

## Abstract #93565

### Creating Healthy Work Environments 2019

#### Strengthening Workplace Health: The Significance of Administrative Recognition of Bullies' Story-Telling Proficiency

**Laura C. Dzurec, PhD, PMHCNS-BC, ANEF, FAAN**

*Connell School of Nursing, Boston College Connell School of Nursing, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA*

Everyone loves a good story. In fact, Fisher (1984) argued that stories tend to be more persuasive than are logical arguments. Stories put a name and a face to data that, in and of themselves, might seem not-all-that-interesting. Well-told stories illuminate lived experience, raising it to a level of understanding not accessible through facts alone, engaging listeners and helping them to relate to one another and to the story-teller through shared experience.

Stories are as significant in places of work as they are elsewhere. As Phillips and Brown (1993) noted decades ago, stories thrive in workplaces. Contributing to the character of workplace climate, stories are “constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by organization members and extraorganizational actors” (p. 1549). They act as metaphors to foster a collective knowing that conditions “understandings and actions” (Phillips & Brown, 1993, p. 1549) both within and beyond individual organizations, extending even to entire disciplines.

Nursing's primary story incorporates a central theme of 'caring.' Nursing as caring is so well-accepted and -situated that those external to nursing, the 'extraorganizational actors' of whom Phillips and Brown speak, frequently report amazement and frank disbelief when confronted with reports of nursing behaviors that are *un*-caring. Despite the predominating, caring image conveyed by nursing's story, however, nurses' actions sometimes are insensitive, or even wounding. In fact, despite its seeming unlikelihood in a context embodied as 'caring,' bullying is rampant in nursing, in the US and internationally. Bullying is a natural outgrowth of complex interactions in high-stress workplaces, and nursing is among them (Islam, Ahmed, & Ali, 2018).

Individuals choose their jobs, their careers, their vocations for myriad reasons. Sometimes they are forced into particular roles or positions; sometimes they choose their work actively and with intent. Regardless of how they come to the workplace, however, all individuals will find their actions and expectations both constrained and encouraged by the employing organization's underlying culture—its fundamental tradition of values and beliefs—and its climate—the emotional 'feel' of the organization (Schein, 1999). Environmental, personal, and leadership factors emerging as co-workers interact day-to-day will influence the climate dynamic. And as individuals experience personal needs, especially if those needs conflict with cultural or climatic expectations, opportunities for bullying will naturally arise.

To bully is to seek illegitimate power. In places of work, bullying is enacted through verbal and nonverbal behaviors aimed to enhance the power and prestige of the bully perpetrator, or to garner scarce social and/or material resources (Shorey & Dzurec, 2016). Bullying acts may be intentional or simply embody a perpetrator's 'reckless behavior' (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). Regardless of intent, however, bullying acts typically are subtle in nature, their parameters, like the parameters of all behavior in the workplace, constrained by features of workplace culture and climate. The subtlety of bullies' affronts belies the damage those affronts impart to individuals and to organizations as wholes. Over time, as day-to-day communications are discombobulated by bullies' communications, workplace bystanders become entangled in the bully's communication web. At that point, if the broadly-consistent findings of more than 30 years of research can be believed, bullying seems to become intractable. The workplace becomes toxic.

Administrators often turn a blind eye to complaints of bullying (Dzurec, 2013) and co-workers find that they cannot stem the tide of dysfunction that follows in the wake of bullies' assaults (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015, 2017). Allowed to continue unanswered, bullying will stymie the leadership efforts of even the most adept administrator, as it destroys workplace ambience and productivity; yet, naming and addressing the mechanisms that constitute bullying's impact—an impact that is only occasionally deemed 'illegal' (Curry, 2016)—seems to have evaded accomplishment.

This presentation reports findings of a critical hermeneutic analysis (Phillips & Brown, 1993) that focused on unearthing and closely examining the communication mechanisms that bullies employ to establish and sustain their power in workplaces. A central theme emerging from the analysis was bullies' story-telling proficiency. That proficiency was notable across a wide range of literature, representing experiences recounted in countries around the world. Additionally notable was the way bullies exploited story-telling, concocting narratives that were compelling even as they supported bullies in 'breaking the rules' of storytelling (Gergen & Gergen, 1987, p. 270)—all clandestinely and without being found out. Findings from the analysis indicated that bullies' success in telling well-fabricated stories incorporated three constituent aspects: first, bullies' skills in exploiting their own communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) or narrative agency (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015) while incorporating just enough truth in their accounts to urge belief; second, listeners' preferences for stories over more objective forms of information (Fisher, 1984), supporting a tendency to 'see' what they *already* believe (Ariely, 2008; Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2004; Lotto, 2017; Sontag, 1966); and, finally, organization administrators' tendency to rely on formal documents to guide their actions, while dismissing interpersonal, climate-related issues as insignificant (Dzurec, 2013; Westercamp, 2013).

Kendon (1992) noted that through codified workplace expectations "what is possible becomes delimited but, by the same token, expectations about what is possible can be set up" (p. 330). Bullies, through their skills in story-telling, foster unexpected possibilities in their workplaces, shifting workplace climate and undermining day-to-day relationships and interactions. As a consequence of their skills, "by carefully managing communication, and therefore the process of cultural production, (bullies)...can legitimate their positions and institute a form of social control that removes the need to exercise control directly" (Phillips & Brown, 1993, p. 1551). (parenthetical phrase added)

Organizational context, as it is expressed via climate, absolutely and silently constrains and shapes ethical decision-making (Wyld & Jones, 1997). Moreover, numerous authors (see, for example, Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Phillips et al., 2018; and Sparkman, 2018) have suggested that workplace bullying can be overcome through workplace administrators' skill and 'know-how.' Findings of this study suggest that administrative 'know how' may be founded in noting, acknowledging, and addressing bullies' powerful story-telling skills as the mechanism by which their affronts are leveled. Through this effort, administrators may begin to build a focused and effective response to bullies' affronts, one that might be replicated worldwide and contribute to enhancing workplace health. That response could be the stuff of a good (and legitimate) story.

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**Title:**

Strengthening Workplace Health: The Significance of Administrative Recognition of Bullies' Story-Telling Proficiency

**Keywords:**

bullying and subtle aggression, enhancing administrative skills and workplace relations

**References:**

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#### **Abstract Summary:**

Organizational context absolutely and silently shapes ethical decision-making. Researchers have suggested that a context of workplace bullying can be overcome through workplace administrators' "know-how". Findings of this study suggest that "know how" may be founded in noting, acknowledging, and addressing bullies' powerful story-telling skills as the mechanism grounding bullies' ersatz power.

#### **Content Outline:**

Key notion: Administrative role in strengthening healthy workplace environments via recognition of bullies' stories

- a. relevance of stories to listeners' interest
- b. prevalence and importance of stories in workplace environments
- c. influence of day-to-day interactions on workplace climate and shifting related stories
- d. bullying outlined with specific implications for workplaces
- e. overview of the way administrators are reported to deal with bullying reports, generally speaking
- f. significance of altering administrative responses to reports of bullying
- g. summary context of the research being presented, as it addresses points a-f, above
- h. specific findings of the research
- i. summary and implications for nursing and nursing education

First Primary Presenting Author  
**Primary Presenting Author**

Laura C. Dzurec, PhD, PMHCNS-BC, ANEF, FAAN  
Boston College Connell School of Nursing  
Connell School of Nursing  
Senior Scholar  
Maloney Hall  
Chestnut Hill MA  
USA

**Professional Experience:** Dr. Dzurec earned her BS at the University of Connecticut, her MS from The Ohio State University, and her PhD from Case Western Reserve University. Her research methods expertise is in qualitative, mixed methods, and post-structuralist approaches. Dr. Dzurec serves on numerous advisory boards, panels, and committees with Sigma Theta Tau, International, the American Psychiatric Nurses Association, and the National League for Nursing. Her extensive research in workplace bullying has contributed to understanding of this complex phenomenon and to building ways to address it more effectively.

**Author Summary:** Laura Dzurec is Senior Scholar in the Boston College Connell School of Nursing. Previously, she served as Dean at Widener University, Kent State University, and the University of Connecticut and held various posts at Oregon Health Science University, University of Maine, The Ohio State University, Kent State University, and Case Western Reserve University. She is a Fellow in the National League for Nursing's (USA) Academy of Nursing Education and the American Academy of Nursing.