



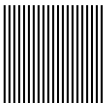
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# Intensive Remedial Identity Work: Responses to Workplace Bullying Trauma and Stigmatization

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**Abstract.** *This study investigates the phenomenon of intensive remedial identity work by exploring responses to the trauma and stigma of adult bullying at work. It analyses the narratives of 20 workers who reported being bullied at work, in which they talk about persistent emotional abuse and their shifting, intensifying identity work in response. The following specific questions are explored: (a) what threats to identity does workplace bullying trigger?; (b) what are the types and remedial goals of identity work?; (c) what is the processual nature of this identity work? Analysis resulted in seven inter-related types of identity work: first-and second-level stabilizing, sensemaking, reconciling, repairing, grieving and restructuring. Each of these was associated with specific identity threats and a constellation of remedial goals. Comparative analysis among self-narratives suggested that identity work occurred in three approximate phases associated with abuse onset, escalation and cessation. Findings extend understanding of intensive remedial identity work in the face of persistently traumatic and stigmatizing organizational experiences. **Key words.** intensive remedial identity work; stigma; trauma; workplace bullying*



Although identity and its relation to organizational life is widely studied in academic research, for the layperson, 'identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis' (Mercer, 1990: 43). When faced with workplace bullying,

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identity work grows progressively more intensive, acquiring a crisis-like quality. As a result, everyday, unselfconscious identity work becomes acutely mindful, shifting to what Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 626) call 'intensive remedial identity work'. Notwithstanding the extraordinarily pejorative character of adult bullying, little is known about the specific identity threats it poses, how identity work seeks to remedy these threats or the progression of such identity work.

Even though bullying and identity are not often examined in tandem, the psychological and physiological harms associated with bullying suggest that one influences the other. Persistently abused workers report elevated levels of anxiety and are at higher risk of substance abuse, depression and heart disease than non-abused workers (De Vogli et al., 2007; Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003; Rospenda, 2002). Long-term workplace abuse is also linked to post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation and suicide (Leymann, 1990; Leymann and Gustafsson, 1996; Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002). The range of damage is indicative of the threat to identity bullying poses. Thus, we should expect those affected to perform intensive identity work when faced with this destabilizing experience.

Defining identity as a reflexively constructed life narrative (Giddens, 1991; Kerby, 1997), this study investigates identity work in response to persistent abuse in organizations. It frames workplace bullying as an experience constituting both trauma and stigma and expands current understandings of identity work in these situations. Specifically, the current study analyses the narratives of 20 bullied workers, paying particular attention to their shifting, intensifying identity work in the face of ongoing identity threats. The paper is structured in the following manner. First, it examines different perspectives of self-identity and explores the literature on identity work, trauma, and stigmatization. Second, the paper describes the traumatic, stigmatizing character of workplace bullying. Finally, it outlines the genesis of the current study and details the guiding research questions, methods/analysis, findings and implications.

## **Self-Identity and Identity Work**

Organizational life, particularly work life in cultures that accentuate achievement from paid employment, has a significant impact on how people define and identify themselves (Du Gay, 1996). Exactly *what* identity is, however, is clearly contested terrain, since identity is virtual rather than tangible. The concept responds to the existential question, 'Who am I?'. This question entails not only who or what people believe themselves to be but also how they should respond to social experiences and be treated by others.

Modernist theories assume that self-identity has 'an intrinsic, essential content, defined by a common origin or a common structure of experience, and often, both' (Howard, 2000: 385). In this view, grand narratives of modernism (e.g. human rationality, traditional role expectations) guide



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much of identity construction. Indeed, most persons believe they have an authentic self. Postmodernists critique the view that identity is stable or unified. Rather, postmodernists view identity as an ongoing accomplishment 'characterized by confusion and conflict', one that moves 'away from the search for "truth" to recognise that inconsistency, complexity, and ambiguity is integral to' the reflexive project of the self (Linstead and Thomas, 2002: 2, 5). In the postmodern world, the grand narratives of tradition have lost salience as guides for identity construction. For human actors seeking a stable, ontological self, the postmodern landscape can seem bleak, one in which 'finding oneself' is fraught with difficulties. Critics of this perspective claim it 'overplay[s] the disorderly, chaotic, variable, and flux-like nature of self-experience' (Crossley, 2000: 527).

Other perspectives fall between these extremes. Giddens (1984, 1991), for example, proposes that society, currently in a state of 'high modernity' (1991: 10) still has institutions guiding self-identity that, although lacking the force of grand narratives in traditional societies, nonetheless are not as decentred as postmodernists claim. In high modernity, socially unifying features (e.g. global economics) are just as central as disaggregating features. In this epoch, identity is 'the self as reflexively understood by the individual in terms of his or her biography', and identity work is 'the capacity to keep a particular narrative going' (Giddens, 1991: 244, 54, emphasis in original). This perspective neither negates the possibility of sustaining a perceived authentic self nor ignores the challenges of doing so. Moreover, in high modernity, the reflexive project of the self is an essential, ongoing accomplishment.

One of the challenges to keeping a particular narrative going is that it can only be maintained when internally perceived as authentic and externally approved by important others (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Gergen and Gergen, 1997; Ibarra, 1999). In organizational life, important others are usually a constellation of peers and supervisors. In fairly stable conditions, identity work is reasonably automatic and instinctual (Giddens, 1991); the self-identity narrative proceeds rather effortlessly, and 'identity work is comparatively unselfconscious' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 626). This shifts dramatically in the face of traumatic, stigmatizing experiences. At these times, identity work becomes acutely conscious and at times even painful (Layton, 1995), and the reflexive self-narrative must be re-storied (Gergen and Gergen, 1997).

### Trauma, Stigma, and Identity Work: The Case of Workplace Bullying

Research on identity work in response to trauma or stigma rarely looks at organizational life. For the most part, this literature focuses on unexpected, serious life changes such as death, divorce, or illness diagnosis (e.g. Breslau et al., 1998; Layton, 1995). Identity work in these situations usually involves substantive shifts as one renarrates self-identity to fit within this new, usually foreign, set of life circumstances. Research about trauma in



organizations focuses on the extraordinary but highly visible occurrences of violence and homicide (Allen and Lucerno, 1996; Kelloway et al., 2006) but rarely explores identity work *per se*.

In a similar vein, stigma and identity research predominantly deals with extra-organizational life (e.g. Kaufman and Johnson, 2004; Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004), although stigmatized subject positions can negatively affect work experiences and opportunities (Deitch et al., 2004; Gerschick, 1998). Stigmatized persons' identity work includes techniques such as passing, selective disclosure, and activism to change others' perceptions (Kaufman and Johnson, 2004; Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004). While trauma identity work focuses on readjusting to a fundamentally changed set of life circumstances, stigma identity work focuses on image repair and escaping negative judgments. More work is needed at the nexus of trauma-stigma-organization-identity because worklife is central to identity construction while posing various threats to identity stability. Of particular interest to this study are the effects of bullying on identity and identity work.

By definition, workplace bullying<sup>1</sup> is 'persistent, verbal and nonverbal aggression at work that includes personal attacks, social ostracism, and a multitude of other painful messages and hostile interactions' (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006: 406). Numerous negative interactions that feel intimidating, insulting or exclusionary constitute bullying—actions targeted workers typically believe are intentional efforts to harm, control, or drive them from the workplace (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). The experience is profoundly traumatic as well as socially stigmatizing.<sup>2</sup>

Workplace bullying is traumatic because it is unexpected and *always* perceived as undeserved and unjustified (Keashly and Neuman, 2005). Abuse is not a requisite aspect of work duties, is unrelated to job demands, and is, consequently, perceived as unwarranted. The shock of being singled out for repeated abuse can be as traumatic as divorce or a loved one's death (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002) and can evoke levels of anxiety and psychological pain necessitating therapeutic help (Randall, 2001). What makes this experience especially corrosive is that it is ongoing, frequent, enduring, and escalatory—typically worsening over time. The trauma is also a function of the intensive fear and dread bullying creates. In fact, bullying and mobbing are often called 'psychological terror' (Leymann, 1996: 375).

Bullying is also profoundly stigmatizing because abuse and public humiliation 'linger in a hundred conversations as members of the original audience re-encounter one another and negotiate the meaning of the original event' (Waldron, 2000: 68). Unlike stigma linked to visible signs of difference, what Goffman (1963: 4) calls the 'discredited', persistent abuse constitutes certain workers as the 'discreditable'. In individualistic cultures, the phenomenon evokes pejorative judgements of targets more often than it does of perpetrators or impinging organizational dynamics. Targets are often blamed because others think targets have done something to deserve mistreatment (Einarsen, 1999). Persistent abuse also indicts



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target agency and connotes weakness or child-status, probably because of its association with schoolyard bullying. Indeed, targeted workers characteristically feel shame about being bullied and being unable to stop it. As such, they participate in self-blame, even while fighting to negate blame from others.

In addition to attributions of blame, stigmatizing comes from abuse content—the claims made about targeted workers. Bullying denigrates individuals' personal lives, beliefs, values, personalities or physical characteristics, effectively portraying targets as undesirables (Einarsen, 1999). It can interfere with, or prevent successful completion of job duties and thus allude to worker incompetence (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). This kind of stigmatization directly and indirectly charges targeted workers with incompetence, moral flaws, or deviance and often results in ostracism, a dynamic further casting them as socially undesirable (Coyne et al., 2004). Given the range of harm, the psychological pain, and the identity threats posed by bullying, it is vital to understand how workers steer the self-project through these treacherous waters.

## Methods

The current project's focus emerged over time, coming to its current focus only after numerous iterations of data analysis, literature review and collegial feedback. The study's impetus was the published call for *Organization's* special issue on identities in complex organizations. Having studied workplace bullying for over six years and frequently hearing how the experience challenged, and at times destroyed, targeted workers' self-perceptions, I saw the special issue as an ideal forum for engagement and exploration of identity work in these situations. In the following, I attempt to be faithful to this emergent process.

## Participants

I have interviewed or otherwise communicated with (email, telephone, letters, etc.) over 200 persons affected by adult bullying from the US, Canada, UK, The Netherlands and South Africa. Of these, most were targets; the others were coworkers, family, friends and bullies, in that order. From this data, I chose the transcripts of 20 bullied workers, selecting an equal number of men and women to achieve some diversity in respondent narratives (rather than to explicitly study gendered identity constructions). Of these, 12 came to the study through a link on The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute's website ([www.bullyinginstitute.org](http://www.bullyinginstitute.org)) and eight were drawn through conversations with colleagues, allied professionals and acquaintances. All were Caucasian; mean age was 32.4 years (range, 18–62). At the time of the interviews, six were working in, and 14 had left, the bullying environment.



US workers were chosen because, to date, bullying research has been conducted predominantly in Scandinavia, the UK, Australia/New Zealand and the European Union (e.g. Einarsen et al., 2003). There is growing interest in the US (e.g. Keashly and Neuman, 2005; Namie, 2003), but US workers remain understudied. Additionally, US workers' experiences and identity work are potentially distinctive from that in other countries, particularly in light of victim-blaming US discourses bringing the abused under suspicion (Ryan, 1976).

### **Procedures**

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, an approach epistemologically based on the principle that humans are self-reflexive and make sense of their lived experience by recounting that experience. The method locates verbal awareness, from participant standpoints, as the pertinent starting place for understanding the phenomenological nature of these lived experiences (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Moreover, in-depth interviews are particularly useful for studying workplace bullying, as well as the complexity of identity work in response to this experience.

Of the 20 interviews, 15 were conducted by telephone in order to speak with study participants living across the US. Five interviews were conducted in face-to-face settings for those living nearby. I used a semi-structured interview guide and recorded all interviews. For the most part, I simply asked participants to tell me about their workplace experiences, and they proceeded with little other prompting. Their experiences guided the interview content and how that content unfolded. Most told stories in a comparatively chronological way marked by occasional backtracking to contextualize certain story elements. During analysis, this narrative structure aided in assessing the processual nature of identity work. On average, interviews lasted 2.5 hours. All interviews were transcribed and reviewed with recordings to check for accuracy.

### **Analysis**

Using Nvivo qualitative analysis software, I approached the data from a grounded perspective (Charmaz, 2001; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). That is, initial data coding of identity work came entirely from the data rather than being sensitized by any set of *a priori* identity work categories. The first iteration of data coding responded to RQ1, 'What kind of identity work do bullied workers discuss?'. It is important to note that participants did not use the term 'identity' or 'identity work'; these terms were theoretically informed interpretations of their recounted experiences.

Two content issues, personal pronouns and emotion indicators, guided identity work coding at this stage. Personal pronouns (e.g. I, I'm, my, mine, etc.) pointed toward implications of self-identity in relation to the



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experience and participant responses in light of self-identity narratives. For example, phrases like 'I'm usually not', or 'I'm the kind of person who', served as road signs to identity work codes. Emotions were also important for preliminary coding because 'emotions are a sign of the "I" ... [,] provide strong cues for the construction of identity' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 101), and 'negative emotions stem from ... inability to convey an image that is consistent with a salient self-conception' (Ibarra, 1999: 780–81). For example, phrases like, 'I was outraged' or 'I cried the entire vacation' pointed to identity work in response to abuse. The two content foci (emotions, pronouns) were often found together.

Using a constant comparative method and adding new codes if existing codes failed to capture new data characteristics, I continued coding interview data until I found no new types of identity work, that is, until open codes were saturated. This resulted in 84 open-codes for identity work. I then reviewed open codes for redundancies and subsequently combined a number of analytically-similar identity work codes. During code reduction, I semantically examined open codes for inclusion under larger, more descriptive identity work types. For example, 'I've always been a stellar employee' and 'I was trained to kill people' collapsed into a larger category (being treated differently than one expects based on a past professional identity).

After partially collapsing open codes, I returned to the identity literature and subsequently adopted the construct 'intensive remedial identity work' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 626), which seemed to capture targeted workers' struggles maintaining or reconstituting identities in the face of bullying. The word 'remedial' generated the next stages of data analysis. Since remedial means to correct or resolve, I analysed the data to answer RQ2, 'What threats to identity does workplace bullying pose?' and RQ3, 'What are the remedial goals of different types of identity work?'.

Associational clusters of transcript text were used to answer these questions. To locate these clusters, I used the 'Find' feature of Word to trace the Nvivo coded data in the original transcript. I then read through the transcript sections adjacent to (before, after) content foci (pronouns, emotion) because identity threats and identity work goals were often clustered near, or included in, these sections. In some cases, participants did not explicitly describe the identity threat separately from the identity work to remedy the threat; identifying the remedial goals led to understanding the identity threat. For example, Rae explained, 'I was so stunned, I finally had to see a counselor to get my head wrapped around it'. Here Rae states the remedial goal (making sense of trauma, stabilizing sense of security) of identity work and suggests the threat to identity (disruption of ontological security).

In other cases, participants directly stated the identity threat and alluded to the identity work remedial goal. For example, Brad said, 'He [the bully] forced my hand when he accused me of slackin' off on the job ... I couldn't



let it go'. In this example, Brad states the stigmatizing threat to identity (accused of sloth) and suggests the remedial goal (rectifying incorrect accusation) to resolving that threat. Finally, I compared the partially collapsed open codes, and categorized them into axial codes based on the identity threat and remedial identity work goals. For example, I collapsed *recalling* and *matching* (targets compare their responses to abuse to past self-identity constructions) into the axial code *reconciling* due to the similar remedial goals of recalling and matching.

Because there was evidence of a temporal process in identity work, I returned once again to the data with RQ4, 'What is the processual nature of this identity work?'. To explore the process of identity work, I closely read the transcripts again and examined them for how identity work was storied. This analysis was aided by participants tendency to craft responses to the interview by 'starting at the beginning' and telling their stories in a mostly chronological manner. I read each interview multiple times to assess breaking points or points at which identity work shifted, resolved or changed in nature. Noticeable breaks occurred at two points: when targets acknowledged bullying, and when bullying ended. Finally, I identified the phase in which each type of identity work was prevalent by tallying the number of times types were mentioned within each phase of the narratives.

## **Identity Work: Phases, Types, and Remedial Goals**

Identity work roughly clustered around three phases of abuse: pre-bullying, bullying and post-bullying. Some types of identity work occurred in one phase but others were found in two or all three phases. However, types were dominant in particular phases and, as such, were categorized as principally occurring in that phase. Table 1 outlines phases, the threats posed to identity, type of identity work needed to revolve the threat, whether identity work was predominantly trauma- or stigma-focused and the remedial goals of each type.

### ***Pre-bullying Phase and Identity Work***

Initially, participants explained that abusive tactics were subtle, circuitous and immensely difficult to describe. During the pre-bullying phase, participants identified increased unease but were unsure whether they were being targeted or were misinterpreting what was happening. The two types of identity work, *stabilizing* and *sensemaking*, predominantly co-occurred but had somewhat different remedial goals.

**First-level stabilizing.** The threat to identity addressed by first-level stabilizing was disruptions to participants' sense of comfort and predictability. Although taken for granted, the uneventful character of day-to-day organizational activities was easily disrupted. As Giddens (1991: 52) suggests, 'the slightest



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**Table 1. Intensive remedial identity work: phases, types and remedial goals**

Identity threat	Identity work	Remedial goals
<b>Pre-bullying phase</b>		
Perturbations to psychological comfort and day-to-day predictability	First-level Stabilizing (trauma-focused)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Re-establishing sense of safety, security</li><li>• Rebuilding comfort; reducing discomfort</li><li>• Increasing stability</li></ul>
Challenging mental perceptions; crazy-making; threats to cognitive ability to accurately perceive environment	Sensemaking, in all phases (stigma and trauma-focused)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Confirming perceptions</li><li>• Identifying causes of abuse and remedying</li><li>• Validating self and value of self</li></ul>
<b>Bullying phase</b>		
Targets' response to abuse dissonant w/identity and experience of being abused dissonant w/past identity	Reconciling (trauma and stigma-focused)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reducing dissonance</li><li>• Highlighting preferred identity and past success</li><li>• Neutralizing, countering accusations</li><li>• Fortifying, reiterating preferred identity</li></ul>
Image seriously damaged by being targeted, others (upper-management) believe bully, blame target for being abused, minimize or disbelieve target	Repairing, also in post-bullying (stigma-focused)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Convincing others of one's value and veracity</li><li>• Moving others to action based on value to organization</li><li>• Overcoming, reducing shame/stigma</li><li>• Convincing others to treat one accordingly to valued identity</li><li>• Impugning bullies (character, personality)</li></ul>
Disrupting, on a deep level, one's ontological security, including shaking/destroying important values and beliefs about the world in which one lives	Second-level Stabilizing, also in post-bullying (trauma-focused)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recovering from trauma, shock, surprise</li><li>• Coming to grips with unfair world</li><li>• Recreating/regaining sense of equilibrium</li><li>• Rebuilding self-narrative to include converted beliefs</li></ul>
<b>Post-bullying phase (target or bully may exit organization to reach this stage)</b>		
Loss of valued position, career, identity as professional and 'good worker', and long-term loss of belief in justice, fairness, personal power, etc.	Grieving, also in late bullying phase (trauma-focused)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Working through/processing the loss</li><li>• Accepting the loss</li><li>• Incorporating loss into self-narrative</li></ul>
How to permanently merge the experience into restructured life narratives and self-perceptions	Restructuring (stigma-focused)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recreating valued self-identity</li><li>• Rebuilding work-related identity aspects</li><li>• Learning or transforming from experience</li><li>• Reaffirming specific aspects of identity</li><li>• Converting evil to good</li><li>• Healing from trauma, 'putting oneself back together again'</li></ul>



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glance of one person towards another, inflection of the voice, changing facial expressions, or gestures of the body might threaten it'. Unable as yet to identify exactly what was happening, participants nonetheless reported feeling 'uneasy', 'weird', 'nervous' and 'uncomfortable'.

For example, Bea started feeling uncomfortable when she first heard rumours circulating about her at work, rumours the sender denied. Her team manager, the alleged bully, reportedly praised Bea in face-to-face interactions but told others Bea had an inflated sense of herself. Bea explained, 'It was hard to describe at first ... Things didn't feel right'. Bea's experience was ambiguous, difficult to decode, and polysemous—that is, it could have had multiple meanings. (Who was telling her the truth?) This ambiguity made the experience difficult to 'put into words'. However, the experience created increasing concern that disrupted her sense of day-to-day continuity and stability.

The remedial goals of first-level stabilizing were to reduce discomfort, increase predictability and reclaim the relatively uneventful nature of day-to-day worklife. For example, Bea stopped telling her manager when she received praise from others. She attempted to stabilize the situation by making small modifications to images she conveyed to a threatening other. Indeed, such selective disclosure is a common stigma-management strategy for members of marginalized groups (Goffman, 1963; Kaufman and Johnson, 2004; Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004).

**Sensemaking.** The second challenge to identity during pre-bullying was the uncertainty participants reported having about their initial perceptions. The ambiguous character of pre-bullying challenged self-assessments of the environment and the ability to accurately comprehend it. These workers reported talking to other organizational members to validate their perceptions; intersubjective sensemaking appeared to resolve some of the ambiguity. Most said that sensemaking occurred with coworkers, rather than family/friends, since family/friends reportedly 'couldn't understand', or 'couldn't get what was going on'. As Ben explained, 'You really can't understand the depth of the [bully's] evilness unless you've been there'.

The remedial goals of sensemaking were confirming perceptions, identifying causes and remedying them, and validating self. For example, Pat asked coworkers if they had faced hostility when talking with the new boss and found that many had similar experiences. Like other trauma victims or members of stigmatized groups, participants sought support from similar others (Goffman, 1963; Layton, 1995; Roschelle and Kaufman, 2004). Although image *repairing* was most prevalent in the next phase, early image repair began during pre-bullying. As Dan remarked, 'I wasn't sure what [the bully] was thinking or trying to do, but ... I damn sure was going to tell my side of the story to [his coworkers]'. His sensemaking included image repair. Sensemaking continued in all phases, but as abuse progressed, it was not about whether abuse was occurring but why and what could be done about it.



### ***Bullying Phase and Identity Work***

Participants reported passing into the *bullying phase* when they were assailed by more directly aggressive, unmistakably abusive acts. The bullying phase lasted from six months to eight years and marked a period where participants were unmistakably aware of being targeted. I categorize bullying as one phase due to the similarities of identity threats and identity work but admit that this glosses over two principal dynamics in narratives: the unremitting escalation of aggression and the waning effectiveness of identity work. Participants reported three types of identity work in this phase, *reconciling*, *repairing* and *second-level stabilizing*, which co-occurred and were often mutually constitutive.

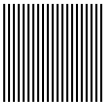
**Reconciling.** The central challenge to identity that triggered reconciling was mismatches between being abused or responses to abuse, and targets' self-narrative. Participants interrogated their reactions to abuse and often deemed those reactions inauthentic to their real selves. Judgements of inauthenticity triggered identity work to reconcile the mismatch. For example, Kay explained,

I heard [the bully's] footsteps to the upstairs door, and I *ran* to my computer with my heart thumping. I remember thinking, 'I am a highly educated, respected professional woman, and I am *running* to my desk like a child. *What is wrong here?*' I was physically sick at the thought that I'd be *caught* looking out a window.

The terror she experienced was counter to Kay's perception of herself as a 'highly educated, respected professional woman'. Her identity work attempted to reconcile being an educated professional with reacting like a scared child. Many others reported fear-dread emotions and the challenges such emotions posed for identity equilibrium. Participants were deeply uncomfortable discovering that others could arouse such fear—even terror—and had believed, prior to the experience, that this would not have been possible.

Abuse also challenged past self-narratives that were based on being valued, successful, or powerful and in control. For example, Kim noted, 'I've had exemplary evaluations from all my other supervisors, ... until [the bully] came in. ... After that, I couldn't do anything right'. Ben, on the other hand, had served in the US military's special forces during the Viet Nam war where he was 'trained to kill people'. As such, he reported being a person others 'shouldn't fuck with'. The incongruence between the previously valued identity and current evidence of a devalued identity called for reconciliation.

The remedial goals of reconciling were reducing dissonance between the experience/response to the experience and one's identity, as well as regaining a sense of equilibrium. In interviews, participants recounted bullies' accusations about them. To 'prove' the inaccuracy of these charges, they repeatedly told me of their past successes. For example, Mack noted, 'I had a number of successful careers in risk management and insurance



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before coming to this company'. Others highlighted aspects of their biographies that defied pejorative indictments. Ben claimed, 'If I can jump out of the sky ... for the government, I'm damned well not going to be abused by some foreman'. Ben's self-identity centred on maintaining power/control, as was evidenced by the repeatedly-summoned 'soldier' narrative. Despite this show of strength, Ben reported seeking therapeutic help, an example that underscores Goffman's (1963: 18) claim that 'stigmatized persons sometimes vacillate between cowering and bravado'.

**Repairing.** A central identity threat bullying posed was damage to professional reputations. The 'othering' character of bullying was constituted through many, often innocuous negative interactions that together comprised a pattern of humiliation and degradation. Each negative act, whether passive or active, called into question targets' competence, commitment, honesty and even social desirability. Ann explained that the bully started 'this tag team attack to underhandedly get rid of me'. Others reported being screamed at and sworn at, ignored in meetings, having doors slammed in their faces, and other nonverbal forms of tainting (e.g. rolling eyes, refusing eye contact, glaring).

Social ostracism also marked participants' experiences. In many cases, others avoided targets, allegedly out of fear of becoming tainted by association or because they were acting as perpetrators' 'henchmen'. Ben described the following after defending an abused coworker:

The people who all joined in the beating and the mobbing were considered friends of the foreman [alleged bully] so now [a targeted coworker] was isolated with a couple of us other pariah, so to speak, and we had to stand on the other side of the garage by ourselves. ... We were treated like sub-humans, like we weren't even there.

Sadly, avoiding the stigmatized is a typical social response due to 'the tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to his close connections' (Goffman, 1963: 30).

Despite feeling impassioned to repair identities, participants also described acute shame. 'Shame bears directly on self-identity because it is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a coherent biography' (Giddens, 1991: 65). Shame was linked both to being targeted and being unable to stop abuse. Targeted workers reportedly 'began to doubt', 'second-guess' themselves, and 'wonder if there's something really wrong with me'. Indeed, stigmatized persons at times begin to believe their detractors and 'agree that [they] do indeed fall short of what [they] really ought to be' (Goffman, 1963: 7). Especially shaming was when identity work failed to alter important others' perceptions and targeted workers were fired or driven from jobs.

The remedial goals of repairing were distinctively social. Tactics focused on altering others' perceptions of the situation; convincing others of targets' pain, veracity, or organizational value; and impugning bullies. Participant



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related numerous interactions that seemed driven by a need for listeners to believe their stories. Initially, many found that others doubted their claims, but 'serial bullying'—when bullies attacked others—apparently decreased disbelief as well as reduced target shame. Brad exhorted a frequently cited reaction to others' abuse and the guilt regarding that reaction:

As bad as it sounds, ... I was glad when [a coworker] was cornered. Then at least I knew it wasn't me, ... After that, [coworkers] would come to me and say, 'Man, you were right, we should have believed you'.

As bullies targeted more people, disbelief among peers dissolved, although decision makers reportedly remained reluctant to intervene. Participants typically said that upper-managers doubted them, believed the bully, minimized their claims or blamed them for being abused. A few reported that with peer support, upper-management finally took action. Ann explained 'I had to convince the owner this was bogus ... I was saved by having a few friends at work that believed and supported me'. Ann's comment points to the interdependent nature of self-identity and resistance; both need support and validation from important others.

An aspect of repairing was also impugning perpetrators, what Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 634) call the 'pejorative construction of the other, who is allegedly responsible'. Although I place impugning bullies in *repairing*, pejorative labels were interjected throughout interviews and, in some cases, shaped the central trajectory for identity work. Indeed, good-versus-evil story lines cast bullies as malevolent demons and organizational authorities as those duped by evil actors. Labels for bullies included 'evil', 'crazy', 'power-hungry', 'insane', 'lunatic', 'narcissist', 'Type-A', 'control freaks', 'devil' and 'demon', to name only a few. Targeted workers attempted to repair identity with derogatory labels that implied, if there is something amiss about my attacker, then I am all right.

**Second-level stabilizing.** The identity threat to which second-level stabilizing responded was a profound disruption to ontological security, including undermining or destroying core values and beliefs. Commonly reported lost beliefs included believing: (a) people would, in most cases, do the right thing; (b) hard work would be rewarded; (c) employing organizations would protect employees from abuse; (d) bullies would be punished or removed for aggressive behaviour; and (e) targets could effectively stop abuse. As participants fully recognized and continued to experience abuse, the slight disruption to security occurring in pre-bullying mushroomed into an existential crisis. By this time, targets reported being bullied for many months.

Ongoing bullying continued to destabilize those targeted, and over time, many reported being unable to rebound fully between attacks. Bill noted, 'I'd no sooner start to get over one of [the bully's] rampages, and she'd go off on me again'. Ted explained, 'It was brutal ... I was coming home almost in tears ... I couldn't believe it had happened'. Bea too recounted, 'I was so



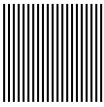
hurt and surprised, that it got to the point that I just could hardly breathe. I just couldn't believe this could happen at work'. Bill, Ted, Bea and others told stories of lost resiliency, lost beliefs and downward spirals, all of which made identity work even more taxing and less effective. Thus, workplace bullying not only disrupted participants' predictable workplace routines but also swamped habitual modes of activity, frames for self-identity and ontological beliefs upon which identity had been constructed.

The remedial goal of second-level stabilizing was dealing with trauma: regaining equilibrium, coming to grips with injustice and rebuilding identity narratives with a set of altered beliefs. For example, Mary explained that after she 'recovered from the shock ... [that] no one was going to do anything about it [abuse], I changed the way I work'. She went on to say, 'I *never* work overtime anymore ... I used to be an A+ employee, and ... now I just do enough to stay under the radar ... C- mostly'. Since organizational authorities failed to intervene despite multiple reports, Mary altered the reciprocal relationship between her and the organization; labour withdrawal created perceived equilibrium. Second-level stabilizing, in Mary's case, was centrally concerned with self-identity, as illustrated when she asked me, 'What kind of person just lets others walk all over them and keeps taking it?'. On the other hand, labour withdrawal created an identity tension; Mary had to sacrifice her highly-valued 'A+ employee' identity to 'even the score'. Others also claimed that they would never again commit as deeply to or sacrifice as much for an employing organization.

### ***Post-bullying and Identity Work***

Post-bullying identity work occurred after participants or bullies had exited the workgroup or organization, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Targeted workers described two inter-related types of identity work in this phase, *grieving* and *restructuring*. More than in any other phase, post-bullying identity work was concerned with re-storying one's damaged self-identity and weaving the experience into a long-term aspect of one's biography. In the absence of continued abuse, targets began a more enduring healing process, although the painful humiliation could be vividly recalled even a decade later.

**Grieving.** Post-bullying challenges to identity included dealing with the perceived loss of professional reputation, organizational identity and self-confidence, and the long-term loss of core beliefs in justice or fairness. Ted explained loss of reputation: 'It's a small community, and [the bully] just character-assassinated me ... It's going to be hard to find another job now'. Rae described the loss of organizational identification; 'I believed in the company. I believed the company ... was a good company to work for ... like you can really accomplish something in your life. That has just been ripped away from me, and it really hurts'. Kim described a loss of self-confidence: 'I just don't know if I have the stuff anymore, ... the stuff it takes to do this kind of work'.



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Grieving also dealt with lost beliefs about the world in which they lived and their relationship to it. Unmistakably, participants had expected worklife to be just, for people to be honest and for hard work to be rewarded. With these fundamental expectations shattered, participants were unable to 'keep a particular narrative going' (Giddens, 1991: 54). For example, Mack recounted, 'I just felt like someone ... tore a part of me away'. Sue said, 'My anger is related to what this has taken from me. It's as though in order to go outside of my personal space, I need to suit up with a toxic shield'. Since the 'self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future' (Giddens, 1991: 75), targeted workers were forced to formulate new—often jaded and distrustful—beliefs about the work world, the people in it, and their future in this threatening place.

The remedial goals of grieving included processing and accepting loss and storying revised beliefs into one's self-narratives. Participants described how they handled losses and came to some form of resolution. Dan said, 'I had to process it, you know? Work through ... what had happened and somehow learn to live with it'. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note that intensive remedial identity work may even call for therapeutic help; such was the case with over half the sample. Twelve participants reported speaking with mental health professionals about grief and other issues arising from bullying.

It was during post-bullying grieving that participants most often talked about their identities in relation to other lifestyle sectors—particularly home and family. Rae claimed, 'my husband has been an anchor. He helped me let go of it and ... see there's lots more to me than just my job. I'd lost sight of that during all this'. Grieving meant restructuring one's entire identity to rebuild the perception of an essential self and reflexively constitute a life story that incorporated the bullying experience. This often included drawing more on nonwork domains for identity work.

**Restructuring.** Another post-bullying challenge for identity was how to permanently and positively merge the experience into restructured life narratives. Successful identity restructuring took months and, for some, even years. For example, Rae echoed a common feeling when she said, 'I wasn't sure I was anything without my job, and ... it took a long, long time to look at myself in a positive way after it [being bullied and leaving the job] happened'. As Du Gay (1996: 9) aptly notes, 'as a fundamental human category, work is represented not only as livelihood, but also as a stable, consistent source of self-identity'. Rae's comment surely illustrates Du Gay's claim.

The remedial goal of restructuring was recreating a self-identity narrative that one could 'live with'. Such identity work included reframing the experience as an impetus for learning or an opportunity for moral transformation, that is, converting 'evil to good'. Restructuring also reaffirmed and expanded favoured aspects of identity, sometimes by incorporating or returning focus to non-work lifestyle sectors. Stories included accounts of becoming 'smarter' or 'stronger' as a result of the experience. Thus, bullying was storied as transformational. For example, Brad explained,



'It was worse than going through my divorce, but, like that [experience], I came out smarter on the other end'. Months after our interview, Deb sent an email saying the bully had been fired and claiming, 'Complaining and standing up and saying "no" has given me opportunities to grow stronger!! (more than I really wanted!). Today I can honestly say I am happy I stood up, because the greatest growth came with self respect'. As Goffman (1963: 11) suggests, stigmatized persons 'may ... see the trials [they] have suffered as a blessing in disguise, ... because of what ... suffering can teach one about life and people'. This theme was evident in interviews but only in the post-bullying phase.

For a few, bullying redirected their life 'mission' or 'purpose'. In these cases, abuse was re-storied into personal campaigns against bullying. Deb explained, 'Now that I know something about this stuff, it's my responsibility to help other nurses that are being abused at work and think it's their fault'. Surviving workplace bullying then developed into a moral imperative that drove new identities and rendered suffering valuable.

**Failed restructuring.** Some efforts at restructuring failed. Two participants explained that the trauma completely fractured their lives: beliefs in themselves, family relationships and fundamental notions of who they were in relation to the external world. For Kim and Greg, self-identity was splintered to a degree that felt irreparable. Even months after the situation ended, Kim blamed herself for allowing others to abuse her, finding it even more unbelievable in retrospect. She continually reflected back on when her self-identity included being a 'good worker'. Kim explained, 'My work made me feel good about myself ... I just can't come to grips with it. How could it happen? Why'd it have to happen?'. The contradictory threads of her lived history simply could not be woven back together. She went on to say, 'I've just been ripped open by this experience'. Both Kim and Greg reported being so shattered that they were unable to rebuild a stable self-identity (at least at the time of the interview). Both had been away from the bullying environment over 12 months. Their experiences illustrate the devastating potential of both unimpeded workplace bullying and failed identity work.

## Theoretical and Methodological Discussion

This study develops the notion of intensive remedial identity work by establishing the types and goals of remedial identity work, expands the identity literature by examining identity work in the face of bullying, and extends bullying research by exploring its traumatic, stigmatizing makeup in relation to identity. Here, I clarify the key features of intensive remedial identity work as revealed by the analysis, explore findings in relation to other trauma/stigma identity work, and position human actors' identity work at the nexus of the modern-postmodern tension.



### ***Intensive Remedial Identity Work***

The empirical manifestations of intensive remedial identity work in response to workplace bullying allow for a fuller understanding of the construct. Three themes emerge from participants' narratives. First, this type of identity work is intensive due to the unique characteristics of work life. While work fulfills basic human needs (e.g. clothing, shelter), it also satisfies higher-level needs (e.g. self-actualization, social status). Threats to satisfying this range of needs necessarily engender passionate responses. Work is also a public, communal experience, so what happens at work, unlike unpleasant experiences at home, is neither private nor sequestered. Rather, mistreatment is often a matter of common knowledge, since others witness or hear about targets' negative, shaming or punishing treatment. Furthermore, work is generally mandatory. Most people *have* to work to earn a living, so targeted workers cannot easily avoid abusive work interactions.

Second, this kind of identity work is consciously goal-directed. Targeted workers feel compelled to justify themselves and their behaviour when confronted with accusations, threats and/or social ostracism. Identity work seeks to buttress preferred identity narratives, preserve narrative coherence, repair and restore image, neutralize 'othering' discourse and/or stabilize existential beliefs. Unlike everyday, unselfconscious identity work, this type of identity work mindfully seeks to adjust significant others' perceptions as well as self-perceptions.

Finally, although identity construction is often referred to as 'work' or 'struggle', trauma/stigma-engendered identity work entails far more effort than identity work in times of job transition or everyday conflicts between job requirements and 'authentic-self' perceptions. It takes substantial exertion; workers so engaged spend an inordinate amount of time on the three inter-related tasks of sensemaking, self-defense, and identity management. Given the effort required, the physiological effects targets report (e.g. exhaustion, insomnia) are not surprising.

### ***Trauma and Stigma in Organizational Settings***

Since working adults spend the majority of their waking hours in organizations, understanding trauma/stigma and identity work in these settings is essential. Except for particular occupations (e.g. hospitals, police), workers rarely anticipate being devastated by workplace experiences. Nor, when embarking on a job, do employees expect to be singled out for ridicule and degradation. However, the idea that organizations can be abusive, alienating, hurtful places is not new (Powell, 1998), despite the fact that bullying comes as a considerable shock to those targeted. Indeed, one of the unifying features of high modernity, globalized capitalism, likely contributes the trauma/stigma in organizations. Capitalist economics typically value profit/efficiency over human concerns (Lutgen-Sandvik and



McDermott, 2008) and thus promote workplaces marked by 'alienation, degradation, powerlessness, ... abuse and aggression' (Perrone and Vickers, 2004: 170).

What this study renders readily apparent is that identity work in response to workplace shock or degradation is quite similar to its counterparts outside organizations. Taking bullied workers as an example, like other trauma victims and stigmatized persons, targets are also forced to restructure identities within a strange, threatening landscape (Layton, 1995). To do this, they often seek interactions with others who have had similar experiences (e.g. Herman, 1997; Holbrook et al., 1999).

Targeted workers grieve the loss of their jobs and reputations in the same way others grieve losing good health, loved ones or marriages (Crossley, 2000; Degarmo and Kitson, 1996; Kubler-Ross, 1997; Layton, 1995; Sonnenfeld and Ward, 2007). They persistently recollect pre-trauma/stigma times in their lives (e.g. Degarmo and Kitson, 1996; Giddens, 1991; Gilmore, 2001) and employ 'progressive narratives' (Gergen and Gergen, 1997: 166) to convert bad to good. Like other stigmatized persons, targets reject tainted subject positions, develop moral imperatives that drive social activism, help others, and raise awareness (e.g. Ashcraft, 2000; Kaufman and Johnson, 2004). Targets also struggle with self-blame, and while fighting the stigmatizing actions of others, secretly participate in self-blame (Goffman, 1963). Although the foci of workplace trauma/stigma centres on employment-related matters, the related identity work is analogous to identity work in extra-organizational experiences.

### ***Mediating the Modern-Postmodern Tension***

Identity work, whether intra- or extra-organizational, underscores human actors' drive for stability, equilibrium, and predictability. As such, the ongoing modern-postmodern debate about self-identity (i.e. stable versus fragmented) rarely makes its way into everyday actors' discursive consciousness. Rather, identity work typically strives for stability and ontological security, despite conditions that may problematize achieving these. The drive for equilibrium is, most likely, due to the psychic pain of fragmentation, disconnection, and insecurity (Crossley, 2000; Layton, 1995)—pain clearly evident in bullied workers' self-narratives.

Granted, humans seek existential, self-narrative constancy in the face of competing discourses and paradoxical experiences. However, identity work is considered successful only to the degree that it maintains a consistently perceived self with which one is relatively comfortable. Human actors strive for and often achieve a stable self-identity despite increasing lifestyle options, diminishing traditional authorities, and rapid social change. The praxis of identity work, then, mediates the poles of modernism and postmodernism by ceaselessly pulling toward the former while grappling with the latter.



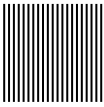
## **Methodological Implications**

The current study moves us toward a better understanding of identity work in organizational conditions. Like any single project, however, it has issues requiring qualification. I address two of these here: the use of in-depth interviews and stage-models. Interviews, in which participants narrate lived experiences, hold the best potential for understanding trauma/stigma-linked identity work. Although interviews do not render objective 'truths', they do provide a window for phenomenological understanding for comprehending experiences from the perspective of affected persons. In fact, I cannot objectively know whether participants were bullied; I know only that participants *believed* they were bullied. However, the perception of bullying was sufficient, given the study's focus, since descriptions of perceived bullying illustrate the reflexive process of identity work. In fact, identity work appeared to direct interviews. Underlying researcher-participant interactions was a sense that participants wanted information, empathy, and, more than these, *to be believed*. As such, interviews provided many examples of how targets performed identity work.

Phase models, like interviews, also have strengths and weaknesses. Phase models of human behaviour in complex organizations run the risk of glossing differences and suggest linear progression from one stage to the next despite the complexity of participant experiences. On the other hand, participant stories did indicate breaking points that suggested phases. The movement from a slight perception of 'something wrong' to clear recognition of being targeted marked a noteworthy shift in identity work. Similarly, the cessation of bullying marked the beginning of re-storying the post-trauma self. As such, the phase model helped to organize and represent a complex, 'messy', long-term experience, but necessarily did so with some loss of detail.

## **Future Research**

This project suggests a number of fruitful areas for future research on identity work. Comparing and/or contrasting men and women's identity work in the face of workplace bullying, trauma or stigma are important avenues for future research. Whether men's or women's identity work differs in these situations has received little attention. Moreover, identity work likely differs across national cultures. This study specifically looked at the experiences of US workers, and research might explore the similarities/differences in identity work among different national cultures. Finally, identity research suggests that people constitute life narratives by incorporating a variety of lifestyle sectors, in particular work and nonwork domains (Ibarra, 1999). This study also suggests that crisis in the worklife domain negatively effects the family domain, reducing the family sector's usefulness for identity work. Further examination is needed to explore the impact of crisis in one identity domain on other domains of identity and what this 'contagion' might mean for the reflexive project of the self.



## Conclusion

Workplace bullying triggers intensive remedial identity work, especially in individualistic cultures where even respect and dignity are considered things one must earn (Collinson, 2003). For persons who strongly identify with their jobs or professions, the experience can be devastating. This study explains, in part, why bullying is so damaging: it rends asunder targeted workers' life narratives. Self-narratives are, in a sense, anchors that ground human actors in a world that is in constant flux. When this narrative is deeply disrupted, persons lose their moorings and are cast adrift.

## Notes

- 1 Workplace bullying, mobbing, employee emotional abuse and non-sexual generalized harassment are synonymous.
- 2 Given the similar dynamics of trauma and stigma, other organizational experiences that would most likely engender intensive remedial identity work include sexual, racial and ethnic harassment (Pryor and Fitzgerald, 2003; Schneider et al., 2000).

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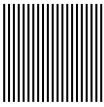
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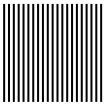
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