

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE: WORKPLACE BULLYING AND THE HUMAN  
RESOURCE PROFESSIONAL

A Dissertation

by

RENEE L. COWAN

Submitted to The Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2009

Major Subject: Communication

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## ABSTRACT

Walking the Tightrope: Workplace Bullying and the Human Resource Professional.

(December 2009)

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Human resource professionals have extensive involvement in workplace bullying situations and workplace bullying research is not reflective of their experience. This study sought to better understand how HR professionals understood and defined bullying, how they made sense of bullying situations and their position in them, and how policies associated with bullying activities were understood and utilized. Using qualitative methods, the findings indicate that HR professionals define and understand bullying as targets do, except they differed in what elements actually turn bullying behaviors into a situation they would label as “bullying.” They also felt that addressing and dealing with bullying was complicated due to its definitional state and their low power position. Still, they felt they took complaints of bullying very seriously and acted in these situations. The HR professionals also made sense of how and why bullying happened by pointing to issues like management style, conflict skills, and personality clashes. Additionally, the roles they played in bullying situations were marked by contradiction and paradox and equated to “walking a tightrope”. Although many felt

their organizations had policies that addressed bullying, it was found that most were ambiguous in regards to bullying or did not mention it at all. This study suggests a number of implications for both theory and practice. The findings also point to many necessary areas of future research which could further our understanding of workplace bullying and where organizations in the U.S. formally stand on the issue.

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and academics. Your efforts have made me a better writer and a more thoughtful scholar.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: WORKPLACE BULLYING DEFINITIONS, ISSUES AND THE HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONAL

Human resource departments in U.S. organizations are typically tasked with hiring, firing, training, managing and handling other personnel issues (Bohlander & Snell, 2007). Human resource professionals (HR professionals) carry out many important organizational initiatives including dealing with employee disputes, serving as a liaison between the employee and the organization, and drafting and enforcing organizational policies and procedures that are approved by upper management (Bohlander & Snell, 2007; Lewis & Rayner, 2003). One issue which has started to garner more attention in organizations and among HR professionals is workplace bullying (Daniel, 2006; Wright, 2008). Generally, academics understand workplace bullying as an extreme, negative and persistent form of workplace emotional abuse achieved primarily through verbal and nonverbal communication (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; 2008). For HR professionals, workplace bullying could be much more complex.

Although it has been argued that HR professionals, in functional roles, likely have extensive involvement in workplace bullying situations (Lewis & Rayner, 2003), to date, workplace bullying research is not reflective of their experiences.

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This dissertation follows the style of *Management Communication Quarterly*.

In this dissertation I take a social constructivist position and argue our understandings of workplace bullying need to include the constructions of HR professionals. A social constructivist (see Berger & Luckmann, 1967) believes that social reality is intersubjectively created through communication between social actors and these constructions are many and varied throughout society (Miller, 2005). In this sense, HR professionals, along with targets and other actors are, through communication, creating what is meant by workplace bullying and how we understand this emerging phenomenon. Consequently, we not only need to understand the experiences of targets in bullying situations but, HR professionals as well.

To date, research on workplace bullying is largely reflective of one perspective in the bullying situation, the target (see Porhola, Karhunen, & Rainivaara, 2006). Targets have reported they are mostly bullied by their managers or someone in a superior position in the organization (Teharni, 2004) and women reported being bullied more than men (Namie & Namie, 2003; Smith, Singer, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003; Teharni, 2004). For men, persistent criticism was reported as the most damaging bully behavior and women reported that hints or signals to quit were most damaging (Hoel, Faragher, & Cooper, 2004). Targets report they do not understand why they are targeted and struggle to make sense of the bullying (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). They expect others in the organization to believe them, but report this does not happen (Lewis & Orford, 2005). Targets also report they initially resisted the bullying and tried to cope with it in functional ways, but eventually they moved to less constructive ways of coping including exiting the organization (Lewis & Orford, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003).

Bullying has been found to negatively affect the target's identity and self-esteem and is attributed to clinical symptoms of trauma, anxiety, distress, guilt, anger, and depression (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2004; Lewis & Orford, 2005).

Certainly, the target's voice is important to engage and the resulting research has provided the world with important knowledge of workplace bullying. However, current research has generally ignored two very important actors in bullying situations; the bully and the HR professional. To date, we have very little knowledge of the bully's perspective beyond personality traits. Specifically, bullies self-reported they were egocentric, aggressive, assertive, and showed little concern for others (Seigne, Coyne, Randall, & Parker, 2007). In addition, they reported a tendency to strive for social dominance (Parkins, Fishbein, & Richey, 2006). Although there are a handful of studies that do reflect the voice of the bully (see Seigne, et al., 2007), it is likely we will not be able to fully understand the bully's perspective. This is because bullies most likely don't interpret their behavior as bullying (Namie & Namie, 2003) and if they do, most would not admit it as such (Seigne, et.al, 2007). A more plausible and, I argue, a more interesting voice to engage is the HR professional.

The HR professional is seen as an integral actor in the bullying situation because they are tasked with assisting targets with complaints of bullying, investigating bullying situations, and enforcing organizational policies (Glendinning, 2001; Lewis & Rayner, 2003; Salin, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to engage and begin to understand the HR professional's perspective on bullying situations and organizational policies designed to address bullying in the workplace. To that end, this chapter will



examine workplace bullying definitional issues which could be impacting HR professional's ability to deal with bullying in the workplace. I also argue for a better understanding of how HR professionals define and give meaning to events or situations associated with workplace bullying. In this chapter, I will first detail the definition of workplace bullying as informed by academic research, and then discuss five issues concerning this definition and the definitional state of workplace bullying that could be complicating the lives of HR professionals.

#### The Workplace Bullying Definition: The Academic Perspective

Definitions of workplace bullying are primarily articulated from an academic perspective. These definitions tend to be receiver-oriented (or are articulated from the target's perspective) and subjective (or centered around the subjective perception of the target of bullying) (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Niedl, 1996). Although there is not a consistent definition of workplace bullying being used in academic research to date, these definitions do have some reoccurring themes. The following is my distillation of the definitions of workplace bullying found in the academic research:

Workplace bullying refers to highly *negative verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors* that are *persistent* and are perceived as being *intentional*, offensive, insulting, malicious, oppressive, and intimidating. Bullying behaviors are *escalated* and targets often have *difficulty defending themselves* against the persistent abuse. Bullying behaviors result in *adverse effects* for bullied individuals and the organization.

#### *Negative Verbal and Nonverbal Communicative Behavior*

The verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors are often referred to as the forms in which workplace bullying is manifested (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). During the late 1990's, researchers from Europe with

a psychology background sought to catalog behaviors associated with bullying. These acts were derived from two main sources of information; literature studies and accounts of victims who had been exposed to long-term harassment and negative actions (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). These forms include: social isolation, personal attacks, insulting remarks, gossip, verbal threats, humiliation, work interference (Einarsen, 1999), information withheld, unmanageable workload, work below target's level of competence, unreasonable/impossible deadlines, excessive monitoring of work, ignored opinions and views, humiliation and ridicule of work, isolation from others, reminded repeatedly of errors, hostile interactions when target approaches others, insulting remarks, gossip/rumors spread about target, being shouted at or targeted with anger, false allegations, persistent criticism, intimidating and threatening behavior, responsibility taken away, excessive teasing and sarcasm, hints or signals that target should quit, pressured into not claiming entitlement, subjected to practical jokes, and threats or actual physical abuse (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). Of course, many of these behaviors are contested. For example, when is "persistent criticism" motivation or assigning "work below target's level of training" an effort to maintain flexibility in staffing? How these behaviors are interpreted by targets determines if they are seen as constituting bullying. In addition, academics argue that the above behaviors are transformed into bullying by five key features; persistent abuse, intentionality, escalation, power issues, and adverse effects (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005).

### *Persistent Abuse*

These definitions point to the idea that workplace bullying is characterized by a persistent pattern of the above negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Einarsen, et al, 2003). For example, Namie & Namie (2003) contend in their definition of workplace bullying, “Bullying at work is repeated...” (p. 3), Rayner, Hoel, and Cooper (2002) write bullying is, “persistent malicious attacks...”(p. xi), Salin (2003) writes bullying is, “repeated and persistent negative actions...”(p. 1214) and Lutgen-Sandvik (2005) writes, “workplace bullying is a pattern of persistent, offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting, and or exclusionary discursive and nondiscursive behaviors...” (p. 15). Most workplace bullying researchers agree that one instance of a couple of the above verbal and nonverbal behaviors should not be considered bullying (Rayner & Cooper, 2006; Vartia, 1996). Instead, bullying refers to a pattern of abusive verbal and nonverbal behaviors of which the target is subjected. Most recent studies categorize these hostile behaviors as bullying if they are reported to be experienced on a weekly basis for at least six months (Rayner, et.al, 2002). This timeframe was somewhat arbitrarily chosen by Leymann (1990), a psychologist, who was the first to actively research the phenomenon. Leymann’s justification for this timeframe was two-fold; 1) he was investigating severe psychiatric and psychosomatic impairments that were not likely to result from brief exposure to social stressors, and 2) this timeframe had been used to investigate other psychiatric disorders (Einarsen, et al., 2003). Other studies have used this timeframe to differentiate between workplace bullying and social stressors experienced at work that are less frequent and not patterned (Einarsen, et al.,

2003). Along with persistent abuse, intentionality has been seen as one of the defining characteristics of workplace bullying.

### *Intentionality/Perception*

The second theme in workplace bullying definitions is one of intentionality or the intent to cause harm (Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Einarsen, et al., 2003; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Intentionality is a contested characteristic of workplace bullying, but is nonetheless seen explicitly or implicitly in these definitions. Some definitions are explicit about intentionality and contend the receiver or target of bullying perceives the negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors as intentionally inflicted to do harm (Bjorkqvist, Oysterman, & Hjelt-Back, 1994; Keashly & Nowell, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; Namie & Namie, 2003; Rayner, et al., 2002; Randall, 2001; Tracy, et al., 2006). For example, Keashly & Nowell (2003) write in their definition that bullying is, “actual or perceived intent to harm on the part of the actor (bully)” (p. 340), and Randall (2001) writes bullying is, “aggressive behavior arising from the deliberate intent to cause physical and psychological distress” (p. 9). Other definitions are more implicit and use language that infers intentionality without explicitly stating it (Field, 1996; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Namie & Namie, 2003; Rayner, et al., 2002). This is seen through the language used to describe bullying behaviors. For example, bullying and bullying behaviors are described as “persistent malicious attacks” (Rayner, et al., 2002, p. xi) or “spiteful and vindictive” (Field, 1996, p. 33) all terms that denote intentional actions. These terms point to the idea that targets of bullying do not see the bully’s behaviors as accidental; they are seen as targeted attacks intended to do harm. Again, these

definitions are receiver-oriented and assume we take the target's definition of bullying for granted as the only definition. In addition to intention, escalation of the negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors is also a key theme in bullying definitions.

### *Escalation*

Bullying definitions highlight the idea that bullying is an abusive process that escalates over time. The negative verbal and nonverbal acts are perceived by targets as more intense, extreme, and personalized as the abuse continues (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Einarsen (1999) contends there are four phases of bullying escalation; aggressive behaviors, bullying, stigmatization, and severe trauma. Bullying begins with aggressive acts or negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors as mentioned above. In many cases, during the beginning phases of bullying, these negative acts are "subtle, devious and immensely hard to confront" (Adams & Crawford, 1992, p. 17). Because of this the target may have a hard time describing or labeling their experience, they only know they have a feeling of nervousness or discomfort (Adams & Crawford, 1992). The behaviors start to become more pronounced, personalized, and aggressive and in the later stages, the target perceives themselves as being victimized and attacked even though they may not have a term to label what they are experiencing (Einarsen, et al., 2003). Although bullying is generally seen as a process that becomes more extreme and intense over time, the rate and intensity of this process no doubt depends on the specific individuals involved (Einarsen, 1999; Leymann, 1990; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Bullying definitions not only highlight the idea that bullying process escalates but also the idea of power inequalities between the target and bully.

### *Power Issues*

The issue of power is also a theme seen in definitions of bullying. Specifically, these definitions highlight the idea that targets have difficulty defending themselves against escalated attacks by their bullies (Einarsen, et al., 2003; Salin, 2003; Vartia, 1996). Some contend that targets are “power-deficient” or do not have as much structural power as the bully in the organization (Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Einarsen, et al., 2003; Keashly & Nowell, 2003; Salin, 2003; 2008). This unequal power distribution is seen as what allows the bully to enact their abuse because targets have difficulty defending themselves in this situation (Namie, 2007; Rayner, et al., 2002; Salin, 2003; 2008). For example, Keashly & Nowell (2003) write, “a power imbalance exists between the two parties” (p. 340) and Salin (2008) points to the idea that the power disparity need not come from the actor’s places on the traditional organizational hierarchy but, can come from less formal structures like access to “knowledge and expertise or support by influential people” (p. 221). This suggests that the bully can be higher in a number of different sources of power.

Other workplace bullying researchers contend that targets are not “power-deficient” and have some power to resist or oppose the bullying attacks (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; 2006). In her research with targets of bullying, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) found that targets framed many of their actions during the bullying situation as resistance. Specifically, she found targets spoke of exiting the organization, using collective voice, using subversive disobedience, actually confronting the bully, and using reverse discourse to resist bullying. These actions were framed as strategies targets used

to fight back. This research points to the idea that targets do feel they have some power but it is insufficient to stop the bullying. In addition to issues of power, workplace bullying definitions also highlight the effects of bullying.

### *Adverse Effects*

The final theme in workplace bullying definitions is the idea that bullying results in adverse effects for both the target and the organization. Some definitions point to adverse effects experienced by the target only (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 2002; Field, 1996; Vartia, 1996) whereas others point to adverse effects for both the individual and the organization (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; Namie & Namie, 2003; Salin, 2003). In regards to the adverse effects experienced by targets, Leymann (1990) explains in his definition that bullying actions result, “in considerable psychic, psychomatic, and social misery” (p. 120), Davenport, et al. (2002) claims, “the individual experiences increasing distress, illness and social misery” (p. 33), and Rayner et al. (2002) contends, “The abuse of power can cause chronic stress and anxiety that people gradually lose belief in themselves, suffering physical ill health and mental distress as a result” (p. xi). Still some definitions go farther; contending adverse effects for the target and the organization. For example, Lutgen-Sandvik (2005) explains in her definition, “the principal effects are damage or impairment to targets and workgroups and obstruction of organizational goals and processes” (p. 15) and Keashly & Jagatic (2003) write, “overall the nature of the effects indicates a deterioration or disabling of the target, the people around him or her, and the organization” (p. 53). The adverse effects to the target’s health, well-being, and career (Duffy & Sperry, 2007; Lewis &

Orford, 2005) which can result in high insurance costs, higher absenteeism and turnover, lower productivity (Hoel, Einarsen, & Cooper, 2003; Niedl, 1996) and costly lawsuits (GlennDinning, 2001). These adverse effects, along with power issues, escalation, intentionality, persistence, and negative verbal and nonverbal acts are the major themes in current academic definitions of workplace bullying.

Academic definitions of workplace bullying speak to the forms in which bullying manifests itself (negative verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors) and the characteristics of bullying (persistence, intentionality, escalation, power issues, adverse effects) which are argued to make it distinct from similar concepts (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; 2007). Although some researchers argue the definition of workplace bullying and the defining elements of bullying are becoming more solidified, there is still much variation in this research and issues with these definitions. In the next section, these issues are discussed in reference to a key actor in bullying situations, the HR professional.

#### Workplace Bullying Definitional Issues and the Human Resource Professional

There are five main issues associated with the definition and definitional state of workplace bullying that could be complicating the work of human resource professionals. First, different labels are being used to describe workplace bullying. Second, academic definitions of workplace bullying have significant overlap with other similar concepts causing confusion on exactly what workplace bullying is and is not. Third, current definitions are often conflicting and can contradict each other. Fourth,



workplace bullying can be seen as being in a state of denotative hesitancy. Fifth and finally, these definitions only represent the academic perspective on the target voice.

### *Issue One: Multiple Labels*

Many different labels have been and are still being used to describe the phenomenon that has now become known as workplace bullying. These have included *harassment* or the “repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate,... It is behavior that persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates, or otherwise discomforts another person” (Brodsky, 1976, p. xi), *employee emotional abuse* as “a nonphysical form of workplace violence” (Keashly & Harvey, 2006, p. 96), and *mobbing* or a “malicious attempt to force a person out of work through unjustified accusations, humiliation, general harassment... It is a ‘ganging up’ by the leader(s) who rallies others into a systematic and frequent ‘mob-like’ behavior” (Davenport et al, 2002, p. 40). Only in recent years have most European researchers and a handful of U.S. researchers settled on the term *workplace bullying* (Adams & Crawford, 1992; Field, 1996; Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Hoel, Farragher, & Cooper, 2004; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Lewis & Orford, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Namie & Namie, 2003; Randall, 2001; Salin, 2003; Vartia, 1996; Zapf, 1999).

The use of multiple labels adds to the confusion over what workplace bullying is and what it is not. For example, *mobbing* is a term that refers to a group activity. As the above definition demonstrates mobbing focuses on a group of employees “ganging up” on one individual. This term has a slightly different connotation than bullying which

tends to encompass both one-on-one abuse and “ganging up” on an individual (Einarsen, et al., 2003). *Employee emotional abuse* is a term that highlights the nonphysical forms of abuse. Although rare, we know that in some cases bullying can escalate to include physical acts (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). And terms like *victimization* and *harassment* seem to point towards the actions or forms in which bullying is manifested to the exclusion of one or some of the characteristics (persistence, intentionality, escalation, power issues, adverse effects) argued to be so important to the concept of bullying. However, these concepts are all very similar and are being used in academic research and popular press articles interchangeably with workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; Keashly & Harvey, 2006). This issue with multiple labels makes it harder for individuals to approach HR with complaints and if they do actually complain it could make it harder for HR professionals to validate and deal with these complaints. From a practical perspective, having multiple labels for the same phenomenon makes it harder for human resource professionals to do the job of protecting employees and the organization. In addition, multiple labels and confusion over exactly what workplace bullying is could also make it harder to write and enforce policies meant to address this type of abuse. Confusion over exactly what bullying is could make it harder for HR professionals to manage and deal with this issue. Not only could confusion arise from the multiple labels currently being used to refer to workplace bullying, but confusion could also arise from the conceptual overlap between workplace bullying and similar phenomena.

### *Issue Two: Conceptual Overlap*

There is considerable conceptual overlap between workplace bullying and other similar phenomena. For example, many of the verbal and nonverbal workplace bullying forms (social isolation, personal attacks, insulting remarks, gossip, verbal threats, humiliation, and work interference) are also seen in other related phenomena. This may be part of the reason many U.S. researchers have been slow to use the term “workplace bullying” and instead research the phenomenon as part of more general concepts like workplace violence (Schat & Kelloway, 2004), workplace aggression (Kelloway, Barling, & Hurrell, 2006), or workplace misbehavior (Vardi & Weitz, 2004). Acknowledging this issue associated with the concept of workplace bullying, Lutgen-Sandvik, et al. (2007) suggested a hierarchy of U.S. academic research topics concerned with negative workplace phenomena. The hierarchy is an effort to clearly define and differentiate workplace bullying from similar and related phenomena. They make the argument that workplace bullying is a specific type of workplace violence or workplace aggression. They position workplace bullying as an intermediate phenomenon which can be subsumed under these more general phenomena, but is also general enough to include very specific types of workplace abuse like social ostracism (Williams & Sommer, 1997) or petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994).

Although this effort greatly assists academics with research on bullying and does start to situate and differentiate workplace bullying from other similar concepts, it is likely not that helpful to practitioners who need concrete ideas of what bullying is and is not to do their jobs. Targets have reported that HR professionals most often do not act in

bullying situations and when they do act their actions are perceived as making the situation worse (Glendinning, 2001; Lewis & Rayner, 2003; Namie & Namie, 2003; 2002). Overlap with similar concepts (some covered by law and organizational policy and some not) does not help HR professionals pinpoint when bullying is occurring and when it is not. When is something bullying and not just petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994)? When does petty tyranny or social ostracism become bullying? Answering questions like these with concrete answers requires the overlap between similar concepts to be more clearly worked out. In addition, this overlap likely complicates HR professionals' decisions on who they can engage when dealing with bullying situations. Can they engage the legal department? The target's supervisor? Upper management? Who an HR professional can consult with during allegations of bullying and who they can refer the target to will depend on how bullying is defined and understood in the organization. In addition, what HR professionals can talk about is complicated by conceptual overlap as well. Legal ramifications can't be talked about unless a law has been broken, the bullying was "because of" a protected class, or the bullying was seen as the intentional infliction of emotional distress (Yamada, 2000). Not only could conceptual overlap of bullying and related concepts be an issue for HR professionals, conflicting definitions of what bullying actually is could also complicate the lives of HR professionals.

### *Issue Three: Conflicting Definitions*

Not only could the multiple labels for workplace bullying and considerable conceptual overlap cause confusion and roadblocks for HR professionals in identifying and dealing with workplace bullying, so could the reality that there is still no consistent

definition of workplace bullying. As I mentioned in the preceding definitional section, although there are themes in these definitions, there are many conflicting and contradictory aspects of these definitions. Some scholars contend that what is highlighted in a workplace bullying definition will depend on the actor perspective taken in the research (bully, target, organization, etc.) and the researcher's professional interest in the phenomenon (Lawrence, 2001; Rayner & Cooper, 2006). For example, a lawyer would most likely articulate a definition which includes damage to the target of bullying so that they could make a claim under current law (see Yamada, 2000), whereas a psychology scholar might be more concerned with including personality types of targets and bullies to support the inclusion of certain dependent variables over others (Zapf, 1999). For example, there are conflicting ideas on the intentionality element of the workplace bullying definitions. Some definitions do not mention intent as a characteristic of bullying whereas others are very explicit about the idea of bullying being intentional. Those who research workplace bullying from a positivist frame would not want to include intent in their definition because it is "normally impossible to verify the presence of intent" (Einarsen, et al., 2003; p. 12), whereas those researchers who are not concerned with empirically verifying intent may choose to include this as a characteristic of workplace bullying.

In addition, there are conflicting ideas on the issue of power and adverse effects in definitions of workplace bullying. Although both of these themes are seen in most definitions of bullying, there are inconsistencies within these themes (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). For example, although most definitions point to the idea that there are issues with

power concerning the bully and target, definitions differ on if the target has power or is lacking power in bullying situations. In addition, most definitions highlight the idea that adverse effects result from bullying behaviors, but what these effects entail are contested. Some researchers highlight the idea the target is adversely affected by bullying whereas other researchers point out adverse effects for the organization and workgroup as well as the target. Again, it seems clear that what is highlighted in current definitions of workplace bullying differs due to a variety of factors.

These inconsistencies and conflicting ideas could make it extremely difficult for human resource professionals to identify and deal with workplace bullying. They could make it harder to recognize bullying in the workplace and help the organization and target deal with it. They could cause considerable headache for those who develop and try to enforce organizational policies. In addition, these themes come from academic literature which is an interpretation of the target's voice. Are these themes even reflective of HR professionals' experiences with workplace bullying? Are some of these themes more salient than others? These themes may not be representative of how human resource professionals interpret the situation. It is important to understand how HR professionals interpret bullying situations because they are typically the organizational representative that has to deal with the bully and target and at the same time protect the organization.

#### *Issue Four: Denotative Hesitancy*

Although workplace bullying is starting to be defined more distinctly and concretely by some academics, it has yet to become a term used in both the

organizational and legal realm to refer to an extreme form of employee mistreatment actionable under current law (Yamada, 2000). In fact, some scholars contend it is in a state of “denotative hesitancy” referring to the initial difficulty in naming experiences before there is a widely agreed upon language from which to draw (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). As noted above, workplace bullying has been referred to as employee emotional abuse, mobbing, harassment, and victimization and, particularly in the U.S., this research is being subsumed and studied under labels like workplace violence and workplace aggression. As argued above, there still exists confusion on exactly what constitutes workplace bullying. When new terms, like *workplace bullying*, are introduced into a language system they are typically challenged or disputed until consensus or denotative conformity is reached (Clair, 1993). Workplace bullying seems to be in this ambiguous state of denotative hesitancy similar to the term sexual harassment in the late 1980’s and 1990’s (Clair, 1993). But unlike sexual harassment today, there is no generally agreed upon legal definition of the term, therefore American workers have little legal protection from workplace bullying (Yamada, 2000; 2003). Although employees can bring bullying-related claims under torts like Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress (IIED), claims that are unrelated to other forms of status-based discrimination or harassment are rarely upheld (Yamada, 2000). The reason the majority of these cases are granted dismissal or summary judgment for the defendant was that the behavior wasn’t “sufficiently extreme or outrageous to meet the requirements of the tort” (Yamada, 2000, p. 2).

Because workplace bullying is in this ambiguous state of denotative hesitancy, many U.S. organizations might not have clear policies on what workplace bullying constitutes and organizational and legal repercussions for this type of behavior (Einarsen, et al., 2003; Kelloway, Barling, & Hurrell, 2006). Additionally, if organizations actually do have a workplace bullying policy, enforcement could be an issue because of the legal issues mentioned above. These issues could leave HR professionals feeling powerless regarding how to talk about and deal with bullying situations. As mentioned earlier, HR professionals working in organizations are often the first people targets seek help from (Lewis & Rayner, 2003) and many scholars see them as an integral actor in the situation (Ferris, 2004; Glendinning, 2001; Lewis & Rayner, 2003; Mathieson, Hanson, & Burns, 2006; Namie & Namie, 2003; Salin, 2008). Although we have much research on the target's perspective of workplace bullying (Einarsen, et al., 2003; Kelloway, et al., 2006; Lewis & Orford, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, et al., 2007; 2008; Tracy, et al., 2006), the human resource professional is an important voice missing from this conversation.

#### *Issue Five: The Missing Voice*

As I have alluded to throughout the preceding paragraphs, the current definitions of workplace bullying are predominantly informed by only one voice, the target's. It seems clear that other voices relevant to this phenomenon should be engaged, particularly regarding the definition or what workplace bullying means. What does the term *workplace bullying* mean to HR professionals? How do these professionals interpret and understand the bullying situation? How do they talk about it? The answers



to these questions could no doubt have a significant impact on how workplace bullying gets talked about and dealt with in the workplace. In addition, all of these questions are complicated by the ambiguous state of workplace bullying as a phenomenon. Because of this, investigating workplace bullying through the eyes of HR professionals could prove very illuminating. In an effort to explore this issue, the following research questions were advanced:

RQ1: How do human resource professionals define and understand workplace bullying?

RQ2: How does this meaning affect how workplace bullying is dealt with in the organization?

#### Research Agenda

Taking the preceding together, the purposes of this research project are multiple. My primary goals are to: 1) continue the tentative dialogue on workplace bullying, 2) explore workplace bullying from the point of view of human resource professionals tasked with identifying and dealing with bullying in the workplace, 3) explore HR professional's perceptions of organizational policies associated with workplace bullying, and 4) seek this understanding through an interpretive in-depth examination that could enhance the largely positivistic body of research.

## CHAPTER II

### THE HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONAL AND THE CASE OF BULLYING: POWER, PARADOX AND POLICY

In chapter I, I explained that the HR professional occupies a very important position regarding workplace bullying, but researchers have yet to identify or analyze the complications embedded in that role. This chapter explores the research on the HR professional's position in bullying situations and points to important questions that need to be answered. In this chapter, I will first discuss the HR professional's power position associated with issues like workplace bullying. Second, I will point to possible paradoxes HR professionals could be experiencing in workplace bullying situations. And lastly, I will discuss the importance of organizational policy in regards to the actions of HR personnel and detail the very limited research on workplace bullying policies.

#### The Human Resource Professional's Power Position

Human resource departments have many different issues and challenges to deal with on a day-to-day basis. Human resource (HR) professionals of today have to deal with a wide variety of competitive and social challenges from going global, managing change and diversity to juggling employee rights with their privacy, safety, and health (Bohlander & Snell, 2007). A specific challenge pertinent to this study has to do with maintaining employee relations while dealing with personnel issues like workplace bullying. It can be argued that human resource professionals are in general low power

holders in organizations (Glendinning, 2001; Namie & Namie, 2000). Byars and Rue (2006) contend, “The primary function of a human resource department is to provide support to operating managers on all human resource matters. Thus, most human resource departments fulfill a traditional staff role and act primarily in an advisory capacity” (p. 5).

In general, the typical employee working in a human resource capacity tends to have as much power as the average employee in any organization. For example, a major responsibility of human resource departments is to develop organizational policies and procedures, but generally these must be approved by upper management (Bohlander & Snell, 2007). In addition, their actions are closely guided by state and national law as well as specific organizational policy (Baron & Kreps, 1999). For example, often HR departments cannot hire a new employee unless management directs them to do so, then when they begin the process it is strictly guided by what a specific department needs and what upper management has approved.

When organizations have policies governing specific areas of employee conduct, HR professionals can use these policies to guide their actions in dealing with employee issues (Bolander & Snell, 2007; Byars & Rue, 2006). For example, some organizations may have policies that address physical violence in the workplace. In this case, what constitutes physical violence in the workplace is strictly defined and if an employee engages in this defined behavior, they are subject to the disciplinary actions outlined in the policy. The organizational policy would give the HR professional the power to address and deal with the workplace violence situation. Policies like this would guide

the actions of the HR professional when the policy is broken and would serve as a tangible rule they can point to in order to act in the situation. However, without a policy to guide action, HR professionals have very little power to deal with specific organizational issues (Richards & Daley, 2003). For some organizations, workplace bullying could be one of these issues (Glendinning, 2001; Salin, 2008).

Although recent research has pointed to the idea that bullying in the workplace is prevalent in organizations in the United States (Lutgen-Sandvik, et al., 2007), it is not clear how many organizations actually have policies that address bullying in the workplace. In their study on the prevalence of workplace bullying in American organizations, Lutgen-Sandvik, et al. (2007) found over 25% of U.S. workers felt they had been bullied sometime during their work history. Additional research also points to the idea that the targets try to seek help from their HR departments (Glendinning, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; 2006). So we know that this type of behavior is happening in organizations and targets act to combat bullying by reporting it to HR personnel. At the same time, research also points to the idea that without an organizational policy that addresses bullying activities, HR professionals likely have even less power to address and deal with these allegations of bullying in a concrete way. So in this situation, how do HR professionals deal with workplace bullying from this low power position? The only answer we have to this question comes from the target's perspective. Based on target accounts, current research argues HR professionals do not deal with allegations of workplace bullying and issues associated with bullying very well (Ferris, 2004; Glendinning, 2001; Namie & Namie, 2000; Lewis & Rayner, 2003). Current academic

research on workplace bullying and the HR professional can be subsumed into two dominant discourses; negative evaluations of HR and their handling of the issue and advice to HR professionals and HR departments on how to more adequately deal with the issue.

### *HR Professionals Do Little about Bullying Issues*

Although there is very little research to date that centers on the HR department and issues of workplace bullying, the research that does exist suggests that HR departments and HR professionals do very little to address the issue of workplace bullying. Again, it must be stressed that this research is only reflective of the target's perspective and their interpretation of their experiences with the HR department. Nonetheless, the dominant discourse surrounding HR professionals and workplace bullying is that they are apathetic about allegations of bullying and do what they can to support or protect the organization (Glendinning, 2001; Namie & Namie, 2003; 2002). This discourse tends to follow two main themes; 1) HR does little about workplace bullying and 2) because of this they are a primary reason bullying persists.

The dominant discourse on workplace bullying and the HR department is that they do little about bullying allegations and if something is actually done, it is for the benefit of the organization (Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott, 2002; Namie & Namie, 2002; Yamada, 2006). Davenport, et al., (2002) contend that organizational representatives do not understand the concept or signs of adult bullying and because of this react with disbelief when these allegations are made. And Namie and Namie (2003) found that targets saw the HR department as the least helpful group in bullying situations

and accused them of doing nothing when bullying was reported. They argue HR departments support the bully because their first priority is to protect the organization. Using target reports on the HR department and HR professionals, Namie and Namie (2002) found that targets believed HR departments dealt with complaints of bullying in four ways; deflect, deny, alert the bully, or conspire with the bully. HR departments deflected the allegation of bullying and sent the target back to the manager to “work out the personality conflict” (Namie & Namie, 2002, p. 6). Targets reported HR departments also denied there was anything wrong with bullying behavior because, “It’s not illegal, so nothing can be done” (Namie & Namie, 2002, p. 6). Targets also suggested the HR department alerted the bully of the allegations which made the bullying worse. And targets felt the HR department conspired with the bully to drive them out of the organization. These themes point to the idea that HR departments and HR professionals are perceived, at best, by targets as apathetic about bullying and, at worst, in alliance with the bully to drive them from the organization. Because of these perceptions, HR departments and HR professionals are seen by targets as a cause of continuing bullying activities.

The second dominant theme in this research is that HR departments and HR professionals are a cause of continuing bullying activities in the workplace. Rayner (1998) found that when targets of bullying asked for help from an organizational representative, the bullying situation was perceived to get worse because of these actions. The perception that HR is a cause of bullying activities persists for many reasons including the idea the HR department exists to protect the organization, not help

employees (Namie & Namie, 2000; Yamada, 2006), i.e. organizations don't want to seem liable for negative bullying activities. Lewis and Rayner (2003) argue that HR departments can't deal openly and fairly with bullying cases because they have to protect the organization from litigation. HR departments are also seen as a cause of continuing bullying activities because they do not have enough power to challenge or deal with an issue like bullying without consent from upper management (Bolander & Snell, 2007; Byars & Rue, 2006; Lewis & Rayner, 2003). They could have some power to deal with the situation if the organization had an anti-bullying policy. Of course, the existence of an anti-bullying policy would most likely indicate consent from upper management. However, if there is no explicit policy that prohibits bullying behaviors then HR professionals have very little power from which to act (Glendinning, 2001). This leads HR professionals to send the target back to the bullying situation where it is oftentimes made worse because of the target's attempts at reporting the behavior (Ferris, 2004; Lewis & Orford, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Namie & Namie, 2002; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006).

One dominant discourse about HR professionals and workplace bullying is that they do not work to stop bullying activities and when they do act, this often makes the bullying situation worse. This discourse uncovers a possible paradox that could be complicating the lives of HR professionals trying to deal with allegations of bullying. HR professionals and the HR department are seen by targets as the organizational actors who are supposed to do something about bullying activities, but their actions in bullying situations only cause further bullying. If they work within their power to deal with

bullying, this is reported to cause an escalation in bullying acts. This paradox could leave them feeling trapped, if they act, negative consequences could result, if they don't act, negative consequences could also be the result. The second dominant discourse about HR professionals and bullying is that they need advice on how to handle bullying issues.

*HR Professionals and Departments Need Advice on How to Handle Bullying Issues*

Although much research on workplace bullying and the HR department does not actually survey or attempt to obtain the perspective of those in HR departments, these sources still extend much advice to those working in HR departments. The idea that HR departments and HR professionals need advice on how to deal with bullying issues is the second dominant theme in academic research on bullying and the HR department. This advice tends to be concentrated in two areas; management of bullying activities and prevention of bullying activities.

The first area of advice has to do with training HR professionals to manage bullying in the workplace including identifying and properly handling bullying issues. Ferris (2004) argues that HR professionals need training on how to properly deal with workplace bullying and not cause further harm to targets. She argues that HR professionals need to be educated on what workplace bullying is and what to look for in bullying situations. She reports this training "has resulted in more appropriate and less damaging approaches to bullying on the part of the organization" (p. 394). In addition, Glendinning (2001) recommends a more detailed proactive approach where HR professionals use a system for detecting and monitoring bullying activities. He says that



HR professionals should monitor turnover, create an environment where employees are encouraged to speak out, conduct detailed exit interviews to determine if bullying is taking place, notify and monitor the suspected bully, offer training to the bully in an effort to rehabilitate them, and finally, if all else fails, terminate the bully.

The caveat for the success of this system rests with how much power HR professionals have to deal with bullying situations. Glendinning (2001) writes, “One of the most critical aspects of the ability to address workplace bullying is how much autonomy a human resources department is given in an organization. Does it have free hand to act against injustices like workplace bullying or is it handcuffed?” (p. 279). As argued above, for a variety of reasons, many HR departments may not have the power required to adequately deal with workplace bullying. Another complication to this type of advice is the ambiguous nature of the concept of workplace bullying itself (see chapter I). How are HR professionals to be trained to identify and deal with a concept that is still not clearly defined?

More advice is given from Rains (2001). Rains argues a “peer listening scheme” is an effective tool for reducing workplace bullying. Believing that employees would feel more comfortable talking to a peer rather than HR professionals, she argues peer listeners should be trained to serve as informal experts who advise their coworkers on how to proceed based on the company’s bullying and harassment policies. There are several issues with this type of advice. First, this approach has not actually been validated. There are no research studies that confirm the use of this method would actually help manage bullying activities. Second, this advice can only be heeded if the

organization happens to have workplace bullying policies in place. And thirdly, current research actually points to the idea that coworkers, at times, “gang-up” on targets and bully as a group (see Davenport, et al., 2002; Einarsen, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003; Leymann, 1990). So it is not clear how or why this “peer listening scheme” could manage bullying in a meaningful way.

Prevention of bullying in the workplace is the second major theme in this discourse. Prevention strategies begin with having clear policies prohibiting bullying behavior in the workplace (Glendinning, 2001; Liefvooghe & Davey, 2001; Vega & Comer, 2005). This assumes organizations have policies HR professionals can use to enforce repercussions for bullying behaviors. To date, we do not have a clear idea of how many organizations actually have policies that could address bullying. In addition, a variety of prevention strategies are recommended which require support from management. Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2008) argue HR departments in partnership with management can reconfigure employee evaluation systems to include confidential ratings of multiple areas within organizations in an effort to build a culture that does not tolerate bullying. Resch & Schubinski (1996) recommend organizations review and consider changes in work design, changes in leadership behavior, ways to improve the social position of individuals, and high moral standards in all departments to prevent bullying.

This discourse also sets up another possible paradox for HR professionals because it says that HR professionals need training on how to identify and deal with bullying in the workplace, but as outlined in chapter I, the ambiguous nature of the

concept of workplace bullying makes this virtually impossible. HR professionals are being told through this research that they should, with proper training, be able to identify, prevent, and successfully deal with bullying activities in the workplace. This neglects the fact that bullying is still an ambiguous concept that has conflicting definitions, overlaps conceptually with other similar concepts, and is in a state of denotative hesitancy. These issues, along with the idea that many organizations do not have workplace bullying policies, make it almost impossible for HR professionals to heed this advice. The two dominant discourses in current research on workplace bullying and HR point to some possible paradoxes that could be experienced by HR professionals. The next section discusses these paradoxes and points to important questions concerning how HR professionals actually understand and make sense of their position in bullying situations.

#### HR Professionals, Workplace Bullying, and Paradox

The preceding research points to two possible paradoxes HR professionals could be experiencing in trying to deal with workplace bullying situations. Paradoxes are typically seen as situations where in pursuing one goal, another competing goal enters the situation and works to undermine the first goal (Martin, 2004; Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Paradoxes are different but related to tensions and contradictions. Tension is a term that is typically used to denote a clash of ideas or principles and is seen as more general than paradox (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Contradictions refer to times when one idea is in direct opposition to another (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Paradoxes take these ideas further and point to times, when through interaction, two contradictory views

have to be reconciled but can't be. For example, Stohl & Cheney (2001) point to a classic paradox associated with organizational democracy; in an effort to institutionalize democratic norms, organizations often make their organizations undemocratic. Stohl and Cheney (2001) argue paradoxes are inherent in organizational life. For example, employees could be told to be creative, think outside the box, and be assertive, but only within the structure the organization has created (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Paradoxes like these expose contradictions or oppositions that could complicate an employee's organizational life. The research on workplace bullying as it relates to HR professionals points to two interrelated paradoxes these employees could be experiencing. I have labeled these paradoxes; *defining ambiguity* and *to act or not to act*. In this section, I will first discuss these paradoxes and point to the sensemaking of HR professionals on workplace bullying as a gap in current workplace bullying research. Then I will move to discuss Weick's theory of sensemaking as related to these paradoxes and the HR professional. And lastly, I will pose a research question aimed at understanding the sensemaking of HR professionals and the topic of workplace bullying.

#### *The Paradoxical Position*

It is likely HR professionals are experiencing some contradictions in their professional lives. Because paradoxes are inherent in organizational life, academic research has uncovered many examples of contemporary employees' experiences with paradox. (Martin, 2004; Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Tracy, 2004; Wendt, 1998; Wood & Conrad, 1983). Martin (2004) found that female middle managers deal with paradoxes of structure, powerlessness, agency, and identity. Wood and Conrad

(1983) theorized women in organizations deal with paradoxes related to being a “professional woman”. They argue that due to the stereotypes and meanings around the ideas of being professional and being womanly, the goal of “being a professional” can not be met without violating the goal of “being a woman”. And Cowan and Bochantin (2009) found that female police officers were likely dealing with a similar paradox in regards to motherhood. These women voiced a tension about needing to choose between being an ideal mother and an ideal worker. However, this proved to be a paradox because the female police officer’s maternal qualities were also what made her valued on the job. If she rejected “motherhood”, she would at the same time be rejecting her professional self. HR professionals are likely dealing with similar paradoxes in their working lives. There are at least two paradoxes set up in current literature on workplace bullying and HR professionals. I have labeled these *defining ambiguity* and *to act or not to act*.

*Paradox 1: Defining Ambiguity, a Lack of Clarity*

The current research contends HR professionals need training on how to identify and deal with bullying in the workplace, however the ambiguous nature of the concept of workplace bullying makes this virtually impossible. HR professionals are told they should, with proper training, be able to identify, prevent, and successfully deal with bullying activities in the workplace. However, the ambiguous nature of workplace bullying situations makes it almost impossible for HR professionals to heed this advice. So they are told they must act but they can’t, under the current definitional circumstances, act in a meaningful way. This paradox is an example of a paradox of

agency which concerns an employee's sense of efficacy within the organizational system (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). The goal is to get training to prevent and manage bullying in the workplace. However, they can't receive training on a concept that is not clearly defined. The second paradox centers on HR professionals lack of power.

*Paradox 2: To Act or Not to Act..., a Lack of Power*

HR professionals and the HR department are seen as the organizational actors who are supposed to do something about bullying activities (Glendinning, 2001; Liefoghe & Davey, 2001; Vega & Comer, 2005) however, they do not have the power to adequately deal with bullying. In addition, when they do act to help remedy bullying situations, their actions are perceived as causing further escalation of bullying activities (Ferris, 2004; Lewis & Orford, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). If they work within their power to deal with bullying this causes an escalation in bullying acts. In sum, if they act, negative consequences are likely to result, if they do not act, negative consequences are also likely to result. This paradox is also an example of what Stohl and Cheney (2001) refer to as a paradox of agency which concerns an employee's sense of efficacy within the organizational system. In essence, the goal of acting (because of the low power position), gets in the way of the goal of assisting or helping the employee. This paradox is about HR professionals' effectiveness regarding issues of bullying in the workplace.

These paradoxes suggest HR professionals could be facing unclear or contradictory expectations concerning workplace bullying issues. Stohl and Cheney (2001) contend that "paradoxes are usually surprising, ironic, unintended, contrary to

expectations, and unsettling” (p. 355). Organizational members have been found to respond to and deal with paradox in a variety of ways. For example, they have responded by exiting the organization (Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Wood & Conrad, 1983), using voice or resistance concerning the paradox (Stohl & Cheney, 2001), separating the two goals and vacillating between them (Tracy, 2004), transcending or reframing the paradox so that it is not seen as oppositional (Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Wood & Conrad, 1986), and by using humor (Martin, 2004). Generally, when paradoxes are uncovered or realized, they either lead to some change or an upholding of the status quo (Czarniawska, 1997). Katz and Kahn (1966) suggested that role ambiguity or role conflict could result from contradictory expectations in organizations making employees more susceptible to burnout and stress. How an HR professional responds to and deals with these possible paradoxes will be affected by how they make sense of the paradox, themselves, the organization, and countless additional factors. Weick (1995) suggests that sensemaking is a necessity during situations of ambiguity or paradox. The next section will discuss Weick’s theory of sensemaking as it related to HR professionals and workplace bullying.

### Sensemaking

Weick (1995) contends that we attempt to make sense when “someone notices something, in an ongoing flow of events that does not fit” (p. 2). For the HR professional, this could be the position they are told to take on workplace bullying by academics and the popular press and the position they can feasibly take in their organization, i.e. the preceding paradoxes. Sensemaking is literally the making of our

understanding on events or situations (Weick, 1995). Through sensemaking we structure our realities and these realities direct our interpretations. The act of sensemaking is retrospective or after the fact (Weick, 1995). This means that we make sense of or give meaning to events or situations only after these events have occurred. Sensemaking is about mean-making, or the creation of meaning, and is thus concerned with process not outcome (Weick, 1995). As mentioned above, the process of making sense is a necessity during situations of ambiguity or paradox. Weick (1995) contends that sense-making is interactional or the idea that we make sense of our experiences through our interactions with others. The HR professional could find themselves dealing with paradoxes associated with workplace bullying, how HR professionals make sense of their position in these situations is an important question that has yet to be answered. How do HR professionals understand and negotiate these paradoxes? How do they construct their position and actions in workplace bullying situations?

To date we have very little research that actually engages HR professionals to better understand their sensemaking on workplace bullying. Based on the preceding, the following research question was posed:

RQ3: How do HR professionals make sense of workplace bullying situations and their position in these situations?

#### The HR Professional, Workplace Bullying, and Policy Issues

As alluded to in the preceding argument, these paradoxical issues get magnified when the phenomenon the HR professional is dealing with is ambiguous. As detailed in chapter I, workplace bullying's definitional issues could cause considerable difficulty for



HR professionals tasked with addressing personnel issues. And, as detailed above, an important aspect of how HR professionals make sense of workplace bullying and their position in these situations could be affected by the existence of an organizational policy on workplace bullying. To date, we have no research that indicates how many U.S. organizations have workplace bullying policies that apply to American workers or what these policies entail. In an effort to demonstrate the need for research on policy issues associated with workplace bullying, I discuss the importance of organizational policy in regards to the actions of HR personnel, and then detail the very limited academic research on workplace bullying policies.

#### *Organizational Power and Policy*

I have been arguing throughout this chapter that HR professionals likely deal with allegations of bullying and bullying activities from a power deficient position and one of the reasons for this position could be the absence of organizational policy on bullying. Organizational policies are clear statements about where an organization stands on certain issues relevant to the organization (Baron & Kreps, 1999). Policies guide employees' behaviors and point to how the organization expects the employee to act or work within the organization (Baron & Kreps, 1999). Theoretically, being able to point to a written policy governing bullying activities could greatly improve the HR professional's ability to respond to and deal with allegations of bullying. If there is a policy then HR professionals and others in the organization are essentially given permission to talk about the issue. Policies generally give organizational issues legitimacy and this legitimacy enables HR professionals to investigate complaints of

bullying and, in a sense, act in a concrete way (Richards & Daley, 2003). To date, we have scant research on how many U.S. organizations actually have policies that could be seen as governing bullying activities and what these policies might entail. However, there is some research beginning to emerge in European countries who have adopted particular federal legislation that protects against bullying-type activities (see Salin, 2008).

#### *Workplace Bullying Policy Research*

In my extensive search on workplace bullying policy, I found only one article that actually directly addressed bullying policies and their impact. Salin (2008) surveyed over 400 Finnish municipalities asking questions on the existence of written anti-bullying policies, preventative measures taken to prevent bullying, and the performance of the municipality in regards to bullying. She also conducted a content analysis of actual bullying policies used by these municipalities. She found that generally the municipalities copied and pasted policy wording from other organizations and did not adapt these to their specific municipality. She speculated these policies lack the detail to successfully address bullying and this could be a sign the municipalities had a low commitment to the anti-bullying policy. In addition, her results also point to idea that the municipalities generally incorporated an anti-bullying policy in response to bullying activity instead of as a preventative measure. She found HR departments often sent the target back to managers to actually deal with the bullying. She notes, as others have, that this can be counterproductive because managers are often the perpetrators of bullying activities (Namie & Namie, 2003; Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002; Salin, 2008).

Although Salin's (2008) study is one of very few studies that actually investigated the use of anti-bullying policies there are many researchers calling for organizations to adopt these policies (Glendinning, 2001; Mathieson, Hanson, & Burns, 2006; Richards & Daley, 2003).

Much workplace bullying research has tended to center on prescriptions for organizations in the area of policy. Mathieson, et al. (2006) suggest information on bullying should be distributed to employees, surveys should be conducted on the prevalence of bullying, and informal and formal appraisal discussions should be used to gauge bullying activities. Richards & Daley (2003) even point to what a good workplace bullying policy should entail; a statement of commitment, a definition of bullying, complaint procedures, and who to contact if one is bullied. However, this research only outlines prescriptions for organizations; it does not tell us if organizations actually use this advice. It also does not indicate what actual anti-bullying policies entail and what HR professionals think about these policies. It is important that we begin to answer these questions if we are to further understand how organizations and HR professionals in the U.S. see and understand workplace bullying. To this end, the following research questions were posed:

RQ4: Do organizations utilize organizational policies to deal with workplace bullying?

RQ5: What is the organization communicating about workplace bullying to their workers through these policies?

RQ6: How do HR professionals interpret and understand these policies?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Workplace bullying has primarily been investigated on the individual and organizational levels through a post-positivist lens. This research has typically sought to uncover causes, effects, and prevention strategies. Research on workplace bullying has primarily centered on defining and measuring bullying behaviors, identifying psychological and demographic characteristics of bullies and victims, and identifying explanatory models (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Niedl, 1995; Salin, 2003; Zapf, 1999). However, this is beginning to change.

Recently, there has been a call to understand workplace bullying from a more interpretive perspective (Jones, 2006; Liefvooghe & Olafsson, 1999; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Rayner, Sheehan, & Barker, 1999; Tracy, et al., 2005). An interpretative approach to bullying research could add much needed depth and detail to our knowledge of workplace bullying and the bullying situation. This is because an interpretive approach involves understanding and interpreting the situated experiences of individuals through qualitative methods. The interpretive researcher believes in situated social realities and the idea that all knowledge is subjective and local and can be gained through observation and interaction with human beings (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002; Miller, 2005). In this sense, the researcher is the instrument used to understand social worlds and objectivity is not a goal. Understanding workplace bullying through an interpretive lens could

drastically expand our understanding of this communication phenomenon. Because I am interested in an in-depth exploration of the human resource professional's sense-making and experiences, an interpretive approach seemed to be the most appropriate way to begin to address my research questions. This is because an interpretive approach allows the HR professional the space to voice their experiences and ideas on bullying, thus revealing how they have made sense of their experiences (Weick, 1995). In addition, Crawford (2001) contends that when workplace bullying is assessed on a case by case basis, it is typically taken more seriously. An interpretive approach allows us to better understand the HR professionals' experiences in a way that aggregated data would not.

As argued in chapter II, we have little knowledge on how HR professionals construct their position and actions in workplace bullying situations. This is an important perspective to begin to engage because how HR professionals understand and interpret workplace bullying and bullying situations could have significant repercussions for how workplace bullying is understood and dealt with in organizations. By engaging HR professionals we can begin to understand their perspective on this phenomenon. This chapter will describe my method for understanding workplace bullying from the HR professional's perspective. I will first detail information on key informants and how I gained access to the HR professionals who participated in this study, and then discuss data collection and data analysis procedures.

#### Key Informants, Access, and Participants

I drew both my key informants and the majority of HR professional participants from the membership of a large human resource management association located in the

south. According to Patton (2002), key informants “are people who are particularly knowledgeable about the inquiry setting and articulate about their knowledge--people whose insight can prove particularly useful in helping an observer understand what is happening and why” (p.321). The Anywhere Human Resource Management Association (AHRMA) is a not-for-profit organization which is dedicated to the advancement of the human resource management profession. AHRMA is a local affiliate of the national Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) and boasts over 800 members. AHRMA membership includes a wide variety of human resource professionals in medium to large-sized organizations and employees who work in small businesses with HR as one of their many responsibilities. Because of this, AHRMA has a broad membership base representing HR professionals from all facets of the HR profession from a variety of organizations. AHRMA’s articulated mission is to “promote professionalism, effectiveness, and understanding in the Human Resource Management field by offering members a wide variety of professional development opportunities and a common forum for sharing ideas and experiences”. This professional organization was an appropriate place to identify key informants and draw participants because the members represent a wide variety of organizations and types of HR professionals. Because I am a member of AHRMA, I had access to prospective key informants and participants.

To gain a better understanding of the AHRMA population and their issues and experiences with workplace bullying, I conducted key informant interviews with a past president of AHRMA and the VP of Membership. I recruited these two informants

through an email requesting a meeting (see Appendix A). Both key informants agreed and were able to provide me with valuable feedback on possible issues and questions associated with workplace bullying. I conducted these two interviews at the beginning of the data collection process to get a preliminary understanding of HR professionals' sensemaking on workplace bullying and gain valuable feedback and advice on interview questions (see Appendix B for a copy of the interview guide). Both key informants believed the interview questions were well-worded and would elicit thoughtful feedback from HR professionals. These two key informants also served as access points to the AHRMA membership population.

### Sampling

I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants for this study (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Purposive sampling refers to the idea that participants are deliberately selected on the basis of specific characteristics (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). In this case, participants were deliberately selected because they were HR professionals. This type of sampling is typical of qualitative studies because the focus is not on a normally distributed population and representativeness of the sample but is instead on a specific, unique social phenomenon (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). A fruitful way to generate these types of participants is through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling "yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest" (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002, p. 124). Lindloff and Taylor (2002) contend snowball sampling may be the only way to reach very specific populations. The central

hallmark of snowball sampling is that the interviewee plays a referral role and provides access to possible participants with the special characteristics under investigation.

Using purposive and snowball sampling, I recruited the HR professionals who participated in the study through three main strategies; 1) AHRMA Linked In® group request, 2) tapping into the networks of AHRMA's past president and VP of Membership, and 3) tapping into my own professional and personal network. I first attempted to recruit current AHRMA members through a message posted on the organization's Linked In® website. Linked in® is a professional networking web tool that enables organizations to create and maintain networking groups for their members. AHRMA recently created such a group for their membership. The AHRMA Linked in® group includes over 300 members of the association. To gain access to the Linked in® group you must be a current member of AHRMA in good standing. It is typical for members to post requests and news through the Linked In® website. When a member posts a request these are not only posted on the Linked In® website, but are also emailed to all of the members. To generate possible participants, I posted general information about the study and a request for participation (see Appendix C). My first request using the Linked in® website helped me garner nine participants. A follow up posting about a month after the first elicited an additional six participants. This recruiting technique allowed me to garner a total of 15 HR professional participants.

I also obtained participants by tapping into the professional networks of one of AHRMA's past presidents and the VP of Membership. After being interviewed themselves, both members emailed the HR professionals in their networks (including



non-AHRMA members) and asked them to participate in the study. This recruitment email included the same general information as was given in the AHRMA Linked in® request (see Appendix C). The HR professionals who wanted to participate emailed me directly for more information. This recruitment technique allowed me to access two additional participants. Lastly, I used my personal networks to generate possible participants. I sent an email to my friends, co-workers, and professional contacts asking them if they would forward the participation request to any HR professional they knew who might like to participate in the study. This email also very closely resembled the request detailed in Appendix C. This request helped to generate an additional 14 participants. After each of the interviews, I asked the HR professionals if they knew of any other HR professional who might want to participate (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). This technique resulted in an additional three participants. The above sampling techniques resulted in a total of 36 participants. This sample size proved to be similar to other organizational qualitative research projects (Cowan & Hoffman, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006).

To be eligible for participation, the HR professionals had to be at least 18 years or older and perform general HR responsibilities. This sampling technique yielded HR professionals from a wide variety of organizations and levels of authority (see Appendix E for detailed chart). The majority of the participants (n=19) were considered mid-level HR managers in small to medium organizations. These participants wore many HR hats in their organizations including training and orientation, benefits, employee relations, compensation, recruiting, compliance, and sometimes even payroll. The majority had at

least one person who worked for them and handled administrative duties as well as assisted them in performing their myriad of job responsibilities. Six of the participants were considered mid-level management in larger organizations and tended to do less administrative work and more managing of the various functions listed above. Six of the participants worked for large organizations and reported they would be considered HR specialists in specific areas including recruiting (n=4), compensation (n=1), benefits (n=1), and training (n=1). Two of the participants reported they were low-level assistants to HR managers and three more reported they were executive level (VP) employees in HR. The majority of participants (n=13) had been in the HR industry for 5-10 years, three reported 0-4 years, seven reported 11-15 years, three reported between 16-20 years and ten reported 20+ years. Close to half (n=15) of the participants reported they had special HR certifications (PHR, SPHR). And the majority (n=28) reported they were members of some regional or national human resources management association.

All of the participants were assured confidentiality and before the interview began were asked to sign a consent form approved by the appropriate Situational Review Board (IRB) at Texas A&M (see Appendix D). The consent form was first thoroughly explained to the participants before they made a decision to sign and participate. After making the decision whether or not to participate and signing the consent form, I reminded the HR professional that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to and could discontinue the interview at any time without this affecting their current or future relations with Texas A&M University or their organizations. The next section will detail data collection procedures.

## Data Collection

Data for this study was collected by using narrative/respondent interviews (Lindloff and Taylor, 2002). Interviews were the most appropriate method to attempt to understand HR professionals' perceptions and experiences associated with workplace bullying because they allowed the participants to detail, in their own words, their experiences. Allowing HR professionals to talk about their experiences helped to reveal how they had individually made sense of and understood issues associated with workplace bullying (Creswell, 1998; Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). In this section, I will briefly detail my data collection procedures for both the interviews and the organizational policies associated with workplace bullying.

### *Narrative/Respondent Interviews*

I first conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with all the research participants. The interviews took place outside of the work environment, when possible, and at a location in which the HR professional felt comfortable talking about their experiences. The majority of the interviews were done face-to-face (n=26). I believe this method is the best way to develop a rapport with the HR professional and attempt to meet both of our needs. However, because of the snowball sampling technique and distance, I had to conduct 10 of the interviews via telephone. There are varying opinions on the use of mediated technologies in carrying out in-depth interviewing. Some contend telephone interviews are not as good because of the lack of visual cues and the absence of rich nonverbal communication, others have found that telephone interviews can be just as intimate and engaging as face-to-face interviews (Sunderland, 1999).

Although I personally prefer face-to-face interviewing, I did have to sacrifice this format in 10 of the interviews because of distance. While conducting the interviews, I found no real differences due to the interview medium used. The telephone interviews lasted about as long as the face-to-face and the interviewees opened up, sharing stories and their experiences.

All of the HR professionals, except one, consented to have the interview audio-recorded. I made the decision to audio-record the interviews, if possible, because I felt this would allow the interviews to more closely resemble a conversation and I wanted to capture the whole interview in the participant's own words. I also wrote down brief notes, thoughts, and questions when needed during the interview. For the HR professional who decided against being audio-recorded, I assured her that the audio recorder was not a necessity and that we could do the interview without the recording device. She consented and I took detailed notes throughout the entire interview. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes with the majority taking about 60 minutes.

The one-on-one interviews I conducted were a mix of what Lindloff and Taylor (2002) describe as "respondent" and "narrative" interviews (see Appendix B for interview guide). The interviews were considered "narrative" in nature because I asked the HR professionals to detail their stories regarding their experiences relating to workplace bullying (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). I asked these questions first to get a better understanding of the HR professionals' sense making and experiences with bullying. Then, I asked a series of open-ended questions to gain an even deeper understanding of how they have made sense of the idea of workplace bullying and how

they understood and interpreted these situations. To do this, I employed what Lindloff and Taylor refer to as a “respondent” interview. The main goal of a respondent interview is to elicit open-ended responses to interview questions. Lindloff and Taylor (2002) contend that “respondent interviews are a lens for viewing the intersection of an individual’s internal states (social attitudes and motives) with the outer environment” (p. 179). Using a respondent interview format allowed me to start to understand the HR professional’s meanings and opinions associated with workplace bullying. Some contend that narrative and respondent interviews allow a dialogue in which interviewees and interviewers jointly construct meaning (Mishler, 1986). And others theorize that we make sense of each others’ questions and responses by engaging each other in dialogue (Pacanowsky, 1988) and sense is made through these interactions (Weick, 1995). Because of this, I strived to build a rapport with the HR professionals and encouraged a sense of empowerment by framing the interview as a conversation where they were encouraged to ask questions and raise issues not covered.

Throughout the data collection process I also made code notes and memos to myself about what I thought I was seeing emerge through the interviews. After each interview, I would immediately record my thoughts on our conversation. Right away I started seeing reoccurrences of particular areas including bullying behaviors, investigation processes, and roles the HR professionals felt they occupied in bullying situations. Saturation was reached in most areas around the 28<sup>th</sup> or 29<sup>th</sup> interview. However, I continued interviewing until my contact list was exhausted. Because these remaining seven interviews reinforced many of the ideas already expressed in prior

interviews, I felt confident saturation was reached. At this point I felt confident leaving the field because I was experiencing what Lindloff and Taylor (2002) refer to as “interpretive confidence” (p. 129). Interpretive confidence refers to the idea that investigators can feel confident leaving the field when there is a “taken-for-grantedness” or the researcher is no longer surprised by the participant’s understandings and meanings, the researcher is seeing saturation or no new explanations and much repetition during interviews, and the researcher has a heightened confidence in their interpretation based on checking interpretations with participants (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002, p. 224). Along with the interviews, I also collected organizational policies on bullying from the participants.

#### *Collection of Texts*

RQ5 asked what organizations seem to be communicating about workplace bullying to their workers through their workplace bullying policies. In an effort to answer RQ5, I asked all of the interviewees for a copy of any organizational document they felt talked about or somehow addressed workplace bullying. I asked if I could have a copy of these documents during the last phase of the interview which concentrated on policies associated with workplace bullying (see Section IV in Appendix B). Only after the HR professional indicated they had policies or organizational documents they felt addressed workplace bullying did I ask for a copy of the document. Fourteen of the thirty-six HR professionals who participated in the study sent me a total of eighteen organizational documents through electronic mail. The remaining twenty-two HR professionals either indicated they did not have a policy or document they felt addressed

workplace bullying or could not email these to me because of confidentiality issues. These fourteen HR professionals emailed me a total eighteen policies. The texts I received served as my primary data set for answering RQ5.

### *Transcription of Interviews*

Once the texts were collected and the interviews were completed, a small grant provided by the Texas A&M University Communication Department allowed me to have twenty-two of the interviews transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. After these transcriptions were completed, I went through each interview checking them for accuracy. I transcribed the rest of the interviews (14) by hand. This resulted in 352 single-spaced pages of analyzable text. As I transcribed, I made more notes and started to see more categories emerging. I recorded what I was seeing, started to detail possible categories or themes, and I made note of where the quotations appeared in the transcripts. The next section will detail my data analysis techniques.

### Data Analysis

After conducting interviews with the HR professionals and collecting the organizational documents HR professionals perceived as addressing bullying in the workplace, I analyzed these two data sets in an effort to answer my research questions. In this section, I will first discuss grounded theory, the data analysis technique used for analyzing the interview data. I will then discuss thematic analysis, the technique used for analyzing the textual data (i.e. organizational documents).

### *Grounded Theory Analysis*

Grounded theory analysis is a commonly used data analysis method which helps researchers' code participant responses into themes, which eventually leads to situated theories on experiences. This data analysis technique was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later refined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Strauss and Corbin contend that grounded theory is "inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). This means that a grounded theory is a theory that is built from data from the actual phenomenon under investigation rather than logically deduced from existing knowledge. Theory develops through an inductive process where, "data collection, analysis, and theory stand in a reciprocal relationship with each other" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). In this sense, the resulting theory is "grounded" in the specific data under investigation. Charmaz (2000) later clarified a constructivist grounded theory approach which calls into question the positivist underpinnings of earlier grounded theory techniques. Charmaz explains, "constructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings" (2000, p. 510). This perspective on grounded theory highlights the subjective experiences of participants and does not assume the researcher can or should be objective in the process of research. Charmaz (2000) contends grounded theory data analysis strategies should be viewed as flexible and not rigidly enforced. Specifically grounded theory's data analysis procedures move us



toward “the development, refinement, and interrelation of concepts” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). This is accomplished through simultaneous data collection and analysis.

### *Open Coding*

Data analysis, when using grounded theory, consists of a two-step data coding process (open and axial). During open coding the data is broken down and emerging concepts are labeled. This is done by breaking down and taking apart sentences, paragraphs and asking questions like “What is this?” or “What does this represent?”, then giving the phenomenon a name. During the open coding phase, I used the Atlas ti 6.0 coding software to help organize the emerging codes. I decided to use a qualitative coding software program because of the volume of data this study generated. This software allows the user to more clearly and systematically organize emerging codes. Additionally, users can more easily see connections between codes because of the software’s functions and tools. Others have used similar programs with much success (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Lutgen-Sandvik (2008 & 2005) used a qualitative coding software program to organize and label interview data associated with bullying resistance strategies and responses to bullying situations.

I began by open coding RQ1 and RQ2 (i.e. what does bullying mean to HR professionals and how does this meaning affect how it is dealt with in organizations). With these two questions in mind, I read through the transcripts identifying and labeling emerging codes related to these questions. Along with my interview notes, I used the software to help me organize the concepts I saw emerging. First, I labeled all of the behaviors that the HR professionals talked about as being bullying and what made those

behaviors bullying or what turned them into bullying. This process generated 65 open codes related to RQ1 and 15 related to RQ2. Often, with the behaviors seen as bullying, I was able to label the behavior with the term used by the HR professional. For example, “nit-picking”, “piling on work”, and “threats” were some of the behaviors mentioned by name. Others I gave labels that seemed to represent the behavior being described including, “nonverbal”, “being isolated”, and “pawning off work”. Additionally, some of the open codes for the things that turned these behaviors into bullying were “perception is what matters”, “the bullied look” and others. I then used the same process to open code RQs 3-6.

After reading through the transcripts and labeling all of the behaviors that were seen as bullying, what turned these behaviors into bullying and how bullying was dealt with by the HR professionals, I read through the transcripts again with an eye toward how the HR professionals made sense of bullying situations and their position in them (RQ3). This process resulted in 82 total open codes associated with RQ3. Thirty-three of these codes were about how the HR professionals made sense of bullying and 49 concerned their position in bullying situations. Some examples of the making sense codes included, “bullying is a personality issue”, “targets are sensitive”, “bullying is a lack of communication skills”, “bullying is a misperception”, etc. And examples of the position codes included, “counselor”, “control emotions”, “feel emotions”, “on the organization’s side”, “model employee”, etc. After reading though the transcripts twice and labeling areas that seemed to be associated with RQ3, I began another focused reading with RQs 4-6 in mind. This resulted in 17 codes associated with RQ4, seven

associated with RQ5, and 16 associated with RQ6. Some examples of these codes includes; “yes, we have a bullying policy”, “no ‘bullying’ policy”, “bullying policy = respect policy”, “no policy needed”, “bullying doesn’t fit”, “policies designed to protect workers”, etc. The complete open coding process resulted in 202 open codes. I then moved to the second step of the process, axial coding.

### *Axial Coding*

During axial coding a researcher further develops the categories identified during open coding by identifying larger themes in the emerging categories. During axial coding the researcher “makes connections between a category and its subcategories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.97). This can be done in a variety of ways including comparing the themes uncovered in open coding for similarities and differences. During the axial coding phase of this project, I turned my attention back to RQ1 and RQ2 and looked for relationships and similarities and differences between the 80 open codes. I did this by printing out the quotations associated with each category and more precisely articulating the category, determining if there were sub-categories and its relationships with other categories. The Atlas ti 6.0 software package allows the user to generate reports on the open codes the user has identified and labeled. One of these reports allows the user to print all of the quotations associated with a particular category. I printed out this report for all 80 open codes. I then put these codes into three different piles; behaviors, forms (what turned the behaviors into bullying), and how bullying is dealt with. I went through each pile separately asking myself questions like, “Are these

codes the same?”, “If they are the same, how are they the same?”, “Are they different? “If so how?”

Some of these relationships were very apparent. For example, the open coding process revealed a few different types of power related to bullying; “power because of age”, “power because of success”, “power because of ganging up”, “power through connections”, “power through knowledge”, “power through experience”, “power through position”, and “power through tenure”. Power became a category related to how HR professionals define bullying and the above were found to be sub-categories in the larger power category. The relationships between other codes were not as clear as the power example above. Codes like “every situation is different”, “bullying is hard to define”, and “bullying is hard to pin down” all seemed different at first glance but, as I started reading through the quotations associated with each category it became apparent these were all the saying the same thing about defining bullying, that it was complicated. Therefore, these categories were subsumed under a category I labeled, “It’s complicated”. I repeated this process, looking for the relationships between the rest of the codes. This coding process resulted in 12 bullying behavior categories, 6 bullying characteristics, and 3 categories related to dealing with bullying. These will all be discussed in detail in chapter IV. I then repeated this axial coding process for RQ3-6.

As with RQs 1 and 2, I printed out all of the quotations associated with each open code related to RQ3 then placed these in four separate piles; those codes associated with making sense, those associated with how HR position saw their position, those associated with how HR felt upper management saw their position, and those associated

with how HR felt targets saw their position. As I did with RQs1 and 2, I read through all of the quotations, asking myself how these open codes were similar and different, were they talking about the same things, just in different ways, if so what was this more general idea and how should it be labeled? For example, many of the open codes referred to bullying as a management issue, just in slightly different ways, because of this the open codes, “manager’s style”, “manager’s skills”, “bullying is a management issue” all were subsumed under a more general category I labeled, “Bullying a management and management style issue”. I repeated this process going through all four of the piles mentioned above. This coding process resulted in 5 general categories associated with how HR professionals make sense of bullying situations, 5 categories related to the roles HR professionals play, 5 categories related to how HR professionals felt upper management saw their position, and 2 categories related to how they felt the targets saw their position. I repeated this process for RQs 4-6. The findings associated with RQ3 will be reported in chapter V and the findings for RQs 4-6 will be reported in chapter VI.

#### *Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis was utilized to gain a better understanding of the organizational policies associated with bullying and what they could be communicating to workers (RQ5). Thematic analysis enables the researcher to identify themes in texts (Owen, 1984). Thematic analysis was an appropriate tool to use when analyzing the organizational policies because they helped me interpret what organizations are communicating about bullying to their employees (Howry & Wood, 2001; Owen, 1984).

It has been used in many projects with the goal of uncovering threads or themes within texts. Examples of studies that have used thematic analysis range from themes in relational communication (Owen, 1984) to themes in the rhetoric of third wave feminists (Howry & Wood, 2001).

Thematic analysis employs three criteria to help identify themes in texts; these include reoccurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Howry and Wood (2001) describe reoccurrence as the, “restatement of meanings even through specific language varies” (p. 325). An example of reoccurrence in organizational texts designed to address bullying could be: “combating bullying is important in organization” and “this organization takes allegations of bullying seriously”. The second criterion is repetition and is seen as the explicit duplication of the same words and phrases. An example of repetition would be using the words “anti-bullying policy” or “bullying acts” repeatedly in the texts. The last criterion is forcefulness. It can be seen as “emphasis” (p. 326). Examples of forcefulness include underlining, boldfacing, italicizing, and using exclamation points.

To identify the themes present in the organizational texts provided by the HR professionals, I first read all of the texts to gain a better understanding of what they entailed. I then re-read the texts and focused on any reoccurring ideas, repetition of words and phrases, and indicators of forcefulness (Owen, 1984). During this more focused reading I uncovered two themes; bullying does not rise to the level of illegal harassment, and only some behaviors are explicitly prohibited. Additionally, I identified another theme due to the absence of specific textual cues. I labeled this theme; anti-

bullying measures are not a priority. These themes will be discussed in detail in chapter VI. The next three chapters (IV-VI) will detail the findings of this analysis.

#### Trustworthiness of Analysis and Findings

To determine the trustworthiness of my findings I employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for evaluating qualitative research: credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility concerns whether the study's findings "ring true" for the study participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study should be judged as credible if the participants, after reading the findings feel I have correctly articulated their experiences. In order to determine if my analysis "rang true" for the HR professionals I spoke with, I approached seven of the participants via electronic mail and asked them for their feedback on an abbreviated version of the findings chapters. This feedback, also called member validation (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002) or member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) takes the research findings back to the participants to understand if the participants feel they are accurate. If the participants feel the researcher's interpretation is in sync with their experiences, this is seen as a reflection of the study's validity. These seven participants had shown an interest in the member check role during their interview and agreed to read the findings and give feedback. The abbreviated version of the findings chapters contained the same content with repetitive examples removed. My request to the seven HR professionals was worded as follows:

Hope this email finds you well! I just wanted to give you an update and ask you for one last favor. One of the ways researchers "check" to see if their interpretations coincide with their participants' interpretations is to ask those who

participated to review the findings and give feedback. I have put together an abbreviated findings report and was wondering if you would be interested in reading it and giving me your feedback.

Four of the seven quickly responded to my email and agreed to read over the findings and give me feedback within a week. The feedback I received from these four participants was focused into two areas: a) that the interpretation did represent their experiences (some mentioned that I “got it right” and the findings were “exactly my experience”) and b) a sense of surprise that other HR professionals also had the same experiences and shared views of bullying. The HR professionals seemed to be satisfied with the analysis and the findings of this study and, indeed, felt like the interpretation “rang true” with their experiences.

Another criterion in establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings is transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability refers to the idea that the researcher has supplied sufficient detail “so that the reader can make the decision about whether to apply the findings elsewhere to a different group or context” (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 298). To satisfy this criterion I provided detailed descriptions of each of the categories that emerged from this analysis. This includes detailed categories associated with how the HR professionals defined and understood workplace bullying, how they made sense of bullying situations and their position in them, what bullying policies were communicating, and what HR professionals felt they were communicating. I included numerous excerpts and examples of each of these categories from the



interview transcripts or the bullying policies themselves to provide as “thick” a description (Geertz, 1973) as possible so that these findings could easily be transferred.

The last criterion used to establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings is dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability concerns whether an external check can be conducted on the study’s analysis process, more specifically, an outsider should be able to see how I went from open coding to axial coding and finally to the core categories described in the findings chapters. It follows that if an external check can be made on the analysis process, then the study’s findings should be seen as dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To demonstrate the dependability of this analysis, I included detailed descriptions of the open coding and axial coding processes and categories (see above) as well as excerpts from the interview transcripts that demonstrate content and tone. The next three chapters (IV-VI) will discuss the findings of this study in detail.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS: HOW HR PROFESSIONALS DEFINE WORKPLACE BULLYING

The data analysis process detailed in chapter III resulted in voluminous findings concerning how HR professionals understand and make sense of workplace bullying. These findings will be the subject of chapters IV-VI. This chapter will focus on how the HR professionals defined and understood the concept of bullying, chapter V will detail how they made sense of workplace bullying and their position in bullying situations, and chapter VI will discuss how HR professionals understood and utilized workplace bullying policies. Chapter VII will be devoted to interpretation of these findings, implications, and conclusions.

#### Bullying Behaviors from the HR Perspective

This chapter will discuss, in detail, how the HR professionals defined and understood workplace bullying. My analysis revealed that most of the HR professionals I spoke with believed that bullying did exist in organizations. Thirty-four of the 36 HR professionals I spoke with believed bullying happened in organizations and nine of the 36 actually talked about being bullied themselves. The two people who did not believe that bullying existed in workplaces instead felt these were issues of communication style and fit with the organization's culture. I will detail both of these perspectives in this chapter. First, this chapter will detail the results of my interviews with the HR professionals who did believe that bullying existed in organizations and their responses

and shed light on RQ's 1 & 2. Then, I will detail the perspectives of the two HR professionals who did not believe that bullying was a phenomenon in contemporary organizations.

RQ1 asked what workplace bullying meant to human resource professionals. My analysis revealed that the majority of HR professionals see workplace bullying in similar ways as academics and targets however, there are important differences that shed light on their perspective. My analysis revealed the idea that HR professionals agree on the types of behaviors that are considered bullying however, they differed in what they saw as the forms of bullying or what elements actually turn these behaviors into a situation they would label "bullying". I will first discuss the behaviors the HR professionals saw as bullying behaviors then I will detail the specific forms that transform these behaviors into bullying from the HR perspective.

The HR professionals I spoke with described a variety of behaviors they considered to be bullying in the workplace (see Table 1 for summary). Specifically they talked about a wide variety of negative verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors, as well as; withholding information, rumors/gossip, undermining, inconsistent/unfair treatment, piling on work, teasing, being isolated, pawning off work, petty behaviors, belittling behaviors, and intimidating behaviors. I will detail each of these categories below.

#### *Negative Verbal and Nonverbal Communication*

The HR professionals clearly felt that bullying is accomplished through verbal and nonverbal communication. Mina commented, "I would have to look at

everything...the body language and the words that are being said”. The HR people indicated some more specific categories at times to detail these behaviors including “intimidation, aggressive behaviors, and threats”. These are talked about in more detail below but, at their very essence are negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

Table 1

## Bullying Behavior Codes

Code Name	Description	Frequency
Negative Verbal Communication	Negative spoken communication acts	28
Negative Nonverbal Communication	Negative unspoken communication acts	23
Withholding Information	Not giving target information needed to do job or to get work assignments completed	10
Rumors/Gossip	Spreading of hearsay or untruths	7
Undermining	Behaviors that are intended to weaken or undercut the target or others; impossible deadlines, constant criticism, ridiculing work, sabotaging work, false allegations, etc.	15
Inconsistent/Unfair Treatment	Treating people differently when there without reason	9
Teasing	Poking fun at another at their expense, joking about the target, mocking	7
Isolating Employees	Intentionally isolating an employee from others and ganging up on them	8
Pawning Off Work	Pushing work onto other people	4
Petty Behavior	Behaviors that show little concern for others, are rude and impolite based on societal standards	17
Belittling Behavior	Behaviors enacted to mock, ridicule, or disparage another employee	22
Intimidating Behavior	Threatening behavior, aggressive behavior, and threats	32

### *Negative Verbal Communication*

These behaviors were negative spoken communication to the target or just using these behaviors in general. Chelsea talked about someone who “whines loudly”, Jaime and others mentioned “verbal altercations”, “verbal abuse” and “abusive language”, and Betty, Jackson, Phyllis and others mentioned “yelling, screaming, raising voice, that kind of stuff”. Phyllis explained these behaviors as “telling and directing people without concern for them as humans or their schedule...very directive, not listening”. Alison mentioned “control types of statements”, Alejandra talked about behaviors like “calling you names” or “we are not going to talk to him or her today”. Pat mentioned “talking to you harshly”, Teri went further when she commented, “It is about the things people say, phrasing” and Doug mentioned “humiliating someone”. These are just a few of the areas of negative spoken communication that were mentioned as bullying behaviors.

### *Negative Nonverbal Communication*

Negative nonverbal communication referred to negative unspoken communication acts. They alluded to tone of voice, nonverbal looks, facial expressions, and body language. Teri and Jean both mentioned, “tone of voice and body language”, Tori commented it was, “glaring”, Calvin felt “it is about the things people don’t say” and Ted said he felt bullying “is in the delivery”. Additionally, Trianna said, “I think it is facial expressions, you know, the glares...”, and Kerry spoke to nonverbal communication when she commented, “sometimes it was not what the person says but it is how they are saying it...”. Chris echoed this idea when he said, “what they do and what they don’t do...watch for reaction...”. Tyson pointed to body language when he

commented on “how they would posture themselves” and Teri felt you could “simply watch someone’s responses to the other person” to see bullying behaviors. Not only were general negative verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors seen as bullying behaviors but the HR professionals also considered withholding information, rumors/gossip, undermining, inconsistent/unfair treatment, piling on work, teasing, being isolated, pawning off work, petty behaviors, belittling behaviors, and intimidating behaviors as bullying. These behaviors will be discussed in detail in the following section.

#### *Withholding Information*

Withholding information referred to not giving the target information they needed to do their job or get work assignments completed properly. For example, Ted talked about withholding information as bullying when he commented, “When someone has an opportunity and almost a responsibility to assist someone in a project or endeavor they hold that intelligence or that data expertise they knowingly and purposely with hold that. They go to the person and say hey I could have helped with that if you had just asked. I think that person was providing very passive obstacles to completion of projects”. Jose said, commenting on what constitutes bullying behaviors, “they may decide to withhold information from you”. And Jaime commented, “Well, I kind of think of when a supervisor holds information out on a subordinate, I think this is a form of bullying.” Likewise, Marty pointed to withholding information as a bullying behavior, “the bullying style I’ve seen over the several years really has more to do with lack of sharing available information so that he who has the knowledge is king”. And Jean also

pointed out bullying is, “Well it is like I know and you don’t. It is a guarding of the information”. And lastly, Stephen simply said, “withholding information” as a bullying behavior. Withholding information seemed to be a power play or a means to demonstrate that the target or others are less powerful than the bully. Also, it seems clear that the withholding of information is done intentionally to make life hard for the target or others. The HR professionals also felt gossip and rumors constituted bullying behaviors.

#### *Rumors/Gossip*

The HR professionals identified rumors and gossip as bullying behaviors. The spreading of untruths or hearsay and the negative connotations of these untruths were what the HR professionals saw as gossip. For example, when asked what he considered bullying, Donald answered, “telling non-truths about someone we would put all that in that category. Gossip, basically”. And Kelly commented that bullying could be, “talking behind his back or making him look bad in front of his peers”. Trianna also described a possible bullying behavior as, “is she is going to talk about me or she is going to come up with something negative to speak with others about me”. And Calvin talked about rumors and gossip as bullying behaviors when he explained,

Let’s say that they saw someone over the weekend with someone and it was a weird situation and it is their personal business but now they are talking with their co-workers and they are spreading rumors and gossip. That is just harassment; you are making that person feel uncomfortable in the work environment.

Not only did the HR professionals feel rumors and gossip could be bullying behaviors but, undermining another’s work was mentioned as well.

### *Undermining*

Undermining was seen as behaviors that were intended to weaken or undercut the target or others in the workplace. Vivian commented that these behaviors “set me up for failure”. Which makes the person look incompetent; as if they did not know what they are doing or could not handle the job. Undermining was talked about in a variety of ways including unreasonable or impossible deadlines or projects, constant criticism, taking credit where it was not due, blaming the target for mistakes they did not make, ridiculing of work, sabotaging work, work below target’s level of training, humiliation, and false allegations. Jose points to some of these areas when he says, “They might blame you for something you didn’t do or they might not give you the appropriate credit. They might not give you the best assignment”. Jean also described undermining behaviors as behaviors he would consider bullying when he commented,

They don’t communicate with me, they hold me accountable for things that they never tell me to do, that are not in my job description, they are always letting someone else - I have to do things and they don’t make other people, or I always have to do the dirty work. And others with the same title don’t have to do it.

And Shondra related a story of one employee trying to intentionally sabotage another employee’s work,

There was another example with the same employee where she picked up one of her co-workers paper and she gave it to someone to take with them as if it was ready to be taken without this employee’s permission and the paperwork was, in fact, not ready. What ultimately would have happened if this employee hadn’t realized what was going on and stepped in, mistakes would have come back on her. This employee came to me and said I really felt that what she was doing was on purpose. She knew you were going to be up here and she knew that paperwork was going to come back while you were up here and someone was going to say it was not complete or correct.



Clearly, behaviors associated with undermining the target were seen as bullying behaviors to these HR professionals. The HR professionals also considered inconsistent or unfair treatment bullying behavior.

#### *Inconsistent/Unfair Treatment*

Inconsistent or unfair treatment referred to treating people differently when there was no obvious reason to do so. The person may have the feeling of being “picked on” because they see themselves as being treated differently from others. Unfair/inconsistent treatment is of course linked to other behaviors the HR professionals considered bullying including, undermining behaviors and withholding information. Jose described these behaviors this way, “Anything that treats people in a similar position differently, I consider bullying. But anything that keeps the employee from having all of the available stuff or tools they need to do their job. Managers definitely control that”. And Stephen commented on a situation he felt was bullying which included a manager singling out one employee and treating her differently because he did not like her,

Because he has no trust in this individual, because he doesn't feel like things that this person says are true half the time, because he has a general dislike for this person he requires them to do more then what they would normally have to do, more than what they have had to do prior for them, requiring the person to do extra things...I see that as bullying.

Specific inconsistent or unfair treatment that was mentioned by the HR professionals were things like piling on extra work and nit-picking (i.e. being overly picky about work completed). Piling work on the individual was seen as giving the target more work than was manageable, piling on tasks, and giving the person so much work they are overloaded. This workload is seen as being inconsistent with others in similar positions.

For example, Kelly talked about how she saw bullying as, “putting more pressure on the employee, as in workload” and described a situation where “the manager piled work on this individual and never took his side with clients”. And Doug talked about a situation that he felt was bullying where the employee’s manager gave “her the grunt work to do”, “was always nit-picking her work” and generally treated her unfairly. Teasing was also seen as a behavior that could be considered bullying.

### *Teasing*

Some of the HR professionals also talked about repeated teasing, joking about or mocking the target as bullying behavior. These behaviors were seen as poking fun at another person at their expense, making fun of the person or telling jokes about the other person where the target does not join in or does not think it is funny. When asked what she considered bullying at work, Vivian commented,

Really just like teasing someone with intent to hurt someone and just continuing to do it over and over. And just getting a rise out of them just to make you laugh or to feel better or more empowered. That is kind of my response to that.

Jaime also felt that teasing or joking that was not reciprocated or was not seen as funny by the target was bullying, she commented, “I mean sometimes they will say something and then, depending on the reaction they will say, well I am just teasing, lighten up”.

There was also a sense that this behavior had to be persistent or done over and over for the HR professionals to consider it bullying. For example, Marian also felt that when employees “tease a lot and make fun of each other” this can become bullying.

### *Isolating Employees*

The HR professionals also talked about intentionally isolating an employee from others and ganging up on them as bullying behavior. In the target literature this is often referred to as “social isolation” (Einerson & Raknes, 1997). Kat talked about social isolation as a bullying behavior when she commented, “they begin to shun others, and people have clicks, and then have they were always going to lunch together and were big buddies, but now so and so is taking their friends away. It is very much like you would see in a schoolyard”. And Tyson talked about workgroups being isolated from HR or another entity that could possibly help them with a bullying manager. He commented, “You can see it where particularly, in a work group where the supervisor may be a bully where they are trying to cut their staff off from HR or other managers so that they don’t have a way to express their concerns.” Not only was social isolation seen as a behavior that could be bullying but pushing or pawning off work, in certain circumstances, was also talked about as bullying behavior.

### *Pawning Off Work*

HR professionals talked about pushing someone’s own work onto the other people or a specific target could, at times, be bullying behavior. Tori, when asked what she considered bullying behaviors, commented, “pawning off work on them instead of doing it themselves” and Shondra also mentioned, “maybe pushing their work off on someone else, finding ways to not really handle their fair share of the work...” as a possible bullying behavior. And Pat, commenting on someone who was trying to bully her, she said,

I am thinking of one individual that I worked with in that past that he was very difficult to work with, he was very brilliant, but I always felt he trying to persuade me or negotiate with me and pawn off work onto me at times and I felt that pressure from him that he was trying to get me to do something.

Not only could pawning off work become bullying but a host of additional behaviors I have labeled, “petty”, were also seen as potentially bullying.

### *Petty Behavior*

The HR professionals talked about a variety of petty behaviors that could contribute to or become bullying. These were behaviors that show little concern for people, they are rude and impolite based on society and work standards. Mina commented, “Bullying would be when you don’t show respect or demean someone in front of everybody else...regardless to how they feel”. Phyllis mentioned, “Just very directive, not listening, but not only not listening, but being like “talk to the hand”; being rude, overly rude.” Chelsea pointed to, “snide comments under their breath”. Ted stated, “Then there are a lot of petty issues that range anywhere from parking to who can use refrigerators. ‘Hey this refrigerator is only for the office staff’ and expecting the person that told to kind of control that”. Donald mentioned a specific case of bullying that included a list of petty behaviors,

We had a couple of ladies who worked in the same area who would do all kinds of things to each from yelling at each other to calling each other and hanging up even though they were in the same cubicle, to messing with each other’s lunches.

On a similar note, the HR professionals also described belittling behaviors as possible bullying behavior.

### *Belittling Behavior*

Some of the HR professionals pointed to belittling behaviors as bullying behaviors. These behaviors seemed to be enacted in an effort to mock, ridicule, or disparage another employee. These behaviors seem to go hand in hand with teasing and inconsistent treatment. Jose commented that bullying was, “basically belittling someone for your own adoration. It is mostly through words or maybe assignments”. Marian talked about bullying as the bully gaining confidence by putting another down, “their lack of confidence in themselves makes them want to bolster themselves up and one way of doing that is putting others down”. Pat commented that bullying behaviors include being “made a fool of or made to feel uncomfortable”. And Kat also talked about belittling behaviors when she gave this example, “If someone makes a mistake, telling the world about it, making them feel as though they can’t do anything right, nothing is ever good enough. Almost like the parent-child relationship, just beating someone down.” And Tyson talked about one person who, as a matter of routine, bullied other employees by belittling them. He detailed some of these behaviors,

...by joking about their weight or pointing out their success because they were an attractive woman. He would say things that would make them almost cower and put them in a position where they were even timid to make eye contact with anyone else in the room. Of course, it was always presented in a joking manner and in a friendly manner but it was clear to everyone else that he was trying to put them in your place.

The HR professionals also talked about behaviors that they and others considered to be intimidating behaviors as behavior that could be bullying.

### *Intimidating Behavior*

When asked what are bullying behaviors, many of the HR professionals answered “intimidation” and explained what they felt these behaviors entailed. They seemed to explain behaviors that made the target feel targeted, threatened or afraid to deny or defy requests. I was able to sub-categorize these behaviors into the following categories; threatening behavior, aggressive behavior, and threats. I will describe each one of these in detail.

#### *Threatening Behavior*

The HR professionals talked about threatening behavior or verbal or nonverbal behaviors that are meant to be scary or frightening as bullying behavior. Some of these behaviors included: yelling, slamming things down, storming out, and implied threats.

Trianna commented,

I think they feel the need to intimidate others and the way in which they do, it is to bully other people. We have a director, who does that. I have seen her do it numerous times where she will just be rude and kind of condescending and threatening you to do certain things.

And Donald mentioned, “Where you get right in someone’s personal space and scare someone is another thing we would consider bullying”. Charlie talked about an example where there was no explicit threat, but an implicit threat to other employees,

One of the attorneys has a threatening personality. When given some staff not getting information that would effect people at a high level, stood up slammed things down and stormed out of the office and said, “I can’t deal with that girl!” which was actually not so covert. The intent in my mind was to intimidate and to get what she wanted as opposed to not through ease but with implied threats which those implied threats were not so clear to me, but by standing up and storming out.

Charlie pointed to the idea that it is not the behavior itself that made it bullying in his eyes but, the intention of the attorney enacting the behavior. The idea that bullying behaviors have to be intentional will be explored in more detail in a forthcoming section.

### *Aggressive Behavior*

Aggressive behavior was also seen as a way to intimidate. Tori, when asked to describe behaviors she considered bullying, simply answered, “aggressiveness”. And Calvin commented,

I think it is just being mean for the purpose of being mean...Being aggressive for the purpose of being aggressive. It’s usually I think to make the other person...make yourself feel better or to give yourself a position of power over the other person.

This behavior can also be threatening (as above) but they seem to be more escalated, and are about power. Phyllis related,

For example, and I share a story that a friend of mine shared that’s a lawyer, she knew a guy who when he would get mad at people, he would bend over and run after them like he was going to ram them , now that’s weird, that’s weird.

As with Phyllis’s story, generally these behaviors were very direct and aimed at the target whereas threatening behavior was less direct. Betty talked about direct aggressive behaviors when she related that to her bullying could be, “talking to a manager or something and they won’t let you leave the room. Not necessarily in a heated argument but if you are in a discussion and you feel uncomfortable and want to leave and they won’t let you”. Ashlee described bullying as, “just very confrontational...I just don’t know how to describe that...someone who has a very aggressive personality...in your face...they may make you uncomfortable and other people in the room uncomfortable”, and Jackson talked about a bully who, “put the fear of God into other executives and

other managers in the company by being coarse and abusive in conversation... yell at people in meetings". And Marian told a story of two different employees who acted aggressively towards other employees and how she felt this was bullying behavior,

In actuality, if someone really got into bullying, and we just recently had a situation where that borders into misconduct and um, takes corrective action, when it crosses into something where I consider it bullying, that example where we had a mechanic who was doing things like...he would, when people went by, he would take a wooden board and smack them on their rear end. Yeah, he actually had a paddle that he made, he left it in his truck and he would do that. Another example was a co-worker and he worked in an area with one of two co-workers in the shop. And if he didn't like their music, he would just go and pull the plug on the radio. He was physically and verbally doing things to exert power over them or to offend them.

Aggressive behaviors were not the only behaviors seen as intimidating, the HR professionals also talked about actual or implied threats and fear tactics as bullying behavior.

### *Threats*

These behaviors were typically verbal and used to apply pressure to the target to illicit some kind of action or a feeling. There seemed to be two kinds of threats that the HR professionals saw as bullying behavior; I labeled these fear tactics and power plays. Fear tactics were more explicit appeals to negative consequences that would result if the request was not complied with. For example, Charlie pointed to a fear tactic when he talked about how bullying would be,

I think a continued pattern of threatening someone's job unnecessarily. Intentionally making people feel on edge about whether they're secure in their job or not. I think things like references to other people who are terminated, references to "I have authority", or continually bringing back up someone's past problems.



And Kevin talked about a bully who tried to scare others into compliance by threatening to go to the boss, “She would say ‘Well if you don’t do this, then I am going to tell Mike that you aren’t being a team player.’” A power play was a threat that put the person in their place or demonstrated that the one person had more power than others. It was kind of a “do it because I am more powerful than you” behavior. For example, Betty commented,

I’ve actually seen a job where we had a manager who liked to bully...push around employees...yell at them until they got their jobs done...and manipulate them and say “No, I’m sorry you can’t take any days off because you aren’t doing your job” but in reality they were doing the job. It was just kind of being pushed around.

Here Betty points to a person using their power of position to push others around at work.

In the next section, I will detail what the HR professionals felt turned these behaviors into what they would label as “bullying”.

#### What Differentiates Boorishness From Bullying?

The negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors discussed above, by themselves, were not what the HR professionals felt constituted bullying in the workplace. Instead there were specific areas above and beyond the behaviors that made these behaviors bullying in their eyes. The HR professionals mentioned several areas that would help them understand if a situation was actually what they considered bullying. These areas had to do with power, if the behaviors were persistent or repetitive, if the behaviors had adverse effects, if the behaviors were intentional, and if the behaviors could be proved by outside confirmation. Each of these areas will be discussed in turn in the following

section (see Table 2 for summary). It is important to note that not all of the HR professionals thought all areas were significant for something to be labeled bullying, but these were reoccurring themes in our conversations.

### *Power*

Power was an issue that was mentioned by almost all of the HR professionals in regards to bullying in the workplace. The HR professionals' who believed bullying happened in organizations talked about the idea that the bully felt or actually had more power than their targets. Teresa commented, referring to bullies, "they never pick on anybody of equal power", and she commented that bullying was really about power, "to me it is when one employee physically, mentally, or emotionally overpowers a co-worker." Jose also pointed to power when he commented, "bullies are drawn to the weaker ones. The person that they think doesn't know their rights or is not willing to stand up." In addition, many of the HR professionals talked about where the bully's power came from in bullying situations. They pointed to both surface-level power and the power that came from the deep structures that serve to sanction and perpetuate bullying behaviors. The HR professionals mentioned many seemingly surface-level power bases that employees who bully could have in the organization. These employees could have power through success and producing, experience/knowledge, through ganging up, because of their position, because of tenure, and because of relationships with powerful people. At times, they also pointed to certain deep structures that allow bullying behaviors to persist in organizations.

Table 2

## Bullying Characteristics Codes

Bullying Characteristics: Specific characteristics that turn negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors into bullying.

Code Name	Description	Frequency
Power	Bullies have more power than targets.	30
<i>Power through success/producing</i>	The bullies' power comes from being successful and producing benefits for the organization.	9
<i>Power through experience/knowledge</i>	The bullies' power comes from having knowledge and experience.	7
<i>Power through ganging up</i>	The bullies' power comes from getting others to bully the target.	12
<i>Power due to position</i>	The bullies' power comes from their position in the organizational hierarchy.	15
<i>Power due to tenure</i>	The bullies' power comes from having a long tenure at the organization.	4
<i>Power due to relationships</i>	The bullies' power comes from a connection or relationship with a powerful act in the organization.	6
Persistence	Bullying behaviors have to be repeated and persist over time	31
Adverse Effects	Harm results for the individual and the organization	23
Intentionality	Bullying behaviors are intentionally done to harm the target or gain something or both	31
Outside Confirmation	Bullying behaviors need to be verified by outside confirmation	22
<i>General Outside Confirmation</i>	Complaints by other employees and third party witnesses	14
<i>Getting a Feeling</i>	The HR professional's expertise in employee relations gives them clues someone is being bullied	6
<i>The Bullied Look</i>	Nonverbal behaviors or targets that demonstrate they are scared, uncomfortable, intimidated	4

*Power Through Success or Producing*

The HR professionals believed power came from being a producer, making the organization money, being successful, and seen as someone the company “just can’t let go” or is too important to lose. Mina commented, “The people who are the star employees are cut more slack”. Similarly, Teresa talked about how those who produced more for the organization had more power in the organization because of their success, “This person is always the one who gets it done. In the role of sales person, that’s the person who has the highest revenues. They are successful in that sense.” Many of the HR professionals reported those with this kind of power were able to, in effect, get away with bullying and negative behaviors. Jackson commented,

I’ve see this more than once, a very similar situation with a sales executive that I’ve worked with in the past, this person got things done so at the end of the day they were a producer they got things done they executed on the job, they delivered, but it was hell working with them.

When I asked Jackson why the person got away with this behavior, he said because they got their job done and made management’s job easier. In addition, he commented these employees were producing and making the manger and company money. This comment references a possible deep structure or a rule in Jackson’s organization; i.e. bullying behaviors are okay if you produce and make the organization money. This rule seemed to be prevalent in many of the HR professionals’ organizations and they talked about how it affected how they dealt with bullying in the workplace. This issue will be discussed in more in a forthcoming section. It was also mentioned that power could come from experience or knowledge.

*Power Through Experience/Knowledge*

HR professionals believed power came from the bullies experience or knowledge in their field or organization. The bully feels they can get away with bullying because they know more or have more experience, they are also seen as someone too important to lose. For example, Kevin commented, “The Recruiter felt that they had more experience and more time invested in the company and the position and therefore knew more information...”, Alejandra mentioned Johnny’s credentials when explaining a case of bullying she investigated at her organization, “Johnny is a well-seasoned professional in the maintenance department, he has a lot of experience and a lot of certifications an he is specialized in certain areas...” She went on to talk about how Johnny seemed to feel he could get away with bullying because of these credentials. In addition, the HR professionals, at times, even pointed to the underlying structures that created these power imbalances. Charlie commented, “They say this person’s been here for awhile and because it hasn’t been addressed...there is some concern whether it ever will be addressed”. And when I asked what about the people who could do something about it, Charlie answered, “It’s interesting to me that...I don’t think it’s been tolerated in most other areas. I think there is a sense that this person is too important, therefore this person can get away with it...” This comment points to a deep structure or a rule in the organization that says bullying behaviors are okay if you are important enough to the organization. Trianna also pointed to the deep structures in her organization that seem to enable some bully’s to enact their abuse. First Trianna described the surface level

bullying behaviors, then she talked about why she thinks this is tolerated in her organization,

I have seen her do it numerous times where she will just be rude and kind of condescending and threatening you to do certain things. I would certainly consider that bullying behavior and it is important to note, because she is so good at what she does no one touches her, so it is kind of an untouchable. Yes, we know she is like that, but we need her too bad.

Like Charlie, Trianna pointed to bullying as something that is tolerated if you are indispensable to the organization. Not only could power come from experience or knowledge, but it could also come from ganging up or mobbing the target.

#### *Power Through Ganging Up (Mobbing)*

Many of the HR professionals talked about what Davenport, et al. (2001) refers to as mobbing. This term points to the idea that several employees “gang up” and bully other employees. The HR professionals talked about there being power in numbers when it comes to bullying. Chelsea talked about a situation, although rare, where employees got together to gang up on their manager, “figuring out how to get people on board with them to get their bullying across...they bad mouth to other people on board with them until it is a whole different level...” In this example, the group became a more powerful force than the manager. These HR professionals also talked about employees bullying by ganging up on the target and attempting to isolate them from other employees and their work “friends.” This demonstrates the bully is more powerful than the target and with others on their side, they are made even more powerful. For example, Alejandra mentioned, “It could be as simple as bringing in doughnuts and not giving you one or hey everyone let’s go to lunch but I don’t invite you. Those are subtle little things that

show that you are out casted and that you are not a part of our group”, and Vivian talked about ganging up when she commented, “So also bullying other people in that person’s crowd to get them on their side and against the other person would be one.” Here Vivian talks about how the bully tries to get others on their side to enact their bullying behaviors. The power to bully could also come from a person’s position or authority.

#### *Power Through Hierarchical Position or Authority*

The HR professionals also believed that bullies use their position or authority to bully their targets, Kerry commented, “And I don’t think lower people bully those above them. I think it tends to be same level, those who are on the same level or below.” Here position meant a higher organizational rank (legitimate power) in the hierarchy and authority really had to do with having the power to reward or punish (reward power). Not surprisingly, position power and authority were talked about together. Betty commented, “I think it would be easier for someone higher up to bully someone in a worker bee position”. Marian talked about bullies using the power of their position to stay powerful, “so in order to maintain my power and influence I have to use my power and I don’t have all these terms but the power of my position.” Not only could authority or position be used to bully but, tenure at the organization was also talked about as a base of power used to bully.

#### *Power Through Tenure at the Organization*

Human resource professionals talked about the idea that those with more tenure at the organization had the power to bully others. Tenure here means they have been at the organization for a longer time than the target. Interestingly, tenure is talked about as

being used by peers or those who do not have position power. Teresa points to the idea that tenure is a power base that can be used to bully, “somebody that obviously has the tenure or the record to prove themselves. That’s the catch about a bully they never pick on a peer”. Kerry talks about how some bullies’ power comes from tenure at their organization, “I have seen some bullying in terms of years at a company. If someone has been there longer and they know you are new or haven’t been there as long: ‘Well I know better than you do.’ ‘Okay why?’ ‘Because I have been there longer’”. The power that comes from a connection with powerful people in the organization was also talked about as something that made a person feel they could bully another employee.

#### *Power Through Connections/Relationships with Powerful People*

Some HR professionals believed that bullies could use the power associated with their connections or relationships with powerful people in the organization to bully targets. This power seemed to overlap with authority. In essence, a connection or relationship with a powerful actor in the organization could make the bully feel they had more power in the organization. Ashlee related a hypothetical example of a person complying with a bully because of who they knew in the organization, “I need you to do things a certain way when asked to do them or respond in a certain manner because that person has a connection to the owner, so I had better be careful, that kind of thing...” Kevin talked about his bullying colleague that had a better relationship with the Director, “She knew she had been there longer and had a better relationship with Mike, who was the boss of the whole department. So she knew that she could kind of push her weight around”. As the above surface-level power bases demonstrate, the HR professionals



believed that bullies actually have or think they have more power than their targets and this power comes from a variety of sources. Although HR professionals pointed to a wide variety of surface level power bases, they also touched on the deep structures that allow or empower bullying behavior in organizations. Power was not the only issue that seemed to transform boorishness into bullying. The HR professionals also talked about the repetitive nature of bullying behaviors as a characteristic as well.

### *Persistence*

The idea that bullying behaviors were not just “one offs” or one time occurrences was also something that HR professionals pointed to that defined bullying. They did not consider one instance of a dirty look, shouting, or snide remark to be bullying. Instead, they felt that these types of behaviors have to be repeated and persistent. They did not specify how frequently these had to happen to be considered bullying and felt that it just depended on the individual case. However, they did use words like “consistent”, “frequency”, “everyday”, and over “ a long period of time”. For example, Teresa pointed to bullying behaviors needing to be consistently enacted to be considered bullying: “I think it has to be consistent. There is always going to be one time. You know, there is something...look I have to have my way this time. That’s not bullying. But if you did that everyday or more consistently, it would be”. Kevin commented, “bullying is an ongoing situation”. Similarly, Ted pointed to the frequency of bullying behaviors, “The frequency of these events from one person to another or from one person to others regardless of how trivial they seem, it is this frequency that makes an employee feel uncomfortable in the workplace that obviously is kind of boarding on the

illegal as well”. And Charlie talked about when he was trying to determine if it is indeed bullying, he said, “I think it comes down to frequency”. Alejandra pointed out that bullying is,

Anything that is continuous. It goes on every single day. It goes on whether you are on break, in the workplace, or outside. If you have words with somebody and then you apologize the next day and you go on about your business and it doesn’t happen again then I don’t consider that bullying. But what I do consider bullying is ongoing.

It was clear the HR professionals believed that bullying behaviors had to be repeated or persistent to be considered bullying. They did not try to quantify how often these behaviors had to happen in order for it to be bullying. This is an area where HR professionals and academics seem to diverge. Academics measure bullying by quantifying the persistence of the phenomenon, as discussed in chapter I, bullying behaviors are considered bullying if they are experienced on a weekly basis for at least six months (Rayner et.al, 2002). The persistence and repetitive nature of bullying behaviors were a key characteristic of what HR professionals considered “bullying”. Another key characteristic was the idea that these behaviors had adverse effects.

#### *Adverse Effects*

HR professionals also mentioned that they more often considered behaviors bullying if the target or others felt uncomfortable or afraid because of the behavior. This is again something that separated bullying from other more benign incivilities in the workplace. In addition, HR professionals went beyond the idea that these behaviors could have adverse effects on targets, but they also mentioned that bullying could have larger effects on the team, morale, or business.

The majority of HR professionals felt bullying had adverse effects on the target and others in the workplace. This was one of the things that helped them determine if it was bullying and not something more benign. The word used most often by these HR professionals was that the bully's behaviors made the target and others feel "uncomfortable". In regards to bullying, Trianna commented, "It makes others feel uncomfortable", and Kerry said, "It is very uncomfortable", Jean felt, "It was just not a very comfortable situation", and Donald stated, "If it leaves one of the individuals feeling uncomfortable then that is what we would consider harassment or bullying."

In addition, they talked about the target and others feeling afraid or constrained by bullying activities. Ted commented that bullies, "They don't allow people to feel valued or feel safe in the workplace. I think what happens is that it instills the fear that anything could happen". And Alison, talking about a supervisor who had bullied her commented, "I kinda felt like she was the wicked stepmother, you know I was trapped in the basement kind of thing." Alejandra more graphically described the types of adverse effects that some targets of bullying suffer,

Bullying is detrimental to a person who has never had any work issues and had always been on time and always done a good job. But now they feel like their work is questionable, their confidence is shot, so to speak. So it affects them all over, not just their work, they stay up late worrying about coming to work, they can't sleep, and when they start to come to work their stomach aches, I mean it really affects some people that way.

Marian also pointed out, "the level of fear, the legitimate fear of your safety that the people around this person felt" as a strong indicator that one of her employees was being bullied. These descriptions of negative or adverse effects for those who are targeted by bullying are actually much more benign (with the exception of Alejandra's example)

than those adverse effects reported by targets and reflected in the academic literature. The most prevalent adverse effect mentioned by HR professionals was the feeling of being “uncomfortable” in the workplace whereas targets talk about much more severe effects including, chronic stress, illness, and social misery (Davenport et al, 2002). This may point to the idea that HR professionals are not privy to many of the effects faced by targets of bullying. The information HR professionals seemed very privy to and concerned about was the possible adverse effects on the organization.

HR professionals felt that bullying could have far more wide ranging adverse effects than just on single targets. They talked about how entire work units and even the organization as a whole could be negatively affected by bullying. Ted mentions that bullying makes the target and others in the workplace feel unsafe and not valued he feels these behaviors, “inhibit growth and communication and intimidates”. These are obviously larger organizational and team effects.

And Trianna, after describing how the bully’s behaviors made “others feel very uncomfortable”, pointed to the larger team and organizational effects of this behavior, “it effects the entire team morale”. Some of the HR professionals even talked about bullying as being contagious and felt it could have a negative effect on the organization’s culture. Some talked about how if bullying behaviors go unchecked, it can spread and this hurts an organization’s culture. Shondra explains, “It can spread and once it spreads into the whole department or other departments, it can become a huge problem.” Calvin also pointed to the contagious nature of bullying behavior, “In some

cases if can become a cancer if it is not dealt with and it create and unproductive, and unhappy, low morale, not going to get our work done environment”.

In addition to bullying creating a negative organizational culture and being contagious, HR professionals also felt that bullying was bad for the organization’s bottom line. Many of the HR professionals talked about, if it was indeed bullying happening, this was very bad for the bottom line. Alejandra talked about how it could shut down a company, “Oh, definitely workplace bullying can get you lawsuits. It can shut down your company.” Jackson commented on a bullying situation he had to deal with, “We needed to get him out of there because frankly that was bad for business.” And Jean put an actual dollar amount on how much bullying could cost his company, “It costs money in turnover. I tell someone that your turnover is 6% and every time you lose someone it costs you \$30k to replace them”. These perceived adverse effects were an important reason that HR professionals felt bullying needed to be addressed by HR departments and organizations. Additionally the HR professionals talked about intentionality and perception when talking about what constituted bullying.

#### *Intentionality vs. Perception*

The intentionality of bullying behaviors versus the perception of intentionality was an important issue mentioned by all of the HR professionals related to when behaviors were actually considered bullying. The issue has to do with whether bullying behaviors had to be intentionally enacted by the bully or if only the perception of intentionality, on the part of the target, was what mattered when determining if a situation was bullying. The academic literature, which reflects the target’s perspective

discussed in chapter I, points to intentional behaviors to cause harm as a defining factor of the bullying phenomenon. Some of these definitions imply that the target's *perception* of these behaviors as being intentional is enough to categorize a situation as bullying. Others are vague on this issue and simply state bullying is intentional.

Although not deeply explored in the target research, this issue proved to be one that was very pertinent to HR professionals who are on the ground dealing with these situations.

As with the target research, the majority of HR professionals I spoke with felt that, in the end, these behaviors had to be done intentionally for the HR professionals to see the situation as bullying and thus take corrective action. However, not only does the target have to see the behaviors as intentional, but the HR professional have to have some kind of outside confirmation of the intention. This issue of verification of the intentionality of bullying will be discussed in the following section. Even though intentionality had to be present and verified for the HR professional to consider the situation bullying, most also felt that any complaint or perception of bullying should be explored and addressed even if in the end they would not label it bullying. Also, some HR professionals who, after investigation would not label a situation bullying, still might recommend corrective action, training, or disciplinary actions.

Most HR professionals felt that bullying was intentionally done by the bully for some outcome or consequence. When asked, when is it bullying, Tori answered, "I guess I would say when it is intentional", Mina mentioned she looked for the "intention behind" the behaviors when considering if it was actually bullying, Kelly commented, "I would think it would be intentional for an outcome", and Shondra felt, "But, I think they

know what they are doing when they are bullying and manipulating”. And Stephen commented,

Just because you think you are being bullied in the workplace whether that is peer or supervisor or someone else, I don't think that makes it bullying, just the recipients side of things. I think intent has to start with the person who is doing the actions that are construed as bullying.

Stephen pointed to the idea that as an HR professional, he would not label a situation bullying on just the perception of the accuser. To determine if it was indeed bullying, he would have to determine the intention of the accused. Some mentioned the outcome was often something that the bully hoped to gain and others mentioned the intent could be to harm the target. In the remainder of this section, I will first discuss the idea that the HR professionals felt bullies enacted their behavior to harm the target or gain something and at times do both. I will then move to talk about how complicated the HR professionals felt it was to determine intention and how often they felt that claims of bullying were really misinterpretations of other's behaviors.

#### *Intentionally to Harm/Gain*

The HR professionals voiced the idea that bullying was intentionally enacted to either harm the target, gain something, or both. Some mentioned that the intent of the bully was to somehow harm or hurt the targets. Kerry commented, “I think there can be some underhanded bullying like that to where you are purposely trying to hurt somebody,” and Alison relates a story of being bullied by one of her managers in which she felt the intent was, in effect, to harm her by holding her back professionally.

More often, HR professionals believed that bullying was intentionally done to gain something. Many of the HR professionals felt that bullies always wanted

something and this is why they enact these behaviors; they think they are going to gain from them. For example, Teresa commented, “It is someone who wants something that someone else has and wants to take it rather than get it fair and square.” Charlie also gave an example of bullying for gain: “The intent in my mind was to intimidate and to get what she wanted, as opposed to not through ease but with implied threats and standing up and storming out.” Tyson felt that “adults fight for the upper hand and to see whether it is to have more influence with management or to improve their situation”. Marty also pointed to the idea that the bully feels they will gain something from their behavior, “that is when it is usually the worst if someone is jockeying for position on a team, and they might not feel as confident about their worth, that’s where the bullying comes out the most of what I have seen”. These examples demonstrate that some HR professionals believed that bullying was often enacted because the bully felt they would gain something from the behavior.

In contrast, other HR professionals felt that people bullied in the workplace to both harm the target *and* gain something at the same time. This seemed to be a kind of “I am going to win and you are going to lose” mentality. Vivian talked about harm and gain when she commented, “Just teasing someone with the intent to hurt someone and just continuing to do it over and over. And getting a rise out of them just to make you laugh or feel better or more empowered,” Alison felt that bullying was “I am going to win and you are going to lose” and Jose points to harm on the part of the target as a possible gain for the bully, “I think that is how they play the game, you pick on someone, you take them down, and the you are the big dog.” It was clear the majority of



HR professionals I spoke with felt that bullying behaviors were intentionally used to harm others, gain something, or both. The HR professionals felt that bullying was intentionally enacted for a variety of reasons.

At the same time, they voiced the idea that it was very complicated to determine intentionality. Just the perception by the target of intentionality was not enough for HR professionals to determine if the situation was indeed bullying. Stephen commented on how he determined if a situation was bullying, “Outside of jumping inside somebody’s head, and the observer like myself, all you can do is take into account the surrounding influences, prior actions, and the relationship to make a determination. And that is not always correct but I think it is the best way”. And Marian pointed to how hard it was to determine intentions,

I think we need to be cautious about the concept of workplace bullying because it is a very nebulous and hard to define concept and there is ah, it is hard to draw the line between what is truly a mal-intended behavior and what is just someone’s persona and what is and I go back to misconduct and what is just an outcome of some dynamics that are going on.

The idea that determining when a situation was bullying and when it was not bullying was complicated will be discussed in more detail in a forthcoming section however, it was very clear that HR professionals found it hard to identify when a situation was bullying particularly the aspect of intentionality.

#### *Is It Really Intentional or a Misinterpretation of Behaviors?*

As alluded to above, the HR professionals felt that mere perceptions of behaviors could not be trusted and that situations like bullying are more complicated than just one person’s perception of mistreatment. Some HR professionals felt that many “bullies” don’t know what effect their behaviors are having and do not intend to bully. This is a

main reason HR professionals need to investigate and get to the bottom of the situation before making a determination on if it is actually bullying or not. For example, Betty talked about how one employee in her organization was being misperceived by others as a bully, “I think it was her personality. It was unintentional what she was doing to and she didn’t realize what the effect was having.” Jose felt some people in power don’t know the effect their behavior is having on others, “I don’t think people bully, I think sometimes they forget themselves and they get in a position of power and they throw their weight around and they unconsciously do things they are not aware of.” Jean also pointed to a misperception in these cases when he said, “Many times people think they are being bullied but they don’t recognize it as supervision.” It was clear that many of the HR professionals I spoke with felt that determining a case of bullying was much more complicated than just the perception on the part of the target of intentional harm. However, there was a small minority of HR professionals who believed that intention did not matter.

#### *Perception Matters Most*

Four of the HR professionals I spoke with believed that bullying did not have to be intentional, instead it is the perception of the target that actually matters (Calvin, Phyllis, Tiffany, and Tyson). If the perception of the target is that they are being bullied, the HR person also labeled or saw it this way as well. These HR professionals often likened bullying to sexual harassment and felt that this behavior was all in the “eye of the beholder.” Calvin commented, “Absolutely, it is all tied back to what we teach about harassment, harassment is about the perception of the victim, and it is never about the

intention of the person who is doing it. It is always about perception. So, it is always the “victims” responsibility to express the way they felt about the situation and fix it”. It is interesting that Calvin points to perception as the reason dealing with bullying is the target’s responsibility. Phyllis commented, when asked when she saw something as bullying and when it was not, “I mean that’s about as easy as saying, when are you treating me differently because I am a woman and when are you not? I mean, it is all about perception, all in the eye of the beholder, it is all in the people who are being impacted by it” and Tiffany echoed Phyllis when she said bullying was, “just like sexual harassment is in the eyes of the beholder, I think bullying is in the eyes of the beholder”. Pointing to perception, Tyson said that behaviors were considered bullying in his eyes when, “someone comes to you and indicates that they feel threatened by someone else’s behavior than that is a clear example to me of bullying”. What is interesting here is that even though these HR professionals voiced the perception of the target was really the thing that mattered in these situations, Calvin and Tyson still felt they had to investigate the claim and get to the bottom of the situation (or verify in some way) to enact consequences in the situation.

#### *Outside Confirmation*

Unlike the target research on defining bullying, an important aspect of defining bullying for the HR professional was through others or gaining outside confirmation. In order to determine if bullying was indeed what was happening, HR professionals talked about having to gain outside confirmation or some kind of proof of the behaviors or intentions. Something was outside confirmation when it was someone other than the

accuser who in some way verified the situation as bullying. This outside confirmation is seen as lending validity to the target's complaint. HR professionals pointed to varying forms of outside confirmation including general outside confirmation tactics such as: others also complaining about the bully, seeing the bullying with their own eyes, hearing about it from other managers or HR professionals, and two additional categories I labeled "getting a feeling" and "the bullied look". These things would help the HR professionals confirm the targets' allegations that they were being bullied.

#### *General Outside Confirmation Tactics*

The HR professionals talked about general ways they could confirm whether bullying was indeed what was happening or whether it was something else. The two general outside confirmation tactics they voiced were through other complaints and witnesses or third party opinions. In regards to other complaints, the HR professionals talked about how it was easier to say something was bullying if other people (besides just the person who filed the complaint) reported similar behavior from the bully or had a run in with the bully. Alejandra pointed out that, "usually when it is bullying there will be a lot more people involved so there is not just going to be one person..." Ashlee felt that a situation was bullying,

When you continue to have similar or the same situation with the same person...so when you start to hear the same accounts by other people at other locations or by different people in that particular location, it is more than just that person trying to get their job done.

Similarly, Trianna felt that it was bullying when "the bullier is bullying other people. It is not just that person." Marian talked about a situation that she determined to be bullying after others confirmed they were treated the same way as the target, "I got a list

and visited with each one of them and it became more and more substantiated and I had other examples.” Finally, Jean felt he could consider a situation bullying, “When I start having 5 or 6 people coming in here talking about how they are treated poorly...”

Another way the HR professionals could gain outside confirmation and validate bullying situations was through witnesses or third party opinions. Witnesses in these situations are found by HR in a variety of ways including; routine audits and through an investigatory process. Donald commented, “The only way you know is you start interviewing people and collecting the facts...” And after doing a routine audit, Alejandra and her department started getting “all of this feedback saying Johnny is...so about 6 people into talking to everyone in the cell, everyone is mentioning Johnny and the problems with Johnny and Joe”. She also explained that, “usually when it is bullying there will be a lot more people involved so there is not just going to be one person and other people are going to know what is going on”. These HR professionals clearly felt that some sort of outside confirmation needed to be obtained to determine when a situation was bullying.

### *Getting a Feeling*

Some talked about how they knew it was bullying because they just “got a feeling” about the situation or case. They talked about just “getting a feeling that something bad was going on” or had to “put two and two together” or “read between the lines”. This was not the only way they determined if it was bullying but, an interesting indicator that lent some validity to the target’s complaints or clued them into a situation no one was talking about. For some this was attributed to their tenure in the industry and

experience dealing with people, for others the behaviors seemed to violate a personal moral code. Pointing to his experience in identifying these things, Charlie related, “I realize the importance of having some sort of formal procedures in place, but in my unofficial work here, I can tell pretty quickly...”, Jean a veteran in the HR industry talked about having to “read between the lines”, Tyson also pointed to his experience in identifying these things, “A lot of it has to do with just years of experience in watching people.... so it takes a while to, it is just the experience of watching people and watching groups to make that call.” Others pointed to some sort of personal moral code that seemed to give them the feeling someone was indeed being mistreated. Calvin commented, “You just had a bad feeling when you walked away, like I just got insulted by that person...” Kevin directly pointing to his own moral standards said, “When you see it, you know it’s not right. You can tell that someone is either being discriminated against or not being treated unfairly because of my own set of standards, like I don’t think that is right, whether it is illegal or against company policies.” Not only did the HR professionals mention getting a feeling as a kind of outside confirmation of bullying, they also talked about identifying it through a bullied-type look.

### *The Bullied Look*

The HR professionals mentioned certain verbal and nonverbal behaviors of targets that demonstrated to them that the target was indeed scared, uncomfortable, and being bullied. I labeled this category, the bullied look because the HR professionals seemed to be talking about a look that those who are being bullied possess and this look, in some of their eyes, helped to solidify their claims or in one case bring the issue of

bullying to the HR professional's attention. Although only four of the HR professionals explicitly talked about a bullied look, this seemed to be an interesting, albeit a different way to verify bullying. Teri commented on how she could tell someone was being bullied, "you can tell when someone is being bullied or intimidated, just by the look on their face, how they kind of step back, a lot of people blush because they are embarrassed or nervous" and Tori commented, that she had to see what was going on, that is the "only way of knowing" and Teresa explained this in detail,

I will tell you that even without there physically being an altercation, when there is that emotional bullying you see body language, you see people that are unhappy to be here. In other words, you and I might have this gregarious conversation. We bring the bully into that loop and one of us that might have been bullied, all of the sudden that's not who we are anymore. We surrender to that person's personality. I think that's bullying. Typically no one wants to say they're being bullied. It will be that they don't react by saying anything; it is their behaviors that reflect this.

It should be noted that all of the HR professionals (who believed bullying exists) felt that any and all complaints or allegations about bullying or bullying behaviors should be taken seriously and looked into. However, to label a situation bullying or misconduct (or whatever term they used), they typically had to have some kind of outside confirmation as discussed above.

The preceding results indicate what behaviors HR professionals tend to see as possibly bullying (negative verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors, withholding information, rumors/gossip, undermining, inconsistent/unfair treatment, piling on work, teasing, being isolated, pawning off work, disrespectful behaviors, belittling behaviors, and intimidating behaviors) and what factors (power, persistence, escalation, adverse effects, intentionality vs. perception, and outside confirmation) transformed these

behaviors into a situation they would label bullying in the workplace. Although they were able to articulate what bullying in the workplace meant and looked like to them, they were also careful to point out that determining if and when a situation was indeed bullying was fairly complicated.

*Bullying: It's Complicated*

Many of the HR professionals felt that bullying was hard to pin down, it was oftentimes, subtle, and they felt that every situation and instance was different. Many of the HR professionals during our conversations had a hard time describing bullying and often needed several prompts to pin down actual behaviors they considered of a bullying nature. They voiced that they knew it happened and sometimes even had dealt with it themselves but also voiced the idea that describing it and pinning it down was complicated. Charlie commented, "Bullying is much more subtle and much more covert...it's kinda like the old Supreme Court justice talking about hornets...you won't know it until you see it. It is very hard to describe or give a definition of it". Because of this many felt it was hard to prove that bullying was happening (and thus do something about it), and it was hard to document. Some mentioned that because there is no general consensus on what bullying is, there are not strict guidelines on how to deal with it, which makes for a wide variety of interpretations on the issue. All of these things make it very difficult to address bullying. Some of the HR professionals believed that bullying should be more broadly defined so that it could be more easily pinned down; still others felt this was not possible and would only harm their ability to deal with a wide range of situations. Calvin commented, "I think it is hard to describe



because it is more about...it is not as tangible I think in the adult environment. Because I think it is really more about things that people say, phrasing, and the things that they don't say." Kevin said, "I almost want to say that it is kind of a gray area because I guess everybody could have their different opinions on what bullying is and their own personal standards of what bullying is not". "Gray areas" and "things people don't say" are not easy things for HR professionals to verify or act on. Phyllis seemed to point to this when she commented,

It all depends; it all depends on the culture, on the situation. Bullying on the Wall Street trading floor is going to be a lot different than with a city seminary. It all depends on the culture and the people and the labels and that type of thing. There is no universal term, but the thing is, it's like harassment, it's like any kind of race, creed, color, sex, origin discrimination...There are some things for example, in an interview process that you cannot say, and if you do say them, it could be grounds for some kind of gender discrimination but, there's not a lot that's cut and dry, black and white about bullying.

Many of the HR professionals talked about how bullying could be very subtle, covert, and therefore hard to deal with and prove, Carol pointed out that, "bullying is subtle and difficult to address", Stephanie commented, "I think it is a little more covert" and Tyson felt "from the HR standpoint, it was difficult to address because you knew what they were doing but it was difficult to prove". After detailing a story about subtle bullying Tyson said, "It was interesting technique to watch, it was a little disturbing, and it was almost impossible to deal with". Shondra also pointed to the idea that identifying bullying was complicated when she said, "I have definitely experienced that in a couple of different places that I have worked. I think sometimes it is something that is very easy to recognize but I think in other situations it is not quite so overt" and contrasting bullying with another phenomenon that he felt was easier to pin down and deal with,

Jose commented, “It is kinda harder to catch than let’s say, sexual harassment”. And Betty, speaking to how subjectively bullying is now defined by organizations (or even HR professionals), commented,

I think that because it isn’t broadly defined you don’t really, I think that is part of the problem...because .it doesn’t have such a set definition... because it is something that is new.....I think it is new within the past five to ten years. Because it is something that’s so new like that, there is not a huge set definition for it...So it could be one thing at one office and something completely different at another office.

Another issue that further complicates dealing with workplace bullying is the idea that bullying is not harassment (which is an idea/phenomenon that we have words to explain and policies to point to when it occurs) but is like harassment or a variant of harassment.

*Bullying = Harassment?*

Many of the HR professionals I spoke with felt that bullying did border on harassment and some even felt it was harassment. However, it is harassment that is not illegal or covered by U.S. law so it does not rise to the level of something like sexual harassment. Ted felt that “most HR professionals would liken it to a variance of harassment and would probably deal with it like it was almost a harassment event.”

Kerry also felt bullying and harassment go hand in hand. While describing what it feels like to deal with bullying, Kerry commented, “...dealing with bullying, harassment, whatever. Which bullying is a form of harassment.” Similarly, Betty commented, “I think what they consider workplace bullying is violence in the workplace and harassment...harassment obviously covers sexual harassment, and it also covers almost like a bullying kind of issue.” Trianna made it more clear where bullying tends to fall as far as these phenomena are concerned: “Well, I think it is very important, in these

situations, to just make sure that nothing else is going on, like harassment. Because I think that bullying, at times, could border on harassment.” And Teri described where bullying tends to fall and this “border” a bit clearer,

To me bullying is, or would be right before, harassment. They are trying to get their way and they are doing everything they can up to the gray line, so to speak. Harassment is where, in my opinion, you are causing another person to not want to come to work, they are unhappy, scared, uncomfortable, and you really affect them mentally.

This is interesting because in effect what these HR professionals are saying is that bullying is like harassment and some even felt it was harassment but, it is a type of harassment that is not clearly defined and does not legally rise to the level of other types of harassment. So it is a phenomenon that almost rises to the level of illegal harassment and yet there no general guidelines to deal with it.

### *Bullying Degrees?*

Another reason bullying seemed to be complicated was the idea that not all bullying was the same. Instead the HR professionals seemed to believe that there were degrees or levels of bullying situations. One HR professional mentioned how bullying behaviors could intensify over time through some kind of process, Jamie mentioned that there were stages of bullying when she commented, “I would suggest dealing with it at the very early stages so that it doesn’t progress into something that could cause a very serious problem”. More often though the HR professionals seemed to be distinguish degrees of bullying by the actual bullying behaviors and the degree of repetition of the behaviors. For example, Tori felt that some types of bullying were more severe than others and this affected what action she took in the situation. She pointed to a complaint

about the way a co-worker was speaking to another co-worker versus a severe complaint like hostility in the workplace; “They can say, I am not really comfortable with their comments made to me or with the way they are treating me...” in this situation she would talk to the bully and try to get the behavior to stop. She goes on to talk about other situations that rise to the level of grievances,

The severity of the grievance, what is it you are bringing to me? **What would be an example of a severe grievance?** Hostility in the workplace, the person seems to be scared to be at work. I am scared to be around this person, this person is really creepy or offensive.

Chelsea also pointed to varying degrees of bullying behaviors when she contrasted bullying in a white collar office vs. a blue collar environment: “I work in a white collar office so I don’t know that I see headstrong bullying that you would see in a blue collar environment.” She goes on to detail an example of bullying in a blue collar environment that included overt intimidation and then added, “That would be rare in my white collar world.” When asked what kind of bullying happened in the white collar world, she answered, “Bullying would be snide remarks under the breath, figuring out how to get other people on your side.” This seems to be low in intensity in contrast to her description of the blue collar example. She went on to point to an intensity even between these two extremes when she talked about bullying that involved many people ganging up on one person, “They bad mouth people to get other people on board with them until it is bullying on a whole different level because of the number of people.” And Phyllis also pointed to varying degrees of bullying behaviors when she pointed out that bullying was

just being very directive, not listening, but not only not listening, but being like “talk to the hand”; being rude, overly rude, I imagine some people would take that up a notch, but umm, to me it’s just like I said it’s not um; those people who take it up a notch, it might get physical.

Here Phyllis seems to be identifying low level or mild bullying behaviors with more extreme behaviors like physical violence. Others pointed to more extreme behaviors as overly aggressive behaviors or deviant behaviors. Marian also detailed two different situations: one where an employee was threatening other employees with a paddle and another was acting aggressively, unplugging other employees’ radio and doing other things to exert their power.

Ted even mentions the idea of degrees of bullying when he said, “I have seen in the workplace where performance comes into play. Adults will bully each other in some form or fashion in varying degrees...” Charlie points to repetition and the actual behavior as indicators of the severity of the situation:

Threats about making their life difficult...either many on a low level or one that is dramatic and sort of over the top...veiled things like “remember, I’ve got more work for you to do” or “remember this person who didn’t do very well”. Dropping little hints collectively over time creating a bullying atmosphere.

It was clear Charlie felt there were varying levels of bullying situations based on the actual behaviors and their persistence. Here a “dramatic over the top” comment seems to be on the same level as several less dramatic comments. These type of comments indicated that HR professionals saw bullying as a phenomenon with varying levels or degrees of severity. On the low end seem to be mild, low intensity behaviors like not listening, petty behaviors, teasing, and snide comments that are fairly infrequent. On the high end are more extreme behaviors like threatening behaviors, deviant behaviors, and

physical violence. These behaviors did not have to be frequent to be considered highly severe. The levels themselves seem to be contingent on the actual behaviors performed and the repetition of these behaviors.

#### HR Professionals: Dealing with Bullying

Obviously how HR professionals define and understand workplace bullying will affect how it gets handled and dealt with in the organization. In summary and in answering RQ1, these HR professionals defined bullying as a wide variety of negative verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors, as well as; withholding information, rumors/gossip, undermining, inconsistent/unfair treatment, piling on work, teasing, being isolated, pawning off work, petty behaviors, belittling behaviors, and intimidating behaviors. In addition, they articulated the idea that these behaviors became bullying when they had to do with power, when they were persistent or repetitive, if they had adverse effects, if they were intentional, and if they could be proved by outside confirmation. As detailed above, some of these forms affect how HR professionals deal with bullying. However, in an effort to more fully answer RQ2, I will discuss in more detail how the way the HR professionals understand and define bullying affected how it was handled in organizations. First, complaints of bullying were taken very seriously, second, because of the nature of bullying, HR professionals had to “get to the bottom” of the situation to determine what exactly was going on, and lastly, the bully’s power position affected how HR could deal with the situation.

### *Bullying Complaints Are Taken Seriously*

Most of the HR professionals reported that complaints associated with bullying behaviors were taken very seriously in their organizations. Taking these complaints seriously meant not ignoring the complaint but, addressing it, dealing with it, and exploring it. Alejandra said, “take all tips serious. People tend to be telling the truth more than not. Usually when you dig into it you find out a lot more.” Jackson also reiterated the importance of taking the complaints seriously, “I will say, always with that issue, just like with harassment, I would take the issue extremely seriously.” And Tiffany commented, “We will intervene immediately, we will take action immediately. As soon as a complaint is brought, everything comes to a screeching halt.”

One of the main reasons these behaviors were taken so seriously is because of the possible adverse effects described in detail above. If the behavior was found to truly be bullying, the HR professionals believed there would be adverse effects for the people and the organization. For example, Shondra commented, “It only takes one person to poison a department and you have a real problem on your hands. To step in and get to the bottom of those issues it takes a lot of time and effort. It is not something that can be ignored because, if it goes on ignored, it will continue to get worse and worse.” Demonstrating how seriously her organization takes complaints associated with bullying, Alejandra commented, “We tell them, if they walk in our doors and tell us something we are going to investigate because as a company we are liable for it.” And Donald pointed to the idea that if complaints of this kind were not taken seriously, it could hurt the credibility of the HR department, “If you don’t take them seriously then

you won't have anyone letting you know what is going on". The most prevalent way the HR professionals talked about taking bullying-type complaints seriously was by getting to the bottom of the situation.

### *Getting to the Bottom of It*

Because bullying was seen as a complicated employee issue and in order to determine if bullying was taking place, HR professionals had to understand intention and get outside confirmation of the situation. Specifically, the HR professionals talked about handling and dealing with bullying by getting to the bottom of the issue. The HR professionals wanted get to get to the bottom of the issue because bullying situations are complicated, they can have adverse effects on the organization, and someone could be misinterpreting another's behaviors. The way the HR professionals got to the bottom of the issue was by investigating. Donald commented, "the only way you can find out if it is bullying or not is to get into the circumstances and investigate them." And Alejandra commented, "our role is to specifically handle those issues, to know about them, to investigate them, and to resolve them and follow up." And Kelly commented that "without doing an investigation, I don't think you can come to a conclusion so quickly."

Part of investigating and getting to the bottom of bullying situations for these HR professionals was the understanding that there are always two sides to a story. Kelly said, "It is not bullying when the manager can come back, after an investigation, and clearly show kind of a rebuttal on what the employee has said or done or declared about what is going on so, there are always two sides to every story." Alison made sure to investigate the target as well she talked about asking them, "what could you have said



differently? What is your part in this? It is always a two-way street...like a tango, a dance...” Jackson commented, “I want the data to support whatever is happening...sometimes people don’t tell you the truth when they come into your office to talk about bullies...” Jean commented, “In employee relations situations, it is never one side or the other, the real story is somewhere in between, somewhere in the middle. And that is why you try to dig out what is the real story here.” Pat also felt there were two sides to every story and this is why getting to the bottom of it is so important,

It is hard, when you are dealing with a conduct issue it is usually subjective and subject to interpretation and usually involves an element of “he said this and she said this” and vice versa. It is difficult to take a subjective conversation and identify if something really happened or not.

In addition to pointing out the importance of hearing both sides of the story, the HR professionals talked about using many different avenues to investigate claims of bullying.

The HR professionals talked about different strategies they used to get to the bottom of a bullying complaint. Because they needed outside confirmation in order to determine if the situation was bullying, avenues like asking questions, observing interactions, and considering prior reputation/actions and researching were all talked about as ways they could get to the bottom of the situation.

The HR professionals used formal and informal interviewing to get a better handle on the alleged bullying situation. They mentioned asking questions of all parties that may be involved. Calvin commented, “We will do some kind of an investigation, they bring it to our attention, we will consult with them, we will ask questions, we will

figure out what the situation is, and if it is something that warrants investigation, we will start the investigation.” Alison felt that,

In a situation like that you have to pretty much ask a lot of questions and get to what the issue is... you have to do your due diligence, you have to interview all parties...there has to be an investigation, research, and check all that against policy...making sure the legal side is considered.

And Tori also believed in a thorough investigation, “thorough investigation, asking the right questions to really get down into the problem”. Some of the HR professionals also talked about observing interactions and relationships as evidenced by determining if the person had a bullied look.

The HR professionals also talked about getting to the bottom of the situation by considering prior actions & reputations as well as doing research. Specifically, the HR professionals used what they knew about the employee as well as any prior information found in the employee’s file to help them understand and get to the bottom of the situation. Alejandra commented, “the first thing I do is go into the files and see what has gone on in the past with these people.” And in this extended explanation, Jackson talked about the importance of researching and getting to the bottom of the situation,

When it is not bullying for example is when an employee is having performance issues in their job and they aren’t performing well. They say their boss isn’t giving them the support they need... they say their boss is...you hear things like they get no support... berates them in front of other people...same kinds of things...they are really tough on them...yell at them even.... And when you actually dig in and investigate and find out that they are about to be on or are already on some sort of final performance approval plan...they are about to be written up ... you find out that there have been performance issues that have been going on for some time...they see the writing on the wall, they are being proactive...they are trying to protect themselves. They are coming to see an HR representative, or some other third party in the company, to help protect their job and they may even misrepresent what is going on...and that happens...

Here, Jackson expressed the idea that a person who has a disciplinary record could not be a person who was being bullied. Jackson clearly pointed to the importance of “digging in” and uncovering the complaining employee’s disciplinary history and taking this into consideration when dealing with their complaint. Needless to say, this could be problematic in bullying situations. If the manager is the person doing the bullying and also in charge of any disciplinary actions against the employee, this documentation could be very misleading and could even be used to further bully the employee. Situations like this could be very problematic for actually dealing with bullying situations and could be why some targets feel that HR is on the side of management.

Jackson was not the only HR professional who indicated that the reputation of the actors in the situation mattered when trying to get to the bottom of the situation. To some, if the person had a reputation as a “complainer” they could get into a situation where they were, in effect, “the boy that cried wolf”. Mina alluded to the fact that some employees are not taken as seriously because they complain to HR often, “these are not the type of complainers and we have some that do and they were here right away”. Charlie also talked about the reputation of the complainant and how this affects how the complaint is interpreted and treated, “so part of it is that I am trying to judge the complainant and the complaint itself. I mean quite honestly I try to put myself, not necessarily me, but would I or other people I know who I consider sincere individuals, would they complain about this?” Vivian actually commented about this issue from the other side – she felt she was being bullied by one of her managers and actually went to her manager to try to get something done about it, “You know at first they looked at me

and said ‘are you sure’, and I said ‘yes, I am sure.’ I was known to have a good work ethic so it didn’t take a whole lot of convincing. I had a good relationship with the CFO as well.” Needless to say, Vivian’s situation was taken care of because of her reputation and the powerful people she knew in the organization. Additionally, Alejandra pointed to the idea that if an employee was a “normal employee” and then started having problems, this would be a strong signal for her that something was wrong,

If I had a person that was typically a normal employee and I never really had problems with them and all of the sudden we change them into another work area and all of the sudden there is problems with him, his work, he is absent a lot, he doesn’t seem to be himself, and the person he is working with have had issues with other people. Then that is a big red flag.

On the flip side, Kat and Teri seemed to be very aware of how misleading reputations can be in these situations. Kat actually voices the idea that you have to be careful with employees’ history and reputation because they can still be telling the truth, “And maybe some would say, ‘well what she is saying, that is just her again’, ‘well no, I have heard some rumblings about this.’ I don’t think that it is necessarily not the case.” And Teri explained how complaining about bullying-type behaviors can have a cumulative effect and cause “the boy who cried wolf” syndrome. Referring to employees who complain a lot about what she felt were insignificant issues, Teri said,

It is like, you are going to waste so many hours over something that is so silly. I mean it is not hurting them, it is not causing them any physical or mental pain or anything like that, it just something silly and I get irritated at times about that. It is like the story of the guy who cried wolf, I mean that is what it is like, and when something really does happen then you are already so exhausted with this person that I could see why things slip through the cracks on some people, not everyone, you know what I mean.

As I have demonstrated above, getting to the bottom of the situation by asking questions, observing interactions, and researching reputations were all avenues the HR professionals used to address and deal with bullying-type complaints. Another issue that affected how bullying-type complaints were addressed and dealt with in organizations had to do with who was accused of the bullying.

*It's All About Who You Are*

HR professionals talked about the idea that the accused bully's power in the organization affected how they could deal with the situation. Oftentimes, when discussing what they did in bullying situations, how they handled them, etc. they would mention that it is not the same for management or "producers". Specifically, those who had legitimate power (or position power) and those employees who are "producers" are treated differently when it comes to allegations of bullying. The HR professionals talked about how, because they had less power than the manager or the producer, they were limited in what they could do in the situation. Stephen commented, "In general, the experiences I have come across, it depends on who you are. A lot of the times as far as what you can get away with and what you can't". Seven of the HR professionals talked about how those with more legitimate power, managers or upper level management, were able to more easily get away with bullying behaviors than employees lower on the organizational hierarchy because of their position as managers. Kerry even alluded to a popular T.V. sitcom, *The Office*, to demonstrate how bad behavior is allowed in many organizations by managers or producers and HR does not have the power to do anything about it. Kerry asked me,

Do you ever watch the Office? Toby, the HR guy, is just trying to stop bad management and change the culture and then Michael [the manager] would be like, you are not letting me have fun. He was allowed to do all of those things...In some cases it is allowed as long as you are producing and are making your boss look good, they don't care how you are getting it done.

Mina related an uncomfortable situation she had to be a part of because her own manager, the Director, bullied another employee hoping to get them to quit. She talked about how she felt very uncomfortable and there was nothing she could do in the situation. After describing some bullying behaviors by the Director that were allowed to take place, I asked her if the employee ever came to her to complain about the treatment and she commented, "No, you know, I never allowed that to happen. I didn't want that to happen. But, I never, I mean since we had an issue it was well, I would try to help but I would feel like I was betraying my boss...it was uncomfortable, because of what the goal was [getting the employee to quit], I really had no choice".

Similarly, ten of the HR professionals felt that those who "produce" for the organization can also get away with bullying. Specifically, they described how if the accused was a "producer" they would be treated differently in regards to bullying behavior. They would be granted more leniencies or just given a slap on the wrist. Teresa related this very clearly when she commented, "I am telling you organizations do it every day because bullies are bullies because they know they can produce. You never have a non-performer be a bully. Think about that. It's not the person who's not doing their job that's the bully because if it were you would get rid of them for not doing their job." And after describing how bullying is generally handled in her organization, Alison related, "depending on if the bully is a top producer, because I have seen this before,

they excuse it, turn their head and look the other way. Depending on what the situation is, they'll typically do the military style, you know command and control or something and they'll railroad HR". Here she is pointing to the idea that complaints of bullying behaviors by a top producer are overlooked because of their status. Additionally, Alison points to the idea that HR has no control over what happens in these situations as HR is "railroaded". Jackson actually discussed in detail two different types of "producers" who might be given leniency with bullying behaviors, one is a producer who gets a difficult job done, and the other is someone who is in sales, making the organization and management money.

It is also not surprising that three of the HR professionals openly articulated the idea that targets typically don't "win". This seems to be due to a myriad of reasons including uneven treatment of managers and producers who bully, ill intention on the part of the bully could not be verified, or simply not enough evidence to prove misconduct. Alison commented, "People who bully get away with it...it is pretty interesting to watch and it is tough to stand up to someone and call them on it." And Jean commented on the uphill battle targets have if they are going to take on their manager or someone more powerful than they are,

The unfortunate thing is that a lot of people do not like to rock the boat. They don't want to stand up and take on the supervisor because usually for the employee it is a losing proposition. If you don't really win and brand someone as a jerk or a bully, you get the reputation as a troublemaker. And you go the other way, it takes a lot. Usually, you are in a slot [position] because the person above you picked you to go there. So, if I picked you to go there I want to believe the best about you, it is hard to see that person doing it.

Here Jean pointed to the target being in a “catch22” when trying to deal with bullying by bringing it to someone’s attention. On the one hand, if they don’t “win” they are branded a troublemaker” and on the other hand, they can’t win because upper management is unlikely to see someone they chose as an employee as a bully.

Similarly, these findings suggest a possible tension HR professionals could be dealing with in these organizations. They are allowed and supposed to enforce rules and policies, do investigations, and get to the bottom of the situation when regular employees are accused of bullying-type behaviors but, have to treat more powerful employees differently. How do they deal with this? What do they think about this? What effect, if any, does this have on them? Some light was shed on these issues by looking at how the HR professionals made sense of bullying situations and their position in them. I will discuss this issue in detail in chapter V.

It is also important to quickly note that two of the HR professionals I spoke with did not believe that bullying existed in workplaces instead they felt these were issues of communication style and fit with the organization’s culture. Roger felt that “grown ups at work adopt a style or set of behaviors they think work for them and I think sometimes that includes being overly aggressive or assertive because people come from different backgrounds.” Clearly Roger believes that behaviors at work are a result of past failures and successes and their cultural background. In talking to Roger, he admitted that he had not heard of the term “workplace bullying” or had read any of the literature on this topic (this was interesting because he was a past President of AHRMA and HRM had just emailed about Anti-bullying week a few weeks earlier). Roger is a highly trained



HR professional with over 20 years in the industry. He was, at the time, A VP of Human Resources and had served as a President of the ARHMA in 1998. Although Roger described what some would consider bullying situations, he made sense of these as something employees (management particularly) did with good intentions (therefore not bullying). He really saw bullying as a pathological person (someone who is “indiscriminate”, someone who wants to “dominate the space”, and is “scared”. He felt not many of these kinds of people are in the workplace. He comments, “I have dealt with lots of cases, hundreds, where employees felt like bosses more that anything, but co-workers as well, were being heavy-handed, insensitive, too demanding, overly aggressive, but I don’t know about...well maybe some of the boss in a bulling context in terms of always being a negative person, always being critical, or always being unsatisfied in that context. Even in those contexts those bosses do it because they think that is going to get them results. I have never met too many pathological people who want to dominate the space just because.” So really, Roger falls into the category of bullying needs to be intentional and he has never experienced a case where bullying behaviors were not done for some good (in the mind of the bullier).

Sandy had never heard of the term before and did not believe it happened in workplaces as well. She commented, “I think things happen in the organizations but I wouldn’t characterize it as bullying.” Instead she talked about see a wider picture of the organization where some employees conform to the culture and some don’t. She says, “No not, really I just wouldn’t associate bullying with the workplace. I see it as culture and conforming where some do and some don’t. The ones that don’t conform normally

don't make it. You conform and at the same time keep things that are unique about you. Because bullying to me is forcing someone's hand, do it my way or else." Sandy was not in employee relations but, senior-level recruiting and worked for a very large organization which she described as having a strong culture where conforming was vital to success. She commented, "Yes, I would see people who don't fit with the culture end up being alienated so they don't have the right context, and contacts. In most companies, the network is the most powerful tool to get information out, to get things done, to find out how things work, to run your ideas by someone you trust, so if you don't have those alliances and relationships, um, meaning you have to, to some extent, conform to the culture."

The next day Sandy emailed me to let me know that had seen a segment on CNN about workplace bullying that evening and had thought about our conversation. She had changed her mind that sometimes, bullying does happen in workplaces. She comments, "My husband and I were watching CNN this evening and they had a lengthy conversation about corporate bullying ;-). The context was interesting when they referenced people talking about others behind their backs and/or having overbearing bosses. In that context, it made me re-think our conversation." Sandy seemed to be re-thinking the idea that bullying existed in workplaces after seeing this news program discuss other behaviors and issues she had not thought of during our interview.

The majority of HR professionals I spoke with felt that bullying existed and they were able to define what they felt bullying consisted of in some detail. These findings suggest that HR professionals are cognizant of this issue and see it as a pertinent issue in

contemporary organizations. To shed more light on this issue, chapter V will discuss how these HR professionals made sense of workplace bullying and their role in these situations.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS: HR PROFESSIONALS MAKING SENSE OF WORKPLACE BULLYING AND THEIR POSITION IN THESE SITUATIONS

The preceding chapter detailed how the HR professionals who took part in this study defined and understood workplace bullying. They articulated many behaviors they considered bullying and even talked about what turned those behaviors into what they would label “workplace bullying”. However, they also felt that it was hard to pin down, subtle, and they felt that every situation and instance was different. Because of this and other issues, they felt bullying was an issue that was very hard to take action on and address. In this chapter I will try to further illuminate HR professionals’ perspectives on bullying by answering RQ3 which asked how HR professionals made sense of bullying situations and their position in these situations. I will first discuss how the HR professionals made sense of how and why bullying situations happen in organizations (see Table 3 for summary). Second, I will discuss how HR professionals made sense of their roles/position in these situations. And third, how they made sense of this position of power in bullying situations.

#### Making Sense of Bullying: How and Why Bullying Happens

The HR professionals I spoke with made sense of how and why bullying happened in organizations by pointing to a variety of issues. Specifically, they felt that bullying was a management and managing style issue, a communication skills issue, an

organizational culture issue, a contemporary issue, or simply a human issue. Some HR professionals even felt bullying could be due to a variety of these issues.

Table 3

Sensemaking on Bullying Situations Codes

Code Name	Description	Frequency
Management & Management Style Issue	Addressing bullying was something that should be done by managers; bullying done by managers is attributed to an aggressive management style.	12
Communication Skills Issue	Bullying was attributed to a lack of advanced communication skills (emotional intelligence or constructive conflict management) on the part of bullies or targets.	5
Organizational Culture Issue	Bullying was attributed to the organizational culture and those in upper management.	14
Contemporary Issue	Bullying was attributed to contemporary issues like the economic downturn, an entitlement mentality, and diversity.	6
Human Issue	Bullying was attributed to personality clashes that are inevitable in organizations.	7

*It's a Management and Management Style Issue*

Many of the HR professionals I spoke with felt that bullying was a management and managing style issue. They felt that management should know how to deal with issues like bullying if they were in a management position and that it was their job to deal with these issues. Some even felt management was the “first line of defense”. In addition, if it was the manager accused of bullying, HR professionals felt that managers

should know how to act, what is right and wrong, and if they did not, they needed training to get them back on track. The HR professionals felt this way because if a manager was accused of bullying behaviors HR professionals often saw this as a misunderstanding due to the management style of the manager. In this section, I will first demonstrate that HR professionals see dealing with bullying activities as management's work and then I will talk about how some HR professionals saw bullying by management as a management style issue.

### *Bullying is a Management Issue*

HR professionals felt that managers and the management team should be the ones dealing with issues like bullying. Specifically, many of the HR professionals believed they should be the ones who are on the front line, they should be the people that targets feel comfortable going to talk to about bullying-type situations, and they should have the skills to deal with these issues. Donald, who works for a very large organization with many different levels of HR and management felt,

The first line of defense is the management team. If it is not taken care of by management then it would go to the Human Resources group which is what we call the Employee Relations office. If an employee doesn't feel it has been handled correctly, they can appeal it in the ethics office of the ombudsmen.

Alejandra, an HR Manager at a large organization, also talked about how employees need to go to managers first, then move up the "chain of command" if things are not resolved,

So it is kind of a double edge sword, you do want them to feel comfortable coming to HR, but you do want to make sure that they go through the chains of command. When I do the training I say, 'Give your manager or supervisor the opportunity to help you just out of common respect.' I think that is a company

culture thing. I didn't find that at other companies where I worked. In fact they didn't go to HR at all.

Clearly Alejandra feels that employees should work within the system to try to get the issue resolved. Chris, who also works for a large organization, also believes managers should be the first to go to when someone feels they are being bullied. Chris commented,

They may feel like they are intimidated, bullied, and ridiculed, and they will go right past the supervisor because that is the person that did it, so they will go straight to their manager or many cases they just call me. 'Hey Chris this is what happened to me and this is why I don't agree with it.' So many times, just through conversation and discussion, asking them to go back make another attempt to talk to their supervisor that seems to clear it up.

Chris's comment demonstrates that he even sends the people that come to him (even those who feel the manager was the one doing the bullying) back to the manager to try to work it out. Are these issues really resolved or does the employee just give up? And Calvin points to managers not wanting to deal with complaints like bullying and trying to push it off onto HR, "we have some leaders who...will often bring them to HR's attention because they want us to deal with them. Well, they should be dealing with it. But ya, they want us to deal with it." Here, again, Calvin points out that HR professionals feel that those who manage the person complaining should be the one dealing with the issue. Obviously the view that management should be dealing with bullying-type complaints could be a serious issue for those employees who feel they are being targeted by their managers. These comments also point to a resistance by some managers to deal with these complaints.

*Managers Don't Like to Deal with Bullying-Type Complaints*

Many of the HR professionals talked about the idea that managers who are on the front line don't want to deal with issues like bullying. They would rather let HR deal with them or not deal with them at all. One of the HR professionals calls this the "Mom factor". Calvin comments, "I have a theory. It is called the "Mom Factor" I think HR in some cases is like...when you have an issue you are going to deal with it but if your Mom is in the room you are going to say MOM". He goes into an example of how one department was dealing with all of their own issues and as soon as they got a local HR representative, they took everything to that person. Ashlee explains how the managers, in her company, are all engineers and do not like dealing with conflict and because of this, things like bullying never get addressed and are not taken care of. Instead what happens is the manager rationalizes that "this is just how the person is" and others have to live with it. Jean also echoes Ashlee and Calvin when he talks about how managers shy away from conflict and don't want to deal with issues like bullying, "because to terminate someone is so unpleasurable. Most people will avoid conflict instead of look for it..." Jaime attributes not wanting to deal with these issues to a need of managers to be the "good guy" and not the "bad guy". This corresponds with the idea that HR professionals are often seen as the "bad guys" or "police" because they have to enforce the rules. This reluctance on the part of management to deal with bullying issues and the pushing off of these issues onto HR seems to result in a paradox of agency when contrasted with HR's power to deal with bullying situations. This issue will be discussed in detail in chapter VII. Clearly, many of these HR professionals felt that



bullying was an issue that managers should be active in addressing and confronting. These HR professionals also felt that many times complaints of bullying were really just issues of management style.

### *Bullying Can Be a Management Style Issue*

HR professionals also voiced the idea that bullying (when it was a manager who was doing the bullying) was an issue of management style. Typically they would talk about the idea that the managers style of managing clashed with the employee. Specifically what HR professionals referred to as an aggressive management style could be misinterpreted by their employees as bullying behavior. The HR professionals seemed to be referring to what Blake and Mouton (1964) talked about as an “authority-compliance” style of management. The concerns of a manager with this style are on productivity and tasks rather than on people. In fact, people are really seen as just another tool in getting tasks accomplished. Some have described these managers as “controlling, demanding, hard driving, and overpowering” (Northouse, 2007, p. 73). Aggressiveness is rooted in communication behaviors (Infante & Wigley, 1986), because of this it was not surprising that the HR professionals commented on the managers communication.

Although Phyllis did feel that bullying existed in workplace, she also commented,

Well, I think that communication, miscommunication is a big deal. You know, like I said there are certain communication styles that will see other people as a bully when it's not their intent. Their intent is to get their work done as quickly and as efficiently as possible, and there are some people that don't like to change or move that fast and they feel like they are being bullied.

Phyllis' comment demonstrates very clearly how many of the HR professionals I spoke with draw the line when it comes to defining behaviors as bullying. There has to be mal-intention for the behavior to be bullying. More often, these behaviors are made sense of as a miscommunication or a clash of communication styles. Similarly, Alison talked about how old styles of management can clash with new ideas and contemporary mores,

A dean at a law school said while pounding his fists on the table is: 'the only way you can control employees is by fear and coercion'. Of course he is in his own protective world for how many years and I said, 'I'm in these corporations everyday and this is not how it works'. The key is what motivates employees and so on and so forth....so it is old thinking patterns...that's the huge one.

Ted also commented on a person who many saw as a bully in his organization. When someone would come to complain about "Bill" he would remind them that this was just his style,

I have had to come back and tell people well I know Bill's style is not the best, he does need to kind of clean things up, that is the way he is. I am not making excuses for him because he does need to change, but it is going to happen and all I can ask is that you be on your guard and likely have to come here again.

These HR professionals seemed to be making sense of bullying situations as issues of management style or a miscommunication, not mal-intended, destructive bullying behavior. Clearly these HR professionals see some bullying-type situations as actually differences in perceptions of appropriate management styles. Additionally, this clash of styles was also attributed to the presence of many, differing generations in one workplace.

*Generational Issue: Clash of Styles*

In conjunction with the issue of management detailed above is a generational issue. Five of the HR professionals believed that this style issue was really a product of

the clash of generations in the workplace. Most mentioned that the more directive, aggressive style of management was a product of their generation (baby boomers) and that some employees misinterpret their style because they are Generation X & Y or they are part of the Millennial generation (more sensitive, more community-oriented, stronger sense of entitlement). For example, Teresa explained how younger generations' values and expectations really clash with older generations. She pointed to the idea that the younger generations feel a greater sense of entitlement than the older generations. And Chelsea talked about how younger generations are "used to being very vocal. I think in my parent's generation they were told that you go to work, you work the same job for 30 years, you get the gold watch, and you are happy with what you got." She went on to talk about how different this is with younger generations. Calvin pointed to the idea that the newer generations may be more sensitive to activities like bullying, "Maybe it has a lot to do with Generation X, Generation Y getting into the workforce. That generation is a lot more community-oriented. So I guess if we can't work together, live together, then that becomes a bigger issue than maybe it used to be or we just sucked it up and dealt with it and now it is you got to play in the sandbox more than we had to before". Clearly some HR professionals believe issues like bullying are a product of a clash of generations in the workplace. Still other HR professionals felt that bullying was really a communication skills issue.

#### *Communication Skills Issue*

Some of the HR professionals made sense of why bullying occurs in workplace by attributing it to an issue with communication. Some felt bullying was really a

communication skills issue. The people involved needed better developed skills to manage and deal with situations or they felt it was a product of the type of job or education level of the employee.

### *Lack of Communication Skills*

Bullying behaviors were often attributed to a lack of skills or training on the part of the bully or target. The person did not have the emotional intelligence or the maturity level to deal with these issues in a constructive way. Chelsea pointed to a lack of communication skills on the part of the target. She talked about how some employees don't know how to communicate with their particular manager to get what they need. She commented,

I think in my environment, the stuff that would be considered bullying is more or less people not knowing how to communicate with each other or not making sure that they got the point across... they need to figure out how they can communicate with the manager to get what they need so they can feel comfortable.

Doug related an example of a claim of bullying that he attributed to a lack of management skills, "We did have conversations with the manager on how to manage, and if I remember correctly, that person rose up through the ranks pretty quickly and probably never got good management training." Doug also commented on who should not be managers because of their lack of skills, he talked about those who are too heavy-handed and overreact and those who can't manage and let people run them over. Other HR professionals felt bullying was due to a lack of emotional intelligence.

### *Lack of Emotional Intelligence*

A couple of the HR professionals talked about the lack of emotional intelligence as a reason bullying happened in organizations. Emotional intelligence refers to a “clear understanding of the emotional needs of a situation and the self-awareness and self-control necessary for using the right emotional display to cope with the situation.” (Miller, 2009, p. 204). Phyllis felt that bullying behaviors were linked to a lack of skill in being emotionally intelligent, “You can do research on emotional intelligence and you can see he’s got, he/she has a problem with emotional intelligence.” And Vivian alluded to issues with emotional intelligence when she commented on how bullies “could be very highly educated but their internal personalities, their egos, and self esteem issues, you know wanting to feel more powerful over someone else. You know like anyone could do it.” Here Vivian alluded to the idea that those who don’t have the skills associated with emotional intelligence could enact bullying behaviors.

### *Organizational Culture Issue*

Other HR professionals felt that bullying had to do with the culture of the organization. Bullying was seen as a product of the culture of the work unit or organization. These HR professionals believed that the organizational culture influenced if bullying behaviors were accepted or if they were not. Some of the HR professionals talked about how “shit rolls downhill” and if those at the top of the organization bullied or set a bad example, this was seen as being the accepted way to act in organizations. Others talked about how bullying behaviors were not tolerated at all in their

organizations and were “squashed” if started. They clearly saw bullying behaviors and how they were dealt with as an issue with the culture of the organization.

*Bullying Behaviors Are a Product of the Culture*

Many of the HR professionals articulated that the culture of the organization influenced how bullying was seen and dealt with in organizations. Kelly clearly believed that bullying behaviors are a product of the culture of the organization and that culture emanates from the top, “But from my point of view, it depends on what kind of organization you work in, it depends on upper management and what they are drilling down and how they are pushing their employees.” Stephen talked about how a culture of bullying could be perpetuated in organizations: “They [the bully] could have had success with a bullying type of technique to get their point across, to get something accomplished, therefore that would support them again and making it a continued behavior.” Donald also seemed to be pointing to the idea that the organizational culture could perpetuate bullying behavior,

I would say those folks that are bullies are used to getting their way through power and through threats and intimidation. In most cases if someone is bullying someone in the workplace they have got their work history or even maybe even in that chain of command currently that bullying behavior is providing protection for them. So it is a bigger bully, in effect, on the street. It is condoned; it is a way of business.

On the flip side, Pat reflected that bullying was a culture issue when she talked about how her organizational culture did not stand for bullying behaviors, “I think it comes back to the culture here, We, every person here expects respect whether in a group or talking to each other one on one. Any conduct that violates that or is disrespectful will be addressed”. Like Pat, other HR professionals also talked about organizational cultures

which do not allow this type of behavior and the impact this has on the workplace and the bullying. Donald, VP of HR for a large organization, gave an extensive example of how stringently and diligently he and his organization have dealt with issues like bullying. After relating this story he commented, “There are those who are pot stirrers and they like to win at the expense of someone else. They don’t like it. Those people will usually leave if you make it very clear to them that you are not going to tolerate it...or you will get rid of them.” Some of the HR professionals who participated in this study would say that Donald, because he occupies a powerful VP position, has more influence on the organizational culture than others because of his position. This finding will be discussed next.

#### *A Bullying Culture Is Influenced and Created by Those at the Top*

Some of the HR professionals talked about how those at the top had a large impact on the organizational culture and this affected if bullying was perpetuated and left unaddressed in organizations. Jean commented, “Everything emanates from the top. So if the President or VP’s were to come out and take a strong stance on this you would have more people address the situations.” And Pat points to a multiplier effect when it comes to those at the top and bullying behaviors, “The higher up you go in organizations in terms of issues, the larger effect it has. If you have a CEO or c-level person who is somehow disrespectful it has such a multiplier effect.” Kerry also talked about how the bullying behaviors tended to originate from the top and then move through the ranks where this became just how things got done, “I mean I know why my old boss would do it, the stress would get so bad from above that he..shit rolls downhill. He would take it

out on us because he got beaten up so bad by his boss.” Along the same lines, Marty, a Senior Project Director for a large global organization, talked about how her organization was also well known for letting bullies get away with their behaviors. Much of this she felt was due to the larger culture in which the organization was embedded in,

It’s not handled because again it’s considered a culturally acceptable way of grasping your way to the top. For example, the individual to whom I report is a notorious bully in every way, shape, and form. The people that work with him, either do as I do which is look him in the eye and say, “Knock it off” or “That’s not how you work with me and cut it out.” Or they react, and they complain to HR who then go to his boss. I’ve been in the room with his boss who is actually the CEO of the corporation of 380,000 employees, and he’ll say, “What do you expect? That’s how he got to where he is. Toughen up and take it.” So there’s no interest on their part in handling it. That’s not considered anything unusual in the normal course of doing business.

She mentions that many of her Western colleagues have left the organization because they take it personally. Instead she deals with it this way, “That you can choose to either take it personally and let it bother you, or you can almost laugh and think ‘Bless their hearts. They just don’t know any better.’ And just tough it out.” Here Marty seems to be suggesting that employees should just work within the system because trying to change such a strong culture is futile. She is not alone in suggesting that organizational cultures are hard to change (Schein, 1992). Although many of the HR professionals felt that bullying was a product of an organization’s culture, some also felt that it was a contemporary issue.

#### *Contemporary Issue*

A few HR professionals felt that bullying was really a product of contemporary society. They specifically talked about the economic downturn (people worried about



losing their jobs), an entitlement mentality on the part of employees, and diversity issues as contemporary issues that could trigger bullying in workplaces.

#### *Economic Downturn*

Three of the HR professionals believed that bullying was most likely a product of the economic downturn the country was experiencing. Jaime felt that, “I think I attribute a lot of that to what is happening to the world at large. People are coming to work with a lot of stress and they are taking it out on other people.” Kerry mentioned:

I think it is people being scared about their jobs, you know, I mean definitely there is a lot more stress right now given the fact that there are lots of layoffs, I mean my company last week had layoffs. It is just, I can’t tell you how many people I know who have been laid off. There is that increase in stress because there is more work and you know they lay off ten people and the work doesn’t go away so now someone is doing two or three jobs.

And Jean felt that, “In an economy that is losing employment, there may be a rush to make sure they [employees] stabilize their place in the workforce. So whatever I can do to show that I am better, that I should be retained, I am the best employee here.” It was clear that some of the HR professionals felt that the economic downturn was producing more stress in employees and they attributed some bullying to this stress. Some of the HR professionals also felt bullying could be due to an entitlement mentality.

#### *Entitlement Mentality*

Three of the HR professionals also talked about what they called an “entitlement” or an “entitlement mentality” as being the reason bullying was happening in workplaces. They talked about how bullies felt entitled to bully or push their way around to get what they wanted, almost as if it was their right to do so. Teresa also related a story of one of her sales people who tried to bully her into giving her some of

the revenue from an old account she had worked on. Teresa did not feel like this was right because the sales person had not worked on the account in recent years, so she would not budge, the employee started to bully her. Phyllis related the idea that in the contemporary workplace, workers feel entitled to work with others without an overly directive style which she equated to being perceived as bullying behavior. Not only was this entitlement mentality seen as a possible cause of bullying but, diversity in the workplace was as well.

#### *Diversity Issue*

One of the HR professionals felt like bullying could be a product of increased diversity in the workplace. Teresa commented,

Part of that is diversity because part of what causes bullying in the workplace is. But, in diverse workplaces the reason they talk about these things is you have some one who is different, whether that is racially, sexual orientation, physical being, whatever it is, and someone is bullying them because of that indirectly. Ok? That I am picking on Jose because he is Hispanic male. So the bullying part can sometimes be subtle, maybe I don't make fun of him for being a Hispanic male, but I pick on him, and is that because he is...And he takes it.

Teresa seemed to be pointing at bullying as a way to abuse colleagues because of their difference. Directly doing so, they knew, would be a violation of organization's policy so they could use bullying behaviors to mask their intentions. Still others felt that bullying was really just an issue with human nature.

#### *It's a Human Issue*

Some of the HR professionals talked about the idea that people bring who they are to the workplace and many times this clashed with those with different personalities. There are people who have different personalities and can't get along and work together.

These HR professionals saw these personality conflicts as something that has always been around and would stay around because there are a variety of personalities in the workplace. On human nature, Kat commented,

I can say that in speaking with anyone about it, it is never going to go away because it is just human nature. When you have groups of people they are going to not always get along, when people don't get along what do they do, they make fun of one another, they go off in their little cliques and groups and that is just what happens and I don't think it matters if you are 5 or 55.

Stephen said, "I think people like to create drama, to create difference, to create spice in the monotony of their lives. The majority of their lives are spent at work...people do crazy things like that. I am glad they do because that means job security for me." And pointing to personality Ted commented, "I also have to understand the personality that caused them to bully, so to speak. There are people that just have the personality where they bully." Kelly really saw bullying on the peer to peer level as, "a personality conflict, I guess that would be a huge part of it." Jean said, "We have a, we have in the neighborhood of about five or less grievances a year. And I would say about two of those are probably just flat personality conflicts. These people just can't work together. And one side or the other has a hardened stance and won't give." Tiffany commented,

If that person feels intimidated, I mean when you have an office of 25 people you have the whole variety of personality types and you have some people who are naturally a little more timid and can be bullied and then you have the person who can start the intimidation. And can just run roughshod over them.

Alison added that she felt the root cause of bullying was just personalities or personality disorders. She felt people bring themselves and whatever dysfunction they have to the workplace,

If you look at the root, root cause of it...it is about people. Whatever baggage and disfunctionality they bring to the work place..I think there are varying degrees of that. There are some people that have some very strong, intense mental disorders.....

personality problems or whatever-coming from homes where they've been abused or whatever, and there are others who it is mild, just whatever they can get away with.

Human resource professionals seemed to feel that bullying behaviors could result from a personality conflict and that these types of conflict would inevitably be found in workplaces. These HR professionals made sense of how and why bullying happened in organizations by pointing to a variety of issues including the idea that bullying was a management and managing style issue, a communication skills issue, an organizational culture issue, a contemporary issue, and/or simply a human issue. The next section will speak to how they constructed their position in these situations and how they felt others saw their role in bullying situations.

#### The HR Position in Bullying Situations

An important aspect of how HR professionals make sense of bullying situations lies in how they see their position in these situations. This section of the chapter details what the HR professionals themselves saw as their position or role in these situations, what they felt upper management saw as their position or role in bullying situations, and what the targets of bullying (or those who have made complaints) saw as their position or role (see Table 4 for summary).

#### *HR Roles: The Human Resource Professional Perspective*

The HR professionals talked about many different roles they felt they had to play when it came to the issue of bullying in the workplace. They mentioned several roles

they played throughout the process of dealing with a bullying issue. Some of these roles seemed to be in contradiction with others. For example, they talked about being an employee advocate or resource to management but at the same time needed to be an investigator and an objective, neutral third party. They talked about moving from role to role as the situation progressed. They pointed to four distinct roles they could play in a bullying situation (trusted listener; objective, neutral third party investigator; management advisor; and mediator trainer coach).

Their first role, after allegations of bullying behavior were brought to their attention, was to be a trusted listener. If, after listening, they felt the situation needed to be looked into more, they took on the role of investigator and an objective third party. After they got a handle on what was really going on in the situation, they moved into the role of a partner, advisor, or resource to management. Lastly, after it has been decided what action (if any) should be taken in the situation, they moved into the role of mediator, trainer, or coach.

Table 4

Human Resource Professionals' Roles in Bullying Situations Codes

Code Name	Description	Frequency
HR Perspective	The roles HR professionals felt they played in bullying situations.	34
<i>Role 1: Trusted Listener</i>	A good listener for employees and a person they could trust with sensitive information.	18
<i>Role 2: Objective, Neutral, Third Party Investigator</i>	HR professional's role shifts to investigating the situation in an effort to figure out what is going on and do this in an objective manner.	15

Table 4, continued

Code Name	Description	Frequency
<i>Role 3: Management Advisor</i>	HR professional's role shifts to being an advisor to management in how to act in the bullying situation.	9
<i>Role 4: Mediator, Trainer, Coach</i>	HR professional mediate, train, and/or coach to address bullying in the workplace.	16
<i>General Role: Emotional Laborer</i>	HR professionals have to regulate emotional displays, abide by certain emotional rules, and perform certain emotions.	14
Upper Management Perspective	The roles HR professionals felt UM thought they should play in bullying situations.	34
<i>Partner or Resource</i>	HR professional's role is to be a strategic partner with management and a resource in bullying situations.	18
<i>"Take Care of It"</i>	HR professional's role is to "fix it" and get it resolved.	7
<i>Rule Enforcer</i>	HR professional's police the office and enforce rules.	3
<i>Objective, Third Party</i>	HR professional was an objective party accessing the situation from the outside.	2
<i>Nags</i>	HR professional was someone who needlessly nags management about bullying situations.	2
Target Perspective	The roles HR professionals felt targets thought they should play in bullying situations.	34
<i>"Fix it"</i>	HR professional was seen as the person who will remedy the situation by firing the bullying, getting the bully in trouble, or in general "fixing it."	22
<i>Someone To Vent To Who is Trusted</i>	HR professional was seen as a person the target could trust who would lent them vent their frustration about the bully.	9

Not all of the HR professionals talked about all of these roles, however, most alluded to the idea that their roles changed throughout the process and depending on the claim and situation, they would take on or move through these phases. Alejandra voiced

succinctly what most of the HR professionals saw as their role in these situations, “Our role is to specifically handle those issues, to know about them, to investigate them, and to resolve them and follow up.” Some had more power than others to do this. An overall role that many of the HR professionals talked about was to either show proper emotion in these situations or to control emotions. All of these roles will be discussed in detail below.

### *Role 1: Trusted Listener*

Many of the HR professionals talked about how one of their early roles was to be a good listener for employees and a person they could trust with their information. When someone has a bullying-type complaint the HR professionals felt they needed to be a good listener and get as much information as possible. In addition, the HR professionals also talked about the fact that some employees just come to HR to be heard. They want someone to listen to their situation and not necessarily act but, be an available listener. Mina points to how important listening was in these situations, “I would really think that for the most part at the beginning you are trying to listen to them and they always appreciate that.” Betty talked about how her position was really to just listen to the person and get as much information as possible,

If you are coming to me with a problem, then it is a listening thing. I want to make sure you will have the feeling that I’m listening to you and I am taking in everything I can get and I am understanding everything you say.

And Trianna described herself as a “safe haven” for others to come and speak with issues when these type of issues arise. Jaime, an HR secretary, described her position as really just to listen and relate any pertinent information to others in HR, “What I am

finding is that a lot of people just want to talk about what happened” Tori, Marty, and Doug also talked about how one of their first roles in these situations was to be a good listener.

Trust in the HR professional seemed to go hand in hand with their listening role. The HR professionals talked about how they tried to gain the trust of employees by demonstrating that they would not indiscriminately talk about the issues the employee brought to the office with others. Particularly when the employee had asked they keep the information confidential. They mention this had positive effects on the reputation of the office and has helped employees feel more comfortable coming to HR with sensitive issues like bullying. They also made it clear that if the person told them about something illegal or against policy was occurring then they would have to tell HR management and deal with the situation. Trianna commented, “Well, I think that they know they can rely on me and that I am someone who is going to hold the information confidential if that is something they want, there has to be that trust there, their definitely is trust here in our organization.” Jaime also talked about how important trust in HR was:

If they come to me in confidence I won't say anything. I really won't. Obviously, if something was extremely clear cut and against the law I would have to but, these situations where things being said or things being done but you cant really pinpoint what is going on here and they ask me not to say anything then I can't and I don't. That is how people build up their confidence to be able to talk to me. You know I want that role. I want them to be comfortable with coming to me and talking to me about something.

Charlie pointed to how important trust is to HR when he talked about his employees not coming to him with issues. He felt this was because he was new and the employees



were not sure if he could be trusted:

I have not had people who come and complain about it which sort of surprised me. I'm at a construction site, so it kind of surprised me. One reason is that I haven't been there a year, and they are still trying to figure out if they can trust me or not.

Interestingly, Donald pointed to the long term importance of trust in the confidentiality of HR for the accused:

We find that you have to keep confidentiality on those investigations because someone could come to me and say 'Renee is bullying me' and if we take that to upper management and we go investigate it and find out that it is not true, you may still have the lingering perception in upper management's mind that Renee was accused of bullying or harassing. So you have to be careful to protect people even when you investigate them because if you don't then you can get a guilty verdict even though there is not a guilty verdict.

Here Donald pointed to the idea that trust and confidentiality were not only important for those who complain about bullying, but also for those who were accused of this behavior. He spoke of the long term effects issues like bullying could have on employees' reputation even when the accused is found to be without fault. In addition, Chelsea, Mina, Vivian, Alejandra, and Chris also talked about how one of HR's roles in bullying situations is to be someone employees can trust with their sensitive information. After listening to the complaint and demonstrating they were someone who could be trusted, the HR professionals talked about shifting into their next role which was an objective, neutral third party investigator.

*Role 2: Objective, Neutral Third Party Investigator*

The HR professionals talked about how their role, once an employee brought a claim of bullying behaviors and they had listened to the claim, shifted into that of a objective, neutral third party investigator. Specifically, they talked about how they had

to get to the bottom of the situation, determine what was going on, and they had to do this in an objective manner. They could not be seen as being on the target's side or the accused bully's side. They had to remain neutral and get to "the truth" by investigating (asking questions, interviewing, watching). Interestingly, this meant that they could not feel emotions for either side of the situation.

Many of the HR professionals talked about this investigatory role they played in these situations. Donald pointing to the investigator and objective role commented, "Our role is a fact finder. To find out what is really going on. There are at least two sides to every story. In between the two sides is probably the truth because everybody biases it a little bit their way." Vivian commented, "I think you are supposed to be an investigator. An investigator of information in the situation that is going on." Marian spoke of both the investigator and neutral third party aspect of her role in these situations, "involves going back to square one getting to the root of the problem, investigating, finding out what is really going on...my role is to be the investigator, the independent looking at the situation from the outside." Alejandra commented, "First the role is to find out the details through an investigation." Tyson also pointed to the investigating and getting all of the facts as a beginning step in the process,

Two parts, one is to assess the facts, identify if there is an issue and what the issue really is. Is someone really being bullied or is it just an employee has a thing out for their supervisor or another employee. So, the first part is to assess the situation and get all of the facts.

And Ted, alluding to the investigating, fact-finding role commented, "I see my role as being the person who will ultimately find the truth..." And Kerry commented,

Typically the HR generalist would see their role as the person who listens to the

employee but also does the investigation.” Others more specifically pointed to their objective, neutral third party role. Alison commented,

As the HR person, I have to differentiate between what’s hearsay, what’s an opinion, what’s an assumption, what’s an inference, what is a story because it is subjective versus what is objective and the facts. I have two columns that I try to put everything that is the story - subjective, on the left hand side. Then, I record everything that is real, specific, and clearly objective on the right hand side.

From her comment, you can see that Alison is determining and sees her role as determining what is fact and what is fiction in these situations. Jackson commented “My role is really to be the objective third party that represents the company.” What is interesting about Jackson’s comment is that he contradicts himself about being an objective third party. In fact, he points to the idea that he is not objective at all but someone who “the represents the company”. This contraction and possible tension in his role could be a product of how management has determined he act in these situations, seeming to be objective but with the organization’s interests in mind. Jackson was not alone in articulating this contradiction. Ted seemed to be conflicted and contradicted himself when he talked about whose “side” he was on in these situations,

I see my role as being the person who will ultimately uncover the truth.... and maybe in the background of that protecting the company. I have never been accused of being an employee advocate. It is pretty clear who signs my checks and who I work for but that doesn’t mean that I can’t be fair or efficient in what I do.

Although he says he is someone who is going to uncover the truth and be fair, he also says he has to protect the company. He seems very aware of the fact that he is swayed towards the organization but at the same time says he is fair. Phyllis spoke to this contradiction when she commented, “Well, as a third party, unfortunately we can’t be

neutral, in that we still have to care about the success of the organization, but it's a third party facilitator." Phyllis instead uses the term "third party facilitator" in lieu of "objective third party" and speaks to what she sees as the reality of the HR professional's position. They can not be objective but are a company representative.

And Jose mentioned,

Well they are management biased [referring to HR]. A lot of employees don't realize that so when they come see me they see me as their advocate. Which is true and it is a balancing act we have to play but at the same time really, ultimately, I am really there for management. It is a misunderstanding that I am not sure we should correct.

Jose seems to point to the idea that this contradiction is something that helps him do their job for the company.

On the flipside, Jean did not seem to be conflicted about the fact that HR's role was to be as neutral as possible and ensure others in the situation understood the policies, "Now we cannot take sides, we don't support management, we don't support employees. What we do is try to make sure that both sides fully understand the policy and the procedures that the policy provides for." Calvin commented on how he saw HR's role in these situations, "I see it as the unbiased third party as much as possible because the first person who brings you the situation is not necessarily the one who is in the right. I have to be very careful about that. I have to be the passionate, empathetic, but not start picking a side." Interestingly, Calvin and others comments point to a possible tension that HR professionals could feel about their role in these situations. On the one hand they have to be objective and neutral "not pick a side" but, on the other had they also have to "be passionate, empathetic" and "care". This tension will be talked about

and explored in a forthcoming section. Clearly, the HR professionals in this study, felt that one of their prominent roles in bullying situations was to investigate and be the neutral, objective third party. However, their comments also point to possible tensions and contradictions associated with this role. These will be discussed in detail in chapter VII. After they had gotten to the bottom of the situation by investigating, their role shifted to being a management advisor.

### *Role 3: Management Advisor*

The third role the HR professionals assumed after listening to the story, investigating, trying to remain objective was to then take what they had learned and be an advisor/resource/partner with management. Most of the HR professionals I spoke with (besides the ones who were high up in the organizational hierarchy; VP or Corporate level), did not have the authority or power to decide what should ultimately happen in bullying situations. As discussed above, many of the HR professionals saw workplace bullying as an issue that management should be dealing with because they had the power to act in these situations. In contrast, the HR professionals most often saw themselves as occupying an advisory role for management, they would advise managers on what they felt needed to be the next action in the situation based on their investigation, the law, and organizational policy. Jose commented,

We typically go through the manager. We check on everything, but it is really the manager who should do it unless they want us to get involved. I am a big believer that HR professionals are not the managers. We are just advisors. I say that because I am a real believer in that. I am like 'hey as long as we advise they can choose to go the wrong way', as long as we have documentation that we advised this.

Pat talked about how she saw herself as partnering with management in the situation, however, the manager had the ultimate say in the situation:

A partner with the management to deal with it, you kind of tag team with whoever the ultimate authority is over the individuals who are in the situation. As an HR person you have the responsibility to make sure that employee relations are healthy and good, however, you really don't have any authority in the situation. You don't have hiring and firing authority over those individuals.

Pat very clearly articulated that she was not the “ultimate authority” in these situations and occupied, instead, an advisory role. Pat later commented that she felt this was a good system because HR could truly be a neutral party, removed from the situation: “I think you have to be, in order to be effective, you have to be removed from having that specific authority. Yes, you can be more objective. The influence comes in from human resources to strongly influence that manager, however, it is ultimately the manager's authority to address the situation.” Jackson commented, “But at the end of the day, my job is to be objective, do my due diligence, make a collaborative decision with whatever management might be involved or affected by that.” Marian commented on being a partner with management, “I see my role as the, um, partnering with management responsible for the people involved.” Here Marian suggested management is the party “responsible” for the employees. After their role as advisor to management was fulfilled, many of the HR professionals voiced they then shifted to a more active role and became a mediator, coach, and /or trainer.

*Role 4: Mediator, Coach, Trainer*

Overwhelmingly, the HR professionals saw themselves as the person, once the process of investigating and getting to the bottom of the situation had been completed,

and decisions on what to do in the situation had been made, who would mediate, train, or coach in the situation in hopes of getting some kind of resolution. This is really not surprising when you consider that many of the HR professionals made sense of bullying as something that happened because of management skills or style issues, communication and conflict skills or personality clashes. All of these things can presumably be improved on with training, coaching, or mediating.

*Mediator.* Many of the HR professionals saw their final role and position in bullying situations as mediators. To most, mediation meant facilitating a conversation between the two parties in an effort to try to get the issues resolved. Kevin, referring to his boss, the HR Director, commented, “I think he sees his role as the mediatory. He used to complain that he felt like the mediatory all the time. Kind of like an on the job counselor.” Phyllis commented on how she followed a model of mediation to aid in dialogue between the bully and target, “Well for me, like I said I follow a model for mediation.” Kelly also commented that she felt her role was, “more as a mediator. It would be someone not directly connected to the situation who listens to both sides of the story with an open mind and tries to come to a reasonable solution that benefits both parties.” And Betty talked about how part of her job is function as a “sort of a mediator...so they could get a clean slate, no opinions whatsoever...I would just sit and mediate through meetings...” Chris also talked about his role as mediator. He commented, “I become more of a person that mediates what’s happening and what is going on, you step into the grounds of an arbitrator.” Not only did they see themselves as mediators but also as coaches.

*Coach.* The HR professionals also talked about coaching as one of their roles in bullying situations. They might coach when there is little evidence that a policy was broken or that there was intention behind the bullying behaviors. Coaching was seen as being less formal than training and was more on the spot advice or practice. They talked about coaching management on communication skills in an effort to not be perceived as bullying and the target on how to stand up for themselves and confront bullying behaviors when they happen. For example, Teri suggested to one of her employees' who was being bullied into doing another employees work to confront the bully. She commented,

The other is engaging employees in conversations that help them understand how to stand their ground. That's hard because you can tell someone all day long to stand up for yourself but when it comes to actually doing it, they rarely do it. So, my counsel is typically...and I had this a while back...this exact situation of an employee who you know...so my councell to her was, you know, you be the lead, don't wait. You be the lead, go into that employees office, and say we have to talk about this.

Trianna, in similar situations, "I kind of see myself as a coach." Teresa talked about how she felt it was HR's role to "teach employees how to communicate in business matters." Tori commented on a manager that she had to coach because she didn't know her communication behaviors were causing her to be perceived as a bully,

We go back and when we view the survey results, she is always surprised she gets a negative result. I have to go back and say, "Well you know you're perceived this way and you think you're this way. So maybe try networking with people and try 'Hi, I am Renee' and smile at people to try and change their perception.

Marty talked about "coaching to the upside and don't focus on what doesn't work." She gave an example of how she did this with a bully who almost no one could work with



and the woman turned around. Marian talked about how she would coach the manager how to have disciplinary conversations with employees who have violated bullying-type policies, “I would also counsel the manager on how to draft the corrective action documentation. This is after, the interview of all the parties, and we are at an outcome. I will coach and counsel the manager on who to handle the disciplinary.” The HR professionals talked about coaching both the target of bullying as well as the offender in an effort to address the situation. Oftentimes this coaching role would be used when there was a misinterpretation of another’s behaviors or when the situation did not rise to a level where disciplinary action was recommended. Being a trainer in these situations was also a role some HR professionals occupied near the resolution of a bullying issue.

*Trainer.* A few of the HR professionals also talked training as an end result of a bullying situation. Calvin related a story of one of his organization’s departments that had activity that bordered on bullying and he talked about how HR put together a professionalism training to remind employees how they are expected to act in the workplace. He commented, “What we did do in one group is put together that professionalism course. That was targeted to a very specific business unit because we had identified that people were just not working well together.” Alejandra talked about how after dealing with a couple of bullying situations her HR department decided to do a training to remind everyone about bullying and harassment in the workplace. She said,

So that is why we did some harassment training and mainly when I talk I encourage talk and scenarios. **So I was going to ask you, you did that training, so in that training did you specifically talk about workplace bullying?** Yes, we talked about bullying. We also talked about manager’s exerting power over their direct reports.

Jose mentioned that he was, at the moment I walked into his office, putting together a training about bullying to raise awareness in his organization (and get his needed state certification), “What spurred it on was basically that I go to the HR every year to get my certification and this seemed like a good topic. Plus it is an up and coming topic. We can see that some types of supervisors might need to remember that this stuff is out there.”

These findings demonstrate that HR professionals saw themselves as occupying many roles in bullying situations. As the situation progressed and changed, so did the role of the HR professional. They talked about first being a trusted listener to the person who was the subject of the bullying behaviors, then after they talked through the complaint with this person, their role shifted into a neutral, objective third party investigator. They needed to collect the facts and get to the bottom of the situation. After they had a picture of what was going on, their role shifted again to an advisor for management, the ones who would determine what should be done in the situation. And lastly, after the remedy had been determined, the HR professionals were generally the ones to carry this remedy out. This typically took the form of a mediation, a coaching session, and/or a full blown training. The HR professionals felt they played a variety of roles in bullying situations including, trusted listener, objective/neutral third party investigator, management advisor, and mediator, trainer, coach. They also voiced a general role they had to play throughout the bullying situation, that of an emotional laborer.

*General Role: Emotional Laborer*

The HR professionals voiced the idea that part of their job in bullying situations was to be an emotional laborer. Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labor as labor that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (p. 7). Waldron (1994) pointed out that emotional labor is the “suppression of authentic emotion and the expression of false emotion to create an illusion for customers” (p. 394). The HR professionals voiced several aspects of dealing with bullying situations which required them to regulate emotional displays, perform certain emotions, and abide by certain emotional rules. The HR professionals talked about the emotions that they had to suppress and create in order to do their job. For example, Jaime talks about how, because she can’t do anything within her system about the bullying, she tries to emphasize and be a friend to the person,

You know it is a difficult situation because you are hearing these things and you kind of put yourself in that situation of what you would do and I am pretty powerless for what I can do. I mean I can talk to the person through it and I can talk to them as a friend. I can really be a friend. That is really how I see my position.

Here Jaime points to the idea that part of her job is to communicate emotion in these situations, to “put yourself in that situation” and “be a friend”. Jaime clearly sees “being a friend” as part of her job and this requires she empathize with the person who is coming to her for help. Similarly, Ted talked about how HR professionals have to have a lot of patience and understanding in these issues, “So it is not easy work, it requires a lot of patience and listening and understanding and then the hard part is defining the

conclusion is it truly a case of bullying or is it just someone being overly sensitive.”

Pointing to the emotional nature of bullying situations, Ted seems to be saying that emotion is part of the job. And this part of the job is to both control or manage emotions or have “patience” and to create emotions like “understanding”. Donald seems to point to the idea that HR professionals needed to keep their emotionality but also be neutral to do this job,

So you have to be careful that you don’t get the policemen syndrome and that you don’t get callused because you can. **What is that?** This means that you get jaded. You could say well there is somebody whining again. You have to be very careful to look into the entire situation with an open eye and investigate them thoroughly and collect your data. If you don’t stay impartial and you get emotionally tied up in them it can be very difficult on you. But if you stay impartial and be a data collector....it is particular tough on people early on in their career.

Donald feels emotion is an important part of the HR professionals’ job in bullying situations and a rule is to not become jaded or hard but to feel appropriate emotions for the situation. At the same time, Donald seemed to voice the idea that being neutral or “staying impartial” is also important in bullying situations. It was clear Donald felt these two roles should be performed simultaneously. Like Donald, Vivian also pointed out HR professionals have to both show emotion and be neutral. Unlike Donald, Vivian talked about showing emotion once you have determined that the person had actually been bullied. She carefully points out that this should only be after they are found to be telling the truth,

I would encourage them to be compassionate with the person being bullied. Let me back up a second. I would find out all the facts from both parties involved. I would if the truth is that they were bullied, I would treat them with sensitivity and compassion.

Vivian seems to be pointing to a rule about when and how emotions should be displayed when dealing with bullying situations. The HR professional should be unemotional throughout the investigation process and then depending on what is determined, display appropriate emotions like compassion and sensitivity.

Alejandra talked about the genuine emotions she felt in these situations and how she has to control these emotions and remain professional and fair to everyone.

Interestingly, Alejandra talked about how she transforms, through thoughtful consideration, her initial emotions in bullying situations to a more professional emotional position,

It is a very huge part of the job. You still go through all of the emotions. So I feel anger when I find out these things and I feel sadness, and the strong desire to stop it and help. So you still have all of the same emotions when dealing with this stuff. So what I learned to do was well people would say well don't be a part of it, well that is you, I am very emotional, I get involved. So I get very involved. So when you are the type of person that I am it is hard to remove yourself and realize that you are in a setting where these people need you to resolve this issue. You need to be the professional. So I find myself wanting to be fair. I want to give them an opportunity to correct this because everybody makes mistakes. I want you to stop and I want you to get help but at the same token I want to be fair to the person that you are bullying and I want them to feel like they are vindicated. I want to balance that somehow but I still want to send a clear message that this is wrong. The hardest place is to play that balance. It is very tiring. A lot of the times people do not like the employee relations part of the job. I can understand why.

Here Alejandra points to another, common rule of displaying emotions in the workplace, expressing emotions professionally. Alejandra also talked about the repercussions of this balancing act on her as a person as being “tiring” and also alluded to the idea that it is something that can drive people away from the profession. Kelly also talked about

how HR professionals have to control their emotions when dealing with issues like bullying and this has repercussions on the HR person,

We have an HR person here who has the right type of personality, who doesn't let those type of issues get into her. She can handle those very easily and be very, not detached from the situation but she doesn't get pulled into it. It is very easy for her to sit down one on one with an individual and confront them with issues that maybe not good to hear for the employee and they can both walk out of that meeting with smiles on their faces, making them feel like they accomplished something. **Can you think of employee relations or HR people you have known and how they feel in these situations?** You know on the outside, to me she looks like she handles it all very well but she has also expressed to me that she goes home beaten up, she goes home feeling beaten up.

Kelly points out that her co-worker also adheres to the "be professional" rule when demonstrating emotions during bullying situations. At the same time, she feels "beaten up" after dealing with these situations. Although she is good at the emotional work her job entails this part of her job also results in negative repercussions or the feeling of being "beaten up". Tiffany talked about how bullying situations are emotional situations and how she has to try to control her emotions and be professional:

But, you know, sometimes, I am human too and my emotions immediately come into play so even though I have to be professional, as professional as I can be during all situations, sometimes for me it is awkward, sometimes I am madder than a wet hen. HAHAAHA, so I have to take a moment figure out what I am going to say to this person, because I do try to be professional. And take it from that level. I try to approach it on a professional level so you have to try to put your emotions aside but, you do have them.

Here Tiffany, like Alejandra points to the rule regarding being professional when displaying emotions. Tiffany comments that she is "madder than a wet hen" but has to "take a moment" and act professionally. Tyson comments about how you have to think clearly and control your emotions in these situations:

You have to be able to judge what you are hearing and observing and respond calmly and not react too quickly. It is real easy when someone comes to you and says this is going on to pull the person in and make accusations. You want to slowly collect the facts without delaying a response.

Mina commented about being objective after she had gained the employees' trust, "I think that once you have your credibility, you have to tell them, you have to be very objective and listen to them and show that you care, and be very objective." Like others, Mina seems to point to the idea that she has to at the same time, show the proper emotions and remain objective. Mina pointed to these two opposing emotions when she says that she has to be both "objective" and "show that you care". Calvin also talked about how he has to control his emotions by 1) showing emotions when a person comes to talk about bullying type situations and 2) not getting too emotional or caught up in their story, or try to remain neutral. And, at the same time, he has to help control the employee's emotions. He comments:

I see it as the unbiased third party as much as possible because the first person who brings you the situation is not necessarily the one who is in the right. I have to be very careful about that. I have to be the passionate, empathetic, but not start picking a side. So, that is a challenge. It is very hard. Because you want to reach out to them but sometimes they are crying, angry, or mad. I see it as my job to try and calm them down as well. I feel that I have to be very emotionally intelligent so I can do that.

Calvin's comment points to the idea that in bullying situations, HR professionals have to manage multiple and conflicting emotions on the job as well as create the proper emotional displays. He attributes success in balancing these opposing tensions to "emotional intelligence". From these comments and others like them, these HR professionals clearly felt that part of their role was to display certain emotions and at the same time manage other emotions, and still try to control other employees' emotional

displays. In contrast, HR professionals felt upper management saw their role in these situations quite differently.

### *HR Roles: The Upper Management Perspective*

The HR professionals' perspective on how they saw their role in bullying situations proved to be different than what they felt upper management (UM) saw as their roles in bullying situations. Some of these roles overlap with how HR saw their role, but many are different and conflicting. Most HR professionals felt that UM saw them as a partner or resource in these situations. Others talked about how UM saw them as the people who would "take care of it" or as an enforcer of rules. Less often the HR professionals felt that UM saw them as an objective 3<sup>rd</sup> party, and as nags. These roles will be discussed below.

#### *Partner/Resource*

Many of the HR professionals I spoke with felt that upper management saw them as a partner in consult with the business or a resource that could be used to deal with bullying situations. This role seemed to be congruent with how the HR professionals saw themselves while occupying the management advisor role. The sheer number of HR professionals that spoke about this role points to their belief of its importance to upper management. Calvin commented, "... and now we are becoming more of a partner in consult to the business. Every company is in existence for a purpose which is to make money and HR's job is to facilitate that process through nurturing and management of the employees, the employee resources, the human resources". Alison commented that in some organizations HR is seen as a partner or "trusted advisor": "Some upper



managements that I've seen that honor HR and consider them a strategic business partner at the table". Pat commented on how UM in her organization viewed her role, "My role is to protect the company and to advise in a way that is going to be beneficial to the organization, really partnering with that manager to influence them". Jose points to the idea that he is a resource for UM when he says simply, "They want me to figure it out and give them advice". Jackson positions HR in his organization as a strong resource to management when he says,

They want to be able to look over to an HR person to manage that issue, collect the information, provide them with a download so that they can make a decision with the HR person. They are going to want the HR person to make a recommendation because they don't have the knowledge, nor do they care to have the knowledge.

Lastly, Stephen related that the UM and management in his organization truly sees HR as a partner and resource, "They view us as a link, as an unbiased informational portion, and a great resource when it comes to dealing with their organization." HR professionals paint a picture of UM trusting and leaning on the HR department for advice on a number of issues involved in bullying situations. They are clear in pointing out that they do not make the decisions in these situations but instead are seen as a resource or a partner in dealing with the situation.

### *Take Care of It*

The HR professionals also related that UM saw their role in these situations as "taking care of it", "fixing it" and getting it resolved. Teresa commented, "Hmm...Someone who takes care of it so they don't have to". And Chelsea, who does not have decision-making power, commented: "Solver of problems. I think that HR is

generally seen as the solver of problems just get it solved, get it fixed, do whatever you need to have it happen, bring us in when you need us, but you are in charge of making sure everybody gets along”. Jean, an HR Director who does not have decision-making power, very simply commented, “Ah, make it go away”. It’s clear that some HR professionals, believed that UM saw their role as the person who would take care of it, fix the problem, and get it solved. What is interesting is that all of the HR professionals who felt this was management’s view did not actually have the power to just “fix it”. This points to a paradox of agency as discussed in the second chapter. The HR professionals’ power position will be discussed in more detail in a forthcoming section.

There were also other HR professionals who voiced the “fix it” role but actually *did* have the power and tools to solve the problem. For example, Marian, an HR Director who actually has decision-making authority in these situations, commented,

I think they rely on me quite a bit. I am very much the first line defense in employee relations problems. I think they see me a person who is going to be fair and take the situation seriously and make sure to get it resolved because we don’t want to lose that employee and we want everyone to be comfortable in the workplace.

Kat, who is the CFO of her organization and does have decision-making authority comments, “They see my role as to take care of every bit of it. It is not even a matter of anyone else being involved, or even worrying about it. Kat will handle it.” It is clear that some HR professionals feel UM wants them to take care of bullying situations even when they don’t have the decision-making power to do so, still a rare few did have the power and felt this was a mandate from UM as well. Beyond just a resource or the

person who will “take care of it”, some of these HR professionals also felt that UM saw them as the one to enforce the rules.

### *Rule Enforcer*

Fewer HR professionals pointed to the idea that UM saw their role as a rule enforcer or the “keeper of the rules”. Alison and Jackson commented on the idea that some UM see HR as just someone to enact or enforce the rules, not determine when they need to be enforced, “Other upper management teams of people or individuals consider HR kind of tactical, ‘keeper of the rules’ someone you only go there to get payroll processed, get someone hired, ....you know like another department, they don’t see them as a strategic partner”. And Jackson commented that UM often sees and uses HR as the “police”,

I think that they kind of see the HR function as, in that particular situation as, I hate to use that term, but really we are sort of “policing” that behavior in the business. We are really the, it is really our role in the company to ensure that we help ensure that employees have a safe place to come to work.

And Shondra commented on how some management try to use HR as the bad guy,

I have had a manager come to me before and said I need you to go talk to this employee because they are going around saying mean things about me. In my opinion if you are a manager you need to be able to confront your employees. Be able to say this is what I am hearing what is the problem. Certainly if you need assistance HR will absolutely step in. I feel like sometimes managers use HR as their bad guy. They want HR to do the dirty work for them.

The role of enforcer of rules or the “keeper of the rules” seems to be in opposition to the partner/resource role. The majority of HR professionals felt that UM saw them as a resource pointing to the idea that those who have the decision-making power value HR and their advice. The rule enforcer role seems to suggest that HR’s opinion and function

are not valued but are seen as those who will do their bidding. The last two categories were not prominent categories but, proved to be both interesting and worth discussing.

#### *Objective Third Party*

Interestingly, only two of the HR professionals felt that UM saw their role as an objective third party. Chris commented: “They see it as someone who can go out there and obtain information that is not tainted, information that appears to be truthful and correct and something that is not really favored one way or another.” Teri talked about how management would use her for her unbiased opinion on situations,

We can talk, it is an unbiased opinion basically. Because management in their particular store, has their own, what am I trying to say, they have already made up their mind about that person at the dealership and they can call me and I can be unbiased because I don't really work with anyone, ya know.

The lack of strength for this category is what makes this category interesting. The HR professionals felt very strongly that their role was to objective and neutral and get to the bottom of the situation. Here, we can see that they feel this was not a prominent role UM felt they should occupy in these situations. This seems to suggest, as some of the HR professionals articulated, that they are really supposed to be looking out for the organization in these situations. This will be discussed further in a forthcoming section. The last role mentioned by the HR professionals was that of the nag.

#### *The Nag*

Two of the HR professionals felt that UM really saw them as a nag in these situations. This was someone who was needlessly nagging them about a bullying situation that they did not see or think was important. Although there were only two HR professionals who mentioned this, it is interesting because it suggests that in some

organizations HR professionals face significant resistance from UM on dealing with bullying issues. For example, Teri commented on how UM saw her role in these situations, “Honestly, I think it is that I am overacting. I get that sense sometimes. If I want to do something to solve a problem, you can see the look on their face, it is like, you are just over reacting, you know”. And Carol talked about how she felt like UM thought of her as a “nag” or a “mother hen” because she wanted to deal with bullying situations.

The HR professionals expressed a range of roles they felt UM thought they should occupy in bullying situations. Some of these, the partner/resource and the objective third party roles seemed to be congruent with how HR professionals saw their role. However, the roles of “take care of it”, rule enforcer, and the nag were all roles they did not feel they should play. In fact, as articulated above, the divergence of these role expectations could be causing the HR professionals to experience significant tension when dealing with bullying situations. This will be discussed in detail in chapter VII. Before discussing these possible tensions, there is another piece of the puzzle that needs to be discussed. Another perspective important to understanding the expectations faced by HR professionals when dealing with bullying situations is the perspective of the target.

#### *HR Roles: The Target Perspective*

How the HR professionals felt the target saw their role in these situations also proved to interesting and often contradictory to what they saw as their role. The HR professionals felt that the people who complained about bullying (the target, the accuser)

saw HR's role as the person who would "fix it" and someone to vent to who was a trusted source. The HR professionals also talked about their reputation throughout the organization and felt this contributed to how they were perceived by employees. These three areas are discussed in detail below.

### *Fix it*

Many of the HR professionals talked about HR being perceived by the target or employees as the people who are going to fix the situation. Ted plainly commented, "I think more often than not they expect me to fix it. I think, number one, most employees will perceive me as the one who is going to fix it." Teresa commented that she felt those who had been bullied saw HR, "as their lifesaver. They see it as when truly when a person comes to HR and says I've been bullied, and I need you to fix it. They are kind of on their last straw. So they see you as a lifesaver, as someone who is going to help them solve their problem." Jaime talks about how bullied employees come to her expecting her to fix it and she has to tell them that she doesn't have the power to do so:

I think that when they come they would like to think that I could help them because then they don't have to go any further. We have a relationship, I listen, I am not a threat to them, I am not someone who could do anymore to them, and I think that they see me in that position because they would like to think that I will do something. I have to make it clear to them that I can only really help them by taking it to the next level.

Kelly talked about how targets saw them to fix it and get revenge, "Fix it! Ha! I would say fix it. Help me get out of this situation sometimes it might even be to want to get back at the manager in some way." Marian commented that targets are, "expecting for the situation to change and usually when they are coming to me it is effecting their work environment in some way and they want it to get better. What ever bullying is occurring

is to get it to stop. To stop it.” Jean very plainly commented that the targets saw HR’s role as: “Fix it, get rid of that person.” Stephen commented, “Sometimes, they want to see heads roll and I have to explain to them that that is not how it works.” Lastly, Tyson also felt that targets saw his role as, “I think most employees see HR as where they go to get it fixed. That all they have to do is bring up the issue and we will take care of it.”

From the above explanation of how HR saw themselves, it is clear that many do not have the power or the authority to “just fix” the situation. Instead, they are they trying to be neutral, getting to the bottom of the situation and they don not have decision-making power. However, they know that those going to HR to complain about bullying behaviors have an expectation that they are going to “fix it” and take care of the situation. We even get a sense of what “fix it” means to these employees; get the behavior to stop, fire the bully, get the bully in trouble. Clearly the “fix it” role points to a disconnect between how targets view HR’s role in these situations and how HR professionals themselves view their role. It seems redundant to say that these differing expectations in the HR professional’s role in bullying situations could be a source of tension and frustration. On a more congruent note, the HR professionals also felt that those who have bullying-type complaints see them as someone who is a trusted source to vent to in these situations.

#### *Someone to Vent to Who Is Trusted*

HR professionals felt that targets of bullying saw one of their roles as someone who would listen to them and as someone they could come to talk to, Jaime commented; “They really want to vent. I am finding that a lot of people just want to talk to you as a

person and tell you that this happened.” Vivian commented,

I think that they would see my role as a trusting source. If they were to ask me to keep something confidential that I felt like I could then they know that I would do that. You know if they wanted to just come to me first just to vent without taking any further action I think they would feel comfortable.

Similarly, Kelly commented, “Someone to listen to them, to understand and hear my point of view and not judge me, ya know? ‘I need help’. Sometimes it is just listening.”

Stephen talked about how he was perceived as someone who would listen and kept the situation confidential:

Sometimes people just need to come in and bitch, and they bitch about whatever their scenario may be and that is all that is wanted and that is fine... I think that they view me as a confidential department, if it needs to be confidential. They have, I think they realize they have a resource when it comes to dealing with employee and people issues.

And Trianna talked about how she did not play favorites and was confidential with employees’ information. Because of this the employees saw her as a trusted source, “I don’t have any favoritism towards the staff so I think they feel confident that if they have situation where they are being bullied, they can come and speak with me.” Tiffany noted the benefits of being trusted by employees,

They might just come and say look, I am not feeling comfortable, I don’t want this to blow up to anything, can you just put the bug in that person’s ear to back off. And that is the ideal situation, really. To be informed of it at a point when it is not escalated.

Acting as a the person who the target can trust and vent to is a role that seemed congruent with how the HR professionals saw themselves in the first phase of dealing with a bullying situation. The HR professionals also mentioned that their reputation also played a part in how targets perceived their role in bullying situations.



### *HR's Reputation*

Part of what goes into the target's view of HR's role in these situations seemed to be colored by HR's reputation. Some of the HR professionals talked about HR's reputation in general. Some of the HR people talked about how they had nicknames given to them by the employees (of course, they heard about this second-hand). In general, HR professionals feel they are up against a somewhat negative reputation in the eyes of regular employees. HR was seen as more of a policing unit and used by management as "the bad guy". Some HR professionals talk about how they are trying to change that and at the same time do their job. Alejandra talked about how she got the nickname, "the hammer" when she took over her HR department and actually started enforcing rules,

So when she wasn't there I took over and she saw some of the feedback and people were like whoa. Then I got the reputation as being The Hammer. I wore it well don't get me wrong. After that she allowed me to do a lot more things. I saw the same things happening over and over again and you have to stop. Ya you give people a chance to correct their behavior because ya people make poor decision but you can't allow thing to repeatedly happen.

She talked about this being a good thing because the employees know that if they bring something to her, she is going to take it seriously, investigate it, and enforce policies.

Marian talked about how she is widely seen as the disciplinarian in her organization and was given the nickname, "The Dragon Lady",

My role in my organization is probably seen very much as a disciplinarian. The employees look upon me as, how to put it, where the lines are drawn. If they see their boss in my office or they are called to my office, they get scared because they think something is going to happen to somebody. I have that kind of aura that she gets involved, something is going to happen, someone is going to get written up, something is going to happen.

She went on to talk about how she felt this was a good thing because the employee knew that if something bad was going on, she would deal with it:

I think they see it in a dual way, I think they see it as their security, a real security to them that if someone is misbehaving it will be taken care of, they want to be protected. And, true misconduct of other people has an adverse effect on people, at the end of the day, the fact that I am around is more a source of comfort and security because most of our employees are tenured and they know me personally and they aren't afraid.

Jean talked about how HR's reputation with UM is really as a "paper pusher" and "record keeper" rather than revenue saver or revenue generator. He remarked,

A lot of the HR functions, we don't actually produce hard cash. That probably the hardest thing and most frustrating thing about HR. 90% of us in Higher Education are assigned to the Finance VP. You don't see, only in a very few organizations do you see them in places other than the business or finance part. And it is very hard to through the yoke off that you are a paper pusher or a record keeper.

Doug talked about how HR is perceived as the police when he said, "Well there is a phrase at [our company] about how you 'don't want to land in HR jail.'" Stephen, a new HR Director for a large hospital chain, commented on HR stereotypes and how he was trying to fight the negative ones,

Unfortunately, in most organizations, they see HR as the deliverer of bad news sometimes, and that is, there are stigmas, there are stereotypes, stereotypes have backing sometimes. I mean the HR guy was the only guy who ever fired anyone, I have seen that before. Um, there are things like that can, prevent a trusting relationships from happening from an employee, a non-decision-making, managerial type employee from interacting with human resources the way they should. I try to prevent that, I try to discourage any kind of barriers between myself and the employee.

These HR professionals felt their reputation was oftentimes something they had to overcome when trying to help targets. It seems clear that these varying views of HR's role in bullying situations are often contradictory and even paradoxical. The HR

professionals themselves felt they played an evolving role in bullying situations which included being a trusted listener, an objective and neutral investigator, management advisor, and a mediator/trainer/coach. In contrast, they felt UM saw their role as a partner/resource, the person who would “take care of it”, and the rule enforcer. And the HR professionals felt that targets saw them as the ones who would “fix it” and be a trusted listener. Needless to say these varying role expectations could be a source of great tension for HR professionals. This will be discussed in detail in chapter VII. The last section of this chapter details how HR professionals made sense of their power in bullying situations.

#### *HR's Feelings on Power and Powerlessness*

The HR professionals in this study seemed to articulate the idea that they occupied both a position of power and powerlessness when it came to bullying situations. This topic will be the subject of this section. In chapter VI I discussed the reality that HR professionals do not feel powerful enough to deal with and confront bullying when it involves a manager (or someone higher in org rank) or a producer (someone with more power). Similarly, the HR professionals' articulation of their role and position in bullying situations points to a lack of power to enact consequences in these situations. In a very real sense, they don't have the power to “fix it” or “make it go away.” For example, Jaime, an HR secretary commented, “The best I could do is bring it to someone else's attention and explain the situation and hope that it goes through the channels from that point on, other than I don't think I could be expected to do anymore”. And Teri, after being asked how much power she felt she had in these situations said,

“None! HAAAAA...” Additionally, Tyson’s comment about his power in bullying situations was revealing. He did not like the term “power” associated with him in bullying situations; he preferred influence. Although most of the HR professionals felt they had very little power when it came to decision-making and determining consequences, the HR professionals did believe they had other sources of power in bullying situations including recommendation power, the power of persuasion, and group power. They even articulated where these sources of power came from; support by UM, the HR position itself, trust, and organizational policy.

#### *Recommendation Power*

Many of the HR professionals talked about how they had the power to recommend management take certain actions in bullying situations. Pat commented on her recommendation power, “That involves coming up with a recommendation or set of recommendations for them, then negotiating with the manager”. Donald talked about how his HR Employee Relations team has recommendation power and this is supported by UM,

Well I think that we have quite a bit. However if there is something that requires action, the Employee Relations has the power to tell the manager that action needs to be taken. If the member of management does not take action, then we appeal it up the chain of command until action is taken.

Jose also commented on recommendation power. He felt it was management’s decision to use the advice or not, “But I am like hey, as long as we advise they can choose to go the wrong way”. Kelly stated that a second-level manager or higher had to be the one to make any decisions, but the HR person would recommend a course of action:

So sometimes the person is an HR generalist and doesn't have the power to do that. An employee relations person from HR who doesn't have the power to do that. I would think they would go to the second level manager. This is what I found, this is what I propose, it is your decisions but going forward, this is not going to work...and let that manager make the final call.

And Tyson actually rephrased my question because (as stated above) he believed he had influence, not power. He commented, "I assume you are asking how much weight my decision or recommendation has? **Yes.** Right now upper management relies heavily on HR's recommendations. This organization allows for independent recommendations and response to those situations." Clearly, these HR professionals felt they had the power to make recommendations in bullying situations but they did not have the power to determine if and when these recommendations would be acted upon. This recommendations power seemed to be connected with the power to persuade the decision-makers to act on the HR professionals' recommendations.

#### *Persuasion Power*

Some of the HR professionals talked about how they had the power of persuasion in bullying situations. When making their recommendations, the HR professionals could use persuasion to move the decision-maker to their point of view. Ted talked about how he evoked "the bottom line" and scare tactics to persuade the decision-makers in his organization,

Sometimes management is like 'Oh that so and so is always belly aching'. But I have to get them to come to the watering trough and realize that this can become a lot bigger than it is. You would be surprised in the private business world if you start to align issues in the workplace with potential costs they kind of tend to pay attention. Some bosses won't listen to anything if it doesn't affect the bottom-line.

Ted also talked about how this strategy worked most of the time and his recommendations were used by UM. Pat talked about how HR had to influence management in bullying situations and being a third party helped them be more persuasive to management:

I think you have to be, in order to be effective you have to be removed from having that specific authority. Yes, you can be more objective. The influence comes in from human resources to strongly influence that manager, however, it is ultimately the manager's authority to address the situation.

Pat also mentioned how executive management in her organization would often side with her over the manager if she brought a strong legal case:

...really partnering with that manager to influence them. In my position, I feel very strongly that I have the support of executive management in terms of most likely they will side with me if there is a difference in what I was saying the legal or best thing to do for the company.

Jean plainly commented, referring to if he had power in bullying situations,

Yes and no. I have no direct control over anybody but the people who work in this office. Now we have the power of persuasion, advice, and communication. So I can't land on you and I can't do anything about it. The only thing I can do is if you have really had a policy violation or if you are really done something that could put the university at risk then I can get the ear of upper management for that.

Jean talked about how he only had decision-making control over his direct reports in the HR office. Other than that, and specifically in bullying situations, he only had the power of persuasion. Doug mentioned his power in bullying situations came from UM allowing "conversation and debate" or the use of persuasive strategies by HR. Teri pointed out that if she was forceful enough with management, they typically did something about the bullying: "I am one that says 'No, there is a problem, we need to face it, we need to deal with it.' **Do they listen?** Yes, if I get strong enough about it,

normally if I say something, yes, they will do something about it.” These HR professionals pointed to their power of persuasion as something that enabled them to influence management in bullying situations. Another source of power the HR professionals spoke of was the power associated with being in a decision-making group.

### *Group Power*

Both Vivian and Teresa talked about how they had more power because they were part of a larger group that was tasked with dealing with these issues. These two had decision-making power, but only because they were a member of the group or committee that was tasked with making these decisions. In Teresa’s case, she and the group could only make recommendations on actions. She commented that she has “equal power as others on the committee.” Vivian responded, “In our organization we kind of do things as a group. In our small group you know if a situation is occurring then the manager, and myself, and upper management are going to discuss it with the individuals and then discuss it amongst ourselves”.

Although most of the HR professionals did not have real decision-making power in bullying situations, the power they did have came from their power to recommend actions, to use persuasion, and through their membership in a decision-making group. Only Donald, Marian, and Kat had the authority to make decisions in bullying situations. They could fire, discipline, prescribe training, and generally act in bullying situations. In all of their cases, their power came from being in a position in management. Donald was VP of HR at his organization, Kat was the CFO of her organization, and Marian was the Director of HR. Marian’s case was a bit different. Although her title was Director,

she reported directly to the owners of her company and stated that although she had the power to fire employees, she did not do so without consulting with the owners beforehand. The rest of the HR professionals articulated that their power to recommend and persuade came from a variety of sources including; support by UM, their HR position, their sound recommendations in the past, and organizational policy.

*Support by UM*

Some of the HR professionals mentioned that one of the things that determined if they had power in these situations or not was if UM supported them. Shondra mentioned the importance of support by her manager when she commented,

I report to directly, currently, to our Chief Operations Director and he really gives me the autonomy I need. If we get to where we need to take drastic measures like termination I go to him and we talk it through. I would say ok this is what I recommend and here is why. But I do feel like I have the power that I need.

Shondra's comment demonstrated her power to act in bullying situations was a direct result of her relationship with UM and their support. Trianna also pointed to the importance of UM in bullying situations. She related a situation where UM did not support disciplinary actions against an employee who was bullying and because of this, nothing was being done about the situation,

There is nothing that can be done. **So even if they were to go to HR...** Absolutely. **Why do you think that it is?** Well it's because our superior is aware of it, very aware of it, and it goes back to that whole, that she does a lot for the community. She is very involved with the regional management, so no one would be willing to reprimand her for fear that she might leave.

Jackson echoed the idea that HR's power was connected to the support of UM when he commented,



I think it depends on the political lay of the land. To give an example...if the bully is related to the Chief Executive Officer, it's going to be tougher because the CEO is protecting that person because they are a relative. So you have nepotism, which is a different issue...**Yeah..** but that affects the kind of support you will get.

Tyson also stated,

It depends. If upper management is responsive to getting it fixed um, it can be a positive experience both for the employees who are subject to it, the employee maybe doing it, and for an HR professional for getting something fixed within a workgroup. If management is not open to addressing the problem it is frustrating because on many levels because people leave and the hardest thing in HR is recruiting and hiring the right people and getting them trained.

Tyson's comment vividly demonstrated how important the support of UM is when dealing with bullying situations. If UM supports HR's activities, the HR professionals felt they could actually address and deal with bullying situations, if they did not, the HR professionals were almost powerless in the situation. The HR professionals also pointed to their position in HR as one of their sources of power in bullying situations.

#### *The HR Position*

The fact that they were in an HR position was one of the reasons they gave for having the power to make recommendations in bullying situations. Ted commented, "I have always felt like I had the proper level of authority for the job and the responsibility of it. It comes from a couple of things: 1. It comes to you because you are the one in the position." On the flip side, Betty noted her positional level in HR as a reason she did not have power in bullying situations:

I think that I am only a representative for that department. They usually don't see me as a huge player. Only if I am brought in by the generalist, do they see me as a bigger player in this situation. The generalist would be a big player. They definitely would take everything that they have to say and their recommendations very seriously.

And Stephen pointed to both his position and the trust management has in him as the two things that gave him power in these situations:

I think I have the full authority to deal with these situations. Part of that comes from the trust of my leadership team has in me and part of that is set up as such... That responsibility for following up and addressing the issues that are called in about falls directly in my department. So that set up along with the trust and confidence from my leadership are kind of the power that gives me the power to deal with these issues.

Tori felt her position in bullying situations came from her place on the Grievance committee: "I think it is grounded in my...the position I serve in the institution...my HR position." It was clear some of the HR professionals felt just an HR position gave them some power in bullying situations. Still others felt that power also came from trust by upper management.

*Sound Recommendations = Trust*

Some of the HR professionals felt their power came from making sound recommendations in the past. Because of this, others in the organization began to trust them and their judgment. Alejandra commented,

When I first got there I didn't feel like I had any because when I would try to intervene with the right thing to do managers would say oh no lets not do that, this is the thing we should do. So when she wasn't there I was in charge. So when she wasn't there I took over and she saw some of the feedback and people were like whoa. Then I got the reputation as being the hammer.

And Betty commented that HR professionals in her organization are only trusted when they have proved they can do the job, "but typically it is only after the proven trust is there. It is only after they've shown the commitment to that specific client group. If they didn't do a good job last time, so what makes me feel that they will this time"? Also,

Tyson's commented that he felt his recommendations held more weight because of good past advice and recommendations. Not only did the HR professionals feel they had recommendation power, some also felt they could have power in bullying situations if there was an organizational policy that addressed bullying.

### *Organizational Policy*

Three of the HR professionals felt their power in bullying situations came from organizational policy. Teresa talked about how HR's power really came from policies and her organization did not have a policy associated with bullying. She pointed out that one of the reasons organizations did not have policies was because bullying is so hard to define:

So the powers to come in and say, "you're fired", you don't really have in HR, unless they violate company policies. Some companies, you know you kind of have a no bullying company policy but then again defining look how difficult it is. And so your power would come by empowering those employees to deal with it.

Teresa felt organizational policy was a strong source of power for those who had them. However, she also alluded to the fact that many organizations did not have bullying policies and because of this HR had to "empower" the employees involved in the situations to deal with the bullying. This comment seemed like a nice way of saying, "You have to figure it out and fix it by yourself". Jean also talked about how a policy violation would give him a stronger case with management, "The only thing I can do is, if you have really had a policy violation or if you are really done something that could put the university at risk, then I can get the ear of upper management for that." Tiffany noted that in her organization, everything is in "black and white" and this gave her

power to deal with bullying situations. However, Tiffany's situation was different because she was also the direct manager of employees. She is not only the HR department to her employees but also their manager,

It is all written down in black and white, I mean "management has a right to manage". That is a quote, and I have had to say that to people before, "I am sorry, you and I don't agree, but management has a right to manage.

Here Tiffany is pointing to a policy she felt allowed her to make a decision about action in a bullying-type situation. The policy that is in "black and white" says that "management has the right to manage" and she and others in her organization have interpreted this policy to mean that they can make decisions when it comes to bullies and bullying situations.

In summary, this chapter detailed how the HR professionals made sense of how and why bullying happens in organizations and their role in these situations. The HR professionals pointed to a variety of issues including management and managing style, communication skills, organizational culture, contemporary society, and human nature as reasons for why bullying happens and how it happens. Additionally, they felt they occupied a variety of roles in bullying situations and many of these roles seemed to directly contrast how they felt upper management and the target saw their role. The HR professionals also articulated the idea that they saw themselves as occupying both a position of power and powerlessness at the same time. An interesting finding on the HR professionals' power position is that so few of the HR professionals pointed to policies as something that could give them power in these situations. Workplace bullying

policies and the HR professionals' understanding and interpretation of these policies will be the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER VI

### FINDINGS: HR PROFESSIONALS AND WORKPLACE BULLYING POLICIES

The two preceding findings chapters have illuminated how HR professionals defined and understood workplace bullying (chapter VI) and how they made sense of bullying and their position in bullying situations (chapter V). The subject of this final findings chapter will revolve around HR professionals' understandings of organizational policies that could address workplace bullying. In this chapter I will discuss if HR professionals believed their organizations had bullying policies and if they did, how these policies were understood and utilized by HR professionals (RQ4 & RQ6). Then I will turn my attention to what these policies seem to be communicating and what HR professionals feel they communicate (RQ5).

#### Do Organizations Have Bullying Policies?

Both RQ4 and RQ6 asked if organizations utilized policies to deal with workplace bullying and if they did, how did HR professionals interpret and understand these policies (see Table 5 for summary). It seemed intuitive to discuss these two research questions together. In short and in reference to RQ4, the HR professionals I spoke with felt that yes, their organizations had and utilized policies to deal with workplace bullying. And, in reference to RQ6, these HR professionals felt a variety of more general behavioral policies, mandated by insurance companies and informed by the law could be combined to sufficiently cover workplace bullying. However, there were

also a handful of HR professionals who did not think their organizations had policies that addressed bullying and did not use organizational policies to deal with bullying. In this section, I will discuss RQ4 and RQ6 illuminating how these HR professionals understood and utilized “bullying” policies.

Table 5

## Frequency of Bullying Policy

Code Name	Description	Frequency
“Yes, we have a bullying policy”	This organization had a policy that used the label “bullying” and specifically addressed bullying.	1
“Yes, we have a bullying policy, but...”	These organizations did have a policy that covered bullying, but it was not labeled as a “bullying” policy. Instead HR professionals used a mix of harassment, workplace violence, and code of conduct policies.	16
“No, we don’t have a bullying policy”	These organizations did not have bullying policies.	12
“A bullying policy? I don’t know”	These HR professionals did not know if they had a bullying policy.	5

*“Yes, We Have a Bullying Policy”*

There was only one HR professional who said their organization had a bullying policy that actually used the word “bullying” and covered bullying activities. Jackson reported his organization had a bullying policy that was subsumed under their harassment policy. He said, “Our policy... bullying...is actually a part of our harassment policy in our policy manual... it falls under that umbrella in our manual. It is

a bullet point, one of the behaviors in our harassment policy that we address that we don't tolerate basically." He goes on to read the policy,

Harassment also includes bullying which is characterized by offensive, malicious or insulting behavior which is intended to undermine or humiliate the recipient for the purpose of or effect of reasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating hostile or offensive working environment . Then further down, there is a bullet point that defines it: Bullying is repeated mistreatment of one or more employees with malicious mix of humiliation, intimidation and sabotage of performance.

What is interesting about this policy is that it seems to be taken from the current target research that defines bullying from a target's perspective (see Keashley & Jagatic, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). When asked how and why they decided to include bullying in their policy, Jackson talked about how he and the other four people who made up the HR department were relatively new to the company and needed to update the employee handbook. They took this as an opportunity to improve the policies. The team had full power to make decisions about what should and should not be included and bullying was one of the topics they felt should be covered. Jackson also mentioned that one of the other HR professionals on the team knew about bullying and had dealt with it in his previous organization. Because of this, the bullying policy was incorporated into the handbook.

When asked if this policy had ever had to be enforced, Jackson commented that it had not been used because bullying was not been a problem in their organization. He commented, "The bullying policy in particular? Fortunately, we haven't had a bully where we've had to refer to this policy. And we haven't had the need...we made this policy based on past experience to be proactive and go out and educate...hum...it's just



not an issue for us at this point.” It is telling that only one organization had a policy that actually mentioned and defined bullying. The majority of HR professionals I spoke with instead felt their organizations had other policies which covered bullying behaviors.

*“Yes, We Have a Bullying Policy But...”*

Almost half of the HR professionals (16) I spoke with said they did have a policy that covered what they considered bullying, but it was not labeled as a “bullying” policy. The term “bullying” was not used in the policy however, they all felt bullying was covered in these policies, and they could enforce the policy in a case they determined to be bullying. Calvin commented, “No, no not in those words. But we do have rules of conduct and those cover a lot of things. We have rules of conduct and ethics.” Ted also commented,

I haven’t seen one. In my last organization, I didn’t see one that was titled that or that was very explicit about workplace bullying. But that was either covered in very specific or broad terms in our harassment policies. If somebody were to ask me if my company had a workplace bullying policy, I would say, yes. Is it titled that way? No.

Kerry talked about how both of her past employers had general policies that she felt covered bullying:

They both had general policies but it didn’t say bullying. It was more around, ya know, there was definitely a harassment policy and bullying can fall under harassment so I think it probably is covered under that general harassment policy. But they don’t specifically call it bullying.

And Tyson reiterated that the term “bullying” was not generally used:

No. So the policies don’t say “bullying.” There is only a policy that talks about treating coworkers with respect. I think it would address any issues that came up under claiming to be bullied. We could respond by showing this policy and that the type of behavior is not allowed.

As these comments demonstrate, many of the HR professionals felt they did have a policy to deal with bullying in the workplace, but it was not labeled “bullying” and seemed to be subsumed under broader, more general harassment or respect policies. Betty pointed to this when she commented, “But I think they consider, what they would consider workplace bullying is violence in the workplace and harassment. I think they might consider it under the umbrella of violence in the workplace and harassment.” Trianna talked about how she felt that bullying was covered, in her organization, under their organization’s mission statement where the statement addressed “respect” and “working together” “If there is cursing involved we would probably look at the policy on profanity it would just really depend on the specific situation. But I would say, yes, those are the two, respect and working together.” As Trianna’s and the above comments illustrate, most of the HR professionals believed that a combination of many of the policies they already had would be sufficient for covering bullying in the workplace. They talked about a range of policies, including violence, harassment, and codes of conduct. I will discuss each of these in turn.

### *Workplace Violence*

Those who mentioned a workplace violence policy as covering bullying saw this as covering threats associated with bullying. For example, Jose commented, “Threats, people don’t understand that if they even threaten a little, we have them jailed, I mean it is really bad”. And Betty, referring to what her organization’s workplace violence policy covered, commented, “It could be a threat, it does not have to be an action”.

### *Harassment*

Those who mentioned bullying was already covered under existing harassment policies tended to point to the idea that their policy not only covered situations in which someone was harassed in reference to a protected class, but a more general type of harassment which they saw as bullying. Ted commented,

There are certain policies that are required to be in manuals and handbooks by the EEOC. Generally the language used in the sexual harassment policy will say any behavior that has the result of making an employee feel uncomfortable or inhibited in the workplace is prohibited...I rely on the general language in the sexual harassment policy.

Alejandra commented,

Well it goes back to the EEOC policy. Our business is run under a government contract so we have to follow the government guideline to a "t." It will say something like "all employees are subject to a harassment free workplace. Bullying, sexual harassment, or harassment of any kind is not tolerated. People who exhibit this type of behavior will have disciplinary action up to and including termination."

Although Alejandra mentions that the term bullying is indicated in her organization's harassment policy, an examination of the policy revealed it is not mentioned. After explaining that bullying was covered under her organization's harassment policy, Betty commented,

Harassment obviously covers sexual harassment, and it also covers almost like a bullying kind of issue. Don't harass your co-workers.....you know... So be nice to your co-workers. So it is something as simple as that. In layman's terms, when you get through all the mess, that is basically what it is telling you.

Pat also felt that her organization's harassment policy covered bullying situations. She pointed to the following excerpt as demonstrating this,

This policy says that harassment may include: "comments, kidding, teasing, practical jokes, slurs, taunting, verbal abuse, degrading comments or jokes,

insulting pictures drawing, it says anyone engaging in or encouraging improper harassment or any violation of this policy even when the violation does not meet the legal definition will be subject to disciplinary action.” So it is almost like bullying could be included in that policy because it is prohibiting discrimination and harassment and it is saying that even if it doesn’t meet the legal definition of protected categories that we would still take action on it.

Here Pat seems to be pointing to her harassment policy as going beyond specific protected classes and encompassing a more general idea of harassment. Marian seemed to echo Pat when she commented,

The anti-harassment policy, of course is primarily designed to prevent sexual harassment and illegal discrimination but it does expand the concept to explain that all employees need to be treated with respect at all times. And there again, it is because the whole issue with Title VII is respect. And truly we don’t want to strictly focus respect on male-female or on sex, age, whatever. Respect is deserved amongst all employees. We have differences and those differences might not be protected by a law, but there are still expected relationships in the workplace.

Marian was not alone when she voiced the idea that existing organizational policies concerned with respect in the workplace would be sufficient to cover bullying situations. Some of the HR professionals specifically pointed to policies associated with respect or certain codes of conduct as covering bullying situations.

#### *Codes of Conduct*

Many (12) of the HR professionals felt that bullying was also covered under their code of conduct policies. These policies either generally talked about respecting others in the workplace and/or contained a list of behaviors that were not allowed. Marian commented, “We have policy that covers work rules. It outlines what is expected in terms of conduct. It gives specific examples of someone threatening or being disrespectful and bullying would be a subcategory under those items.” Ted also

mentioned that his organization has a policy that, “spoke to supervisory behavior and how to deal with employees and it talked about being professional. I think the term respect came out in a lot of those policies.” Tyson talked about his organization did not having policies that specified “bullying,” but “there is a policy that talks about treating coworkers with respect. I think it would address any issues that came up under being claimed to be bullied”. Interestingly, Trianna talked about how her organization covered bullying situations under their mission statement. She felt the mission statement was a kind of code of conduct that generally laid out how employees were to act. When asked if she saw her organization’s mission statement as a kind of policy, she commented, “Absolutely. Respect is very important, work together as a team, because of our cornerstones, let us see, put our residents first...I can’t remember all of them...” When asked if she would look to these policies when dealing with bullying situations, she commented, “Yes.”

It seems clear that many of the HR professionals felt their organizations already had policies in place that could cover bullying situations. Because of this, it is not surprising that many of the HR professionals believed there was not a need for a separate, more specific anti-bullying policy. In addition, some even felt that one could not articulate an anti-bullying policy because the phenomenon is elusive and hard to concretely define. When asked if he thought his company should adopt an anti-bullying policy, Jean commented, “You are going to go too far, there are a gillion types of behaviors and some people would take what you and I consider to be bullying and they would not consider it bullying at all.” Tyson commented,

I can't speak for everyone in the industry, but it is really just another term for issues that have always existed in the workplace and have been addressed through other policies. So those things are like...violence in the workplace, sexual harassment, behavior that is already addressed. It doesn't need to be classified again as something else.

Marty pointed to the idea that what is considered bullying is very subjective:

It's just as we were talking earlier, the Indian individual to whom I report is as an obnoxious an s.o.b. as you'll ever meet in your life, but I absolutely adore him. He's great to me, he's just an obnoxious s.o.b. and I know that and we roll on, but to somebody else he makes them cry every time he walks in the room. It's really hard to define, whereas obviously sexual harassment is pretty easy to spot. I don't know that you could actually write a policy when it's so personally individual.

Phyllis is pointed to as why organizations would not have a term like bullying included in organizational policy:

I don't think that they would in my opinion put something like that in their handbook, simply because that's not a legally referred to term. They might say that you can't harass a person which is a legally supported term, but bullying is not yet a legally supported term so they are not going to put that in their handbook.

Here Phyllis articulated the idea that because bullying was not a term that had any meaning in a legal sense, it is not a valid term to use in a handbook on organizational policy. In addition, some of the HR professionals felt that it was just a given or expectation that one should not engage in bullying-type behaviors and act in a professional manner in organizations. For example, Alison commented, "...everyone assumes that we get along or people behave accordingly." Calvin commented, "It is just implied expectations that we have just never written down because you just expect it." Chelsea commented, "We don't expect bullying, we don't expect intimidation. We do expect that you treat others with respect..." Kat talked about the golden rule when she

commented, “you know I will tell you that some of these smaller ancillary policies, you know, instead of just the policy of life which is to treat others the way you want to be treated yourself, is that written down somewhere? It is something that I go by but, it is not written down.” Kat points to the taken-for-grantedness of treating others in the workplace the way you would like to be treated. As she points out, she felt this should not have to be written down but is just something everyone should live by. These HR professionals also mentioned how they used and enforced these policies in bullying situations.

#### *Utilization and Enforcement of Bullying Policy*

In an effort to more directly answer RQ6, I asked the HR professionals to talk about how they used and enforced these policies. The HR professionals most often talked about using these policies to inform or educate employees. They also mentioned enforcing the policies through a set of rules associated with the policy. Of the HR professionals who felt their organization already had a policy that addressed bullying, the majority talked about using these policies to inform/educate employees of their existence and the expectations associated with them. Tori talked about how her organization actually closed down for half a day every year to inform employees on policies, policy changes, and answer questions, “We talk about them annually at our informational gathering. We close down once a year for half a day and we get into round circle fashion and we talk about the changes and it’s a question/answer format.” Ted commented that his organization’s policies, “were explained to them and that they were responsible for not just that, but all policies and rules and procedures.” Calvin talked

about how his organization used the policies to educate possible offenders, “We will often pull them out and reference them in a discussion or when we are doing a formal disciplinary action”. Tiffany commented that, “you can use it as a preventative...I can just go to the offender and say, you know better. You know the rules. At that point you can nip it in the bud”. And Teri said, “We educate the employees with them, through training, they read our policies, managers train them...” It is clear that these HR professionals used the policies to educate their employees on what was considered professional behavior in the workplace. They also talked about how they enforced these policies in specific situations.

Overwhelmingly, the HR professionals mentioned enforcing the policies they felt covered bullying activities through sets of prescribed rules. Alison commented, “I am sure that there is a process and procedure that you would have to go look up and follow according to our company’s rule you need to go see first you do this, then you do this, then you do that...” Alison’s comment pointed to the idea that if she wanted to enforce one of the policies she would have to follow a formal procedure. Alejandra talked about “using the disciplinary process” to enforce policies associated with bullying. Ted mentioned about needing to follow a “formal process” when enforcing policies, and Donald pointed to the policy itself as prescribing how enforcement was handled: “Then if there are issues with any of those policies, then corrective action should be provided then they are enforced in the code of conduct policy.” Like Donald, Pat talked about using the actual policy to enforce the rules, “You use it like a formula to address the situation.”



These HR professionals felt that their organizations did have policies that indirectly addressed bullying and bullying behaviors. They believed that a combination of many of the policies their organizations already had would be sufficient to cover bullying in the workplace. They talked about a range of policies including; violence, harassment, and codes of conduct. They also discussed how they utilized these policies to inform and educate employees as well as to enforce repercussions for violating the policies. Still others did not think their organizations had policies that could cover workplace bullying.

*“No, We Don’t Have A Bullying Policy”*

Some of the other HR professionals I spoke with felt their organizations did not have a policy that addressed workplace bullying. Kevin commented, “I am going to say no because I have not heard of any that do, including my prior employers and current employers. I am not sure if they exist, but no one has ever mentioned it so I am going to say no.” Jose commented, “Not per say.” These HR professionals also seemed to think that bullying could not be truly covered under harassment or violence policies. This is in contrast to the majority of HR professionals who felt that those policies did cover bullying activities. For example, Marty commented,

No. I’ve never seen one. **There’s not really any other policies that would cover it? No. If you don’t have one why does the organization not have one? Can you speculate on that?** I really can’t. I tend to think that it would be something under...it’s not workplace violence necessarily...it’s not sexual harassment necessarily...I think it’s really hard to define what’s considered bullying.

And Shondra echoed this idea when she commented,

Not specifically. Here is the thing with workplace bullying...if you come to work

and punch someone yes our policy covers that but if you just come to work with a bad attitude...sometimes it can be hard to pinpoint the single action. Our policy of respecting our co-workers falls into that category of not bullying co-workers.

And Teresa answered,

No, and if we do, we don't call it that. You know, most companies have codes of ethics for how to treat your co-workers. But see most bullying isn't disrespecting them publicly or demeaning them, it's simply pushing them to get their way, that's the line. How do you deal with that?

What is interesting about these HR professionals' responses is that they also had harassment and code of conduct policies but they believed these policies did not fully cover what they considered bullying in the workplace. Like Teresa and Marty, some of the HR professionals felt it would be very hard to write a policy on workplace bullying because it is hard to define. Trianna, an HR professional who actually felt that her company's mission statement covered issues associated with bullying in the workplace commented, "I guess because it is so hard to define. I mean it is so hard to define exactly what bullying is. **So it would be hard to write down a policy?** Yes, it really would". It was clear that some HR professionals did not feel their organizations had policies that could cover workplace bullying and many felt that it would be very difficult to even write a policy that addressed bullying. While these HR professionals knew their organizations did not have bullying-type policies, others really didn't know if their organization had these anti-bullying policies.

*"A Bullying Policy? I Don't Know..."*

There were also five HR professionals who did not know if they had a policy on bullying. All of these HR professionals, except Kelly, were tasked with Employee

Relations duties and possible enforcement of company policy. Chelsea, a recruiting specialist who wore many “HR hats” in her organization, felt there could be a policy that applied to bullying situations but didn’t know what this would be and only speculated on what the policy said, “We could just go back to the handbook and possibly find some policies...I think it talks about how we expect you to be an adult and get along with others. If you don’t there are measures that will be taken.” Kat didn’t know what the policy was called or what it entailed:

Some address a few of the other things. We have kind of a canned policy as far as that goes. You know the fact that it won’t be tolerated and contact your immediate supervisor or in the case you don’t feel comfortable then contact... **What is it called?** It is part of a big policy that covers all kinds of stuff.

And Stephen, Director of Human Resources for a large hospital chain, admitted he didn’t know if his organization had a bullying policy because he had only been there a month but would most likely treat it as a behavioral issue. He commented,

Well, let’s see, I have a 40 ton policy book and have been here a month and a half. Let’s see, we have the no workplace violence, we have policies that dictate how we deal with grievances, how we follow up with these, if there was something that...let’s see. Outside of that, bullying is more or less a behavioral issue and you have to address it as a behavioral issue.

Chris, a human resources manager who was responsible for employee relations issues, tried to look up the policy while we talked: “I can’t think of one. Doesn’t mean we don’t; I’ll look and see. It doesn’t address it as far as bullying. If you give me, while you are talking, I will look.” He goes down the list of policies reading these off, and then gets to harassment and looks to see if anything is there.” He then commented, “I would say the policy I am looking at now is as close to anything, it is our harassment policy.” It

is clear from these comments that some HR professionals did not know if their organization had a policy that they thought would cover bullying activities and it was even clearer these HR professionals had not used existing organizational policies in a bullying situation.

The majority of HR professionals I spoke to believed they did have policies that addressed bullying in the workplace place, but did so indirectly and without using the term “bullying.” Still only one HR professional had access to a true bullying policy that defined the term and detailed repercussions for the behaviors and the other HR professionals felt they did not have a bullying policy or didn’t really know if they had a bullying policy. In the remaining section of this chapter, I will discuss what these HR professionals felt the above policies were communicating to employees as well as what these policies actually say about bullying.

#### What Are Anti-Bullying Policies Communicating?

In order to better understand what was being communicated through policies that were seen as addressing bullying and answer RQ5, I not only asked the HR professionals what they thought the policies communicated but also collected the policy documents. I was able to collect documents from thirteen of the sixteen HR professionals who felt their existing policies covered workplace bullying. I received eleven harassment policies and seven codes of conduct policies. Interestingly, I did not receive any workplace violence policies.

I will discuss my findings from both of these sources below. Interestingly, what the HR professionals felt was being communicated by the policies and what the policies

actually detail proved to be divergent. To begin, I will discuss what the actual policies seem to be communicating to workers: 1) anti-bullying measures are not a priority, 2) bullying does not rise to the level of illegal harassment, and 3) only some behaviors are explicitly prohibited. Then, I will discuss what the HR professionals themselves thought the policies communicated to employees; 1) the organization expects professional behavior, 2) the organization cares and acts in these situations, and 3) if you want to make a complaint, you have an avenue.

#### *Anti-Bullying Measures Are Not a Priority*

After analyzing the policies the HR professionals felt covered and spoke to bullying in the workplace, it became evident that these policies could be communicating the idea that anti-bullying measures are not a priority in these organizations. The evidence for this finding is the utter lack of any reference to bullying in these policies. As many of the HR professionals communicated, their policies do not use the term “bullying” and they do not define what bullying means. This lack of any mention of the term bullying or any definition that speaks to bullying could leave some employees with the impression that anti-bullying measures are not a priority in their organization. In addition, the seemingly ad hoc nature of the various policies (code of conduct, harassment, workplace violence) also contribute to the idea that addressing and preventing bullying is not a priority. The policies themselves also demonstrate that bullying does not rise to the level of illegal harassment.

*Bullying Does Not Rise to the Level of Illegal Harassment*

The policies that the HR professionals felt covered workplace bullying seemed to also be communicating that bullying did not rise to the level of illegal harassment.

Although many of the HR professionals pointed to their harassment policies as covering bullying activities, the actual policies themselves tell another story. Six of the nine policies do not even use language that points at a more general type of harassment that is supposed to cover bullying situations. Instead, these policies are very explicit about what is actually considered harassment. Not surprisingly, what is defined as harassment in these policies is sexual harassment or harassment because of a protected class. For example, one policy simply states:

Harassment, other than sexual harassment, is verbal or physical conduct that denigrates or shows hostility or aversion to an employee because of gender, race, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, marital status, *or any basis prohibited by law* when such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an employee's work performance, creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment, or otherwise adversely affects an individual's employment opportunities. [Italics added]

As this policy demonstrates, harassment is defined by those areas that are prescribed by law. Another of these harassment policies communicated the same idea when harassment was defined,

Any form of harassment which violates federal, state or local law, including but not limited to harassment related to an individual's race, color, religion, sex, genetic information, sexual orientation, pregnancy, medical condition, national origin, age, disability, is a violation of this policy and will be treated as a disciplinary matter.

Again, this policy seems to have an exhaustive list of types of harassment and hinges on the notion that the harassment has to "violate federal, state or local law." At this point in

time, bullying is not a form of harassment that is defined by the law. It seems relying on policies like these would leave employees little recourse in bullying situations.

The remaining four of the nine harassment policies do leave room for a more general type of harassment to be covered. Although most of the policies use the same legal language as the excerpts above, they also include a catch all phrase that could cover bullying. Another policy reads very closely to the two excerpts above but begins with the following, “Harassment, a form of discrimination, occurs if you are subjected to unwelcome behavior (i.e. verbal or physical conduct) that is demeaning or causes offense.” The policy then moves into talking about illegal harassment, laws that prohibit harassment and discrimination, how to report these situations, and what the possible consequences could be in these situations. Another, similar policy begins by defining harassment as, “unwelcome conduct, whether verbal, physical, visual, that is based on (protected categories) or status in any group protected by federal, state, or local law.” Then the policy seems to point to an area that could cover bullying, when it states, “without limiting the foregoing, the company will not tolerate harassing conduct that affects....” This wording seems to leave the door open for other areas, outside of the legal arena, which could be considered harassment by this organization. However, this could seem ambiguous and vague to employees or even HR professionals reading and trying to use these policies. In addition, the idea that a more general type of harassment or bullying situation is included and covered by these policies seems to get lost and obscured by the legal language and definitions. Additionally, placing so much emphasis on what is protected by law could leave an employee with the impression that only those

being harassed because of a protected class are protected by the policy. Another factor that could contribute to this is the fact that the majority of the policy content was dedicated to illegal harassment, specifically sexual harassment.

*Only Some Behaviors Are Explicitly Prohibited*

The policies that concern codes of conduct and lists of prohibited behaviors seemed to detail many behaviors that were not acceptable in workplaces. If the policies included a list of behaviors that were prohibited, there tended to be only one or two references to behaviors that would be considered bullying. For example, “fighting or threatening violence in the workplace,” “insubordination or other disrespectful conduct,” “assaulting, threatening, or acting in a violent way toward others,” “intimidation or threat of any kind...making derogatory or unfounded statements about the employer, its employees or clients; using vulgarity or failing to be courteous at all times” were all types of behaviors listed in the code of conduct policies. These were the only references to bullying type activities in these policies and they were listed with a wide variety of behaviors including “sleeping on the job”, “refusal to work a required schedule”, and “failure to properly punch time card”. However these policies, like the harassment policies, included detailed repercussions for these behaviors including disciplinary action and possible termination. The other code of conduct policies, those that did not include a list of prohibited behaviors, tended to include a general statement that could be a catch-all that could be applied to situations of bullying. One of these was a “Courtesy” policy that stated,

Courtesy is the responsibility of every employee. Everyone is expected to be courteous and friendly to our customers, vendors and suppliers, as well as to their



fellow employees. No one should be disrespectful or use profanity or any other language which injures the image or reputation of the company.

Another standard of conduct policy focused on “Personal conduct” which was described as “orderly and professional conduct in relation with the public and fellow workers...since the company may be judged by its personnel and/or their actions, it is most important that employees’ conduct be above reproach off-duty as well as on-duty.” A respect statement that is signed by employees simply stated, “I recognize my duty to act responsibly, be a team player, always do my best and treat others with respect and dignity.” Although these general statements get closer to covering bullying situations and not just specific behaviors, they do not include any repercussions for actions that violate the policy or how to address possible violations.

As I mentioned above, what the HR professionals themselves thought the policies communicated to employees was quite different from what the policies themselves seemed to entail. Specifically, the HR professionals felt the policies communicated that the organization expects professional behavior, that the organization cares and acts in these situations, and if an employee wants to make a complaint, they have an avenue. These will be discussed in detail below.

#### *The Organization Expects Professional Behavior*

Of the sixteen HR professionals who felt they had policies that addressed workplace bullying indirectly, seven felt these policies communicated to employees that the organization expected professionalism. Teresa commented, “The conduct policy? That we expect professionalism” and Calvin commented, “It just says you are expected to act like a professional.” In a similar vein, Trianna commented that she felt their

policy “sets the groundwork for how we expect people to interact with one another” and Pat said, “I think it communicates that the expectation of respect in the workplace and it communicates a reasonable standard”. Along with communicating that professional behavior was expected, some HR professionals felt these policies communicated the idea that the organization cares about bullying situations and acts in them.

#### *The Organization Cares About and Acts in Bullying Situations*

Five of the HR professionals who felt they had policies that addressed workplace bullying felt that these policies communicated to employees that their organization cared about these situations and acted in them. Mina commented, “I think they understand that we want an environment that is safe for them because I tell them that we want you to be looking forward to coming to work”. Kevin commented that, “I guess it would probably communicate that your employer wants to help resolve the situation.” Kelly mentioned, “To me, if it was happening to me, knowing that there is someone I can go talk to, or there is protection for me.” Pat commented that these policies communicate fairness in these situations, “I think it communicates fairness, it comes down to fairness and people are going to be treated fairly in the workplace. I think people appreciate it and they are probably more often glad it is there than if it is not.” Not only did the HR professionals mention these policies communicated the organization cared about and acted in bullying situations, but they also communicated the idea employees had an avenue to address the bullying situation.

*Targets Have an Avenue to Complain About Bullying*

Three of the sixteen HR professionals talked about how the policies communicated to employees that they had an avenue to complain about bullying activities and a policy that could help them address the situation. Tiffany commented, “I think they do feel like there is a way out, they don’t feel trapped, they don’t feel like there is no one they can go to, and I think that is a real confidence thing.” And Jean spoke to this when he said,

If you are strong-willed enough and you want to take on someone, you have instruments to do it. You have to push it, the policies are not intentionally written to favor one side or the other. They are written with the intention of getting issues aired and evaluated and then someone makes a reasonable decision but they take time.

Chris also felt that these policies communicated an avenue for employees to address bullying when he commented,

I believe it gives the employees solid ground that these are things that we do not support and will not support and we will do everything we can to make sure their work environment is free of these things and it also let’s them know there are ways in which they can report these types of activities.

These HR professionals clearly believed that the policies communicated to employees they had an avenue to complain about bullying and get their issue brought to the organization’s attention.

This chapter detailed the HR professionals’ sense making and perspectives on organizational policy associated with workplace bullying. It was clear the majority of HR professionals believed their organizations did have a policy that addressed bullying albeit indirectly and without using the term. Still there were many others who did not believe their organizations had policies which spoke to bullying situations or did not

know if their organizations had these policies. The implications of these views will be discussed in the following chapter. Additionally, this chapter detailed what the actual policies entailed and what HR professionals thought these policies communicated to employees. It was found that these two areas seem to be divergent, the policies themselves seemed to be communicating that anti-bullying measures were not a priority, that bullying did not rise to the level of illegal harassment, and only some behaviors were explicitly prohibited. Whereas the HR professionals felt these policies communicated the idea that the organization expected professional behavior, the organization cares and acted in bullying situations, and if an employee wanted to make a complaint, they had an avenue. Implications and possible repercussions of this disconnect as well as my interpretation of all of the findings detailed in chapters IV-VI will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER VII

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The preceding findings chapters add much detail to the HR professionals' sense-making on bullying, their position in bullying situations, and the policies that are designed to address bullying activities in U.S. organizations. In this last chapter I will synthesize this myriad of findings by discussing how they can be interpreted based on existing research and pointing to important theoretical and practical implications. The following section will discuss this study's findings.

#### Discussion

The preceding findings chapters reveal several important findings regarding how HR professionals define and understand bullying and deal with it, how they make sense of bullying situations and their position in them, and how they understand and interpret policies associated with bullying. This section will summarize and further discuss these findings.

#### *How Did HR Professionals Define and Understand Workplace Bullying?*

My analysis revealed that the majority of HR professionals define and understand workplace bullying in similar ways as academics and targets. However, there are important differences that shed light on their perspective. Human resource professionals agreed on the types of behaviors that are considered bullying (negative verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors, as well as; withholding information, rumors/gossip,

undermining, inconsistent/unfair treatment, piling on work, teasing, being isolated, pawning off work, petty behaviors, belittling behaviors, and intimidating behaviors) however, they differed in what they saw as the forms of bullying or what elements actually turn these behaviors into a situation they would label as “bullying” (see pgs. 67-87). These elements were a power imbalance, if the behaviors were persistent or repetitive, if the behaviors had adverse effects, if the behaviors were intentional, and if the behaviors could be proved by outside confirmation. With the exception of the issue of intentionality and outside confirmation, these elements are very similar to what targets and academics see as transforming negative, boorish behaviors into bullying. Unlike target and academic definitions of bullying, these HR professionals believed that the behaviors had to be done intentionally to harm the target or gain something and the behaviors had to be verified by outside confirmation if the situation was going to be labeled bullying. This is quite a departure from the target and academic perspectives who tend to feel that just the perception of the behavior as bullying by the target is enough to give the phenomenon the label of “bullying”. It is clear that when the HR professionals define bullying they do so from a sender orientation rather than a receiver orientation as targets and academic do (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Niedl, 1996). Additionally, their definition is much less subjective because of the need for outside confirmation.

Curiously, the HR professionals felt, at the same time, that identifying and “pinning down” bullying situations was very complicated because of the myriad of behaviors associated with it, the varying degrees of bullying situations, and its often

subtle nature. The idea that the HR professionals felt that verifying and dealing with bullying situations was complicated seems to reflect the notion that workplace bullying is indeed in a state of denotative hesitancy. The HR professionals voiced confusion on exactly what constituted bullying; it was like harassment but different, there are levels of it but these are not consistent. Because of this many felt it was hard to prove that bullying was happening (and thus do something about it), and it was hard to document. Some mentioned that because there is no general consensus on what bullying is, there are not strict guidelines on how to deal with it and this makes for a wide variety of interpretations on the issue. All of these things make it very difficult to address bullying.

The HR professionals also felt that identifying and defining bullying situations was further complicated by the fact that bullying had levels or degrees based on the actual behavior performed and the repetition of the behaviors. On the low end seemed to be mild, low intensity behaviors like not listening, petty behaviors, teasing, and snide comments that were fairly infrequent. On the high end were more extreme behaviors like threats, intimidation, deviant behaviors, and threats of physical violence. These behaviors did not have to be frequent to be considered highly severe. Needless to say, the idea that bullying could have varying degrees further complicates concisely defining the phenomenon and the HR professional's ability to address and deal with these situations. In fact, this could be a reason some targets feel HR professionals do little in bullying situations (Namie & Namie, 2002; WBI/Zogby, 2007). If the HR professional is looking for behaviors that only fall on the highly severe end of this scale, they would not recognize lower intensity behaviors as bullying and might do little to address them.

Consequently, how the HR professionals defined bullying affected how it was handled in the organization.

*How Did This Meaning Affect How Bullying Was Handled and Dealt With?*

Because HR professionals are oftentimes the people who are tasked with addressing bullying situations (Bohlander & Snell, 2007), how they defined and understood bullying had an effect on how these situations got handled and dealt with in organizations. Although the HR professionals voiced the idea that addressing and dealing with bullying was complicated by its definitional state, the HR professionals also talked about taking complaints associated with bullying very seriously (see pg. 93). Taking these complaints seriously meant that these HR professional did not ignore the complaint but put energy into exploring and addressing the issue. One of the main reasons these behaviors were taken so seriously was because of the possible adverse effects to the employee as well as the organization.

Additionally, because bullying was seen as a complicated employee issue, the HR professionals talked about handling and dealing with bullying by getting to the bottom of the situation (see pgs. 94-98). They wanted to get to the bottom of the issue because they felt bullying situations could have adverse effects on the organization and one person could be misinterpreting another's behaviors. They did so by investigating or asking questions, observing interactions, considering prior reputation/actions and researching. These two findings are interesting because targets of bullying generally feel that HR departments do very little in bullying situations and they feel bullying behaviors get worse when they seek help from their HR departments (Davenport, et al., 2002;



Namie & Namie, 2002, Yamada, 2006, 2008; WBI/Zogby, 2007). It seems that from HR's perspective, they are indeed trying to address the situation. It could be that targets have this negative impression of HR departments because they are not privy to the investigative process and the HR professional's efforts to get to the bottom of the situation. In fact, some of the HR professionals actually mentioned that much of the work they do in these type of situations is not shared with the target in an effort to respect the confidentiality of all parties involved. These findings point to one of the paradoxes discussed in chapter II. The HR professionals are expected to act in bullying situations but, they can't act in the way targets expect them to act.

What seemed to be complicating the HR professionals' efforts to deal with bullying situations was how powerful the bully was in the organization (see pgs. 99-104). Oftentimes, when discussing what they did in bullying situations, how they handled them, etc., they would mention that it was often not the same for managers or "producers". Specifically, those who had legitimate power because of their position in the organization (French & Raven, 1968) and those who were "producers" (employees who generated revenue for the work unit or organization, had invaluable contacts, or those who seemed invaluable to management) were treated differently when it came to allegations of bullying and often got away with it. Because they had less power than the manager or the producer, the HR professionals were limited in what they could do in the situation. It is clear how this uneven treatment of managers and producers could be detrimental to targets of bullying. Because most bullies are managers (WBI/Zogby, 2007) or, by HR's own definition, have more power than their targets, some bullying is

not dealt with and targets are left to fend for themselves. Although not directly their fault, this finding also adds validity to some target's negative accounts of HR professionals and their handling of bullying situations (Davenport, et al., 2002; Namie & Namie, 2002; Yamada, 2006). Because power holders in the organization are treated differently in bullying situations, it is also not surprising that three of the HR professionals openly articulated the idea that targets typically do not "win". This evaluation has been echoed by many targets in bullying situations (WBI/Zogby, 2007). There seemed to exist a myriad of reasons for this including uneven treatment of managers and producers who bully, ill intention on the part of the bully could not be verified, or simply not enough evidence to prove misconduct. How do HR professionals make sense of bullying situations? The next section will discuss the findings concerning this question.

#### *How Did HR Professionals Make Sense of Bullying Situations?*

The HR professionals seemed to make sense of how and why bullying happened in organizations by pointing to a variety of issues including: a management and management style issue, a communication skills issue, an organizational culture issue, a contemporary issue, or simply an issue of human nature. Overwhelmingly, the HR professionals felt that managers should be the employees' who deal with bullying situations and the "first line of defense" (see pgs 107-110). Some mentioned sending employees back to their managers with bullying-type complaints to speak to them first. Most of the HR professionals felt this was just standard protocol that was often not adhered to by managers or employees. Obviously, the view that management should

deal with bullying-type complaints could be a serious issue for those employees who feel they are targeted by their managers. This finding lends validity to the reports by targets of getting sent back to their managers to work out the situation (Namie & Namie, 2002; WBI/Zogby, 2007). Interestingly, these HR professionals made sense of many bullying situations by managers as simply a misunderstanding associated with the manager's aggressive management style. They mentioned when the "bully" found out about the allegations they often reacted with embarrassment and disbelief.

The HR professionals also made sense of bullying situations as an issue with employees' communication skills (see pgs. 111-12). They felt that bullying situations happened because the bully did not have advanced communication skills, like the skills associated with emotional intelligence, to get their point across in a professional manner. This is not a new perspective as other research efforts have found some bullying is a result of a lack of social competencies (Adams & Crawford, 1992; Field, 1996). Bullying situations were also attributed to targets not having the communication skills to deal with bullies. This finding is also supported by research that demonstrates some targets become targets because they are seen as easy prey (Zapf & Einerson, 2003). However, what is perceived by HR professionals as a lack of communication skills could be a result of the power differential between the bully and the target. In some cases, the target may have the communication skills but these may not be of much help when dealing with a bully who has more legitimate power or is a strong "producer" in an organization. Research supports this idea as many targets resist bullying through a wide

variety of communicative behaviors but the bullying typically does not stop (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005).

Bullying was also seen as a product of the culture of the organization (see pgs. 113-14). Many of the HR professionals believed that the organizational culture influenced if bullying behaviors were accepted and if they were not. Some talked about how “shit rolls downhill” and if those at the top of the organization bullied or set a bad example, this was seen as being the accepted way to act in the organization. Others talked about how bullying behaviors were not tolerated at all in their organizations and were “squashed” if started. This observation is echoed in bullying research that contends top management has a large influence on if bullying is perpetuated in organizations (Yamada, 2008). This finding is also consistent with Salin’s (2003) theory on the antecedents to bullying behaviors as these HR professionals felt the culture could be an enabling and even a motivating factor in bullying activities. The HR professionals talked about structures and processes (bully “getting away with it”, management not addressing the behavior, or the behavior being “how things are done”) that enabled or made it easy for bullying activities to occur. They also talked about structures and processes (reward systems, expected benefits of the behaviors) which actually motivated employees to bully because of the positive repercussions of the behaviors.

Bullying was also seen as a result of contemporary society (see pgs. 116-17). The HR professionals mentioned things like the economic downturn (people worried about losing their jobs), an entitlement mentality on the part of employees, and diversity

issues as contemporary issues that could trigger bullying in workplaces. This perspective reflects Salin's (2003) theory on precipitating processes as antecedents to bullying. She sees precipitating processes as those that trigger or ignite bullying behaviors in workplaces. Issues that arise because of diversity, the prevailing economic climate, and the notions of what employees feel they are entitled to in the workplace could all trigger latent bullying tendencies to emerge in organizations (Salin, 2003). Additionally, Baron & Neuman (1998) found that times of downsizing and organizational change were highly related to occurrences of bullying behaviors like verbal aggression and obstructionism.

Lastly, bullying was seen as an issue of human nature or a personality conflict (see pgs. 117-19). By this they meant that organizations are places where all types of personalities have to interact and work together to achieve organizational goals. Because of this, there was inevitably going to be some personality types that clashed with others resulting in conflicts in the workplace. This conceptualization of bullying has been investigated heavily by bullying researchers (Zapf & Einarson, 2003). This research has generally determined that by itself, personality conflicts do not sufficiently speak to the issue of what causes bullying situations. Instead, many believe that there are several antecedents to bullying situations and personality issues are just one of these (Zapf & Einarson, 2003). This perspective also seemed to be reflected by the HR professionals as they voiced several of the issues mentioned above while making sense of how and why bullying happens in organizations.

*How Did HR Professionals Make Sense of Their Position in Bullying Situations?*

The HR professionals talked about many different roles they played in bullying situations as well as what roles they were expected to play by other key actors; upper management (UM) and the target. Through these roles they also pointed to their position of power in bullying situations. The HR professionals themselves described several different roles they played in these situations; trusted listener, objective/neutral third party investigator, management advisor, and mediator, trainer, coach (see pgs 119-130). They talked about moving from one role to the next as the situation progressed. Not all of the HR professionals talked about all of these roles however, most alluded to the idea that their roles changed throughout the process and depending on the claim and situation, they would take on these roles and move through these phases. Of these roles, the HR professionals only seemed to be conflicted about being an objective/neutral third party investigator. Some of the HR professionals were blatantly contradictory regarding this role. The implications of this contradiction will be discussed in a following section.

Additionally, the HR professionals also talked about another more general role they played in bullying situations, that of an emotional laborer (see pgs. 131-36). This role required the HR professionals to regulate their emotional displays, perform certain emotions, and abide by certain emotional rules. The HR professionals talked about the emotions that they had to suppress and create in order to do their job. For example, they talked about having to control their emotions and have patience, be neutral and at the same time create emotions like understanding, compassion, and sensitivity. One important rule that emerged was the idea that they had to be “professional” in their

emotional displays. Kramer and Hess (2002) found that employees commonly voiced this rule when it came to emotional displays and the most important elements of this rule were “having control over one’s emotion displays and maintaining a ‘business-like’ atmosphere” (p. 72). They also talked about the toll this emotion work took on them as some felt “tired” and “beaten up” at the end of a day.

How the HR professionals saw their role in bullying situations proved to be different from how they felt UM or the targets saw their roles in these situations. Some of these roles overlapped and others proved to be different and conflicting. Congruent with their own perspective, most HR professionals felt that UM saw them as a partner or resource whereas others felt UM saw them as the people who would “take care of it” or as an enforcer of rules (see pgs. 136-40). Less often the HR professionals felt that UM saw them as an objective third party, and as nags. Further they felt the targets saw them as the person who would “fix it” and someone to vent to who was a trusted source (see pgs. 141-144). This view of how targets see the HR professionals’ role seems to be in line with the target research on the same subject. Targets have expressed that when they seek help from HR departments, they expect the HR professional to listen to them and fix the issue (Davenport et al., 2002). The HR professional’s own perspective and the targets’ expectations seem to be congruent in some areas. The role of listener and trusted source seem to be congruent with how the HR professionals saw their roles however, the roles associated with “taking care of it” and “fixing it” seem to be in contradiction. In sum, The HR professionals themselves felt they played an evolving role in bullying situations which included being a trusted listener, a objective and neutral

investigator, management advisor, and a mediator/trainer/coach. In contrast, they felt UM saw their role as a partner/resource, the person who would “take care of it”, and the rule enforcer. And the HR professionals felt targets saw them as the ones who would “fix it” and be a trusted listener.

Because of these roles and various other factors, the HR professionals held both a position of power and powerlessness when it came to bullying situations (see pgs. 146-53). They felt powerless because they could not, in a real way, deal with and confront bullying when it involved a manager (or someone higher in organizational rank) or a high producer (someone with more power) or even enact consequences in bullying situations. In addition, the finding that nine of the 36 HR professionals I spoke with felt they had been bullied also spoke to their powerless position. Even so, many of the HR professionals felt they were powerful in some respects because they could recommend actions to UM, use persuasion to sway UM, and sometimes use the power that came with having others support their position. I articulated the question, “how do HR professionals deal with bullying from a low power position?” in the second chapter, and it seems the preceding discussion answers this question. They do the best they can with what they have, recommendation and group power and persuasive talents. Of these three, the power of being in a group seems the most promising because those HR professionals who were in groups who investigated bullying were actually able to take part in the decision-making process.



*Did Organizations Have Workplace Bullying Policies? If So, How Were These Utilized?*

The short answer to this question was no. The long answer was that almost half of the HR professionals *felt* their organizations had policies that spoke to workplace bullying but the term “bullying” was not used (see pgs. 155-63). However, bullying was covered through a mix of workplace violence, harassment, and code of conduct policies. Because of this, these HR professionals did not feel they needed an anti-bullying policy. Most targets would likely disagree because many have complained that nothing is done about bullying even though most organizations do have these standard policies (Davenport et al., 2002; Namie & Namie, 2002). How were these policies used? If the HR professional felt his or her organization had policies that covered bullying, they used the policy to primarily inform and educate (see pgs.163-64). They used the policies in periodic trainings and seminars to inform employees of their existence and educate employees on the organization’s expectations of behavior. They were also used to educate policy offenders. If it was determined a policy was broken, they enforced the policies through a set of rules associated with it. This finding was interesting when contrasted with the overwhelming sentiment of targets who report nothing is done in bullying situations (Field, 1996; Namie & Namie, 2002; WBI/Zogby, 2007). It seems plausible that much of what targets consider bullying situations may not rise to a level where HR professionals can actually use these harassment, workplace violence, or code of conduct policies. Or this sentiment by targets could reflect the idea that most bullying is subtle and covert thus making it hard for HR professionals to verify and pin down policy offenses.

The rest of the HR professionals said they did not have a policy that addressed bullying or they did not know if they had a policy (see pgs. 165-67). This finding is not surprising when contrasted with the reality that HR professionals do not have the power to act in bullying situations, one reason they do not have this power is because most did not have policies that would enable them to act. If there is no policy that prohibits bullying and details actions to be taken in bullying situations then HR professionals have very little power from which to act (Glendinning, 2001). Of those who did not have a policy, many talked about the difficulty of actually writing an anti-bullying policy because of its complexity and definitional state. Even more revealing is the finding that a few of the HR professionals had no idea if they had a bullying policy and only speculated on how bullying could be covered by their existing policies.

*What Were Workplace Bullying Policies Communicating?*

It seems clear from this investigation that what the HR professionals felt was communicated by the above policies and what the policies actually detail were different and at times even divergent (see pgs. 167-74). The policies themselves seemed communicated that anti-bullying measures were not a priority, that bullying did not rise to the level of illegal harassment, and only some behaviors were explicitly prohibited. The harassment policies, as they are written, do not seem to offer bullied workers much protection because most were written as if labeling a situation harassment hinged on the notion that the behavior had to “violate federal, state or local law”. At this point in time, bullying is not a form of harassment that is explicitly included in the law. Additionally, those policies that did have some wording that would point to a more general type of

harassment (i.e. bullying) may not be helpful because of their ambiguity and emphasis on legal language and definitions. Placing so much emphasis on what is protected by law could leave an employee with the impression that only those being harassed because of a protected class are pertinent to the policy.

Although the harassment policies did not seem to offer bullied workers much protection, the more specific code of conduct policies seemed to provide protection for some behaviors associated with bullying. Specifically these were behaviors associated with threats and threatening behaviors. Other code of conduct policies were written very generally (“Be courteous”, “Be respectful”, etc.) and *could* include a vast array of negative organizational behavior including bullying. Although these general statements get closer to covering bullying situations and not just specific behaviors, they do not include steps an employee should take if they feel the policy has been violated, repercussions for actions that violate the policy, or how to address possible violations. General policies like the aforementioned courtesy and respect policies seem to communicate the idea that a severe case of bullying would fall under the same umbrella as not saying “good morning” to a fellow co-worker one morning. Because these policies are very general and ambiguous, what constitutes bullying is left up to the organization’s (i.e. upper management’s) interpretation. In organizations where there is already a culture of bullying, policies like these would most likely not help targets. The absence of a specific policy which mentions bullying could send negative messages to employees about how the organization understands and views bullying situations, i.e.

organizations do not care about bullying situations, organizations do not do anything in these situations, and there are no avenues for help you are in this situation.

In contrast, HR professionals felt these policies communicated the idea that the organization cares and acts in bullying situations, if an employee wants to make a complaint, they have an avenue and the organization expects professional behavior. There seemed to be a disconnect between what the policies themselves say and how the HR professionals interpreted the policies. After reviewing the policies, it is clear they are ambiguous about bullying if not completely ignore the phenomenon. However, the HR professionals overwhelmingly voiced the idea that these policies communicated the idea that the organization cared about bullying situations. What could explain this disconnect? It may be that the only type of bullying they had to deal with also coincided with illegal harassment. This is certainly possible as others report bullying situations which coincide with illegal harassment are often reported and addressed at a higher degree than harassment that is status blind, i.e. bullying (WBI/Zogby, 2007). However, this begs the question, what would these HR professionals do if the complaint did not escalate to the level of illegal harassment? Would these policies be effective in these cases? The HR professionals also felt that if employees had a bullying complaint, the policies provided them an avenue to address the situation. This view seems to be in contrast with the above discussion which demonstrates using these policies in bullying situations would be at best complicated and at worst a worthless effort.

The above discussion and summary points to many different issues that could have both theoretical implications and practical implications for organizations, work

groups, HR professionals, and employees. In the remaining section, I will discuss these implications, limitations of this research, and point to areas that still need to be further explored.

### Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

In addition to answering important questions concerning how bullying is defined and understood by HR professionals, how they made sense of bullying situations and their position in them, if organizations used bullying policies, what these were communicating, and how these were interpreted by HR professionals, this study also puts forth implications for theory and practice. In the remaining sections I will articulate these implications and then suggest possible limitations of this study and directions for future research.

#### *Implications for Theory*

These findings point to several implications for theory. First, bullying is in a developmental state similar to sexual harassment before case law helped to make the phenomenon clearer. Second, not only should the conceptualization of bullying degree concern repetition of bullying acts, it should also incorporate the severity of the bullying acts. Third, HR professionals' role in bullying situations is full of contradiction and paradox and because of this they cannot act as expected by targets. And fourth, the cycle of bullying should reflect an active HR professional who could be an integral actor in stopping the cycle of bullying. These implications will be discussed in detail below.

*Workplace Bullying Is Still in an Ambiguous, Developmental State*

The current investigation also made clear the definitional state of workplace bullying is complicating the lives of HR professionals. They saw the phenomenon of bullying as being in a developmental state. Although most had heard and used the term, the actual phenomenon was seen as a variant of harassment, workplace violence, or workplace misconduct but also different from these phenomena. It seems the conceptual overlap of these phenomena with bullying do complicate the lives of HR professionals as some could not adequately address the behaviors because they did not fit into any of their existing policies. Their perspective suggests workplace bullying is still in a state of denotative hesitancy as some researchers suggest (Lutgen-Sandvik 2005). Many of the HR professionals qualified their efforts at defining bullying by saying the phenomenon was complicated because there is still no general consensus on what it is and how to deal with it. By this they seemed to mean that workplace bullying was not a legally supported or defined term so definitions and ways of dealing with it were complicated. These issues with ambiguity are not surprising as they seem to echo the state of sexual harassment before case law helped to define and make clearer sexually harassing behaviors and hostile work environments (Collins & Blodgett, 1981; Gutek, Nakamura, Gahart, Hanschumacher, & Russell, 1980; Pryor, 1988). Research reports that policies/guidelines concerning the prevention of sexual harassment, like bullying, were very hard to construct because of a lack of consensus on sexual harassment behaviors/situations (Pryor, 1988). These HR professionals felt that bullying situations were, at times, hard to pin down and deal with because what is considered by one person

as a bullying situation might not be seen as such by another. This issue was also pertinent in sexual harassment situations and was not clarified until case law began to make sexual harassment situations clearer for HR professionals, organizations, and victims (Gutek et al., 1980). Additionally, the new EEOC guidelines issued in 1980 were meant to address sexual harassment, but they were seen as being too vague to adequately address the phenomenon and hard to implement (Collins & Blodgett, 1981). If bullying is in a developmental state similar to sexual harassment in the 1970's and 80s, it seems legislation addressing the issue needs to be specific and concrete. Additionally, like sexual harassment during its developmental state, workplace bullying will likely continue to be an ambiguous phenomenon that is hard to deal with and pin down until specific legislation is passed to aid HR professionals in articulating policies and guidelines meant to concretely deal with the issue. The findings of this study also point to a need to re-conceptualize bullying degree.

#### *Re-Conceptualizing Bullying Degree*

These HR professionals felt there were degrees of bullying. This finding should be taken into consideration when defining and investigating bullying. In this section, I will first discuss how bullying degree has been conceptualized in existing research and then articulate how the findings from this investigation extend our knowledge of the bullying degree construct.

To date, there is limited research concerning bullying degree, however a few authors have begun to investigate this issue. Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) extended work by Davenport et al. (2002) by conceptualizing bullying degree as “cumulative

score reflecting intensity, frequency, and duration of negative acts that constitute bullying” (p. 844). *Intensity* was conceptualized as the cumulative number of negative acts experienced by the target; *frequency* was conceptualized as the cumulative number of acts reported to happen on an extremely frequent basis (two negative acts at least once a week); *duration* was set at six months. They suggested a mid-range score would reflect two possibilities; a high number of negative acts at a low frequency or a limited number of acts at a high frequency. These authors suggested three gradations of bullying each resulting in more negative outcomes. The first was pre-bullying (a low bullying degree) and they equate this to a first degree burn, over time these can cause damage but they are superficial and quick to heal. The next level up would be a second degree burn (a mid-level bullying degree), this bullying is more intense and frequent and often requires professional treatment to heal and lastly, they speak of a third gradation (a high bullying degree) that is analogous to a third degree burn. These cause permanent damage and likely never fully heal.

The findings of this dissertation help to confirm that not all bullying is the same and does have degrees. The HR professionals in this study suggested that repetition (intensity and frequency) made bullying more severe. However, they also suggested that the severity of the bullying behaviors experienced should also be incorporated into the bullying degree construct. The HR professionals pointed to the idea that not all bullying behaviors should be weighted the same. Because of this I suggest an additional continuum related to the severity of the negative bullying act. On the low end are seemingly mild behaviors like not listening, petty behaviors, teasing, and snide



comments. On the high end are more extreme behaviors like threats, intimidation, deviant behaviors, and threats of physical violence. Bullying behaviors on the low end would be weighted less heavily than those on the high end. As an example, a mild behavior could be given a score of one while high end behaviors could be given a two. This weighting of the individual bullying act would be reflected in the intensity and frequency components mentioned above. Obviously what constitutes mild, medium, and severe bullying behaviors needs to be investigated in greater depth incorporating target's perceptions. However, the current investigation makes clear that not all negative acts/bullying behaviors are the same and this finding should be incorporated into definitions of bullying as well as how we measure and investigate bullying degree. Additionally, we need to test this fine tuning of the intensity and frequency constructs to understand if the three gradations of bullying articulated by Lutgen-Sandvik et al., (2007) and Davenport et al., (2002) change or can be more specifically articulated and defined.

*The HR Professionals' Role in Bullying Situations Is Full of Contradiction and Paradox*

The dominant theory surrounding HR professionals and workplace bullying is that they are apathetic about allegations of bullying, do not act in bullying situations, and do what they can to support or protect the organization (Glendinning, 2001; Lewis & Rayner, 2003; Namie & Namie, 2002; 2003). The findings of this study call this theory into question and reveal a more nuanced view of HR professionals' position in bullying situations and their handling of them. This study revealed the HR professional's position in bullying situations and their handlings of these situations are not as cut and

dry as the above theory suggests. Instead theirs a position filled with contradiction and paradox. Contradictions refer to times when one idea is in direct opposition to another (Stohl & Cheney, 2001) and paradoxes are typically seen as situations where in pursuing one goal, another competing goal enters the situation and works to undermine the first goal (Martin, 2004; Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). In this section I will briefly detail three clear contradictions and one paradox associated with potentially opposing or clashing role expectations of the HR professionals in bullying situations. Then I will discuss some implications of these findings for a prevailing Human Resource Management (HRM) philosophy.

*Contradictions.* The findings on how the HR professionals view their role in bullying situations and how they feel UM and the target view their role in these same situations pointed to three revealing contradictions. The first contradiction concerned where HR professionals' loyalty is supposed to lie in bullying situations. This contradiction surfaced when the HR professionals discussed their role as a neutral, objective third party who investigated to uncover the facts. They felt their role was to be neutral and not take sides in bullying situations and at the same time many also felt they were expected to be on the organization's side. The implications of this are clear: HR professionals see their role as striving to be neutral and uncover the facts but are expected to do this with the good of the organization in mind. This obviously lends support to the current idea that HR professionals do what they can to protect the organization (Glendinning, 2001; Namie & Namie, 2002; 2003) however; it is clear the HR professionals are conflicted by these contradictory expectations and are not apathetic

about bullying. The second contradiction seemed to be in how the targets saw HR's role and how HR professionals themselves saw their role in bullying situations.

As detailed above, the HR professionals saw a large part of their role in bullying situations as the person who investigates, is objective and gets to the bottom of the situation. At the same time, they talked about how they felt the targets saw their role as the person who would just "fix" the situation by firing the bully, stopping the behavior, or getting the bully in trouble. These are two seemingly contradictory positions to occupy because the HR professional sees their role as just to investigate, report the findings of the investigation, make recommendations, and carry out any actions recommended by management. They did not see themselves as the person who was going to "fix" the situation. Needless to say, this contradictory expectation of the role that HR will play in bullying situations could be one of the reasons targets feel HR professionals do little in bullying situations (Glendinning, 2001; Lewis & Rayner, 2003). If the target goes to HR expecting HR, after learning of the situation, to fire the bully or get them in trouble, it is likely this expectation will be violated. Instead, it is more likely they will open an investigation and get to the bottom of the situation and the end result may or may not involve the remedies voiced by targets. And, as the HR professionals reiterated, this remedy will most likely not be determined by the HR professional. This is a very different notion of acting in the situation than what targets expect. This contradiction suggests targets may have unrealistic expectations of HR professionals in bullying situations.

Lastly, the HR professionals voiced conflicting ideas on their power in bullying situations. They pointed to being powerless in acting in bullying situations when the bully was a great producer or someone who had more legitimate power. Additionally, they were also powerless in the sense that they generally did not have decision-making power concerning disciplinary actions in bullying cases. However, at the same time, they felt they did have power because they could recommend actions, persuade, and use their power within a group to act in these situations. Again, these are two contradictory positions to occupy. They see themselves as powerful but also know they do not have power over managers and can't make important decisions on what is actually done about bullying situations. Not only is the HR professionals positions full of contradiction, it also seems to be paradoxical.

*Paradox.* A clear paradox stemmed from the roles HR professionals felt they should perform in bullying situations. As discussed above, the HR professionals felt that a large part of their role was to be a neutral, objective third party in bullying situations. This involved being an unemotional investigator who just dealt in the facts. At the same time, they had to be understanding, emotional, and empathize with the target. The paradox stems from the HR professionals having to display emotions and at the same time be unemotional. They had to be neutral and objective and at the same time be empathic, understanding, and “show that you care”. The goal of acting towards being neutral and objective gets in the way of the goal of being empathic and emotional with the target. Trying to accomplish one of these goals negates the other. This is a situation where they seem to be “damned if they do” and “damned if they don't”. Some even

voiced feeling negative repercussions because of this paradox as they mentioned feeling “tired” and “beaten up”. This paradox points to the varying role expectations of HR professionals and the position they occupy in bullying situations. They feel they should be neutral but at the same time need to show emotion and empathetic with the target.

These contradictions and paradox speak to the theory that HR professionals do little in bullying situations, are apathetic about allegations of bullying and are on management’s side in these situations. This investigation suggests a more nuanced view of the HR professional and their position in bullying situations and suggests an actor position that is full of possibly debilitating contradictions and paradox. Their position makes clear that HR professionals cannot just act as expected by targets instead they struggle with contradictory expectations and do what they can with what they have to handle and address these situations. In trying to describe dealing with these varying role expectations, the HR professionals indicated it was like, “walking a tight rope”, being “in the middle”, “walking a fine line”, and “balancing” competing interests. These comments all give some indication of how the HR professionals were trying to manage these contradictions and paradox. According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996) and Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek (2004), managing organizational tensions and contradictions can be accomplished in a variety of functional and dysfunctional ways. They detail several different praxis patterns or choice points individuals can make to change the nature of the contradiction while residing in the middle of it. Some, like denial (obscuring or denying the contradiction by only legitimating one pole of the contradiction) or disorientation (a fatalistic attitude in which the contradictions are

regarded as inevitable, negative, or harmful) are considered less functional and are often emotionally taxing ways to manage contradictions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004). Whereas transcendence (poles are transformed into a particular situation or framed so they are no longer regarded as oppositional) and reaffirmation (contradictory poles are accepted and celebrated as enhancing the richness of the relationship) are more healthy, functional ways of managing contradictions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004). Future research should investigate how HR professionals seem to be managing these contradictions and paradox and the repercussions of these strategies. Additionally, we need to determine if utilizing more specific policies concerning bullying situations would help to make HR professionals position in these situations less contradictory and paradoxical. We know that HR professionals can use these policies to guide their actions in dealing with employee issues (Bolander & Snell, 2007; Byars & Rue, 2006). It seems a direct policy associated with bullying could assist in dissolving some of these contradictions especially those associated with power and action. This practical implication will be discussed in a forthcoming section.

#### *Complicating the Cycle of Bullying and Role of HR Professionals in Bullying Situations*

It was clear the HR professionals played an evolving and progressive role in bullying situations. Theories that seek to explain what happens in bullying situations, like Lutgen-Sandvik's (2003) model on the cycle of employee emotional abuse, need to take into account this important finding. Currently, HR professionals in bullying situations are seen as simply part of the management system that serves to isolate the

target, stigmatize them as a troublemaker and further bullying activities (Namie & Namie, 2002; 2003). This research points to a much more complicated view of the HR professional's role and actions in bullying situations. Instead of being conceptualized as simply part of a management structure that perpetuates bullying, these findings suggest HR professionals listen to targets complaints, emphasize with their situation, take the situation seriously, investigate, strive to be neutral, and use persuasion, their power to recommend certain actions, and their power as a group to act in bullying situations. Human resource professionals feel they can identify bullying when they see a case of it but, verifying and pinning down these cases is very complicated. Additionally, if they are able to verify the abuse and make recommendations on actions to be taken in the situation, these are generally accepted by UM. These findings suggest points where HR professionals' involvement could impact the cycle of emotional abuse.

Lutgen-Sandvik's (2003) model proposes the abuse begins with an initial incident that brings the target to the negative attention of a bullying manager. Stage 2 begins when the target recognizes they are being targeted and often unfairly disciplined. Here is the first point at which HR professionals could be called on to help intervene. Human resource professionals report they take complaints associated with bullying behaviors very seriously, they listen, try to be neutral and investigate. If the bullying behaviors can be verified, there are actions the HR professional can take to help (recommend training, coaching, or discipline for the manager and persuade upper management of their view). The above intervention is greatly assisted by targets that use resistance strategies. We know that many targets resist bullying, especially in the very

early stages and take such actions as documenting abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; 2006). This documentation coupled with the HR professional's involvement could help to arrest the cycle or at least slow the progression of abuse. If not, the cycle moves to stage 3 and is characterized by a turning point in the bullying. Typically the bullying behaviors become more negative, personal, and frequent and the target is labeled a troublemaker. Stage 4 is characterized by the organization's ambivalence to the targets' situation. Specifically Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) refers to upper management's ambivalence to target's complaints of abuse. However, she points out that if upper management does allow the target's voice to be heard, the cycle can be arrested. The finding that HR professionals contribute to how upper management views these situations is important here. HR professionals have the potential to aid targets by their involvement, especially if their allegations can be verified. If not stopped, the cycle progresses to stage 5 where the target becomes further isolated and silenced and later, stage 6 is characterized by the exiting of the target because they were fired, quit, were transferred or went on sick leave. At this point the cycle regenerates and begins again with a new target. These additions raise questions that need to be addressed by future research, does the combination of documentation and HR assistance increase positive outcomes for targets?

The findings of the current investigation also points to a further extension of the cycle of bullying model. As Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) suggests, the cycle most often regenerates with a new target and the bullying begins again. The HR professionals' experiences in dealing with bullying situations suggest that as the number of these cycles increase, so does the likelihood of HR helping to put an end to the cycle. Some of the



HR professionals even pointed to some bullies being “serial bullies” or those bullies who exhibit a pattern of bullying with multiple targets (Field, 1996). In these cases, the bullying is typically not stopped until multiple targets have complained and sought HR’s help. These findings point to the idea that the cycle is most likely to be interrupted after more than one revolution and the likelihood of arresting the cycle should drastically increase upon each revolution. They also suggest the more complaints HR departments receive about the bully, the more likely something meaningful can be done because conceivably a strong case against the bully is being built by these complaints. This study not only generated implications for theory, but also pointed to implications for practice.

#### *Implications for Practice*

The findings of this study point to several important implications for practice. First, current Human Resource Management (HRM) philosophies could be unintentionally perpetuating bullying situations. Second, communication by upper management can perpetuate or stop bullying in workplaces. Third, clear policies on bullying are needed. Fourth, training efforts undertaken with the bully could be a viable remedy in some bullying situations. Fifth, facilitating justice on the part of the target should result in positive affects for the target and the organization. These implications will be discussed in detail below.

#### *HRM Philosophies Could Be Perpetuating Bullying in Organizations*

This investigation found that HR professionals themselves should not be blamed for perpetuating the epidemic of bullying and allowing bullying behaviors to persist.

Instead, the prevailing HRM philosophy should be interrogated. The dominant HRM philosophy used in many organizations positions HR departments as a strategic partner to management that is removed from the day-to-day activities of the line manager (Lewis & Rayner, 2003). Two of the tenets of this philosophy, first articulated by Storey (1993), seem to be relevant here: the notion that the line manager's role should encompass everything from performance through discipline and HRM should play a strategic role in organizations. Referring to the first tenet, it is obvious how this philosophy could unintentionally perpetuate bullying activities in organizations. The HR professionals I talked to overwhelmingly reflected this tenet when they voiced the idea that direct managers should be addressing and dealing with allegations of bullying and, at times would even send employees back to their managers to deal with the situation. Putting this tenet into practice seems like a prudent strategy for organizations as developing strong relationships between managers and employees have been found to strengthen commitment. However, in bullying situations this practice typically results in negative consequences (WBI/Zogby, 2007). Practices associated with the second tenet could also prove to be perpetuating bullying activities as part of HR's strategic role is carrying out organizational objectives and protecting the organization. In organizations where bullying is "just how we do things", the HR function could serve to reinforce these behaviors (Salin, 2003). In fact, Lewis & Rayner (2003) argue the philosophy and constituent components of HRM may actually create environments where bullying is perpetuated and unchallenged. Future research should further interrogate dominant HRM philosophies and the resulting practices for unintended consequences that could be

adding to the bullying epidemic and explore practical ways these consequences can be avoided. Another practical implication of this study is that upper management plays a pivotal role in bullying situations.

*Bullying Is Perpetuated or Arrested by Communication of Upper Management*

An important finding of this research is the reality that communication by upper management (UM) can perpetuate or stop bullying in workplaces. These HR professionals believed that upper management played a pivotal role in if bullying was perpetuated and allowed to persist in organizations or if it was “squished”, discouraged, and stopped in organizations. Many felt this was because of UM’s legitimate power to enact policies and strong influence on the culture of the organization. This finding supports Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott’s (2008) theory concerning Employee Abusive Organizations or EAOs. They propose that “EAO’s are likely to develop when organizational leadership enacts or is seen as condoning abuse or hostile discourse” (p. 323). These HR professionals’ experiences seem to lend support to this proposition. Many voiced the idea that if there was no support by UM in dealing with bullying issues or if UM used bullying tactics there was little they could do in bullying situations.

Any theories that speak to how bullying should be addressed and dealt with need to take UM into consideration. For example, the advice to HR professionals about how to handle workplace bullying issues discussed in chapter II would need to be adjusted to reflect the influence of UM on these issues. Suggestions that point to what the HR professional should do in bullying situations miss the larger picture articulated by the participants of this study. Suggestions that only address HR departments’ actions, like

those of Rains (2001) and Ferris (2004), fail to take into consideration UM's influence on HR professionals' actions in bullying situations. Consequently, their suggestions do not add to productive discourse on how bullying can realistically be handled by HR departments. In contrast, the next three implications suggest realistic ways organizations can address bullying.

#### *Clear Policies Are Needed*

This investigation suggests clear policies regarding bullying are needed for a variety of reasons. First, it gives the HR professional more power to deal with the situation. Because bullying is overwhelming enacted by those in management positions (Field, 1996; Rayner et al., 2002; WBI/Zogby, 2007), HR professionals seem to be better positioned to deal with bullying in a meaningful way. Anti-bullying policies seem to be a practical way to empower HR professionals in bullying situations. When organizations have policies governing specific areas of employee conduct, HR professionals can use these policies to guide their actions in dealing with employee issues (Bolander & Snell, 2007; Byars & Rue, 2006). Second, clear policies on bullying would help to remove some of the current complications HR professionals talk about when trying to identify and handle bullying situations. Using the term "bullying" and including any one of the definitions talked about in chapter I would be a good starting point for adding clarity to what is meant by bullying and certainly gives more detail than nothing at all. Third, the ad hoc way other policies are being used seems to add confusion to how the organization sees bullying, what actions should be taken when these situations arise, and what actions employees are supposed to take if they feel this is happening to them. Lastly, there is a

disconnect between what the policies actually say and what HR professionals feel the policies communicate. This is no doubt due to the ambiguity of the policy on the issue of bullying. As argued above, this ambiguity would most likely make it very hard to enforce the policy in some situations.

The current literature has no shortage of suggestions on what should be included in these policies. Two comprehensive recommendations are provided by Namie and Namie (2002; 2003) and Richards and Daley (2003). Namie and Namie (2002; 2003) suggest these policies include protection against a hostile work environment extended beyond just protected classes, a definition of bullying that includes the term bullying, an investigation procedure that will be perceived as credible and fair, required documentation by the claimant/target, description of the range of employer proposals to remedy the situation, and an anti-retaliation clause. Richards and Daly (2003) recommend a statement of commitment, a definition that include examples of bullying behaviors, who to contact if you think you are being bullied, a complaints procedure, and support for targets. There are a myriad of suggestions about what to include in policies that address bullying, however Salin (2008) feels what is most important is that the policy is developed with the specific organization in mind and is not just a copy and pasted effort. She contends thoughtful consideration of the issue is reflected in a policy that is uniquely designed for the particular organization. Another practical implication of these findings is that in some cases, training is a viable option to thwart bullying.

*Training Could Be a Viable Remedy in Some Cases*

These findings point to the idea that in some bullying cases, training efforts undertaken with the bully could be a viable remedy. These HR professionals felt that some bullying was a management style or communication skills issue. They explained some behaviors perceived as bullying were really a result of a managers' aggressive management style and not mal-intended or malicious. They also mentioned cases that seemed to be bullying but were really a lack of communication skills on the part of the bully. If this is truly the case and these "bullies" don't actually intend to bully, training could prove a viable remedy in addressing the situation and not just a cope out for real action. The HR professionals are not alone in suggesting training as a viable remedy in some bullying cases. Flynn (1999) and Glendinning (2001) both report that some bullying managers simply don't have the people or management skills necessary to change, and this is why training is so important in these cases. Glendinning (2001) and Sheehan (1999) both suggest bullies should be notified that their behaviors are unacceptable, be offered training so that they can improve their skills and possibly be rehabilitated, and their progress should be closely monitored. If certain benchmarks are not met, at this point more severe discipline would be an option. An important aspect of this process is the "buy in" of the bully as training by itself does little to change behaviors (Beebe, Mottet, & Roach, 2004). Instead trainees need to be motivated and understand the end goal for training to be effective (Beebe, et al, 2004; Gay & D'Aprix, 2006). From the HR professionals' experiences, it seems important these trainings include such people skills as emotional intelligence and how to deal productively with

conflict. Emotional intelligence refers to a “clear understanding of the emotional needs of a situation and the self-awareness and self-control necessary for using the right emotional display to cope with the situation.” (Miller, 2009, p. 204). Generally, emotional intelligence is a skill that can be developed through training (Miller, 2009) and has even been suggested by bullying researchers as a possible solution to some bullying situations (Sheehan, 1999). Conflict management training also could prove helpful in these situations as some of bullying situations involve divergent personalities which seemed to ignite conflict or would-be bullies who did not know how to productively deal with conflict (Sheehan, 1999). In some cases, more formal management training may be needed for those who lack these skills. This investigation suggests training could be a viable remedy in some bullying situations but, the success of these efforts hinge on the “bully” themselves. Some of the HR professionals in this study actually reported progress using this remedy but admit it is not appropriate in every situation. What does seem to be appropriate in every situation is facilitating a sense of justice for the person who feels they are being mistreated.

#### *Facilitating Justice Should Have Positive Benefits*

Although this investigation revealed HR professionals do act to deal with bullying in a variety of ways even from their low power position, we know from existing research that targets do not *feel* as if HR is there to help them and generally view HR professionals in a negative light (Ferris, 2004; Lewis & Rayner, 2003; WBI/Zogby, 2007). This feeling is the reality for the target who thinks they are being wronged in the workplace. Arguably this disconnect could have a negative effect on organizations and

HR departments as it could be contributing to stress, turnover, burnout, and lower productivity and job satisfaction (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik, et al., 2007; Zapf, 1999). This disconnect points to a practical implication and suggests HR departments need to help facilitate a sense of justice for the targets in bullying situations. Recent research suggests employees who feel as if they are being bullied will try to attain a sense of justice in their situation and report vindication as their main motive (Cowan, 2009). Gaining a sense of justice could give the target back some of the confidence and security that is typically lost in bullying situations and reinvigorate their belief in and commitment to the organization (Martin & Bennett, 1996).

HR departments could help create a sense of justice for the target in a variety of ways. For example, setting the targets' expectations about what procedures and steps will be taken after bringing the complaint to HR and then following through with these steps could provide targets with a sense of procedural justice. Procedural justice refers to perceptions of fairness of the processes and methods used to determine outcomes (Lind & Tyler, 1988). If the target perceived the procedures and methods of dealing with the bully and the bullying situation as fair, they may feel more satisfied with outcomes as well. HR professionals could also help facilitate interactional justice by handling these situations in a sincere and legitimate manner. Interactional justice is concerned with the fairness of the interpersonal treatment a person receives (Bies & Moag, 1986; Cropanzano, Prehar, & Chen, 2002). Research suggests interactional justice can affect employees' trust in management, their affective commitment to the organization, and withdrawal behaviors (Barling & Phillips, 1993). Ensuring the target



is dealt with in a respectful and sincere manner could help them feel a sense of interactional justice. The preceding discussion of theoretical and practical implications illuminates many areas where theories associated with bullying can be extended and practical measures can be taken by HR professionals and organizations to deal with issues associated with bullying. The remaining section will discuss the limitations of this research effort and point to additional areas of future research.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

Although this study was fairly narrow in its scope, its limitations suggest areas for fruitful research and further inquiry. The majority of participants in this study were members of some kind of professional HRM organization. As a result, these findings have limited transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to those HR professionals not involved in professional organizations. Those HR professionals who are a part of professional organizations likely have more access to educational programs and activities that allow them to develop their expertise and have access to regular forums for members to meet and exchange information on current human resource issues. Because of this they represent a participant pool that is likely better educated and informed on emerging HR issues such as workplace bullying. Future research should attempt to understand the perspectives of those HR professionals who are not a part of professional organizations in an effort to understand their perspective on bullying. It seems plausible that they may be less familiar with the phenomena and define and deal with it differently.

Although this study, to the best of my knowledge, is one of the first to examine and seek to understand organizational policies associated with bullying in the U.S., it is limited by the number of organizational policies examined. Although I was able to collect policies from thirteen of the 16 HR professionals who felt their organization had a policy associated with bullying, this is a very limited number of texts of which to make definitive conclusions concerning bullying policy. Instead, these findings should be seen as a starting point in the conversation on bullying policy in the U.S. We still need to understand how many organizations actually have anti-bullying policies that specifically address workplace bullying. Understanding the compositions of these organizations, their reasoning behind adopting the policy and how these get used and enforced could prove very revealing of exactly where U.S. organizations formally stand on this issue.

Lastly, this study attempted to widen the lens of bullying research by focusing on an important, albeit ignored, actor in bullying situations, the HR professional. This focus should be widened again to include further investigations on the organizational dynamics involved in bullying situations. Specific attention should be paid to the HR department's function in the organization. Prevailing HRM philosophies contend HR should be seen as a strategic partner in organizations which was echoed by some of the participants as a reality. Others believed their HR departments simply served the position as the "bad guy" or "keeper of the rules". In an attempt to widen the lens, we need to understand how these philosophies and others influence the handling of bullying situations and what discourses are created about bullying by their presence or absence.

This study attempted to widen the lens of bullying research to include the experiences, perceptions, and understandings of HR professionals. It has provided a broad view on HR professionals and the phenomenon of workplace bullying including; what HR professionals feel constitutes bullying, how it is dealt with, how they make sense of bullying situations and their position in them, and how they understand, use, and enforce bullying policy. Future research should add further detail in all of these important areas.

### Conclusion

Although HR professionals have extensive involvement in workplace bullying situations, workplace bullying research is not reflective of their experiences (Lewis & Rayner, 2003). This study sought to better understand how HR professionals understood and defined bullying, how they made sense of bullying situations and their position in them, and how policies associated with bullying activities were understood and utilized. The findings indicate that HR professionals define and understand bullying as targets do except they differed in what elements actually turn bullying behaviors into a situation they would label as “bullying”. They also felt that addressing and dealing with bullying was complicated due to its definitional state and their low power position. Still, they felt they took complaints of bullying very seriously and acted in these situations. The HR professionals also made sense of how and why bullying happened by pointing to issues like management style, conflict skills, and personality clashes. Additionally, the roles they played in bullying situations were marked by contradiction and paradox and equated to “walking a tightrope”. Although many felt their organizations had policies

that addressed bullying, it was found that most were ambiguous in regards to bullying or did not mention bullying at all. Future research is necessary to further understand where organizations in the U.S. formally stand on issue of bullying and should continue to widen the lens on this important issue.

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## APPENDIX A

## Participant Recruitment Email: AHRMA Key Informants

Subject: Possible Meeting?

Dear Ms. -----,

My name is Renee Cowan and I am a new member of AHRMA. I am a PhD student at Texas A&M University working on my dissertation. This project centers on Human Resource Professionals and their experiences in dealing with challenges in the workplace. One of the most important steps in this project is to talk to HR professionals about their experiences. Would you have some time to meet with me and talk about this project? I assure you our conversation will be kept confidential. I can meet at any time that is convenient for you!

Sincerely,

Renee Cowan

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide

**PROJECT INTRODUCTION:** Thanks so much for taking part in this study. I believe this is very important research, especially from the HR point of view, but to date little attention has been paid to HR's experiences. This study is being conducted to try and gain a better understanding of the ideas associated with bullying and the experiences in dealing with bullying from a Human Resource Professional's (HR) perspective.  
**EXPLAIN CONSENT FORM AND ASK PARTICIPANT TO SIGN.**

#### I. WORKPLACE BULLYING STORIES

##### A. Bullying.

- Like kids on a playground, do grownups bully each other at work? As an HR Professional, have you or someone you know seen this at work? If yes, can you tell me the story?
- Is this such a big deal?

#### II. WORKPLACE BULLYING DEFINITIONS

B. Now I would like to better understand what workplace bullying means to you and to your organization.

- What behaviors would you consider to be bullying in the workplace? Why?
- How do you know workplace bullying when you see it?
- How do you know when it is bullying and when it is not?
- What is it like to deal with workplace bullying in your organization?
- What do you think the organization should do about workplace bullying?
- How do you think your organization handles issues associated with workplace bullying? Why?

#### III. WORKPLACE BULLYING & HR POSITION

C. Let's talk about your position in these situations.

- What happens when someone has a complaint about bullying?
- How do you see your role in these situations? What are you supposed to do and what would you like to do?

- What is it like to deal with workplace bullying situations? How much power do you feel you have to deal with these situations? Where does this power come from?
- What is it like being an HR person dealing with complaints of bullying?
- What does it feel like to be a part of a bullying situation?
- What do you think upper management sees as your position in these situations?
- What do you think the target sees as your position in these situations?
- If these are different, how do you reconcile the two?

#### IV. ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

D. Let's now talk about any policies your organization may have which would address bullying.

- How does the term "workplace bullying" resonate with you?
- Does your organization have a policy that addresses workplace bullying? Can you explain that policy for me?
- If you don't have one, why don't you have one?
- CAN I HAVE A COPY?
- Why was the policy created? How was it created? What factors affected the adoption of this policy?
- How are organizational policies designed to address bullying in the workplace utilized and enforced?
- What do HR reps (not just management) think about this issue?
- What do you think the policy communicates to workers? What do the workers say about the policy?

#### V. CLOSING

E. To close, is there anything else you would like to talk about?

- What lessons have you learned along the way? What things would you do the same? What things would you do differently?
- What advice would you give to another HR representative about dealing with bullying?
- If you could give your organization some advice on how workplace bullying should be handled and dealt with in the organization, what would it be?
- Do you have any questions for me? Do you want to see the final study (if so, get mailing address or email)?
- Do you mind serving as a member check (explain this and get good contact information).

#### VI. DEMOGRAPHICS/IDENTITY

F. First, let's cover some basics about yourself and your job.

- Male or Female
- What is your current job title/position?
- How many years have you been with your organization? How long have you been in this industry?
- Type of organizational – large/small – what industry?
- What certifications do you have?
- Are you a member of AHRMA/SHRM?
- Can you give me a general idea of the structure of the HR department? i.e. do you report to an HR manager, what position do they report to, etc.
- Briefly describe your HR responsibilities for me.

## APPENDIX C

## Participant Recruitment Email: Linked in® AHRMA Participants

Subject: Graduate Students Needs Your Help!

Dear ARHMA members:

My name is Renee Cowan and I am a new member of AHRMA. I am also a PhD student at Texas A&M University working on my dissertation. This project centers on Human Resource Professionals and their experiences in dealing with challenges in the workplace. One of the most important steps in this project is to talk to HR professionals about their experiences. If you would like to participate in this study or want more information, please feel free to contact me at [renee\\_cowan1@tamu.edu](mailto:renee_cowan1@tamu.edu)

Sincerely,

Renee Cowan



## APPENDIX D

## CONSENT FORM

**Workplace Challenges and the Human Resource Professional**

You have been asked to participate in a research study that will be investigating the Human Resource Professional's experiences in dealing with challenges in the workplace. You were selected to be a possible participant because you are a Human Resource Professional. A total of 30 people have been asked to participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to understand your experiences related to challenges faced in the workplace and how these are handled.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an audio-taped interview. This study will take up to one hour. The risks associated with this study are very minimal however, interview questions could evoke feelings of discomfort or negative memories. The benefits of participation are the opportunity to share your experiences.

You will receive no monetary reimbursement for your participation.

This study is confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records, including audio-recordings and interview transcripts, will be stored securely and only Renee Cowan will have access to the records. The audio recordings and interview transcripts will be kept for three years in a locked file cabinet in Renee Cowan's office. After three years, the audio-recordings and transcripts will be destroyed. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Texas A&M University or your organization. If you decide to participate, you are free to refuse to answer any of the questions that may make you uncomfortable. You can withdraw at any time without your relations with the University or your organization being affected. You can contact Renee Cowan [renee\\_cowan1@tamu.edu](mailto:renee_cowan1@tamu.edu) and Dr. Charles Conrad at (979) 845-5530 or [cconrad@tamu.edu](mailto:cconrad@tamu.edu) with any questions about this study.

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board - Human Subjects in Research, Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, you can contact the Institutional Review Board through Ms. Melissa McIlhaney, IRB Program Coordinator, Office of Research Compliance, (979)458-4067, [mcilhaney@tamu.edu](mailto:mcilhaney@tamu.edu).

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please initial below if you consent to being audio-recorded:

Y \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

## Research Participants

Key:

Job Classification: Mid-level HR manager (ML), HR Specialist (Spec), Low-level HR (LL), HR Executives (Exec)

Organization Size: Small (S), Medium (M), Large (L)

HR Certifications: Professionals Human Resource certification (PHR), Senior Human Resource certification (SPHR), None (N)

Pseudonym	Job Classification	Org. Size	Years in HR	HR Certifications	HRM Assn.
Tammy	ML	S	10	N	Y
Lori	ML	S	16	N	Y
Teresa	ML	M	33	SPHR	Y
Kim	Spec	M	10	N	Y
Roger	Exec	M	20	SPHR	Y
Mina	ML	M	7	N	Y
Alan	ML	M	10	N	Y
Jaime	LL	M	16	N	N
Kevin	Spec	M	3	N	N
Phyllis	Spec	L	30	SPHR	Y
Ted	ML	L	33	SPHR	Y
Alison	ML	M	25	N	Y
Charlie	ML	S	9	PHR	Y
Donald	Exec	L	33	N	Y
Jose	ML	M	15	PHR	Y
Vivian	ML	L	14	N	Y
Alejandra	ML	M	10	PHR	Y
Kelly	LL	S	4	N	N
Marty	Spec	L	28	N	Y
Betty	Spec	M	4	N	Y
Ashlee	ML	M	12	PHR	N
Jackson	ML	S	9	PHR	Y
Shondra	ML	S	5	PHR	Y
Marian	ML	M	40	SPHR	Y

Pseudonym	Job Classification	Org. Size	Years in HR	HR Certifications	HRM Assn.
Pat	ML	S	8	PHR	Y
Kerry	Spec	L	9	N	Y
Kat	Exec.	S	15	N	N
Doug	ML	L	21	SPHR	Y
Sandy	ML	M	9	N	N
Stephen	ML	M	6	SPHR	Y
Jean	ML	L	39	N	Y
Chris	ML	M	20	PHR	Y
Teri	ML	M	11	N	N
Tiffany	ML	L	8	N	N
Tyson	ML	S	14	N	Y
Carol	ML	L	15	N	Y

## VITA

Name: Renee L. Cowan

Address: University of Texas at San Antonio

Department of Communication

One UTSA Circle

MB 2.248E

San Antonio, TX 78249-0643

Email Address: [renee.cowan@utsa.edu](mailto:renee.cowan@utsa.edu)

Education: B.S. in Communication Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, 1998

M.A. in Communication Studies, Texas State University-San Marcos, 2005

Ph.D. in Communication Studies, Texas A&M University, 2009