees. I'm still not sure I would report such an incident again. It would be a hard decision given how poorly that was managed and its effect on me and what I suspect may have happened. Which was it led to me being laid off. It would be a super hard decision for me. Maybe I need to make friends with the HR folks. I don't even know what a better ... how I can trust an organization again. Because I was pretty naïve in thinking that reporting to HR is the appropriate thing to do and would get what I needed out of it…[What I and everyone else] that was being bullied by this person needed, and hopefully get that person out of the organization.

Finally, Participant 4 noted she learned a lot about what the professional workplace looks like, and it’s not what it seems on TV and took away a valuable lesson about people for the future:

I definitely had that bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, pencil skirts and heels everyday view of what an office was going to be like. It was like all cute notebooks and crushing meetings

and going out for Starbucks. I learned really quickly it was like, it's more like The Office television show meets WWE wrestling. It's not like that at all. I think it definitely, fairly and necessarily, took out some of that naiveté. That definitely would've happened I think anywhere, but I think that the most difficult part for me was realizing that being in a professional workplace doesn't just automatically bring on professional behavior. Not everyone has a natural innate leadership style or clear call to action for the organization they're working for. Not everyone is there because they believe in the mission or the company's goals. It was just really demoralizing to feel like I had to go back to 7th grade and try to negotiate the people 90% of the time, that's 90% of emotional energy in professional workplace for me at this point. That has actually been one of the most bittersweet rewards is that I now consider myself a really adept people person.

The lessons that each took away were different. Yet, each reflection indicated a realization that helped the individual grow in terms of their understanding of the realities of the workplace, and in their perception of their role in it. Their lessons learned were a reflection of the outcome of their experience. Since Participant 1 was one of the few to outlast the bully in the organization, it makes sense that her insight was an affirmation of confidence and in taking proactive action. Conversely, Participants 2 and 4's reflections leaned more toward losing some of their youthful naiveté about the professional workplace.

Summary

Given the long-term nature of the situations each participant found themselves in, the nature of their experiences was not always linear. However, there were distinct linear milestones that were similar across interviews. First came the recognition and acceptance that what they were experiencing went beyond normal unpleasant office behaviors, leading to feeling a lack of

security. However, this was almost always coupled with an acknowledgement that they are not the only person being targeted in the organization, which temporarily mitigated the impact of the bullying. During this stage, participants mainly tried to avoid interactions with the bully, and sought support from co-workers.

Eventually, the experience of the participants intensified to the point that they felt compelled to seek official support from HR and others in leadership positions. In one instance in this study, this resulted in positive changes for the participant, who felt supported by the organization when they required the bully to receive coaching for their behaviors. The bully left his position voluntarily not long afterwards. The situation was resolved with the participant feeling an increased sense of confidence from the outcome.

However, in seven out of the eight interviews, HR and leadership were unsupportive of the target when it was reported through official channels. This was usually coupled with an explanation of "that's just how he/she is," unofficially condoning the behaviors of the bully and confirming an organizational awareness that the participant was not the only target of the bully. At this point, fixing the problem seemed hopeless to the target and they discontinued problem-focused coping strategies. They focused their energy exclusively on emotion-focused coping strategies, such as continued social support from others who were aware of or were experiencing a similar problem, and a greater focus on work/life balance to mitigate the impact of the situation. During this phase, they reported that their productivity, quality of work, and motivation also suffered, with participants noting they would do the bare minimum to get by.

Unlike in previous studies outlined in the literature review, the research did not find a return to problem-focused coping after the initial lackluster reaction from leadership, indicating that young professionals may give up hope for a solution to the problem more quickly than

workers with more experience. Since they perceived a lack of solution to their situation, the emotion-focused coping phase lasted until the problem was concluded, with either the bully or the target leaving the organization.

Figure 1 on the following page illustrates this process and outcomes based on the results of the interviews conducted in this study along with integration of insights from memos that were written throughout the analysis process.

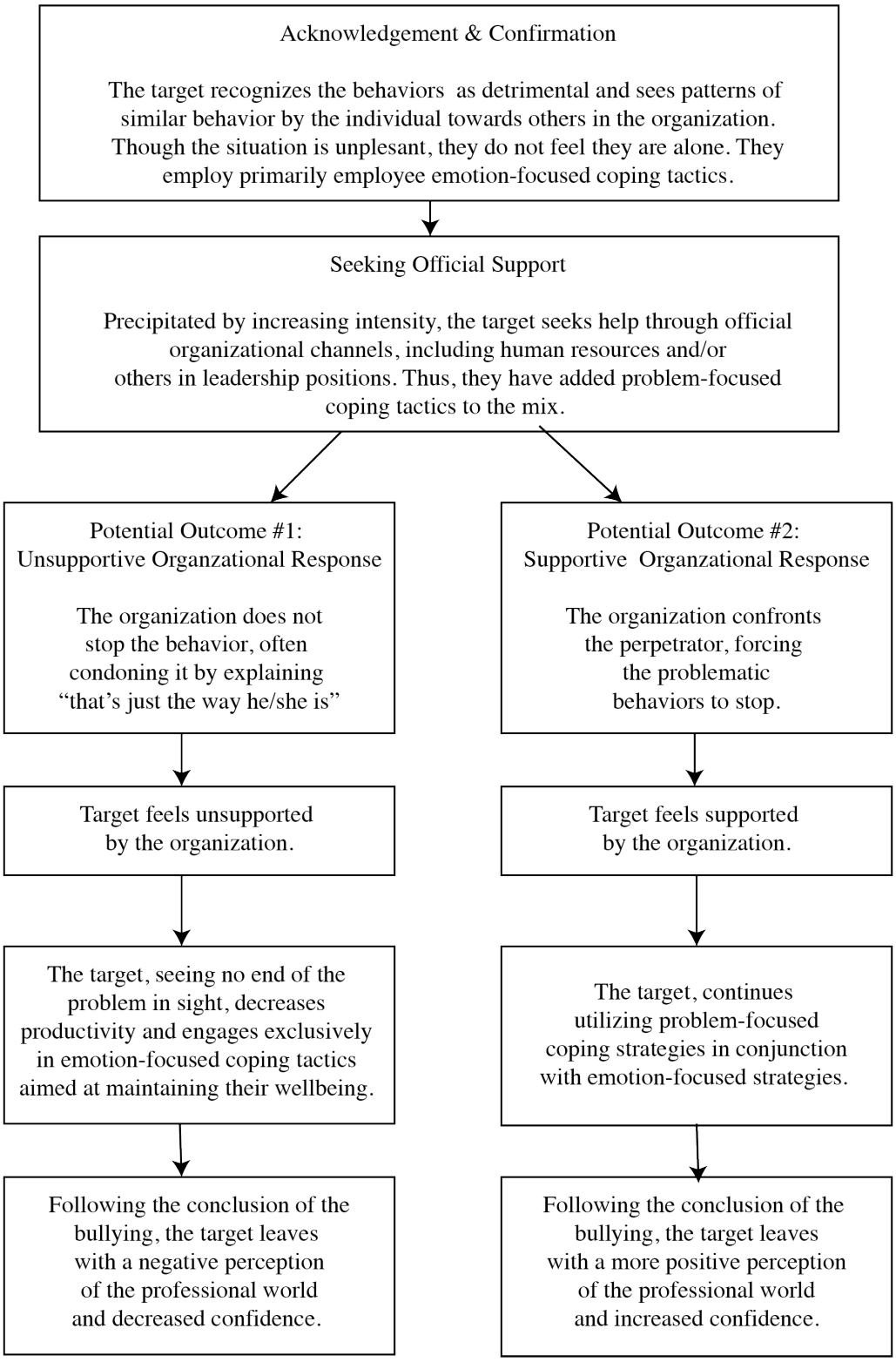

Figure 1. The process of young professionals coping with workplace bullying.

In summary, Chapter 4 discusses the tactics that the young professionals in this study used to cope with being the target of workplace bullying. Following recognition of the bullying and official reports to human resources and others in leadership positions, the finding show the tactics participants employed was ultimately dependent on the perceived response of the organization once the bullying occurred. If the target felt supported by the organization, they continued to engage in problem-focused coping tactics and had a more positive outcome following the conclusion of the bullying, including increased confidence. The experience may have been negative but overall, the system worked and came to their aid. However, if the target felt unsupported by the organization, they would forgo further problem-focused coping tactics and focus solely on emotion-focused coping until the bullying concluded. Afterwards, those targets had a more negative outcome, including decreased confidence and a more negative perception of the professional world. They perceived the system to have failed them and would be reluctant to report future incidents through official organizational channels.

Chapter 5 will discuss these results and offer additional analysis within the greater context of the broader landscape of research in this area.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Results

The purpose of this research was to understand how young professionals cope with being the target of workplace bullying. Though each of the individuals who participated in the study were in unique working situations, the research uncovered distinct and pronounced core categories that occurred across their diverse circumstances. Almost all instances began with an acknowledgement of the severity of the problem, followed by a realization that they were not the only person being targeted by the perpetrator – the bully was a known entity in the organization who had targeted others before. This realization occurred through individual observation of this person's behavior, or through social channels in the organization that the target utilized for support. This acknowledgement granted the participant a temporary reprieve of sorts, since he or she did not feel completely alone and were able to acknowledge that they were not the cause of the problem, but rather a target of it.

As time went on, the situation would become more unbearable and eventually lead the target to report the behavior through official channels to human resources or another person in a more senior leadership role. In one case examined in this study, this produced positive results with the target feeling supported by the organization, and ultimately a positive conclusion. However, in the remaining seven cases, the organizations were perceived to be unresponsive to the target's concerns, even when clear evidence and documentation were provided to back up their claims. In many cases, leaders within the organization acknowledged that the perpetrator's

behaviors were a known problem and hardly an isolated incident. Still, they were behaviors that the organization was not going to dedicate energy to stopping, leaving current and future targets vulnerable to attack. In these instances, the targets were left feeling unsupported by the organization.

The targets seeking official support from the organization can only be constructed as a problem-focused coping tactic – they are making an active effort to rid themselves of the bullying behavior. At this point, the organizational response dictated what happened next. If the target felt supported by the organization, they would generally continue to engage in problem-focused coping tactics. However, if the target did not feel supported by the organization, the participants in this study discarded problem-focused coping tactics entirely. When it became clear their organization was not interested in helping them to solve the problem, the targets looked inwardly to mitigate the impact of the stress they were experiencing. They begin to lose motivation for their day-to-day work. As a result, their productivity and quality of work decreased. Their detachment from their work continued when they begin to place a greater emphasis on finding emotional support from trusted colleagues, and on life outside of the organization to reduce their stress levels. The target stayed in this stage until the bullying concluded. In the case of participants in this study, that meant that either the target or the bully left the organization. In five of the eight interviews, the exit of the target or the bully from the organization was voluntary. However, in three of the eight cases, the target was involuntarily terminated from their position after reporting the bullying through official channels.

Finally, the way the organization responds to official reports also impacts how the target views the professional working world in general. When the organization was supportive, the target left the incident with an increased sense of confidence in themselves and organizational

leadership. However, when the organization was perceived to do nothing to help the target solve the problem, it left a sour taste in their mouth about the realities of the professional world, making them less likely to trust organizational leadership in the future, specifically human resources offices.

Discussion of the Results

The results of this study indicate not only an impact on the individuals who are targets of workplace bullying, but also an impact on the organizations the bullying occurs in. Psychologists may be more interested in the former, since it impacts the emotional health of the individual targets. However, business leaders will likely take greater interest in the latter since it draws a direct line between the acts of workplace bullying and bottom line business results.

One of the most interesting results in this study is that the outcome for the participants was most influenced by the official response of the organization once the bullying was reported. In the one instance where the HR representative took measures to address the situation, the outcome for the participant was positive, including outlasting the bully in the organization and experiencing increased confidence from the ordeal – she knew that if she faced something like this in the future, she would be able to navigate it effectively. However, in all other cases examined in this inquiry, the organization allowed the bullying to continue. As a result, the target had a much more negative outcome.

Unfortunately, these results are not unsurprising. Research has been telling us for years that the most likely outcome in these situations is that management and human resources will not help the target, may actually come to the aid of the perpetrator (Namie, 2014), and that the only way out of being bullied in an organization for most targets is to leave their jobs voluntarily or wait to be fired (Namie & Namie, 2009). The emotional problems this lack of support results in

for the target are serious and can ultimately lead to more complex health problems if not mitigated (Djurkovic et al., 2004; Lee, 2000; Namie, 2012; Wiedmer, 2010).

When the study commenced, it was expected that the process that young professionals go through when coping with a workplace bullying situation would be distinct from more seasoned professionals due to their lack of experience. The results supported this, though not in the way that was expected. Previous research into broader groups indicated that targets were likely to waffle back and forth between problem-focused strategies and emotion-focused strategies through the ordeal (Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004). Though it was hypothesized at the outset that young professionals would place a greater emphasis on emotion-focused strategies, the researcher did not expect the emphasis to be as strong as it was. In the course of the whole experience, relatively little attention was paid to problem-focused strategies. After one assertive attempt at reporting the problem to HR and leadership, which was most often rebuffed, targets seemed to accept their fate. After seeing clearly that the organization was not going to come to their rescue, they simply shut down and did not attempt problem-focused efforts in earnest again. This continued until the ultimate conclusion of the problem, which usually resulted in the target exiting the organization. This, too, aligns with previous findings that leaving the organization entirely is the best way to solve the problem (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010), with targets from previous studies wishing they had made their move sooner.

Though the impact of workplace bullying on the businesses it occurred in was not the primary subject of inquiry, the unexpected results are worth noting. Participants consistently reported that their productivity and the quality of their work suffered because of the bullying, particularly after reports of it to HR and other in leadership positions went unheeded. Participant productivity or work quality was not measured directly but is rather assessed through self-report

during the interviews. However, this does align with previous research finding that the act of being a target of workplace bullying depletes individual energy and internal resources, resulting in emotional exhaustion (Tucky & Neall, 2014), links between productivity and psychological well-being (Donald et al., 2005), along with many studies indicating a link between stress and reduced productivity (Cincotta, 2005; Eagan & Garvey, 2015; Gies, 2011; Paras, 2008). When someone is emotionally exhausted, it is not possible for them to be producing their best work. This in itself implies that the cost of workplace bullying has a direct result on the bottom line. It is not possible to know the cost of lost productivity and opportunity in this study, but one can estimate the significant overall costs per year if just a handful of employees are under-performing as a result of being targeted by toxic individuals within the organization. This makes proactively responding to reports of workplace bullying not just an ethical imperative, but also a fiscally responsible one.

Conclusions Based on the Results

In looking at the results, one of the most surprising aspects was how easily the targets abandoned problem-focused strategies. One may be quick to blame generational differences for the quick abandonment of proactive strategies, assuming that giving up easily when the going gets rough due to an overly indulged childhood is simply one of the defining characteristics of those in the Millennials generation, of which many participants are a part (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). There may be some truth to this. In their research regarding how Millennials handle stress in college, Bland, Melton, Welle, and Bigham (2012) found their participants had not developed adequate coping mechanisms for reducing stress, leading to a lower stress tolerance. Also, the very act of being a target of workplace bullying runs directly counter to the values that

Millennials hold most dear at work: Interesting work, achievement, job security, and co-workers they enjoy (Kuron, Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng, 2015).

But this seems to require an assumption about the participants that may not be altogether correct. Did the participants in this study really give up on problem-focused tactics that easily? Or was the stressed caused by the situation already too great to continue to handle in a problem-focused way? Looking back at Selye's work (1950), we know that the body has a finite amount of resources when it comes to coping with the physical consequences of emotional stress. It is not an out-of-this-world assumption to think the targets may have been in their situations for longer than even they realized. Given their inexperience, and the tendency of workplace bullying to begin as things that seem rather trivial in nature (D'Cruz & Noroha, 2010; Lewis, 2006), it may be that the bullying has been occurring for significantly longer period of time than was reported, only coming to the point of recognition when things began to reach the more extreme end of the spectrum. In other words, by the time they notice it, it is already pretty bad and has likely resulted in unacknowledged stress for an extended period of time. When it is finally reported, it is easy to see why pushback from someone in human resources or a senior leadership position would make the problem seem instantly unsurmountable; they simply do not have the resources left to fight.

Additionally, it is not a stretch to believe that through the course of the bullying, the experience eroded their self-efficacy. Tuckey and Neall (2014) found that the experience of being targeted reduces the ability of individuals to pull from their internal resources, which is sped up when there is emotional exhaustion or burnout. Given that the individuals in this study reported increased stress and burnout through lethargy, crying at work, and "shutting down", it is likely that by the time they filed their official grievance, it was truly a last resort. When it was

met with a perceived lack of organizational support in response, it crushed their belief in their ability to rid themselves of the problem. Donovan and Williams (2003) note that the size of the difference between one's goal and their present reality directly contributes to whether effort towards that goal is maintained. With the leadership of their organization seeming to organize against them, it is no wonder the efforts of the participants in this study to rid themselves of workplace bullying were abandoned.

Even if they did want to continue to fight after being turned away by leadership and HR, and had the resources to do so, they may not know how to do so. Recall back to the work of Hertel et al. (2015) in Chapter 2, which found that younger workers are more likely to engage in emotion-focused techniques because workers develop greater problem-focused coping techniques as they age and gain workplace experience. At this stage in their career, young professionals not developed the skills to navigate difficult interpersonal situations, particularly if they had been turned away by those whose responsibility it is to help them. It is easy to see this from their point of view. After all, who else would they be able to turn to in the organization for help, particularly if the bullying were coming from their supervisor. This is Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) very definition of the cause of emotion-focused coping – when a person has determined that the problem is outside of their control and nothing can be done to change it.

It was particularly striking that after approaches to HR and organizational leadership were unsuccessful, targets were less likely to perceive social emotional support among peers who acknowledged the problem to be beneficial as a coping strategy. It was as if dwelling on the problem, with no solution in sight, simply made the situation worse rather than helping to reduce the stress. This, too, can be seen as an emotion-focused response. It also aligns with Stoeber and Janssen's (2011) findings that if the bullying continues for an extended period of time, the target

is increasingly likely to try to simply deny the existence of the problem. However, avoiding some emotion-focused strategies – such as emotional support – has been shown to be beneficial to some targets. Van den Brande, Baillien, and De Witte (2016) found that social support is one of the emotion-focused strategies that can increase the negative impact of work-related stressors on bullying targets. This aligns with findings indicating that as workplace bullying persists and its severity increases, targets are less likely to perceive support from colleagues as helpful (Tuckey & Neall, 2014).

Reducing the use of emotional support as a coping mechanism may also have been an exercise in avoidance – they simply do not want to discuss the subject with their colleagues to avoid acknowledging the behaviors are taking place. Unfortunately, avoidance may have the opposite of its intended impact, and will likely increase stress over time. suggesting that targets must acknowledge and address the problem head on in order to effectively manage their personal stress levels rather than simply hoping it will go away (Van den Brande et al., 2016). This finding is supported by Bernstein and Trimm (2016), who found that avoiding the problem had a negative impact on psychological well-being, and exacerbated the negative impact on the target's self-esteem. This aligns with evidence that there are links between mistreated workers and lower self-performance reviews, as well as a decreased ability to self-manage, one of the key factors in emotional intelligence (Giorgi et al., 2016). This, too, aligns with the outcomes in this study, supporting the conclusion that that if the bullying is not addressed by the organization, it will have a negative consequence on the target's perception of themselves.

Perhaps the most profound result of this study is not focused on the targets at all, but rather on the organizations in which the bullying is occurring. Research has shown that when workplace bullying is allowed to continue in organizations without consequence, it will

perpetuate the problem and likely result in more workplace bullying in the future (Ramsay et al., 2011; Robinson & O'Leary, 1998). Though this study did not address perpetuation direction, it did find that the bully was a known entity in the organization, implying there was always more than one target. It also found that there was clear bottom-line impact of bullying in regard to the lost productivity of the targets. Each target reported differences in their work output after the bullying began, and even greater differences after organizational refusal to help fix the problem. This finding is corroborated by other studies. In Turkey, Karatuna (2015) found that targets would engaged in destructive coping behaviors as a result of prolonged bullying, including ignoring non-essential tasks, leaving tasks undone, and intentionally arriving late and leaving work early. Also conducted in Turkey, Mete, and Sökmen (2016) found a positive relationship between experiencing workplace bullying as a target and decreased job satisfaction and turnover intention which would ultimate result in additional costs for the organization in regards to lost organizational knowledge, and recruiting/hiring/training a replacement.

From the very start of their experience with workplace bullying, the targets in this study observed that they were not the only person impacted by the bully. In many of those cases, the bully was also a known entity in the organization. Combined with evidence that perpetrators tend to be naturally adept at organizational politics and can rise quickly through the ranks as a result (Treadway et al., 2013), one can imagine the financial costs of the problem in the organization, particularly if the bully hangs around for years or decades. Therefore, one can conclude that in organizations where bullying is condoned by leadership as "just the way they are", and thus allowed to continue, the impact will hit stakeholders where it counts – in the wallet.

It is not possible to provide an accurate estimate of lost productivity costs in this case. However it is possible to consider the costs related to employee turnover. All but one of the

participants in this study left their organization as a direct or indirect result of the bullying. Estimates of the cost of turnover varies widely from 30% of annual salary for a lower-skilled team member to 250% of salary for someone who is more difficult to replace (Hester, 2013). That means that if the employee being targeted leaves as a result of the bullying when he or she is making just $35,000, even with no other impact on the organization the cost has already hit five figures as a minimum estimate. Increase the salary and the skill of the employee and the costs begin to skyrocket. If you also consider the evidence provided in this study that the bully always targets more than one person in the organization and is a known entity to leadership and it will not take long for costs just based on turnover to hit more than six figures. The financial impact is significant.

But the human impact is far more costly. Notes Gallos (2008):

> Handling strong emotions in the workplace – dealing over time with others' frustration, anger, and disappointment resulting from organizational life in a competitive world of scarce resources and nonstop change – can be hazardous to body and soul. It exaggerates feelings of managerial overload, diminishes creativity, and makes it harder to resolve everyday dilemmas. It can lull those exposed to the workplace affect into a complacency that keeps people and organizations locked in patterns that are productive for neither – and that block the development of structures and strategies for a healthy workplace. (p. 354)

The cost of workplace bullying is a human cost that is beyond how many more dollars could be earned with a high functioning environment. A psychological contract exists between an organization and its employees the minute they enter into an agreement to work together. The contract is a subjective one based on the perceptions of the individual parties – the individual and

the organization (Rousseau, 1989). Nonetheless, if an organization owes anything to its employees that is implied with the offer letter, it is a psychologically safe working environment. That is breached when workplace bullying is condoned by the organization. And when those in a position of power to stop it choose to do nothing when presented with evidence by a target, that can be considered nothing sort of condoning the behavior.

In this study, three of the participants were fired after they reported the bullying to human resources, and one can assume that it was justified by decision makers as a result of their negative behavior at work. However, this negative behavior is to be expected when the psychological contract has been breached – when the organization does not hold up its side of the bargain it is directly linked to lower organizational trust, reduced perceptions of employee relations efforts, higher levels of absenteeism, reduced productivity, and higher intentions of turnover (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2006; Robinson, 1996). When the organization has not created a working environment that is not structured to enable their success, it is unethical to hold their workforce accountable to a standard that is not possible to meet.

This research has shown that when young professionals enter the workforce in an environment that shows them the worst of human nature instead of the best, it will leave them with a sour taste in their mouth about the professional world and their own abilities that will follow them for the foreseeable future. How many great leaders has the world missed out on because they had the misfortune of encountering an unnecessarily toxic environment early on in their career? How many people have given up on their dream jobs because human resources didn't want to rock the boat? These are costs that we'll never truly be able to calculate, but certainly can imagine.

Limitations

There are clear limitations of this study. First, the size and breadth of the qualitative sample must be acknowledged. Though the sample allowed for data saturation, it was made up of eight participants with many coming from a non-profit or educational industry, and was not a sample that was intended to be representative of a larger population. Additionally, though the study was about professionals aged 35-years-old and under, only one of the participants was under the age of 26-years-old, leaving out those at the lower end of the age spectrum with the least professional experience. This makes sense – they may not have recognized that they were the target of workplace bullying and therefore could not raise their hand to participate in a study. Still, it leaves a gap in the potential population.

Further, participants recounted their perception of their experiences. Data was not collected from the perspective of others involved, including co-workers, human resources, others in positions of leadership within the organization in question, or the perpetrators themselves. Participation in the study was also limited to those recognized that they were in a workplace bullying situation, and therefore could be recruited for such a study.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the researcher interviewed, analyzed and interpreted all of the data for the study. Particularly since she herself was a target of workplace bullying during data collection, there is the possibility of researcher bias. However, the researcher did take efforts to minimize that bias recommended by Charmaz (2006) through the use of personal reflection through journaling.

Implications for Practice

Professional seeking to help young professionals who are the target of workplace bullying must keep in mind the context under which they are seeking help. They have been a

target for an undetermined amount of time, but long enough so that they are likely experiencing elements of burnout. When turned away at their first deliberate attempt at help seeking organizational support, they abandon problem-focused tactics entirely, indicating that their internal resources are depleted. Their self-efficacy has been eroded. Even if they want to continue to fight, their lack of professional experience leaves them unarmed. If they make their way to an I/O psychology professional in search of help, they are arriving in their office in a weakened state in which continuing to recount their experience might make the matter worse. Strategies that will allow them to mitigate the immediate impact of the stress such as mindfulness and meditation would be appropriate. Gallos (2008) also identifies boundary setting, a commitment to health, establishing balance, and a pursuit of creative activities such as art and music.

However, professionals should not give in to the individual's potential inclination to avoid the problem directly. Instead, they should help the targets to engage in proactive strategies to remove the stressor from their lives. Instead of defaulting to guiding them to continued problem-focused strategies directed at the organization in the wake of seeming insurmountable odds, one might consider if resources would be better directed on exiting them out of the organization entirely and into a more healthy and empowering environment. To do so effectively, professionals will likely have to work with them to rebuild their self-esteem and confidence, and help them to be forward looking at external opportunities that exist on their desired career path. In essence, this requires resilience and grit.

Finally, there is a distinct responsibility for I/O psychology professionals working within organizations that are condoning the bullying environment – be the constant voice for those who cannot find support. Even with all the available evidence, it is understandable that those outside

of the field may not know how to identify it, how to help, or even want to admit that workplace bullying is taking place in their organization. However, I/O psychology professionals have the training and experience to identify it, and therefore the obligation to. If for no other reason than the existence of workplace bullying in the organization directly inhibits their ability to effectively do their job and meet their performance goals.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study was limited in the industries it covered, and skewed more towards the non-profit spectrum due to the nature of the sample. The study could be expanded with a specific focus on different types of industries to examine if the results hold true.

Additionally, this study found a distinct pattern between the response of the human resources department and organizational leadership and the outcome for the target. In the one instance that the response was supportive, the target came away with a renewed sense of confidence about how she would approach a similar situation in the future. In all other instances, when HR and organizational leadership were perceived to be unsupportive, the targets were left with a feeling of skepticism about the professional world, and specifically about human resources professionals they may encounter in the future. Additional research could be conducted to see if there is a significant correlation between the level of perceived organizational support when these instances are reported and the outcomes for the target after the bullying is resolved.

Another area for future research is how organizations are successfully combatting workplace bullying. So much attention is paid to the problem itself, but very little is paid to the organizations that are doing a great job of investigating and resolving it when it is reported. If we want organizations to take bullying seriously when it is occurring, we must provide them with a roadmap to do so. For example, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst organized at the

executive level to develop awareness, a grievance procedure for investigating all complaints and campus-wide educational opportunities for faculty and staff to prevent and address the problem with workplace bullying they were experiencing on campus (University of Massachusetts, 2016). However, research has not examined initiatives like this in any sort of depth in regard to effectiveness.

Finally, the organizational impact of workplace bullying cannot be overlooked. Given that the targets in this and other studies have reported a significant decrease in their productivity over time as a result of the bullying and the lack of organizational response, it calls into question the very real cost of bullying within organizations. What is the true impact on the bottom line? Research in this area may be the most helpful in spurring organizational response in the future by making the business case for ridding their organization of that type of toxicity as soon as it is identified.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to understand how young professionals cope with being the target of workplace bullying. Eight interviews were conducted with participants aged 35-years-old and under at the time of the bullying about their experiences and how they handled it throughout the process. The developed theory proposes that in organizations where bullying occurs, it is never the result of a simple personality conflict between the bully and the target. Rather, the perpetrator is a known entity within the organization, typically targeting more than one person at a time. The target identifies what the bullying is doing prior to reporting it to HR, and may endure the bullying for a significant amount of time before that step is eventually taken. Due to the nature of workplace bullying and the gap between when it begins and when it is perceived by the target, we cannot be sure how much time elapses prior to the incidents being

reported. Once it is officially reported, the response of the human resources office, and other organizational leadership that it was reported to, essentially determined the outcome of the bullying in this study. If they are unsupportive of the target, the result has negative implications for both the target and the organization. The target retreated inwardly and engaged in coping strategies focused on mitigating the stress the bullying has caused. They also decreased their overall productivity to the point of consciously doing the bare minimum to get by, which can be assumed to have resulted in an impact on the organization's bottom line. If the organization did not take proactive steps to stop the bullying, it only resolved itself when either the target or the bully left the organization entirely.

The findings of this research emphasize the importance of the response of human resources professionals and those in organization leadership positions in these types of situations, and help them understand the broader nature of the problem of workplace bullying when it is reported. It can be easy to dismiss reports of workplace bullying as an interpersonal squabble or personality conflict. However, the stories of the participants in this research illustrate that is a serious, long-term, problem, the toxicity of which can have a profound implication on the long-term health of the organization and its ability to recruit, motivate and retain top talent. Addressing these incidents as they are reported is not just the ethical approach to managing your talent; it is also key to an organization's long-term financial success.

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL WORK

Academic Honesty Policy

Capella University's Academic Honesty Policy (3.01.01) holds learners accountable for the integrity of work they submit, which includes but is not limited to discussion postings, assignments, comprehensive exams, and the dissertation or capstone project.

Established in the Policy are the expectations for original work, rationale for the policy, definition of terms that pertain to academic honesty and original work, and disciplinary consequences of academic dishonesty. Also stated in the Policy is the expectation that learners will follow APA rules for citing another person's ideas or works.

The following standards for original work and definition of *plagiarism* are discussed in the Policy:

> Learners are expected to be the sole authors of their work and to acknowledge the authorship of others' work through proper citation and reference. Use of another person's ideas, including another learner's, without proper reference or citation constitutes plagiarism and academic dishonesty and is prohibited conduct. (p. 1)
>
> Plagiarism is one example of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is presenting someone else's ideas or work as your own. Plagiarism also includes copying verbatim or rephrasing ideas without properly acknowledging the source by author, date, and publication medium. (p. 2)

Capella University's Research Misconduct Policy (3.03.06) holds learners accountable for research integrity. What constitutes research misconduct is discussed in the Policy:

> Research misconduct includes but is not limited to falsification, fabrication, plagiarism, misappropriation, or other practices that seriously deviate from those that are commonly accepted within the academic community for proposing, conducting, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results. (p. 1)

Learners failing to abide by these policies are subject to consequences, including but not limited to dismissal or revocation of the degree.

Statement of Original Work and Signature

I have read, understood, and abided by Capella University's Academic Honesty Policy (3.01.01) and Research Misconduct Policy (3.03.06), including Policy Statements, Rationale, and Definitions.

I attest that this dissertation or capstone project is my own work. Where I have used the ideas or words of others, I have paraphrased, summarized, or used direct quotes following the guidelines set forth in the APA *Publication Manual*.

Learner name and date: Karlyn Borysenko, April 24, 2017

APPENDIX. RESEARCHER-DESIGNED GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- When did you first recognize that you were being bullied by your co-workers / boss?
- What did it feel like when you first recognized you were being bullied?
- Did you tell anyone about the bullying? What were their reactions to what you told them?
- Tell me about your experience being bullied in the workplace. What incidents stand out most in your memory?
- What is the first thing you remember doing to cope with the situation?
- How did your personal life change after the bullying started?
- How did your professional life change after the bullying started?
- Looking back, what did you do that helped you to cope with the bullying that helped you the most? What actions did you take ended up being the least helpful?
- Would you have done anything differently in the situation if it were to happen again today?
- What could the organization have done differently in the situation?
- What should I have asked you today that I did not think to ask?