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Workplace Emotional Abuse

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Just before leaving for the weekend, George answers a call on the help line and quickly realizes it's from Mr. French, who's always got a problem late in the day. His computer's crashed again, he informs George, and this time he demands to talk to somebody competent!

George has had his share of problems with Mr. French, the sales department manager. On several occasions in management meetings, he's questioned George's competence. He just ignores George anytime he meets him in the hall, and George has heard he bad-mouths him to his staff.

When it becomes clear that Mr. French has no one but George to turn to this late in the day, he gets even more insulting about George's inability to fix his problem. Just before he slams the phone down, Mr. French lets loose one final attack: "I should come down there and knock some sense into you overpaid, underperforming college kids!"

George is barely able to speak to Mr. French, let alone find a solution to his problem before he hangs up. He sits and wonders what nice things Mr. French will be saying about him at the next management meeting. George tries to understand why his manager never seems to defend him at these meetings. He's also insulted about being called an incompetent college kid and annoyed that Mr. French would have the gall to suggest that he could smack him into compliance. That just infuriates George, particularly because he sees no alternative than to suck it up. Another weekend wasted worrying about this joker, he thinks. Why do I put up with this treatment?

Unfortunately, the scenario above is common in many organizations. It depicts employee experience with persistent psychological aggression. In fact, the majority of workplace aggression acts are nonphysical (Chappel & Di Martino, 1998; Keashly & Harvey, 2004; Neuman & Baron, 1997). One recent statewide survey by Jagatic and Keashly (2000) found that 24% of respondents report being exposed to psychologically aggressive behavior

on a frequent basis. Although there has been some resistance to including the more “psychological” forms of aggression under the rubric of *workplace violence*, traditionally defined as physical (Di Martino, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003), recent occupational health and safety guidelines recognizing the extent and impact of nonphysical aggression do incorporate verbal abuse and harassment in their definitions of workplace violence (e.g., Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2003, www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/violence.html). Accordingly, in this chapter we elaborate on emotional abuse as a nonphysical form of workplace violence.

Our first goal in this chapter will be to provide some conceptual clarity on what we intend by the term *emotional abuse*. Several constructs of nonphysical harassment have been introduced to the literature, and we need to understand how emotional abuse is proposed as a way of integrating these seemingly distinct phenomena (Keashly & Harvey, 2004). We then articulate our current thinking on emotional abuse as a workplace phenomenon; illustrate its various and far-reaching effects individually, organizationally, and socially; and discuss what we know and what is still to be known about its sources. Once we have laid out this landscape, we will identify and prioritize needed areas of research. We conclude with discussion about the implications for action by organizations concerned with emotional abuse in the workplace.

Emotional Abuse: Meaning, Measurement, and Prevalence

Discussion of the prevalence and impact of emotional abuse at work must be preceded by a discussion of its nature, one that delimits the construct with respect to a variety of phenomena that have recently been articulated in the research literatures on workplace hostility, harassment, aggression, and conflict. A central defining element of emotional abuse is that it involves repeated or persistent hostility over an extended period of time. Thus, we exclude from this conceptual domain the *occasional* aggressive acts or lack of decorum that arise out of everyday encounters. We view research on abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), bullying and mobbing (e.g., Einarsen, 1999; Leymann, 1990; Namie, 2000), harassment (Brodsky, 1976), petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1997), and generalized workplace abuse (Richman, Flaherty, & Rospenda, 1996) as examples of repeated and enduring hostility. Further, all these forms of persistent hostility have been demonstrated to undermine the target's sense of competence as a worker and a person, which is a second defining feature of emotional abuse (Keashly, 2001). A particularly unique feature of these types of hostility is that they occur in an ongoing relationship between the target and actor(s) rather than from “strangers or acquaintances.” These forms of mistreatment are about hostile relationships rather than hostile

events. In contrast to most occasional aggression, exposure to persistent hostility within an ongoing relationship creates a psychological work environment akin to being under siege (Waldron, 2000). Thus, the individual who is repeatedly exposed to fellow workers' verbal or nonverbal, but *nonphysical*, aggressive behaviors attacking their person is said to be undergoing emotional abuse at work.

This conceptualization of emotional abuse as a chronic state of existence has implications for measurement and hence for the determination of prevalence. The research on workplace aggression generally, and persistent hostility in particular, has typically measured constructs in terms of frequency of a variety of behaviors over a specified period of time (ranging from 6 months to 5 years) presented on a checklist. Further, with the exception of European workplace bullying research and recent North American research (e.g., Keashly & Neuman, 2002), even the indicators of frequency of occurrence that could in a limited fashion be equated to an assessment of degree of repetition have been vague and ill defined (e.g., *never* to *very often*). Moreover, until recently, the relationship of the actor to the target was also not part of the assessment (Keashly & Neuman, 2002). Such measurement does permit a picture of employees' degree of exposure to hostility at work but does not truly capture a state of emotional abuse—when a situation moves from being difficult or abrasive to being abusive (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). A complementary measurement approach that reflects this concern is seen in the workplace bullying and sexual harassment literatures, which utilizes detailed definitions to which respondents identify as reflective of their experience (or not). Several workplace bullying studies (see Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999, for review) have also included behavioral checklists and defined respondents as bullied or not based on whether they endorse experiencing at least one behavior at least weekly for a specified period of time, often 6 months (Saline, 2001). As with the sexual harassment literature, the two methods produce different victimization rates but allow the opportunity to explore the thresholds of when hostility becomes abuse.

Acknowledging these different measurement perspectives and applying the criteria of persistence and impact, we share the following statistics to give the reader a sense of the extent of emotional abuse at work. Based on data from a 2004 statewide survey ($N = 438$), approximately 10% of a representative sample of working adults self-identified as having been persistently mistreated by someone with whom they worked in the previous 12 months. Ninety percent of those indicated that they were notably bothered by it, for a rate of 1 in 10 respondents being treated abusively (Burnazi, Keashly, & Neuman, 2005). A study of workplace stress and aggression with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs ($N = 4,790$) reported a higher rate with 36% of workers exposed to persistent hostility, with persistence defined as experiencing at least one aggressive behavior at least weekly for a period of a year (Keashly & Neuman, 2002). Almost 7% of the respondents reported being exposed to at least five or more different aggressive behaviors persistently. When the

additional criterion of impact was applied (i.e., bothered them *moderately to a great deal*), 19% of all respondents would be described as experiencing abuse at work. To paint the picture even more starkly, data from a Web-based survey of self-identified targets of workplace bullying in the United States (Namie, 2000) revealed the average length of such abuse was 16.5 months. These figures reveal to us that a significant proportion of working adults can be considered to be undergoing emotional abuse at work.

Effects of Emotional Abuse

Now that we know emotional abuse is indeed part of many workers' working experience, what does it cost them, their organizations, and others with whom they are connected? Although the literature on occasional aggression has tended to focus more on antecedents than effects, research on persistent interpersonal hostility such as emotional abuse has been primarily focused on documenting the effects of exposure. Table 6.1 provides a listing of the well-established effects of *persistent aggression* along psychological, behavioral, and organizational dimensions (Keashly & Harvey, 2004; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003).

In viewing Table 6.1, it is important to indicate that research on emotional abuse and aggression at work has drawn on occupational stress models as an organizing framework (e.g., Keashly & Harvey, 2004; Schat & Kelloway, 2003). These frameworks represent aggression as an environmental stressor, and that which follows is represented as the personal stress experience and the psychological, physical, and behavioral strain that develop through ongoing or extreme exposure. These frameworks also specify several moderating and mediating variables that are also common to stress research. Many of these outcomes are, in fact, predicted to be causally associated with one another through various mediating mechanisms. These issues and the relevant processes have been discussed elsewhere (e.g., Harvey & Keashly, 2003b; Keashly & Harvey, 2004; Schat & Kelloway, 2003), so we reserve our comments to six observations regarding the collective import of these outcomes:

First and perhaps most powerful about this list is how extensive and comprehensive the impact of undergoing emotional abuse at work can be. Psychological effects ranging from anxiety and negative mood to depression, as well as behavioral impacts related to problem drinking and substance abuse, are clearly suggestive of the potential for a broad spectrum of generalized effects. These effects seem to cover the full range of effects typically noted within stress research generally (Jex & Beehr, 1991). Indeed, so pervasive are the effects that one can presume that they affect individuals' functioning in several aspects of their lives.

A second factor relates to the retaliatory behavioral effects that can emerge from such treatment. Prolonged exposure to abuse can result in the target behaving in a hostile and aggressive manner, both actively (e.g., verbal

Table 6.1 Some Effects of Emotionally Abusive Behaviors on Targets

<i>Category</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>Source</i>
Direct		
Negative mood	Anger, resentment	Ashforth (1997); Richman et al. (1999); Richman et al. (2001)
	Anxiety	Keashly et al. (1994); Richman et al. (1999); Richman et al. (2001); Tepper (2000)
	Depressed mood	Richman et al. (1999); Richman et al. (2001)
Cognitive distraction	Concentration	Brodsky (1976)
Indirect		
Decreased psychological well-being	Lowered self-esteem	Ashforth (1997); Cortina et al. (2001); Price Spratlen (1995)
	Problem drinking	Richman et al. (1999); Richman et al. (2001); Rospenda et al. (2000)
	Depression	Tepper (2000)
	Overall emotional health	Jagatic & Keashly (2000); Rospenda (2002)
	Self-efficacy	Duffy et al. (2002)
	Life satisfaction	Tepper (2000)
Poor psychosomatic function	Physical ill health (general)	Duffy et al. (2002); Price Spratlen (1995); Richman et al. (1999)
Reduced organizational	Decreased job satisfaction	Burnazi et al. (2005); Cortina et al. (2001); Harvey et al. (2005); (1996); functioning Jagatic & Keashly (2000); Keashly & Neuman (2002); Keashly et al. (1994); Keashly et al. (1997); Price Spratlen (1995); Sinclair et al. (2002); Tepper (2000)
	Job tension	Harvey (1996); Keashly et al. (1997)
	Greater turnover	Keashly et al. (1994); Sinclair et al. (2002); Tepper (2000)
	Work withdrawal behaviors	Cortina et al. (2001)
	Greater intention to leave	Ashforth (1997); Burnazi et al. (2005); Cortina et al. (2001); Harvey (1996); Jagatic & Keashly (2000); Keashly & Neuman (2002); Keashly et al. (1994); Keashly et al. (1997); Tepper (2000)
	Increased absenteeism	Price Spratlen (1995)
	Decreased productivity	Ashforth (1997); Price Spratlen (1995)
	Organizational Commitment	Duffy et al. (2002); Keashly & Neuman (2002); Tepper (2000)
	Family-work conflict	Tepper (2000)
	Leadership endorsement	Ashforth (1997)
	Work unit cohesiveness	Ashforth (1997)
	Organizational citizenship behaviors	Zellars et al. (2002)
	Counterproductive behaviors	Duffy et al. (2002)

outbursts, physical assault) and passively (withholding organizational citizenship behaviors, silent treatment). Such responses may fuel escalatory spirals that may lead to physical violence (e.g., Folger & Baron, 1996; Glomb, 2002) or the spreading of hostility to initially uninvolved others (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). This has clear implications for organizations and effective functioning, but it can also contribute to the misdiagnosis of these situations as conflicts to be resolved between parties when, in fact, there are harmful elements of one party abusing the other.

Third, the effect of alcohol use and abuse is revealing for its potentially exceptional relationship to prolonged exposure to workplace hostility. Many of the other effects noted are fairly characteristic of exposure to any workplace stressor, including occasional aggression (Barling, 1996). However, Richman and her colleagues (1996, 1999) and Rospenda, Richman, Wislar, and Flaherty (2000) argue that chronic *social or relational* stressors like emotional abuse are more predictive of disorders or diseases that develop slowly over time, such as alcohol abuse. In their 2-year longitudinal study of generalized workplace abuse, individuals exposed to chronic abuse were more likely to manifest drinking problems than those who had been exposed to it on a more time-limited basis (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty, & Freels, 2001).

Fourth, the overall nature of the effects indicates deterioration or disabling of the target, the people around him or her, and the organization. In fact, several of these effects (e.g., hypervigilance, intrusive imagery, avoidance behaviors) are considered symptomatic of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although PTSD has been defined as a response to a single, overwhelming event (e.g., workplace shooting, natural disaster), it has been argued to apply to targets that experience prolonged hostile interactions (e.g., Namie & Namie, 2000). For example, Namie (2000) reports that 31% of women and 21% of men responding to his survey on workplace bullying reported exhibiting all three trauma symptoms. Similar arguments are made in the European literature on workplace bullying (e.g., Hoel et al, 1999) and have been supported in psychological harassment research in Canada (Soares, 2002). These are alarming mental health correlates that clearly warrant more data and long-term monitoring.

Our fifth observation is that the research has tended to focus on the link between exposure and these measured effects without distinguishing between direct (immediate) effects and indirect (medium to long-term) effects (Barling, 1996; Rospenda et al, 2000; Tepper, 2000). As our observations above would indicate, there are likely more specific linking mechanisms to consider. For example, Barling (1996) has argued that the direct effects of the psychological experience of hostile behaviors are negative mood, cognitive distraction, and fear of violence. If these immediate effects are not alleviated, they will result in the more long-term and extensive effects, such as decreased psychological well-being, poor psychosomatic functioning, reduced organizational functioning, emotional exhaustion, poor job performance, and accidents. In addition to explicating the evolution of these effects, this approach identifies places for

tertiary action in helping targets deal with even limited experience of emotional abuse before the damage becomes more extensive.

The final observation regards the focus of the impact. Most research on emotional abuse has tended to focus on the individual and, to a more limited extent, the organization; however, there is evidence that the victim net needs to be cast more broadly to include third parties, described as covictimization (Glomb, 2002) and vicarious victims (Rogers & Kelloway, 1997). This net includes family and friends who act as support for the target, as well as coworkers who either see or hear of the mistreatment. In addition to spawning secondary incivility spirals, hostility directed at others has been shown to cause similar negative effects in witnesses, such as fear they will be next, frustration over not being able to intervene, poorer teamwork and a diminished sense of empowerment, and anger at the organization for not controlling the actors (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Bennett & Lehman, 1999; Neuman & Baron, 1997; Rogers & Kelloway, 1997; Schneider, 1996). Glomb (2002) extends the net even further with evidence that similar negative effects can be expected for the actors themselves. Broadening the notion of victimization enables a more detailed accounting of the human and organizational costs of emotional abuse and forms the basis for building the "business case" for the economic and social value of intervention (secondary and tertiary). Preventive action requires an understanding of the sources of emotional abuse, to which we now turn our attention.

Sources of Emotional Abuse

The literature on persistent hostility has focused primarily on effects rather than antecedents of emotional abuse. A notable exception is the more mature literature on sexual harassment in the workplace, wherein the antecedents have been drawn out and studied more carefully (e.g., Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2003). Accordingly, we will necessarily be drawing on the broader workplace aggression literature to explore the sources of emotional abuse. We do this cautiously, understanding that explaining how someone will behave aggressively (occasional aggression) does not necessarily extend to predicting when someone will engage in persistent hostility toward another person (emotional abuse).

A major assumption of and theoretical force for conceptualizing emotional abuse has been to cast the problem from an interactionist perspective (Keashly & Harvey, 2004; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). The belief is that emotional abuse arises from a complex interaction of individual actor, target, and situational forces. The notion is that emotional abuse is a hostile relationship that *occurs* and is *maintained* through a variety of mechanisms that we can identify as sources of the condition. In this section, we will focus initially on the actor, move to discussion of target vulnerability, and then step back to consider broader situational forces in the form of organizational

culture and workplace norms. It will be argued through empirical work and relevant theory where applicable that emotional abuse is a condition that arises and is maintained through these interactive forces.

Individual Influences: Actor Factors

The popular literature on abusive bosses and coworkers describes them as psychopathological, often with roots in their experiences as abused children or as schoolyard bullies (e.g. Namie & Namie, 2000; Wyatt & Hare, 1997). The empirical literature has examined more specific personality characteristics and provides some support that an individual's personality does play an important role in subsequent behavior. A basic premise of trait theories of personality is that traits represent a relatively stable set of characteristics about a person that predisposes the individual to behaving in predictable ways. Not surprisingly, personality characteristics associated with anxiety or anger and hostility, such as trait anger and self-control (Douglas & Martinko, 2001), depression (Tepper, Duffy, & Henle, 2002), type A personality (Neuman & Baron, 1998), negative affectivity (Neuman & Baron, 1998), neuroticism (Jockin, Arvey, & McGue, 2001), emotional susceptibility and irritability (Caprara, Rnezi, Alcini, D'Imperio, & Travaglia, 1983), and attributional style (Douglas & Martinko, 2001) have all been linked to increased aggressive behavior. Traits such as tolerance for ambiguity (Ashforth, 1997), agreeableness, conscientiousness (Jockin et al. 2001), and high self-monitoring (Neuman & Baron, 1998) similarly are predictive of reduced likelihood of aggression. In a related vein, Ashforth (1997) found that managers who hold Theory X beliefs (workers need to be forced to work) were more likely to behave aggressively toward subordinates. Thus, the personality and cognitive biases of actors seem to have an influence on engaging in aggressive behaviors. Whether certain personality types are predictive of tendencies to show *persistent* aggression is as yet an unexplored question.

Positional characteristics may also have an important influence on engaging in aggressive behavior. In terms of the actor-target relationships, the research is suggesting that there may be differences worth investigating further. For example, Keashly and Neuman (2002) report that superiors and coworkers are more often actors than subordinates or clients, and LeBlanc and Kelloway (2002) found that aggression is more likely from the public than from organizational insiders. These varied findings are likely a result of the nature of occupations and types of behaviors categorized as workplace aggression. Schat and Kelloway (2000), for example, included a variety of occupations, some of which are considered at high risk for workplace violence from customers or strangers (e.g., bank tellers, taxi drivers, home care workers). Keashly and Neuman (2002) were able to demonstrate that different actors (superiors, coworkers, subordinates, and customers) engaged in different forms of aggression, concluding that physical aggression is more likely from organizational

outsiders than insiders, whereas the reverse is true for nonphysical aggression. These findings are interesting when examined in the light of LeBlanc and Kelloway's (2002) conclusions that factors that predicted violence from a member of the public were different from those that predicted violence from an organizational insider. It is possible that factors may vary because they are predicting or explaining different types of aggressive behavior. This interpretation has interesting implications for the emotional abuse literature. If, indeed, it is the issue of type of aggression that is key, and the distinction between occasional and persistent aggression that we have drawn is valid, then it is likely that there are unique predictors for emotional abuse. Regardless, although evidence is slowly gathering about an actor-behavior link, it is still unclear whether such differences are due to variation in or a combination of issues related to definitions of aggression, opportunity to aggress, occupations studied, and other situational factors to be considered later.

In regard to actor gender, there have been mixed results regarding whether men or women are more likely to be the aggressor (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Again, this appears to be linked to the type of aggression examined. For example, men are more often perpetrators of physical aggression than women (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Drawing on the social psychological literature on gender and aggression, Bowes-Sperry, Tata, and Luthar (2003) have argued that the nature of workplace aggression (primarily psychological and often provoked) suggests that there would be no gender differences. We have consistently found no gender differences in the reported actors of emotionally abusive behaviors (see Keashly & Jagatic, 2003, for review). The studies we reviewed, however, did not examine the issue of motive for the aggression. Bettencourt and Miller (1996) note that gender differences in aggression are more likely when aggression is unprovoked, that is, when aggression is proactive. It may be that persistent aggression, such as emotional abuse, reflects a more proactive or instrumental aggression, and if so, gender may be expected to account for some variability in this form of aggression, with men being more aggressive. Data from a Web-based survey of self-reported victims of workplace bullying (Namie, 2000) found that contrary to Bettencourt and Miller's (1996) conclusions, women were more frequently identified as actors. Such differences may reflect the limited types of aggressive behaviors included in the studies reviewed. Specifically, they note that more indirect aggression, which Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Hjelt-Back (1994) suggest women are more likely to engage in, was not well represented in these studies. Such mixed results are provocative, and the identification of motive and type of aggression as important influences should fuel future research to continue examining potential effects of gender.

Moving a step away from positional and personal characteristics to more person behaviors, two factors have received some empirical support: abuse history and alcohol use. Alcohol use and abuse and past aggressive or antisocial behavior have both been found to predict self-reports of engaging in primarily psychologically aggressive behavior at work (Greenberg &

Barling, 1999; Jockin et al., 2001). Alcohol use has been well established as a precursor to aggressive behavior. For example, the family violence literature consistently reports an association between family alcohol abuse and various forms of aggression in the home (e.g., O'Farrell & Murphy, 1995; Pan, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994). By extension, this suggests that there is reason to expect a comparable link to the more persistent forms of aggressive behavior in the workplace, such as emotional abuse. Abuse history has also been found to be important in target's appraisal of emotionally abusive behavior. In both a scenario study (Keashly, Welstead, & Delaney, 1996) and an interview study of targets (Keashly, 2001), we found that previous hostile history with the actor was linked to judgments of the behaviors as abusive. Taken together, these studies provide strong support for the relationship of person behaviors to subsequent emotionally abusive behavior and the need for such behaviors to be explored more systematically.

Individual Influences: Target Factors

It may seem odd to discuss target characteristics as sources of emotional abuse. It seems suggestive of blaming the victim; however, because emotional abuse has been characterized as a hostile relationship, it is important to consider both members. Two different lines of research are of interest here. The first line of research focuses on the target's personality or interpersonal style. The premise is that a person may be at risk for being selected as a target of someone else's aggressive behavior because of how he or she interacts in the workplace. Olweus's (1993) work on schoolyard bullying identifies provocative and submissive victims. Provocative victims were characterized as obnoxious and somewhat aggressive in style. Submissive victims were characterized as anxious and socially awkward. And it would appear that the results may generalize to the workplace. Target negative affectivity has been linked to reports of being a target of aggressive behavior (Aquino, Grover, Bradfield, & Allen, 1999). Tepper et al. (2002) demonstrated that this was also true for persistent forms of hostility. Specifically, a supervisor who was depressed or felt he or she had been treated unfairly was more likely to become emotionally abusive to a subordinate who was high in negative affectivity.

The second line of research is exemplified by the work of Zapf and Gross (2001) on workplace bullying focusing on the conflict management behaviors of targets. They argue and demonstrate that targets may contribute to the escalation of hostilities because of their responses to the actor. Work by Aquino and Byron (2002) also finds similar results in relation to both high and low dominating conflict styles: targets possessing these styles were more likely to report being victimized at work. Such findings are consistent with various social psychological theories. For example, based on the frustration-aggression principle (e.g., Fox & Spector, 1999), it is possible that certain competitive styles may be perceived by actors to frustrate their goals and thus encourage retaliation through aggression. One can also invoke justice constructs to

illustrate that perceived injustices predict workplace aggression (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999). Although we believe that targets are not responsible for an actor's abusive treatment, studies like these identify additional places where primary intervention can be undertaken. Thus, recognizing that a target's response or typical way of handling difficult situations may have some impact on the direction in which an initially hostile situation may go suggests that enhancing employee skills in dealing with potentially difficult situations, as well as stress management, may be helpful (Schat & Kelloway, 2000).

Situational Forces

Situational forces that facilitate (or mitigate) the likelihood of aggression have been discussed within the workplace (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 1998) and general societal contexts (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Our focus here is to examine those situational factors we believe may be responsible for *persistent* hostility in the workplace.

Actors and targets exist within the broader social context of an organization and its environment. Thus, their behaviors are guided by and evaluated based on social norms of what is and is not appropriate. The characterization by a number of researchers of emotional abuse specifically and workplace aggression more generally as socially or organizationally deviant (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Neuman & Baron, 1997; O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996) assumes that social norms exist that discourage such behavior. Yet research described here indicates that such persistent and enduring hostility characterizes many people's work environments. In contrast to occasional aggression, the existence of persistent hostility suggests either that there has been a weakening or failure of social norms (Neuman & Baron, 2003; Richman et al. 1996) or that unspoken norms exist that at their worst support such behavior and at their best tolerate it (Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Keashly, 2001).

Although broader societal concerns, issues, and, thus, norms are imported into organizations (Donnellon & Kolb, 1994), organizations have their own unique influence on the behavior of their members. Together these factors contribute to the organization's culture, which is a shared system of beliefs, values, and behaviors that determines the kind of workplace behaviors that are rewarded and punished (Schein, 1990; Sperry, 1998). That is, organizations may vary in the extent to which they sanction aggression through the culture that prevails (Douglas, 2000). This thinking is consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), which stresses the importance of modeling and of rewards in learning and expression of aggressive behavior. Within work teams, Glomb and Liao (2003) have demonstrated the impact of coworker modeling of aggression on increased likelihood of an individual's aggression. At the broader organizational culture level, the organization through its actions (or inactions) signals its perspective on aggression. The notion that organizational tolerance of various abusive behaviors plays an enabling role has been well supported in the sexual harassment literature (see Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2003, for

review). Similar findings of organizational influence are found in the research on emotionally abusive behaviors through studies looking at facets of organizational culture (Douglas, 2000; Jagatic, 2001; Keashly & Jagatic, 2000) and at perceptions of unjust treatment by the organization (Tepper et al., 2002). Regarding organizational culture, the more negatively employees (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000) and professionals in training (Jagatic, 2001) perceived their organization in terms of morale, quality of supervision and teamwork, and employee involvement, the more frequently they reported experiencing emotionally abusive behaviors. Taking a person X situation perspective, Douglas (2000) found that the impact of organizational culture on engaging in aggressive behavior was more dramatic for those employees who were low in self-control. Although we have noted actor proclivities for aggressive behavior, this finding is supportive of the enabling (and potentially mitigating) role that an organization can have on aggressive expression by its members.

This effect can also be noted through the lens of organizational justice theory. Perceived organizational injustice can be viewed as an indicator of a hostile work culture and has been consistently found to be linked to reports of behaving aggressively at work (Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Neuman & Baron, 1997; Tepper et al. 2002). Because of their enduring nature, these situational factors would seem to be of particular importance to an understanding of emotional abuse as *persistent* hostility and be less important as a triggering mechanism for *occasional* aggression. Thus, norms represented within the organization's culture, whether imported and tolerated or internally generated, may surreptitiously function to maintain the psychological hostility.

Although intriguing, the current challenge with most organizational culture-behavior research is that the data are correlational. This opens up the question of the causal nature of this link. Does a negative workplace environment result in more hostile employee behavior, as the European literature on workplace bullying (e.g., Einarsen, 1999; Hoel et al. 1999) and the American literature on toxic work environment (Harmon et al. 2003; Neuman & Baron, 1997; Wright & Smye, 1996) suggest? Or does hostile behavior left unchecked result in a toxic work environment, as suggested by Andersson and Pearson's (1999) discussion of the development of "uncivil" workplaces? The relationship is likely bidirectional, the dynamics of which can be more fully explored only through longitudinal research.

A Comment: Emotional Abuse as Proactive or Reactive Aggression?

Having reviewed the sources of emotional abuse, it is important that we acknowledge the distinction between reactive (affective) and proactive (instrumental) aggression in discussions of workplace aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Duffy et al. 2002; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Neuman & Baron, 1997; Tepper et al., 2002). In the discussion of gender and workplace aggression, we suggested that emotional abuse might be reflective of instrumental aggression. The

workplace aggression literature appears to have an implicit assumption that such aggression is reactive or “emotional” in nature as evidenced by work on the aspects of a hostile or aggressive personality (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 1997) and work looking at actors also being targets (e.g., Glomb, 2002). But aggression can also be instrumental or predatory (Felson, 1993), wherein the actor is not simply reacting to some hurt or frustration (also referred to as dispute-related aggression; Felson, 1993) but may view treating another in this manner as instrumental to the achievement of some desired end, such as gaining compliance. References to these hostile behaviors as exercises of power (e.g., Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Lewis & Zare, 1999; Namie & Namie, 2000) and as efforts to control and create target dependency (e.g., Bassman, 1992; Hornstein, 1996) or hinder a person’s reputation and success on the job (Duffy et al. 2002) are consistent with an instrumental aggression perspective. Thus, although both types of aggression *intend* harm by definition, the ultimate goal for behavior is different (e.g., harm or injury vs. compliance; Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Accordingly, the goal of behavior becomes a central question and one that has been assumed rather than explicitly examined in either the emotional abuse or workplace aggression literatures (Neuman & Keashly, 2004). O’Leary-Kelly, Paetzold, and Griffin (2000) have explicitly surfaced the notion of emotional and instrumental goals in their discussion of an actor-based perspective on sexual harassment, and perhaps it is time we do the same with respect to other forms of aggression in the workplace.

Major Empirical Studies

A variety of qualitative and descriptive studies can be identified as instrumental to later work on emotional abuse. These were pioneering inquiries that provided the rich descriptions of a workplace problem that researchers had until that point generally overlooked. Among these are Brodsky’s (1976) examination of workers’ compensation claims revealing generalized forms of harassment, Ryan and Oestreich’s (1991) qualitative interview study describing sources of fear in the organization and the “undiscussable” of abusive managerial behavior, Bassman’s (1992) depiction of the sources of abusive practices and behaviors in organizations, and the nursing and medical literatures’ quantitative descriptions of abusive treatment of nurses and medical students (e.g., Cox, 1991; Diaz & McMillin, 1991; Rosenberg & Silver, 1984; Silver & Glickin, 1990). This early literature painted a picture of hostile interpersonal relationships in North American organizations that was seemingly generalized and went well beyond the traditional sexual and racial lines that were at that time familiar to organizational researchers. The sexual harassment research that began in earnest in the 1980s (see Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2003, for review) has provided models and perspectives that have guided some of the work on emotional abuse. In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, Leymann’s (1990) work on mobbing in the workplace fueled an incredible burst of empirical research in the European Community that was

and continues to be influential in thinking about and examining workplace emotional abuse in the United States and Canada. It is out of this context that a number of research studies related to emotional abuse emerged. We highlight three of them in this section: (a) the earlier work of Keashly and her colleagues in assessing the existence and parameters of emotional abuse as a workplace phenomenon; (b) the longitudinal work of Richman, Rospenda, and their colleagues that has revealed the impact of chronic or persistent exposure to hostility in the workplace; and (c) the work of Tepper and his colleagues on abusive supervision and links to organizational justice.

In 1994, Keashly, Trott, and MacLean introduced to the organizational and violence literatures the notion of emotional abuse as a significant part of workers' experience. Taking an exploratory approach, Keashly et al. (1994) had undergraduate students with work experience indicate the frequency with which they had experienced a number of different behaviors in the workplace (both positive and negative), the degree of negative or positive impact of each of the behaviors on them, characteristics of the actor, their responses to the actor, and the impact of those responses on the overall situation. Several facets of job satisfaction were examined as outcome variables. Although the methodology of this study is simple, the results were quite revealing and sparked further research related to key findings.

First, this study found that a significant proportion of respondents were dealing with ongoing hostility from people with whom they worked. Specifically, 14% of the sample reported being exposed to 10 or more behaviors (out of a possible 28). This was evidence of the existence of nonsexual, nonphysical persistent hostility (i.e., emotional abuse). Second, these seemingly minor behaviors were rated as having moderate to extremely negative impact on the respondents and were significantly related to job satisfaction. Further, 14% of the sample left the organization as a result of the treatment. That is, these behaviors were harmful to both the individual and the organization (i.e., turnover) and thus needed to be included in assessments of hostility at work. Third, bosses and coworkers were reported to be the main actors, which highlighted the organizational insider aspect of emotional abuse (in contrast to physical violence in which actors are typically organizational outsiders) and introduced the notion of power differential to the discussion. Finally, the study provided evidence of the nature of target responses and the impact of those responses on changing the situation. Targets tended to use indirect, emotion-focused strategies that did not alter the situation notably. This finding drew attention to the need to look at target coping and more broadly the types of responses both individually and organizationally that would alter such hostile situations (i.e., secondary intervention).

Utilizing a similar behavioral indicator of abusive behaviors, Keashly and her colleagues (Harvey, 1996; Keashly, Harvey, & Hunter, 1997) extended their findings of impact to include turnover intention, job commitment, and job-related tension with different working populations. Perhaps most important for the development of the construct of emotional abuse, this study demonstrated the unique and significant contribution of emotional abuse to

these outcomes over and above that accounted for by the classic role state stressors of role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload (Keashly et al., 1997). Thus, emotional abuse was demonstrated to be a unique *sociorelational* stressor that is qualitatively a different from the more structurally linked role state stressors. This led to the expectation that it may have different effects on targets and perhaps a different process dynamic (e.g., coping mechanism effectiveness may vary). This theme has been resoundingly supported in the work of Richman, Rospenda, and their colleagues, to which our attention now turns.

What is particularly notable about the work of Richman and her colleagues (e.g., Richman et al., 1999; Richman et al., 2001; Rospenda et al., 2000) is the longitudinal nature of their research. Framing hostile treatment as a sociorelational stressor (i.e., one grounded in working relationships rather than work structure), they have collected four waves of data on faculty and staff of a midwestern university and are in the process of gathering a fifth wave. Data on over 1,500 employees and former employees over this time period have been gathered. The published literature reflects results from the first three waves of data (1996, 1997, 2001), with fourth-wave data (1 year later) beginning to be presented and discussed. This study is a mail survey that, among other things, included a measure of generalized workplace abuse (a similar measure to emotional abuse), as well as sexual harassment. Outcome variables of interest were the proximal indicators of mental and physical health and more distal, long-term effects of indicators of alcohol use and abuse. Further, indicators of coping with exposure to hostile behaviors were also included and their impact on outcomes examined. Overall findings are that generalized workplace abuse is more frequent than sexual harassment and that physical violence was less frequent than all other forms, confirming the significance of emotional abuse as frequent and therefore an important form of workplace violence and hostility.

Of particular interest to this discussion is the published work on the first two waves of data (Richman et al., 2001) that permitted the identification of employees who were exposed to chronic abuse (reporting exposure at each of the first two waves of data, reflecting 2 years of abusive treatment), those who had not previously been mistreated but now were, those who had been mistreated according to the first wave but were no longer being abused in the second wave, and those people who had not been exposed to such hostility. Such comparisons directly address a core element of emotional abuse, that is, persistence (frequency and duration). The results are telling. Those exposed to chronic abuse show greater evidence of negative health outcomes and negative drinking behaviors compared with the experience of all three other groups. Highlighting the unique impact of this sociorelational stressor, even those for whom abuse had desisted continued to show negative drinking outcomes long past the end of the abuse. Richman et al. (2001) argue that such findings support the distinction between stressors of an interpersonal nature and those of a more structural nature. When the latter end, the effects tend to diminish with time. Such was not the case for abusive

treatment, suggestive of the impact of such treatment for undermining and disabling the target (Keashly, 1998). The findings with regard to coping are also troubling. Efforts at active coping (confronting the actor, reporting it to the supervisor, or filing a grievance) often failed, and when they did, the effects on targets were intensified. Richman and her colleagues take this as additional evidence that persistent hostile mistreatment (emotional abuse) is a profoundly different kind of stressor, the effects of which are more extensive and enduring. Indeed, she argues that such persistence and the failure of individual coping to alter the situation are characteristic of a sociostructural rather than a strictly interpersonal phenomenon, directing attention to the organization as a key source of, and resource for challenging, abusive treatment (Keashly & Harvey, 2004; Richman et al., 1999).

Tepper and his colleagues' work on abusive supervision picks up on this organizational connection in their studies examining the role of perceived organizational injustice as an antecedent in supervisor's abusive treatment of subordinates (Tepper et al., 2002) and as a mediator of its impact on subordinates (Tepper, 2000) and of subordinates' responses to the mistreatment (Zellers, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). Tepper (2000) introduced his notion of abusive supervision in a study focused on subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision on the part of their direct superior. Reflecting that the effects of abusive supervision may be lagged, Tepper gathered his data at two points in time, 6 months apart. In Time 1, 712 residents (53% response rate) of a midwestern city who were employed and were formally supervised returned usable surveys with questions about abusive supervision, perceived job mobility, and organizational justice (distributive, procedural, and interactional). At Time 2, individuals who completed the first survey and who still had the same supervisors ($n = 362$) were invited to complete this follow-up survey, consisting of items on job and life satisfaction, organizational commitment, conflict between work and family, and psychological distress. Those Time 1 respondents who did not have the same supervisors at Time 2 were asked to describe how the relationships had ended. These responses were coded as either *voluntarily quit* ($n = 119$) or those whose *supervisors left or were fired*. This group was contrasted with the group who still had the same supervisors. They found that subordinates who perceived their supervisors as more abusive were more likely to quit their jobs or positions.

Of those who stayed in their jobs, abusive supervision was associated with poorer outcomes. The role of organizational justice was shown to be important in mediating these effects. Tepper argued that the existence of abusive supervision fundamentally violated subordinates' sense of (a) being treated in a fair and respectful manner (interactional justice), (b) the organization developing and enforcing procedures that discipline abusers (procedural justice), and (c) receiving the same amount and type of positive input from supervisors that other coworkers do (distributive justice). These results speak directly to the significance of the organization and its norms for defining employees' experiences.

This selective set of studies paints a clear picture that emotional abuse is a distinctive stressor in the workplace and that it seems to be maintained through interplay of the actor(s), the situation, and the organizational environment. These studies also demonstrate that methodological improvements are being made regularly in the area, so the type of data being reported is increasingly providing actionable information. Nevertheless, the emotional abuse construct is still nascent; much has to be examined in future research.

Future Research Directions

As research on emotional abuse evolves, new directions for research and scholarship have become evident. We have explored some specific directions in other writing (Keashly, 1998; Keashly & Harvey, 2004; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003), so we will focus here on three meta-themes for such research. Research and scholarship are needed to address (a) the “black box” of the emotional abuse experience, (b) the notion of persistent hostility as a defining feature of emotional abuse, and (c) the bridging of cross-specialty and disciplinary findings.

We invoke the black box analogy in emotional abuse research to suggest that limited work has focused on the psychological and cognitive mechanisms involved in victims’ experience of emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is as much a psychological experience as it is a study of external events and outcomes. Most research has focused on the more easily accessible elements of the concept, and we have yet to appreciably explore the psychological processes relating to the human affective and cognitive experience that can be associated with the phenomenon (Harvey, 2003; Harvey & Keashly, 2003b). There are studies examining these types of psychological variables as part of a more general investigation (e.g., fear; Harvey, 1996; Schat & Kelloway, 2000); however, there is limited research that has an explicit focus on understanding these experiences (cf. Harlos & Pinder, 2000; Keashly, 2001). There are numerous potential approaches to studying the psychological processes involved in the experience of emotional abuse. For example, researchers can look at several affective and cognitive issues regarding the role of target’s emotional reactions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), ruminations (Harvey & Keashly, 2003b), worry (Harvey, 2003), and posttraumatic symptoms (Soares, 2002). The case can also be made for personality as a psychological process variable, and some research is now beginning to emerge that is also likely to be revealing (e.g., Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001). It is clear that much is to be done in understanding those psychological processes most relevant to understanding emotional abuse and health at work.

It is apparent from extant research that aggression can be conceptualized as varying from the more occasional exposures to the chronic forms we labeled as emotional abuse. The premise of emotional abuse is that this persistence is an important element in the conditions and outcomes that targets report. There are likely important differences in these experiences that are critical to

understand. Indeed, research on stress more generally has noted that acute and chronic stressors are different and potentially have different forms of impact on the individual (Kahn & Byosiere, 1992). It is our belief that the research aim of understanding the impact of persistent hostility will be best achieved through a pluralistic research agenda. Longitudinal research such as that by Richman and her colleagues (e.g., Richman et al., 2001) is an example of the type of research that gives us compelling information on the problem and its effects. Continued research along these lines is highly desirable; however, other research methodologies can also contribute through in-depth analysis of fewer cases. Understanding the experience of emotional abuse will benefit from an ongoing dialogue with those who have undergone the ordeal. This almost certainly involves research methodologies such as diary studies, case studies, and detailed interviews that are geared toward collecting rich information.

Although it may sound trite, it is nonetheless true that cross-disciplinary research would be advantageous. Much can be gained by exploring the work on emotional abuse and related concepts in other disciplines. The workplace is a relatively new context to be examining the emotional abuse construct. We have drawn on the concept of sexual harassment due to its related context and because it is proximal to our knowledge and experience with organizations; however, other areas as diverse as organizational communication (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004), child sexual abuse (e.g., Spaccarelli, 1994), spousal psychological abuse (e.g., Follingstad & DeHart, 2000), and aggression more generally (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) are among examples of several areas from which we can draw insights for model building and research. In some cases (e.g., Spaccarelli, 1994), the specified models identify psychological variables and other processes that generalize well to the experience within the context of work. The failure to draw on and work with a variety of literatures leads to reinvention of the wheel and reduced progress in addressing this very costly workplace phenomenon (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003).

Implications for Practice

To comprehensively address the wide range of factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of abuse and to deal with the impact, a multipronged approach is necessary (Di Martino et al., 2003; Glomb & Liao, 2003). Most fundamentally, people in the organization need to recognize the importance and centrality of work and working relationships to people's identities and sense of self (Harlos & Pinder, 2000). Acknowledging this allows for the development and implementation of effective action. Effective response to the problem will entail not only risk assessments, preventative measures, and policies but also effective leadership and role modeling to inculcate the needed culture. These are primary and secondary forms of

intervention that we must engage. Tertiary interventions must also be considered in regard to the needs of the target of emotional abuse, for changing or removing the source of the problem may not deal fully with the scars that remain and continue to impede the individual. We briefly outline some implications for practice that our current knowledge of emotional abuse allows.

A risk management approach would suggest the need for a comprehensive assessment of risk factors (e.g., Harvey & Keashly, 2003a; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002) as well as protective mechanisms. Although the research literature and theorizing on sources of emotional abuse are still developing, there are some directions that can be fruitfully pursued in terms of reducing the risk. The earlier discussion of organizational culture suggests the need for clear policies against persistent forms of aggression. Moreover, evidence of the co-occurrence of various forms of harassment and abuse (Keashly & Rogers, 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Richman et al., 1999) suggest that policies need to be conceived broadly to promote respectful treatment and at the same time define and proscribe certain types of aggressive behaviors, such as sexual and racial harassment, intimidation, and exclusion (Meares et al., 2004). The organization needs to indicate clearly what constitutes abusive treatment and to identify the procedures for notifying appropriate persons of the situation and for investigating the concerns raised. Further, the range of consequences associated with engaging in such treatment of other employees needs to be clearly spelled out (Glomb & Liao, 2003).

The existence of these policies is not enough, however. How these policies are implemented and controlled is most critical for success, including how leaders are seen to respond. As Offerman and Malamut (2002) note with respect to sexual harassment, "Paper policy isn't enough—leaders need to walk the talk" (p. 892). The notion of leadership giving life and substance to policies speaks to the different levels of messages communicated to employees. If the choice is between what is said in policy and how the leadership behaves with respect to that policy, employees will go with behavior. Prevention work must involve organizational leadership (management and union) working together to develop a shared vision of a healthy workplace and communicate it in writing and action.

A similar logic applies to employees who are at risk for being actors and dealing with them through clear policy and action. Research provides support for the notion that individual characteristics and circumstances at work are key determinants of aggressive behaviors in the workplace. Thus, in addition to organizational culture and policy changes, those individual characteristics that can be changed through training should be (e.g., skills in stress management and dealing with difficult situations, as well as adequate job training), but when characteristics are resistant to change, removal of the person may be required. Indeed, the group influences literature indicates the need to "eliminate aggressive role model," (people who persist in treating others in a hostile manner). Screening during hiring has been suggested by some, but

we feel the nascent state of the research on traits and emotional abuse prevents such a recommendation.

Even committed leadership and proactive policies implemented consistently and fairly may not be able to prevent all mistreatment. Organizations need to be prepared with a variety of actions to intervene when the situations arise. Assuming that the reporting mechanisms are viewed as accessible and effective, actions that focus on supporting targets in their efforts to cope and to deal with the aftermath of such treatment become critical. Some suggestions come from the developing coping and social support literature regarding aggressive treatment. As noted by Richman et al. (2001), social support that arises from within the organization (as opposed to extraorganizationally in the form of friends and family) and that directly addresses the situation will be more effective than more emotion- or internally focused coping. As an example, Schat and Kelloway (2003) examined the moderating impact of two types of intraorganizational support. Instrumental support (direct help and assistance from coworkers and supervisors in dealing with the events) buffered the impact of aggressive treatment on emotional and physical health as well as job-related affect. Such findings highlight the importance of developing an organizational culture that does not tolerate aggression and behaviorally supports employees in dealing with it. Informational support in the form of training in how to deal with aggressive or violent behavior also buffered impact but only on emotional well-being. Although limited in its impact, training is a standard organizational response to dealing with issues. The question remains as to what such training could or should involve. Training in conflict management skills (e.g., Glomb & Liao, 2003; Zapf & Gross, 2001) has been proposed for all employees including actors. Such thinking is based on the premise that most aggression is reactive and the result of mishandled conflict. As we have argued, however, emotional abuse has a more one-sided or nonreciprocal quality to it, which may militate against conflict management skills as an effective tool for targets in dealing with an abusive actor. Indeed, some conflict management processes can effectively suppress public recognition and hence response to these kinds of hostile relationships (see Keashly & Nowell, 2003, for further discussion). Nevertheless, training all employees in alternative responses, besides aggression, to these situations can provide the space and time for other organizational actions to come into play.

For those who have been harmed, the provision of counseling and recovery time, as well as rehabilitation (e.g., job retraining or relocation to take on a new position), is an important part of a systemwide approach to dealing with emotional abuse. It is hoped that such remedial actions would not be necessary for any well-designed system, but it is a naive hope that researchers can ill afford to entertain. As with any other form of hazard to which the organization might inadvertently expose its employees, the effects of emotional abuse, should they occur, must be understood and dealt with in their entirety. Tertiary care that is most effective and to be recommended is difficult to stipulate at this stage due to the lack of systematic research; however, action is clearly needed here if what some authors suggest is confirmed

through continued research—that serious psychological damage in the form of posttraumatic stress disorder can result from certain lengths of exposure (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996). These types of outcomes go well beyond the everyday risk and stress that are an expected part of working life.

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