

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Constitution of Employee-Abusive Organizations: A Communication Flows Theory

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*Given the range of destruction wrought by persistent employee abuse, it is crucial to understand how employee-abusive organizations (EAOs) come into being and persist. It is also essential to look beyond individualistic “bad apple” explanations to understand the phenomenon’s complexity but, to date, little scholarship does so. Indeed, there is insufficient theorizing about the phenomenon. To address this issue, we theorize how EAOs come into being, persist, and change through a confluence of communication flows. This article takes as a starting point and builds upon a message-flows typology from which we create a new theory that explains how EAOs develop and change. The theory identifies abusive message types and underscores how organizing occurs in confluences or synergies among the communication flows in which specific messages occur. We present a case study that drives the theory and illustrates the dynamism among communication flows. The case also illustrates change and the impact of worker resistance.*

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In employee-abusive organizations (EAOs), workers experience persistent emotional abuse and hostile communication they perceive as unfair, unjust, and unwanted. As a result of ongoing hostility, workers suffer heightened fear, dread, and job insecurity (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). Communication and teamwork break down as employees become guarded, suspicious, and hypervigilant (Lockhart, 1997). Indeed, some estimate that persistent bullying or employee abuse<sup>1</sup> is “a more crippling and devastating problem for employee and employers than all other work-related stresses put together” (Adams & Crawford, 1992, p. 13). Studies in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the European Union suggest that nearly half of all workers are bullied on the job and 70% witness bullying sometime during their careers (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007).

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These hostile environments are extremely costly for organizations and their stakeholders. Direct costs include increased disability and workers' compensation claims, medical costs (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002), and lawsuits for wrongful or constructive discharge, discrimination, and harassment (Yamada, 2005). Indirect costs include low-quality work, reduced productivity, high staff turnover, increased absenteeism, and loss of positive public images (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). Even less tangible costs are the opportunities lost due to reduced worker commitment, withdrawn optional effort, time spent making sense of abuse, and associated loss of creativity (Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Tepper, 2000).

Given the range of destruction wrought by persistent employee abuse, it is crucial to understand how EAOs come into being and persist. It is also essential to look beyond individualistic "bad apple" explanations to understand the phenomenon's complexity (e.g., Field, 1996; Namie & Namie, 2000) but, to date, little scholarship does so (for organizational antecedents, see Hoel & Salin, 2003; Salin, 2003). Indeed, there is insufficient theorizing about the phenomenon. Rather, research focuses on prevalence, impacts, target-bully characteristics, and, more recently, potential interventions (e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Tehrani, 2001). To address this issue, we theorize how EAOs come into being, persist, and change through a confluence of communication flows.

In this article, we take as a starting point and build upon a message-flows typology (McPhee & Zaug, 2000) from which we create a new theory that explains how EAOs develop and change. The theory identifies abusive message types and underscores how organizing occurs in confluences or synergies among the communication flows in which specific messages occur. We also present a case study that drives the theory and illustrates the dynamism among communication flows. The case also illustrates change and the impact of worker resistance.

We organize the article in the following manner: First, we define EAOs and describe a case study of a women's multiservice agency. Second, we explain how this case study illustrates not just abusive behavior but also the development of an EAO. Third, we summarize the original model and the ways we have extended it. Fourth, we illustrate the message types of each flow likely to contribute to EAOs and point out the confluences among flows by revisiting the case study. Fifth, we discuss the contributions from the theoretical application for understanding the complexity of employee abuse and ameliorating destructive environments. Finally, we present a number of theoretical propositions regarding EAOs that emerge from the data and the extended model.

## Defining EAOs<sup>2</sup>

EAOs are hostile work environments in which employees experience persistent harassment and fear at work because of the offensive, intimidating, or oppressive atmosphere. In EAOs, workers are the object of persistent targeting for abuse, which can include work obstruction, verbal abuse, social ostracism, personal criticism,

and, at times, physical aggression. This abuse can occur in a variety of situations and communicative events and target multiple employees. Aggressive and highly escalated conflict between two organizational members, absent mistreatment of others, would not constitute an abusive organization. Similarly, one-time communicative events, regardless of how disturbing they might be, would not constitute an abusive organization. If, however, numerous workers are abused, if abuse is a persistent feature of organizational life, and if multiple flows include abusive message types, the organization is employee abusive. In the following section, we present an EAO case study.

### **The women's center: An employee-abusive case study**

To illustrate the communication flows theory of EAOs, we organize our assertions around examples from the case study of a community women's center (CWC).<sup>3</sup> We reconstruct a brief case history of this organization and its process into, through, and out of a period in which it was employee abusive.<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge that communication flows constitute numerous dynamics, not only abuse, and we do not mean to eliminate or minimize these. Our purpose is, however, to identify the abusive dimensions of organizing in particular, so we take that as our central focus. It is important to note that this case is neither unique nor rare; similar dynamics have been reported in numerous other cases (e.g., Coyne, Craig, & Smith-Lee Chong, 2004; Crawford, 2001; Lee, 2000; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008).

The CWC is a small rural, nonprofit, multiservice agency in the western region of the United States, serving the needs of women and children. Initially, five local women founded the organization to provide safe haven for battered women. They incorporated as a nonprofit, and during the first 5 years, community donations and volunteers supported the CWC services. The founders then lobbied to create state funding and networked with similar organizations statewide to strengthen lobbying efforts. Securing state funding required CWC to develop policies and procedures that mirrored regulations for services to victims.

The initial organizational structure was a simple hierarchy in which the director hired and supervised shelter counselors and worked with the board to create policies. As programs were added, the director's position shifted to one that served as overall agency administrator and direct supervisor of program managers. Employee-abusive dynamics emerged in the agency's 11th year when the director left after years of service. The board found it difficult to replace the director because, constrained by limited grant funds, it could only offer a relatively low salary. After a search with few applicants, it hired Sue, a long-term shelter counselor with no managerial experience, who was willing to work for the small salary.

Traditionally, the board had communicated exclusively with the director; this pattern continued with Sue. In fact, Sue barred workers from attending board meetings, unless specifically invited to give reports. As such, the board had no staff feedback mechanisms and discovered much later, when problems surfaced in board appeals, that Sue had numerous problems with co-workers prior to the promotion.

Initially, employee abuse appeared somewhat sporadically but escalated in frequency and intensity over time. Sue convinced the board that new policies were needed to deal with problem employees and instituted policies to make firing workers easier. Workers who brought concerns to the board were usually fired soon afterward for various reasons. There was no record of the board overturning any of these appealed personnel decisions. With increasing staff turnover and appeals to the board, the board required Sue's attendance at managerial training. Staff reported that Sue often established new antiemployee policies after these training sessions—a dynamic evident in board meeting minutes. For example, the probationary period was extended from 3 to 9 months, after Sue received training on "How to Legally Fire Employees."

As CWC became an increasingly hostile workplace, program managers attempted to find "thick-skinned" workers, or at least to inoculate new employees to the hostile environment, by including implicit warnings in employment interviews. Personnel files indicated that interviews included questions such as, "Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a controlling manager. How did you handle that situation?" and "Have you ever worked with a manager you had trouble getting along with? How did you handle it?"

When new workers entered the organization, current employees told them stories of Sue standing over people as they cleaned out their desks, publicly screaming at employees, and humiliating staff in front of clients and co-workers. These stories included numerous warnings to new workers about what to avoid in order to "stay out of trouble." Current and past workers who were targeted or who witnessed others' abuse also talked about these experiences outside CWC. Eventually, word spread through the community, and it became difficult to attract employees. As CWC's reputation declined, state funders sent an auditor to review the program. Staff members were so terrified of retribution that they withheld information from the state auditor.

The hostile environment continued to escalate, with short periods of reprieve after board warnings to the director, for over 7 years. The board believed that it needed to remove Sue but was fearful of a wrongful termination lawsuit. At board meetings, Sue often recounted the precarious legal position of organizations regarding employee lawsuits—information she ostensibly gained from managerial workshops. CWC's attorney also stressed the legal liability and was averse to recommending Sue's removal. Eventually, seven program managers went to the home of the board secretary and strenuously protested the abuse. Many were prepared to find other jobs if Sue was not removed. They each prepared written documentation to be used in case of a lawsuit. The board fired Sue after a protracted, 7-month process in which the resisting workers were terrified of discovery.

The board subsequently increased the position's salary and hired a new director with staff input. To open up communication with staff, the board established a staff liaison position who attended monthly board meetings and spoke regularly with the president. Staff chose this liaison independent of the director. The board and new

director developed a multirater evaluation system, including confidential subordinate evaluations of supervisors. Over the following year, CWC slowly regained its former reputation in the community and began attracting more job applicants, including some of the previously mistreated employees. We revisit this case and use it to explain how communication flows produce and reproduce EAOs and how they are mutually constitutive, often in unintended, unrecognized ways.

### Interpretation of case study

Organizational discourse is most often studied in a particular context whether it is an interview, performance review, or compliance-gaining situation. However, though the meaning of discourse is influenced by its context, discourse that occurs in one organizational context can influence the discourse in other contexts (Sillince, 2007). This case study highlights how an organization was constituted and reconstituted through a variety of discourses and how messages from one context influenced messages in others. Instead of simply highlighting how Sue's direct communication with her employees was abusive, this study illustrates how a confluence of message flows worked together to create an EAO.

As this case study demonstrates, an EAO develops over time and is influenced by a number of factors. Although on the surface it may seem as if Sue was the source of hostile dynamics in the organization, she was, in fact, only one part of the constellation of contributing factors. The problems at CWC were systemic—poor funding, limited access to resources, few staffing options, a remote location, a *laissez-faire* board, a staff that repeated and thus magnified episodes of abuse, and a small community that reinforced the negative communication patterns evident in the organization. The case study demonstrates the need for an EAO theory that considers multiple communication flows and examines how discourse in one flow influences discourse in another flow and continuously constitutes an organization. In the next section, we will outline our EAO theory by identifying and explaining the communication flows that occur in organizations and how messages in these flows shape employee abuse.

### Constitutive message flows

The constitutive turn in communication theory, a perspective that “conceptualizes communication as a . . . process that produces and reproduces shared meaning” (Craig, 1999, p. 125), provides a fruitful beginning for the development of an EAO theory. This perspective underscores the complex, shifting nature of organizations as they are formed and transformed through the relational interactions among members, external audiences, and cultural meaning systems (Cooren, Taylor, & Van Every, 2006). Significantly for our purposes, the perspective broadens current views of employee abuse from individualistic to systemic and allows examination of the issue in its full complexity—encompassing not only individual or subjective but also social–communal and historical–cultural dynamics that organize human endeavors.

Specifically, the communication flows theory of EAOs builds on an existing model that we extend in a number of ways. The original model's four flows are "typical directions and basic contents of communication, each [with] a different constitutive force for the organization" (McPhee & Zaug, 2001, p. 587) and different intended audiences. The following briefly describes each flow and its general message types. We expand the model by adding a fifth flow, augmenting elements of the original flows, and underscoring the confluence among flows.

### **Organizational self-structuring**

Organizational self-structuring includes formal communication that legally establishes the organization, determines how member time will be utilized, and directs the development and allocation of resources (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). Message types include official documents (bylaws, contracts, and budgets) and the communication that draws legitimacy from such documents. The formal structures expressed in these messages create, maintain, and reinforce the concentration of control and direction in an organization. Messages in this flow include communication or structural substitutes for communication (McPhee, 1985).

### **Membership negotiation**

Membership negotiation is "communication that establishes and maintains or transforms its relationship with each of its members" (McPhee & Zaug, 2000, p. 8). Thus, this flow includes organizational messages to recruit new members, to socialize incoming and established workers, and to promote member identification with the organization. It also includes the informal interactions among workers that serve as new member socialization. Another message type of this flow communicates an impression of the organization to external audiences and, in the case of EAOs, can include what we call *negative anticipatory socialization*.

### **Activity coordination**

Activity coordination organizes and fine-tunes work activities, as formal self-structuring "can never be complete or completely relevant, [is] never completely understood, and [is] frequently amended in an information patchwork of adjustments" (McPhee & Zaug, 2000, p. 14). Message types include exchanges that modify work practices, solve immediate problems, and deal with exceptions and unexpected issues. The original model gives the relational aspects of activity coordination little attention, but we argue that social interactions are central to activity coordination and have considerable organizing force. In fact, the social-emotional dimensions of work either provide the lubricant that keeps tasks progressing efficiently or create negatively charged reciprocity cycles that freeze up task completion (Fineman, 2006).

### **Institutional positioning in the social order of institutions**

Institutional positioning includes messages seeking acceptance or finding a niche within a social order of institutions. Such messages are "mostly external communication to gain

recognition and inclusion in the web of social transactions” (McPhee & Zaug, 2001, p. 588). These messages create or negotiate the organization’s image as a legitimate or unique member of a social system, work to establish acceptability, and communicate adherence to community requirements. The flow includes sanctioned interactions (e.g., public relations) and, importantly for our purposes, nonsanctioned interactions (e.g., employee talk to friends, family). The original model gives little attention to the latter—an issue of importance in the constitution of EAOs.

### Theoretical extensions key to EAOs

In addition to the extensions mentioned, the message flows in the original model fail to adequately account for larger cultural and historical discourses that underpin the constitution of organizational life or to examine “how the global affects the local” (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 10). The flows thus far represent discourse or “talk and text in social practices” (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 7)—the numerous micro-interactions that constitute organizing. Even *institutional positioning* representing mesolevel interaction falls short of the taken-for-granted meanings “that transcend particular organizations and situations” (Lammers & Barbour, 2006, p. 357) and are embedded in social, historical, and cultural values, ideologies, and beliefs (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). We extend the model by adding an additional flow accounting for cultural and historical Discourses (with a capital D)—“general and enduring systems of thought” (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 7). We call this flow the syncretic superstructure.

#### Syncretic superstructure

The syncretic superstructure is a shifting macrosystem of meaning schemas from which organizations emerge and in which they are suspended. Discursive formations are “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, science, and possibly formalized systems” (Foucault, 1972, p. 191). The rules governing discursive formations determine, at any given historical or cultural period, (a) what can be talked about, (b) who is allowed to speak, (c) how they are supposed to speak, and (d) what form of speech is accepted as knowledge or truth (Foucault, 1972). Although the superstructure has an impression of permanence, it is, in fact, an evolving, changing, social amalgam of meaning. To account for the never-entirely-stable nature of this superstructure, we use the descriptor *syncretic*. A syncretism is a partial integration of meanings that is forever unfinished, always heterogeneous, and embedded in epochs of human history.

Extending the fluid metaphor of message flows, the syncretic superstructure might be conceptualized as an *ocean* of discursive and nondiscursive consciousness (Giddens, 1984) in which the other message flows, and the organizations constituted through those flows, blend, emerge, and float with permeable boundaries. Thus, organizations produce, reproduce, and transform their distinctive identities predominantly by taking from but at times adding to much of what is in the

surrounding waters. In this flow, rather than specific message types, we find meaning schemas. For continuity, we call these *message types*, but in this flow, messages represent deeply rooted beliefs and ideologies that are strongly influenced by culture and history.

### Constituting EAOs through communication flows

Each communication flow has the potential to contribute to constructive or destructive organizing. Here, we describe various message types likely to be a comprising force in EAOs. Although each flow is differentiated, there are extensive cross-currents. What becomes readily apparent, especially by inductively exploring the case study, is that flows are mutually constitutive and messages overlap into and transform other, often multiple, flows. Messages in one flow merge with, shape, and influence—usually in unseen, unintended ways—messages in other flows. Moreover, messages both transmit information and meaning while also *reproducing* those meanings and, by association, particular ways of organizing. Indeed, messages and flows are both the “the medium and the outcome of the practices they recursively organize” (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). The following outlines the message types that, while not exhaustive, provide a substantial cross-section of indicators, antecedents, and factors that constitute EAOs.

#### Employee-abusive organizational self-structuring

Although self-structuring message types (e.g., formal documents) and interactions guided by those message types do not generally formalize overt abuse, they do legitimate the use of power, usually without addressing its abuse. Formal documents lay out the respective rights of organization and member, invariably favoring the former or its managerial representatives (Deetz, 1992). Two examples of self-structuring messages that have the potential to contribute to employee abuse are antiemployee policies and laissez-faire upper management.

#### *Antiemployee policies*

Personnel policy manuals and handbooks create the tenor of the working relationships between members and organization. Although policies are not, in and of themselves, employee abusive, they often contribute to legitimated abuse and escalated fear of employment loss (Salin, 2003). Moreover, adversarial policies generate antagonistic employer–employee relations, particularly when those policies elevate employment insecurity. Three such policies are progressive discipline, at-will employment, and one-way employment evaluation.

Discipline policies outline the steps through which managers progress in order to punish undesirable, and chart a course for desired, performance (Fairhurst, Green, & Snavely, 1986; Falcone, 1997, 1998). Sadly, even though progressive discipline policies ostensibly afford employees procedural due process and “assist in the positive development of the employee” (Barth, 2002, p. 10), they can as easily fabricate the

impression of due process and be used as the legally required precursor to worker expulsion (Fairhurst et al., 1986).

At-will employment policies, in contrast, strip away employee due process by asserting that employers can terminate employment at any time with or without cause or notice (Heller, 2001). The fear and economic insecurity generated by at-will policies and practices contribute to increased pressure and stress, uncertainty, sensed powerlessness, and the subsequent likelihood to engage in aggressive behavior (Salin, 2003). At-will policies can engender aggressive workplaces in which workers terrorize and undermine others to establish dominance.

Formal evaluations also have the potential for abuse when the only perspective is that of an evaluating supervisor. The language and form of formal employee evaluations can easily be subverted and distorted in order to fire or punish “undesirable” workers (Bassman, 1992; Brodsky, 1976). Because supervisory staff “[create] the documenting language, they author the formal record of ‘what occurred’” (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003, p. 482). Employee responses may be included in formal records but, in practice, have little or no impact (Dulebohn & Ferris, 1999).

Relatedly, many supervisors loathe the evaluation process, especially having to present negative feedback (Thomas & Bretz, 1994). This issue is exacerbated when faced with evaluating abusive, aggressive workers. In these cases, supervisory staff often

grossly inflate performance appraisals . . . rather than giving honest, constructive criticism . . . Inflated appraisals may reflect supervisors’ fears of reprisal because the behaviors of the would-be avenger may be as intimidating to his supervisor as they are to his colleagues and subordinates. Though the employee’s performance may be substandard, the potential avenger might even be recommended for promotion or lateral opportunities in an attempt by the current supervisor to rid himself or herself of a problem employee. (Pearson, 1998, p. 210)

An unintended consequence of positive evaluations is that they reward aggression, and aggression becomes sedimented and even more difficult to confront. Furthermore, when positive evaluations and resulting promotions or raises inadvertently congratulate aggression, other organizational members may begin modeling that behavior.

#### *Laissez-faire managerial oversight*

Upper management’s abdication of, or “hands-off” philosophy about, supervisory oversight can also contribute to environments where employee abuse is ignored or tolerated (Di Martino, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003). Such abdication may occur because management is physically removed, loathe to interfere and break the “chain of command,” or has little idea of how to deal with aggression (Crawford, 2001). When persons perceived as embodying the organization fail to intervene or when interventions fail to stop abuse, employees report feeling revictimized. What is worse,

authorities often blame the abused employee, side with the abuser, or frame the issue as a personal matter (i.e., a personality conflict) (Keashly, 2001).

Employees infer that the organization does not care about or want to hear about worker abuse and, by association, that workers are of little value (Folger, 1993; Keashly, 2001). This inference contributes to the further degradation of working environments as loyalty, identification, productivity, and performance deteriorate (Keashly & Neuman, 2005). Deficient or absent upper management oversight and failure to end abuse are key symbolic building blocks of inimical work environments. What is more, upper managers' refusal to intervene or to entertain circumvention closes off legitimate avenues for problem resolution.

### **Employee-abusive membership negotiation**

Membership negotiation includes messages that attract or repel potential members, assimilate new members, and provide ongoing socialization for current members. These include formal or intended messages and informal or unintended messages. Message types in this flow that contribute to EAOs include prehiring interactions such as hostile interviews, implicit warnings, and negative anticipatory socialization. Posthiring messages include socialization into aggressive cultures and warnings and horror stories.

#### *Hostile interviews*

In the hostile interview, the "interviewer seems to delight in constantly evaluating the interviewee, often with belittling and embarrassing comments or questions and subtle nonverbal signals" (Hamilton, 2001, p. 261). Such tactics both reflect the current valuation of the workplace while also reproducing that valuation. Hostile interviews may be used to "weed out" persons "too weak" to handle the pressure, or to "toughen up" those preparing to enter the organization (Marcus, 1994).

#### *Implicit warnings*

Recruitment and interviews may also include implicit cautions that both communicate and constitute the workplace's abusive tenor. A recent recruiting advertisement warned: "Our environment is fast-paced, high-pressured, and sometimes unpredictable." Of course, this does not conclusively point to an abusive workplace, but it bodes threat, forewarns applicants, and encourages the "weak hearted" to self-select out. Indeed, such ads legitimize high-pressure working environments. Subsequent employee complaints can be muted with "We told you," effectively silencing vital warning signals. Implicit warnings can also be embedded in employment interviews and include asking interviewees how they would deal with close supervision, difficult supervisors, or aggressive organizational members (Marcus, 1994). Workers often recognize these implicit early warnings retrospectively, after they have been in the hostile environment a while (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006b). Both recruitment and interview warnings convey "previews of coming attractions," but more than simply reporting or warning, they legitimize and reproduce the hostile environment they ostensibly present.

*Negative anticipatory socialization*

Although membership negotiation is most often intended to draw in and assimilate workers (Feldman, 1976; Gibson & Papa, 2000), message types in this flow can also repel potential members. We call this dynamic *negative anticipatory socialization*. Although not explicitly described in the original model, we argue that negative anticipatory socialization is an unintended message type unique to EAOs. Organizations where persistent abuse drives away talented employees and organizational authorities fail to intervene begin repelling potential recruits because past and current workers openly discuss their negative experiences with others (Hoel, Einarsen, & Cooper, 2003).

*Socialization into aggressive cultures*

Once potential members become members, the indoctrination and adaptation to abusive environments begin in earnest. In hostile workplaces, new members gradually adapt to aggressive workgroup norms (Salin, 2003), and bullying and abuse may become institutionalized and passed on as tradition (Johns & Menzel, 1999). Workers who cannot adjust often leave (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006a). When norms accentuate toughness and “survival of the fittest,” workers may even support or participate in bullying weaker members, or at the very least, ignore (Neuman & Baron, 2003) or naturalize it (Deetz, 1992). In particular, if the top ranks abuse subordinates, aggression will likely flow downward and perpetrate the bullying norm (Ashforth, 1994; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Lyon, 2006).

*Warnings and horror stories*

The interdependent, social nature of work ensures that worker conversations will spread and amplify occurrences of workplace humiliation, punishments, and ostracism (Waldron, 2000). When there is a history of employee abuse, cautionary messages abound for newly hired persons (Bies & Tripp, 1998). Warnings can be direct by instructing new workers what to do or avoid doing or indirect by recounting others' painful experiences. These admonitions communicate the risk of siding with targeted co-workers or getting on the “bad side” of aggressors. Horror stories, a special kind of warning, are grapevine tales of abuse and humiliation that are told and retold in work groups (Jennifer, Cowie, & Anaiadou, 2003). Warnings and horror stories are both the outcome of past abusive interactions and the material from which future interactions are organized. They *perpetuate* the abusive environment by both silencing potential resistance and presenting employee abuse as a taken-for-granted feature of organizational life (Crawford, 2001).

**Employee-abusive activity coordination**

This flow, in which workers interact with peers and supervisors to carry out tasks and to manage workplace relationships, includes message types that workers perceive as most directly abusive and is, by a wide margin, the focus of most research related to hostile workplaces. Affected workers rarely recognize how institutional positioning, self-organizing, or the syncretic superstructure contribute to abusive environments

(Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006b). But they experience hostility in activity coordination first hand: screaming, sarcastic jokes (Einarsen et al., 2003), social ostracism (Williams & Sommer, 1997), ignored requests, failure to pass on important information (Neuman, 2004), and so forth. Although the bulk of abusive interactions in this message flow are supervisor-to-supervisee (Namie, 2003; Rayner et al., 2002), peer-to-peer abuse also occurs (Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999). The persistent nature of abusive messages builds an environment of fear, dread, and hypervigilance (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Additionally, when many people are aggressive, hostile, and disrespectful, others are likely to follow suit (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993).

### *Abusive supervision*

A common theme in hostile workplaces is abuse of power and “emotional tyranny . . . of the weak by the powerful” (Waldron, 2000, p. 67). Abusive supervision conflates cruelty and mistreatment with legitimate managing yet can be easily explained as part of directing subordinates’ work (Brodsky, 1976). Abusive supervisors also appear to “pass on” their aggressive style to others (Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2004). When supervisors are abusive, over time, workers subjected to those supervisors may also become abusive (Tepper, 2000). Messages typifying abusive supervision include, but are not limited to, excessive criticism, anger and profanity, unreasonable or impossible work delegation, backstabbing, breaches of confidentiality, and discounting or contempt (Keashly, 2001).

Personal criticism has little or nothing to do with the subordinate’s job performance and includes attacks on appearance, family, and personal interests or values (Einarsen, 1999; Keashly, 2001). Excessive work criticism, often combined with micromanagement and surveillance, is the “‘hammering away,’ a ‘drum beat,’ being ‘under the gun,’ and . . . ‘water torture’” described by targeted workers (Tracy et al., 2006, p. 163). Anger and profanity commonly mark these exchanges. In addition, job goals conflict, unexpectedly shift, or are moving targets—all of which destabilize already beleaguered workers (Adams & Crawford, 1992).

Backstabbing or talking derogatorily about someone to others, usually while appearing friendly to the targeted person, is also a communicative dynamic of EAOs (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Workers report hearing aggressors say one thing in the presence of targeted workers (praise) and another in their absence (denigration) (Keashly, 2001). Abusers also disclose confidential information with the targeted workers’ colleagues, usually in a manner that stigmatizes, demoralizes, or isolates those targeted (Crawford, 1997; Rayner et al., 2002).

Discounting, contemptuous messages, usually communicated nonverbally or through nonaction, disregard workers’ presence and needs or concerns (Tracy et al., 2006). Abusers may snort or roll eyes at comments, ignore the target when he or she speaks, or avert their eyes when passing targets in the hall (Keashly, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Because reciprocity is a key feature of human interaction, these acts can ripple through the organization in waves of retaliation, revenge, and cycles of aggression (Neuman & Baron, 2003).

*Abusive co-worker communication*

Co-worker communication also contributes to EAOs and includes many of the same hostile messages as abusive supervision (excluding work delegation), and is more likely in organizations where supervisor–supervisee abuse is widespread (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Johns & Menzel, 1999). In addition to anger, profanity, backstabbing, breach of confidences, and disconfirmation, four other abusive peer-to-peer messages constitute hostile workplaces: inappropriate authority, sabotage, silent assent, and henchmen (Lynch, 2005; Olweus, 2003; Rayner et al., 2002).

Using inappropriate power in abusive ways brandishes what targeted workers perceive as illegitimate authority. This serves to establish bullying co-workers' dominance over targeted workers and is more likely when workers feel powerless and are competitively pitted against each other (Lewis, 1999). Co-worker sabotage involves destroying targets' work, spreading gossip about targets, derogating co-workers' ideas and projects, or taking credit for targets' work, all of which also contribute to EAOs (Hoel & Salin, 2003).

Silent assent (Lynch, 2005) and co-workers as henchmen (Olweus, 2003) are also widespread in EAOs. Both emerge as responses to the pervasive fear in hostile environments. Fear pushes co-workers to stand by mutely, a response most likely for self-preservation rather than an intentional act to harm others (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Silence is interpreted by targeted workers as assent—agreement that abuse is acceptable. Co-workers can also be directly complicit henchmen. Similar to school-yard bullying, these members participate indirectly in bullying but rarely take the initiative. They side with the aggressor most likely out of a desire for safety in a high-risk environment. Both issues make employee abuse difficult to expose and eliminate. Silence and henchmen increase fear, make it difficult to gather concerted voices against abuse, and intensify the difficulty of exposing aggressors.

**Employee-abusive institutional positioning**

Interactions among or between organizations and the organizational environments in which they exist are key to this flow. Although there are competing, sometimes paradoxical, ideologies about work and organizational life, EAOs adopt and reproduce those that validate or rationalize worker abuse and oppression. This flow often contributes to the constitution of EAOs in such indirect ways that affected workers and organizational authorities may not recognize how abuse became a feature of the organization. Three dynamics in this flow linked to hostile work environments are legal environments, market pressures, and institutional isomorphism.

*Legal environment*

The legal environment in which organizations situate themselves constitutes the organization in specific ways. For example, countries with lower rates of workplace bullying (e.g., Scandinavia) more often have legal protection against such practices (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). In the United States, there is no such legal protection for workers, but there is statutory protection for worker groups who have historically

experienced discrimination (Yamada, 2005). Thus, legal discourse is an important factor that constitutes organizations in different ways.

#### *Market pressures*

Restructuring (e.g., downsizing) often results in increased work hours and pressure to bring work home (Fairhurst, Cooren, & Cahill, 2002; Tourish, Paulsen, Hobman, & Bordia, 2004). A potential consequence is that often hostile environments are marked by incivility and aggressive communication (Sypher, 2004; Salin, 2003). If the perceived instrumental power of bullying increases in high-pressure environments, managers can intimidate and harass workers to deal with competitive, increasingly demanding work situations. This contributes to “boiler room” environments primed for even more abuse, including peer-to-peer bullying (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Lawrence, 2001). Stress and frustration can trigger the search for scapegoats to relieve tension (Einarsen, 1999). Beleaguered workers may protest, usually resulting in retaliation from already overwhelmed supervisors (Hoel & Salin, 2003).

#### *Institutional isomorphism*

Organizations often imitate other organizational models (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), even in the absence of proof that these models are successful (Abrahamson, 1996), and “consulting organizations and benchmarking practices . . . encourage the imitation and spread of [an assortment of] management ideas” (Pfeffer, 2006, p. 10). Organizations copy differing ethical perspectives. Those embracing values of capitalism and individualism model different beliefs about employees and organizational responsibility than do organizations positing public responsibility (Nicotera & Cushman, 1992) or servant leadership (Kalwies, 1988). Organizations with “competitive, self-reliant, ‘survival of the fittest’ attitudes” (Nicotera & Cushman, 1992, p. 444) place the responsibility for individual success or failure squarely upon the individual. If these organizations appear successful, or they appear chic in the public sphere, others may attempt to establish a presence through emulation (Abrahamson, 1996). Unfortunately, in cultures where individualism, meritocracy, and aggression are admired and rewarded, competitive, self-reliant, survival of the fittest organizations will predominate.

#### **Syncretic superstructure**

EAOs reflect larger ideologies that provide more support for, rather than defense against, employee abuse. Many of the meanings inherent in contemporary workplaces come from an amalgamation of economic theory, religious and secularized ideals of work, the merger of corporate interests and governing bodies, and the embeddedness of rugged individualism, meritocracy, and the ideology of entrepreneurialism. The culturally embedded meanings that contribute to and support hostile work environments are complex and often difficult to recognize. Because these messages constitute workplaces in often unrecognized ways, they also go unquestioned or are viewed as natural and normal (Deetz, 1992). This makes it difficult for organizational members to discern values supporting employee abuse because not

only do “the rules and resources contained in those structures constrain or enable what agents can say” (Sillince, 2007, p. 374), the assumptions about appropriate behavior typically operate in a taken-for-granted way. The issues we address are potentially more applicable to Western cultures with capitalistic systems and less applicable to communal, egalitarian systems with socialistic economies. In what follows, we examine only a few of the unseen, but powerful, meaning schemas contributing to environments of employee abuse: work and religion, individualism, meritocracy, reverence for hierarchical power, profit as ultimate motive, and workers as indolent.

#### *Work and religion*

“The idea that ‘work’ has some essential ‘real’ meaning which precedes or evades its dominant discursive articulation in any historical or cultural context cannot be substantiated” (Du Gay, 1996, p. 5). As with many ideologies, beliefs about work are rooted in religious historical teachings. For example, John Calvin suggested that certain people were chosen by God as the “elect.” As such, their external success and wealth were believed to be blessings from God and evidence of internal goodness and righteousness. Business practices often reflect this Calvinist belief (usually nonconsciously) but also insinuate the opposite. That is, external difficulties are evidence of internal “badness.” Thus, if workers are being persistently targeted for abuse at work (or are poor, on welfare, etc.), they are probably deserving of such treatment.

#### *Individualism*

Indeed, individualistic explanations for worker abuse are common in organizations (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006b). Blaming-the-victim explanations successfully transmute the issue from an organizational to an individual problem. This subjectification of workplace experiences serves a compelling political purpose by mitigating organizational responsibility for worker harm (Deetz, 1992). Given the ideology of individualism, bullying can be easily classified as a personal rather than an organizational problem. What is more, bullies and targets can be shrugged off as simply having pathological personalities. As such, aggression is not an issue for which organizations are responsible. The problem becomes the responsibility of individual employees. Indeed, when abused workers complain to upper management, they are often told not to take it so personally or the bullying is framed as a personality conflict (Keashly, 2001).

#### *Meritocracy*

Relatedly, belief in meritocracy works against systemic diagnoses of hostile work environments. Meritocracy is a system in which advancement is based on individual achievement or ability and where leaders are selected as a result of these characteristics rather than success or leadership being based on wealth, class, or birth (Young, 1961). The reasoning follows that if workers are bullied, they probably deserve it or, at least, should be able to stop it. For organizational members faced with abuse,

meritocracy coupled with Calvinist ideology and individualism underscore an overpowering tendency to blame the victim (Ryan, 1976).

#### *Reverence for hierarchical power*

Embedded in values about work and achievement are revered tenets of classical and scientific management, especially those related to positional power. Despite the emergence of participatory management and servant leadership, hierarchical structures are still dominant (McPhee, 1985). Regardless of their socially constructed nature, contemporary organizational actors behave toward hierarchical structures and their designated lines of communication as sacrosanct. An aspect of these tenets that is rarely questioned is managerial prerogative (Collinson, 1992)—even by workers being abused (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006a).

Relatedly, there is often veneration of highly placed, ambitious, promotion-oriented employees, and such veneration conveys a near reverence of position power (Du Gay, 1996). Reverence for top-level organizational members constitutes organizations in specific ways, often by allowing a few organizational actors astonishing leeway, including the right to harass and threaten workers with impunity (Dumaine, 1993). Hierarchy veneration culminates in environments that silence subordinate workers, overemphasize supervisory voice, obstruct upper management involvement, and tolerate abuse as part of positional privilege. Furthermore, if someone is highly productive, whether or not with positional power, that person's aggression is often overlooked (Crawford, 2001)—concern about their abusive performances is overshadowed by bottom-line productivity.

#### *Profit as ultimate goal*

When organizations' sole or paramount goal is a drive for increased profit, human actors are easily treated like objects or detriments. The notion that organizations have social responsibility beyond the drive to higher profits has met both mild (Drucker, 1992) and severe criticism (Friedman, 1970). Indeed, vociferous advocates for profit as businesses' only social responsibility claim that any organizational responsibility beyond simple profit is "preaching pure and unadulterated socialism" (Friedman, 1970, p. 2). In socialistic economic systems, this argument has little power. However, in the United States (and other nations emulating the U.S. economic model), particularly after the "Red Scare" engendered by Senator Joe McCarthy's hearings when socialism was synonymous with communism, labeling an activity as "socialist" easily predicted its failure. Such arguments are still salient in silencing voices and perspectives claiming that organizations have broader responsibilities. Despite an ideology that organizations are and should be profit driven, "profitability as the primary measure of economic success is often a highly distorted economic indicator" (Deetz, 1995, p. 15). Regardless of the distortion, profit remains, for many organizations, the primary consideration. In such environments, concerns for human actors are easily disregarded or framed as antithetical to the organization's bottom line. Indeed, many of the before-mentioned belief systems

work with a drive-to-profit mentality to minimize or render invisible the abuse workers suffer in this sine qua non campaign.

#### *Workers as indolent*

Inherent to a drive for profit and the reverence for highly placed organizational members is the belief that subordinate workers need close supervision and surveillance. Despite the absence of any evidence that increased pressure and aggression result in increased productivity, and considerable research that suggests the opposite (Folger, 1993), some organizations use terror tactics to drive human resources (Hoel & Salin, 2003). Using such tactics operates on the belief “that workers are most productive when subjected to the goad of fear or harassment” (Brodsky, 1976, p. 145). Captured in the well-known Theory X (McGregor, 1960), the argument proposes that workers are lazy and need constant managerial pressure or oversight in order to get them to work. An offshoot of this squeeze-the-workers approach to human resource management is to blame targeted workers for being abused. The unspoken accusation is: “If you were doing your job, this wouldn’t be happening to you.”

In these and many, many other unrecognized ways, meaning systems converge to constitute workplace beliefs in a way that provides support for worker abuse. These meaning schemas, along with other message flows, create a confluence that constitutes, over time, EAOs. In the next section, we revisit the case study and examine the confluence among flows.

### **Analysis of message flows in case study**

As human actors respond and interact, they organize according to environments they are simultaneously constituting and historical forces of which they are predominantly unaware. It is usually only when looking back, what Weick (1995, p. 24) calls “retrospective sensemaking, . . . [the idea that] people can know what they are doing only after they have done it,” that actors are able to see the confluence that communication flows organized. Thus, lessons from the case study presented reposition us in the direction of a new theory by applying the extended communication flows model.

An organization does not simply appear already formed, and an EAO does not simply develop because one person bullies another. The case study demonstrates how one organization with formally positive employee relations was reconstituted as an EAO as the discourse in various message flows changed. CWC did not become an abusive organization simply because Sue abused employees; becoming an EAO required the implicit consent of the board and was reified by the narratives of employees, who changed outsiders’ perspectives and sensitized newcomers to potential abuse. Further, this case study demonstrates how an organization can be reconstituted from an EAO to a more positive place to work. After the abusive director was removed, policies were changed, communication avenues between staff and board were enhanced, and checks were put in place to monitor potential abuses of power.

### **Organizational self-structuring**

CWC developed a number of organization versus employee policies, used a one-way evaluation system, and maintained a board that, for years, were loathe to intervene in problems despite high turnover and multiple complaints. When board members finally tried to correct staff problems, they sent Sue to external training to improve her management skills. A review of Sue's personnel file suggested that a number of trainings stressed the legal threats to organizations posed by employees. Board meeting minutes indicated that, by and large, antiemployee policies appeared soon after managerial training—usually within a 3-month window. The board's reliance on external technical expertise had at least one unintended consequence: policies aggravating already antagonistic supervisor-subordinate relations.

Additionally, board members attended training that frequently instructed a "hands-off" stance regarding day-to-day organizational operations. CWC also subscribed to the monthly *Corporate Board Member Magazine*; many articles warned of the dangers associated with board interference in management. The board members experienced a double bind: feeling restrained from interfering but ethically pressed to do so. At CWC, laissez-faire oversight was rooted in beliefs and practices regarding the role of the board in relationship to management.

### **Member negotiation**

At CWC, job candidate screening eventually included hostile interview questions and subtle warnings. New member socialization more often than not incorporated horror stories of the departed—those Sue singled out to terrorize and humiliate. The hostile environment created by repeated incidents of abuse and grapevine rehashing of those events drove out high-quality staff. Those in the shelter program (from which Sue came) said hiring teams often eliminated highly sensitive job candidates because they worried these people would be "crushed" by Sue's aggression. The organization's reputation also served as negative anticipatory socialization, and CWC began having problems attracting qualified employees. Indeed, staff members candidly admitted warning others away from work at the agency.

### **Activity coordination**

Nowhere is the pain and suffering of abused CWC workers more prevalent than in their stories of daily work interactions. Abusive supervision was the most common and recognizable message type, and many said they remained silent when others were singled out. Some explained their silence as self-protection, but they often experienced considerable guilt for the choice. They understood that Sue had formal power and past experiences underscored the board's support for her use of that power. Few believed fighting back was a viable choice and so either distanced themselves from Sue or left CWC rather than speaking out. Abusive supervision, coupled with widespread peer silence, both communicated and reproduced the hostile environment until finally a group of managers collectively fought back by circumventing the chain of command.

### **Institutional positioning**

Although one might not associate market pressures with a nonprofit agency, the move toward privatization in the 1980s and 1990s affected service provision at CWC. The political environment spawned an accountability mindset for state and federal government funders of social services. Accounting for funds increasingly absorbed staff hours—hours that had been spent providing services. Many personnel files included administrative notes requiring increasing levels of grant-related record-keeping. Program managers spent more and more time filling out or creating reports for government funders and, as a result, shifted more of the direct service work to employees. Chronically understaffed, CWC members explained that every year each person was doing the work of a larger number of needed but unfilled staff positions.

### **Syncretic superstructure**

Individualistic explanations for employee abuse abounded at CWC—mostly that abused workers were to blame. Sue labeled them problem employees who were lazy, inept, or disgruntled and would or could not successfully follow direction. At first, other employees hoped that removal of the targeted worker would end the abuse. Unfortunately, after a short reprieve, another worker emerged as the identified problem. Because targeted workers were often so disoriented by ongoing abuse, when they appealed up the chain of command and appeared to testify before the board, their stories were often disjointed and highly emotional. Sue's voice, until the final 7 months, was given more weight than grieving workers. The few who sought legal assistance were unsuccessful at winning their cases.

Underfunding for social services and inequity of women's salaries are also important to this case. Despite increased funding for domestic violence services during President Clinton's first term, funding for this agency and all local social services was chronically inadequate. CWC functioned well when it had a director who was committed to the organization's mission and willing to work for a modest salary. Compounding this issue was the social inequity of women's salaries when compared to their male counterparts. The CWC board was all female, and the members (with one exception) worked at relatively low-paying jobs. The board member who earned a six-figure salary often spoke of her difficulty convincing other board members to increase the director's salary.

### **The constitution of EAOs: A communication flows theory**

Organizations and organizing are constituted by discourse (e.g., Cooren et al., 2006; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Weick, 1995). Our goal here was to understand how an organization is reconstituted both "from the circumstances of a local interaction" (Cooren & Taylor, 1997, p. 220) and from the "persistent structures that predate each interaction" (Sillince, 2007, p. 366). Examining the variety of discourses in one organization allows us to understand how small changes in one type of discourse can effect change in other types of discourse and affect the overall

character of the organization's communication. We built upon a message flows framework as the basis of a communication flows theory of EAOs. Examining how one EAO developed provides us insight into both the importance of discourse in constructing the "feel" of an organization and in understanding how "events occur that change for all time the meaning of . . . contexts, [and] . . . effect . . . discourse in other contexts" (Sillince, 2007, p. 365). The previous discussion of message flows and the examination of the case study suggests the following propositions about the constitution of EAOs:

Proposition 1: EAOs are likely to develop when abusive, employee-antagonistic discourse is evident in two or more message flows.

The more message flows in which employee-abusive messages are evident, the more embedded the abuse. Although there are instances when one employee abuses another and although workplace policies sometimes limit employee recourse, these communicative behaviors, in and of themselves, do not constitute an organization that is abusive. An organization is employee abusive when hostile messages are seen in two or more message flows and multiple workers are negatively impacted. In the CWC case, Sue's treatment of individual employees, though harassing, was not sufficient to create an abusive organization. However, when the board failed to intervene, despite years of employee firings and grievances, employee abuse became a sedimented organizational dynamic. Moreover, as organizational members talked about abusive messages in and outside of the organization, abuse became taken for granted, and the organization more likely to continue employee-abusive communication patterns.

Proposition 2: EAOs are likely to develop when organization leadership enacts or condones abusive and/or hostile discourse.

After reading the CWC case study, it would be easy to blame Sue for the development of the hostile workplace. However, the board was complicit in how CWC transitioned into an EAO. The tone of an organization is largely set by the communication of its leaders. When organizational leaders enact or condone employee abuse, abusers feel justified in their behavior and those who are abused develop a sensed powerlessness (Tepper, 2000). Additionally, leaders create and implement the formal documents of organizational self-structuring, so any changes in official policies require the agreement and action of those same positions.

Proposition 3: EAOs are more likely to develop when numerous organizational members breach the norm of civil discourse.

When many organizational members breach the social norm by acting aggressively and disrespectfully toward others during day-to-day activity coordination, others are more likely to breach the norm themselves. Indeed, acting aggressively can be viewed as a "contagious" social disease (Hatfield et al., 1993). Such contagion may be due to others' beliefs that they can breach the norm with impunity or that they are expected

to breach the espoused norm (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000). When many organizational members breach the norm of civility, others are likely to do so as well, constituting an exceedingly hostile climate.

On the other hand, when organizational members see only one or two organizational members breaching a social norm (e.g., civility) but no one else breaches that norm, the deviance stands out and renders the breach more dramatic and powerful (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). When only one or two aggressors are in a workgroup, their abusive behavior presents a vivid reminder of undesirable interactions and others will be less likely to replicate bullying behavior—especially if they are punished or at least not rewarded (Sutton, 2007).

Proposition 4: EAOs are likely to develop when the syncretic superstructure is marked by cultural norms of competition, individualism, and aggression.

Cultural norms strongly affect the level and degree of workplace bullying and the provision of protection for workers (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). For example, German labor law protects workers and includes statutes against bullying (Schultz, Friedman, Saguy, Hernandez, & Yamada, 2004). Additionally, low-power distance and feminine and/or egalitarian cultures likely contribute to the lower rates of bullying (Einarsen, 2000). As such, harassing behavior and a superior's abuse of power is more common in cultures that focus on individual achievement and assertiveness, such as the United Kingdom and United States, than in Scandinavia, which privileges a more egalitarian style (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

Proposition 5: EAOs are likely to worsen when abusive, hostile interactions persist over time.

There is considerable evidence linking repeated abuse over a long period of time to escalated hostility. Continued abusive interactions become more intense, extreme, and personalized the longer they endure (Zapf & Gross, 2001). Employee abuse is often a developmental process that escalates—either gradually or rapidly—depending on the actors, situation, and setting (Leymann, 1990; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Both the intensity of hostility and the intensity of toxic effects multiply when such abuse is unimpeded.

During the early phases of abuse, targets may have difficulty describing their experience. Abusive tactics may be “subtle, devious, and immensely difficult to confront” (Adams & Crawford, 1992, p. 17). Devious, hidden attacks also make the experience difficult for targeted workers to encode (Leymann, 1996). In later stages, however, targets are assailed by more directly aggressive acts, and they are unmistakably aware of being under attack. Over time, targets are “isolated and avoided, humiliated in public by excessive criticism or by being made a laughing-stock. In the end both physical and psychological means of violence are used” (Einarsen et al., 2003, p. 14).

Proposition 6: EAOs always result in harm and negative outcomes for a variety of stakeholder groups.

EAOs are always exceedingly destructive and negatively impact targets' self-esteem, physical health, cognitive functioning, occupational functioning, and emotional health (Keashly & Neuman, 2005). Abused workers report elevated levels of anxiety and are at higher risk of substance abuse, depression, and heart disease than are nonabused workers (De Vogli, Ferrie, Chandola, Kivimäki, & Marmot, 2007; Rospenda, 2002). Research also associates long-term abuse to posttraumatic stress disorder and suicide or suicidal ideation (Leymann, 1990; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002).

Abuse at work also negatively affects those who have witnessed it. Co-workers are *secondary* targets of employee abuse, similar to persons who witness and are psychologically marked by acts of workplace violence and murder (Barling, 1996). When co-workers witness others' abuse, they make the quite logical assumption that they could be targeted in a similar fashion; hypervigilance becomes a permanent feature of worklife. Organizations are also damaged as fear, emotional exhaustion, and guilt increase the likelihood of staff turnover for those targeted and bystanders (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006a). The human costs of bullying are heartbreaking, but bullying also impairs organizations and by extension those served by organizational products or services (Bassman, 1992).

Proposition 7: EAOs can be altered but generally require concerted, collective efforts and the commitment of upper management.

Organizations, like all systems, are constantly changing and evolving. EAOs are constituted through communication, and as such, they can be reconstituted through shifts in communication patterns—remarkably, changes can take place with even small communication changes (Keashly & Neuman, 2005). The CWC case study not only exemplifies how one EAO was constituted through multiple abusive message flows but also demonstrates how changing the communication in the message flows reconstituted the organization as nonabusive. However, transforming a system from negative to positive required concerted effort and time and was not without cost to those who resisted.

Additionally, because the policies of an organization affect how personnel issues are resolved, upper management must acknowledge the abusive policies and commit to changing the procedures. In fact, the severity of an organization's response to employee harassment is linked with effectiveness in combating the abuse (Nelson, Halpert, & Cellar, 2007). At CWC, the board eventually recognized the organization's overall deterioration and worked with a new director, employees, and stakeholders to change its policies and improve its communication.

## Discussion

We argue that a communication flows theory provides a unique and useful tool that assists in understanding the complexity of EAOs. That communication constitutes organizations and organizes human action and relationships are virtually taken-for-granted concepts in communication scholarship. Intuitively, one can

grasp the idea that as we talk with others and pick up cultural messages, our impressions and sense making are shaped and transformed. As impressions and sense-making shift, so do our actions and the way we organize those actions. By association, it stands to reason that communication also organizes human collectivities into larger, complex, goal-oriented organizations and societal institutions that persist over time.

Translating an intuitive understanding of communication's constitutive nature into descriptive, explanatory models of complex organizations is a task to which scholars have put much attention. The challenge to constitutive theorizing is conceptualizing explanations for the complexity of organizations while remaining parsimonious enough to be functional. A communication flows theory of EAOs attempts to do both. What is more, such a framework presents a theoretical approach from which we can render the constitutive capacity of communication empirical (i.e., observe or examine processes through which organizing occurs). In particular, the theoretical application to a specific EAO case study permits exploration of mutually constitutive communication processes (how the micro creates the macro, the macro shapes and structures the micro, etc.) and highlights the multifaceted nature of EAOs using a multilayered, yet straightforward, framework.

The communication flows theory of EAO moves a simple taxonomy of organizing processes to a lens through which we can render empirical the communication processes that form EAOs. To make this move, we specified examples of abusive message types in each flow and, potentially of more importance, drew attention to the associations among message flows through a case study. The communication flows framework coupled with the case study constitutes an explanatory theory of EAOs and exposes the hidden difficulties of designing effective interventions that restructure organizations. Examining how multiple message flows create such organizations and shape members' perceptions and reactions will enable organizational members to understand, and hopefully alter, the tenor of abusive organizations. Moreover, it will reduce the likelihood of relying on individual, psychological explanations for this complex social phenomenon.

The communication flows theory of EAOs and illustrative examples of multiple messages contributing to persistent employee abuse provide a number of contributions to communication theory. First, the case study underscores the complexity and mutually constituent nature of the communication flows. It specifies the processual connections in which formalized texts of organizational self-structuring affected day-to-day activity coordination. Although the flows are analytically distinct and allow theorists to dismantle and examine the complexity of organizational communication, in practice, each one "address[es] more than one constitutive task" (McPhee & Zaug, 2000, p. 1). What is more, the case study calls attention to the interdependence of flows as they ripple into one another. For example, an examination of the case study shows that as activity coordination is increasingly marked by hostile communication, membership negotiation message types are simultaneously altered. This highlights how organizations are constituted and transformed through

a synergistic cross-current of flows rather the separate flows merely “adding up to” an organization.

Second, the application provides richly nuanced insight into the complexity of EAOs. Of fundamental importance is recognizing this complexity and developing requisite variety (Weick, 1995) in analyses and interventions. The application and explication provide a diagnostic tool of sorts for examining organizational message flows, unmasking the institutionalized meanings, and identifying message types contributing to employee abuse. For example, although upper management often discourages circumvention, our discussion points out how this “hands-off” approach fails to ultimately serve organizational stakeholders or goals. Organizations may consider opening up communication and encouraging interactions that move up, down, and sideways, as well as those that weave in and out of formal designations. Organizations might reconfigure employee evaluation systems as CWC did. Systems that broaden the sources of employment evaluation to include confidential ratings from multiple actors can (a) remove the potential for abuse of power by a single supervisor and (b) reduce worry of retaliation when evaluating aggressive workers.

Third, organizations may be unaware of how much their practices—grounded in taken-for-granted assumptions about workers, market pressures, and organizational structures—reproduce antagonistic relationships with workers. They may not easily recognize adherence to individualistic explanations or unquestioned value placed on hierarchical position. Certainly, recognizing and then critiquing some of these beliefs is a beginning. For example, in the case study, the board deferred to external expertise for retraining Sue. Unfortunately, this often had the unintended consequence of legitimizing and thus entrenching her tendency to devalue and dehumanize workers or view them as indolent threats to her or the organization.

Finally, it becomes clearer through the case study that messages transmit beliefs and meanings but, at the same time, are constitutive and organizing. Thus, the point is not whether communication transmits information within organizations or whether communication constitutes organizations. Both dynamics are at play in all communicative interactions. Human interactants speak with one another intending to transmit information, and communication—or its absence (i.e., silent assent)—constitutes workplaces. Communicative tactics such as hostile interviews, implicit warnings, personal criticism, and horror stories transmit current valuations of the workplace environment, but they also reproduce that valuation and, by association, the workplace climate. The two dynamics are simply inseparable.

## Conclusion

The human and institutional losses associated with employee abuse are appalling. Despite certain capital-labor ideologies that dehumanize workers and posit that increased pressure increases productivity, there is no evidence that aggression nets any substantive gains for organizations. Quite the contrary—employee abuse is

counter to the best interests of organizations and their stakeholders. To date, the study of bullying and nonsexual harassment has predominantly focused on individual, dyadic, or workgroup dynamics, fundamentally the types of communication that occur in the activity coordination flow. This article, however, takes microinteractions into consideration and also includes the meso and macro message flows to present a communication flows theory of EAOs.

## Notes

- 1 The terms *mobbing*, *employee emotional abuse*, *workplace bullying*, and *generalized nonsexual harassment* are synonymous.
- 2 We use the term *organization* to indicate entire organizations, especially when they are relatively compact, centrally located, and marked by a small workforce. We also use it to indicate cohesive divisions of larger institutions or corporations. Thus, we would more likely identify one university department as an “organization” constituted by employee-abusive message flows, than claim that the message flows of one department comprised an employee-abusive university. We also anthropomorphize the term *organization*, using it as a linguistic device to ease discussion, but we plainly intend it to mean organizational members or representatives.
- 3 All names, including the organization’s name, are pseudonyms.
- 4 The first author worked 12 months with a board of directors dealing with its organization’s increasingly hostile environment, which culminated in the replacement of the agency director and the revamping of the organization’s communication and feedback systems. During this involvement, she interviewed board members, program managers, the agency attorney and auditor, and 80% of direct service staff. In addition, she examined the personnel files of all staff for the preceding 5 years (including the agency director’s personnel file), board meeting minutes, state funder reviews, and financial audits.

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# **La constitution des organisations abusant des employés : Une théorie des flux communicationnels**

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## **Résumé**

Vu l'étendue de la destruction créée par l'abus persistant des employés, il est crucial de comprendre comment les organisations abusant des employés (OAE) apparaissent et demeurent. Il est aussi essentiel de regarder au-delà des explications individualistes (les « pommes pourries ») pour comprendre la complexité du phénomène, mais jusqu'à maintenant, peu de recherches s'y sont consacrées. De fait, la théorisation au sujet de ce phénomène est insuffisante. Afin d'aborder cette question, nous théorisons la façon dont les OAE apparaissent, demeurent et changent à travers une convergence de flux communicationnels. Cet article prend comme point de départ une typologie des flux de messages à partir de laquelle nous créons une nouvelle théorie qui explique comment les OAE se développent et se modifient. La théorie identifie des types de messages abusifs et souligne la façon dont l'action organisante apparaît dans des convergences ou des synergies au sein des flux communicationnels dans lesquels des messages spécifiques apparaissent. Nous présentons une étude de cas qui fait avancer la théorie et illustre le dynamisme des flux communicationnels. Le cas illustre également le changement et l'impact de la résistance des travailleurs.

# **Der Aufbau von Arbeitnehmer-missbrauchenden Organisationen: Eine Theorie des Kommunikationsflusses**

Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik

Virginia McDermott

In Anbetracht des Ausmaßes der Zerstörung durch fortwährenden Arbeitnehmermissbrauch, ist es wichtig zu verstehen, wie Arbeitnehmer-misbrauchende Organisationen (AMOs) entstehen und existieren. Dabei ist es essentiell, Betrachtungen über individualisierte „Schwarze Schaf“-Erklärungen hinaus anzustellen und die Komplexität des Phänomens zu verstehen. Bisher gibt es wenig wissenschaftliche Arbeit zu diesem Thema – mehr noch, bislang liegt keine brauchbare Theorie vor. Um diese Lücke zu schließen, soll theoretisch aufgearbeitet werden, wie AMOs entstehen, existieren und sich durch Kommunikationsflüsse ändern. Dieser Artikel beginnt mit und baut auf Botschafts-Fluss-Typologien auf, auf Basis derer eine neue Theorie zur Entwicklung und Veränderung von AMOs vorgelegt wird. Die Theorie identifiziert missbrauchende Botschaftstypen und unterstreicht, wie ein Organisieren durch den Zusammenfluss oder Synergien von Kommunikationsflüssen, in denen bestimmte Botschaften auftreten, entsteht. Wir präsentieren eine Fallstudie, welche die Theoriebildung vorantreibt und den Dynamismus von Kommunikationsflüssen illustriert. Die Fallstudie veranschaulicht ebenfalls Veränderungen und den Einfluss von Arbeitnehmerwiderstand.

# **La Constitución de las Organizaciones Abusivas de los Empleados: Una Teoría del Flujo de la Comunicación**

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## **Resumen**

Dado el grado de destrucción traídos por el abuso persistente del empleado, es crucial comprender cómo las organizaciones abusivas de los empleados (EAOs) nacen, toman forma y persisten. Es esencial mirar más allá de las explicaciones individualistas de la “manzana podrida” para entender la complejidad del fenómeno, que hasta ahora, pocos estudios han hecho. En verdad, la teorización acerca de este fenómeno es insuficiente. Para tratar este asunto, teorizamos cómo EAO nace, toma forma, persiste, y cambia a través de una confluencia de los flujos de comunicación. Este artículo toma como punto de partida y se construye sobre la base de la tipología del flujo de los mensajes desde el cual creamos una nueva teoría que explica cómo EAO se desarrolla y cambia. Esta teoría identifica tipos de mensajes abusivos y subraya cómo el proceso de organizar ocurre en confluencias ó sinergias entre los flujos de comunicación en los cuales los mensajes específicos ocurren. Presentamos un estudio de caso que dirige a la teoría e ilustra el dinamismo entre los flujos de la comunicación. Este caso ilustra también el cambio y el impacto sobre la resistencia del trabajador.

Palabras claves: matonismo en el trabajo, acoso, asedio, comunicación organizacional, abuso emocional.

## 虐待员工之机构的构成：传播流理论

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### 摘要

鉴于持续虐待员工所造成的大范围的破坏效果，我们有必要理解虐待员工之机构（EAO）是怎样形成并长存的。另外，我们有必要越过单个“坏苹果”之解释，去探讨这个现象背后的复杂性。但到目前为止，此类研究微乎其微。事实上，对此类现象的理论概括相当不足。为了解决这个问题，我们概括了 EAO 怎样借助传播流之汇合来生成、长存和变化。以此为出发点，本文构建了一个有关信息流的理论格式，从中我们创造了一个旨在解释 EAO 怎样发展和变化的理论。这个理论界定了虐待信息的类型，并强调了组织怎样在传播流（含有特定信息）的汇合过程中发生。我们展示了一个促成该理论的个案，并阐述了传播流的永动性。这个个案还阐释了变革及工人抵制所产生的影响。

## 고용자 남용조직들의 구성: 커뮤니케이션 흐름 이론

Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik

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### 요약

지속적인 고용자 남용의 파괴작업의 범위에서, 어떻게 고용자 남용 조직들(EAOs)이 형성되고 유지되는지를 이해하는 것은 매우 중요하다. 또한 현상의 복잡성을 이해하기 위하여 개인적인 배드 애플 설명을 넘는 관찰이 절대적이거나, 이에 대한 연구는 거의 없는 실정이다. 이러한 논제를 논의하기 위해 우리는 어떻게 EAOs가 형성되고, 지속되고, 그리고 커뮤니케이션 흐름의 융합을 통해 변화하는지를 이론화하였다. 본 논문은 어떻게 EAOs가 발전되고 변화하는가를 설명하기 위한 새로운 이론을 형성하는 것으로부터 그 출발점을 삼았다. 이론은 남용적인 메시지 형태를 동일시하고 특정한 메시지들이 발생하는 커뮤니케이션 흐름속에서 융합과 시너지들이 어떻게 일어나는지를 강조하였다. 우리는 이 이론을 이끌어내는 한 사례를 연구하였으며 커뮤니케이션 흐름들 사이의 역학구조를 설명하였다. 사례는 고용자 저항의 변화와 영향을 표현하였다.

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