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The Communicative Cycle of Employee Emotional Abuse:  
Generation and Regeneration of Workplace Mistreatment

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Abstract

Employee emotional abuse (EEA) is repetitive, targeted, and destructive communication by more powerful members toward less powerful members in the workplace. It is costly, widespread, and may be the precursor to workplace aggression and violence. In this paper, I synthesize extant research findings with my own managerial experience into a comprehensive gestalt of EEA as a communicative process that evolves, escalates, and moves to new targets when earlier targets exit the organization. The model proposed depicts a six-stage cycle that provides a means for (a) understanding the dynamics of abuse, (b) recognizing the indicators of abuse, (c) controlling or stopping the abuse, and (d) predicting the development of unchecked abuse. Practical implications of the model and areas for future research are identified.

The Communicative Cycle of Employee Emotional Abuse:  
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Over 90% of adults experience psychological and emotional abuse at some time during the span of their work careers (Hornstein, 1996). The supervisors who inflict psychological abuse on subordinates represent one of the most frequent and serious problems confronting employees in today's workforce (Yamada, 2000). While the television news is quick to report the rare but sensational incidents of disgruntled employees returning to their former workplaces seeking revenge (e.g., *Honolulu Advertiser*, 1999), rarely do we see stories of employee humiliation and psychological violence perpetrated by more powerful organizational members. Research indicates a link between workplace abuse and workplace violence as the aggressor becomes increasingly more threatening to targeted employees (Namie & Namie, 2000). In addition to increased threats of violence from abusers (Leymann, 1990), employees who feel unfairly treated may express their anger and outrage in subtle acts of retaliation against their employers, including work slowdown or covertly sabotaging the abuser (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). As reported in a government study, "the cost to employers is untold hours and dollars in lost employee work time, increased health care costs, high turnover rates, and low productivity" (BNA, 1990, p. 2).

Employee emotional abuse (EEA) is a repetitive, targeted, and destructive form of communication directed by more powerful members at work at those less powerful. As Yamada (2000) argued, "Intimidating, mean-spirited, manipulative, and sometimes high-decibel behaviors are not unusual workplace occurrences, especially from supervisors and managers" (p. 477). In support of Yamada's claim, one study estimated that approximately one in four

managers abuse their employers (BNA, 1990). In another study, over 97% of nurse managers reported experiencing abuse (Cox, Braun, Christle, Walker & Tiwanak, 1991), while 60% of retail industry workers (Ellis, 2000), 23% of faculty and university staff (Price Spatlan, 1995), and 53% of business school students (Rayner, 1997) reported abuse at work. Evidence of employee abuse was found in a wide variety of organizations, including hospitals, universities, manufacturing plants, research industries and social service agencies (e.g., Ashforth, 1994; Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Hjelt-Back, 1994; Meares, Oetzel, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2002; Keashly, 2001).

EEA is also quite costly, in that it (a) refocuses employee energy from productivity to self-protection (Hirigoyen, 1998; Wyatt & Hare, 1997); (b) results in staff turnover and burnout (Infante & Gorden, 1985; Rayner & Hoel, 1997); (c) intensifies the use of sick leave (Thomas-Peter, 1997); (d) increases medical and workers' compensation claims due to occupational stress (Bassman, 1992); (e) results in hiring costly consultants (author's experience); and (f) leads to out of court settlements, legal fees and litigation (Kontorovich, 2001). Additionally, communication and teamwork break down (Lockhart, 1997), and organizations lose credibility and suffer loss of good reputations (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 1999). Considering the high incidence of EEA, the costs to employees and organizations, and the potential for abuse to become aggression or violence, it is a crucial area for research and theoretical development. In view of the fact that workplace abuse is perpetrated *by and through communication* and is often the result of an antagonistic use of language within organizations, the issue should be a key area of interest to organizational communication scholars.

Extant research on EEA is rich in both frequency data and case studies, each exploring unique, sometimes discrete aspects of workplace abuse. Researchers have examined the forms,

characteristics, effects, and extent of EEA in an assortment of organizations. Investigations explore areas such as organizational position of abusers, incidence of abuse in specific populations, organizational response to abuse, and effects of abuse on both targets and organization (e.g., Cox, et al., 1991; Gorden & Infante, 1987; Sheenan, Sheenan, White, Leibowitz, & Baldwin, 1990; Waldron, 2000). What is lacking is a conceptual synthesis of workplace abuse extrapolated from this body of research and presented as a whole rather than a collection of parts. Providing such a synthesis is the primary objective of this article. The cycle described herein offers a conceptual construction of EEA as a gestalt or whole that evolves, intensifies, and regenerates through identifiable stages or levels of abuse. It is based on an analysis of current research findings as well as the author's experience as an administrator.

The model predominantly focuses on top-down emotional abuse and as such, conceptualizes organizations as the "sites of domination and exploitation" (Mumby & Putnam, 1992, p. 465). Research indicates that, while coworkers are at times abusive to other coworkers, the overwhelming majority--from 70-90%--of abusive communication is perpetrated by superiors toward subordinates (e.g., Beasley & Rayner, 1997; Ellis, 2000; Harlos & Pinder, 1999; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2002; Keashly, 2001). This article describes abusive superior-subordinate communication and is organized in the following manner. First, EEA is conceptualized and discussed in relation to muted group theory. Second, I explain Leymann's (1990) linear depiction of mobbing, which he described as repetitive, psychological workplace abuse. Third, I present a developmental, cyclical model of EEA's progression and regeneration. I conclude with both practical and theoretical implications and suggest avenues for future investigation.

## Conceptualizing EEA

For the purposes of this article, EEA is defined as targeted, repetitive workplace communication that is unwelcome and unsolicited, violates standards of appropriate conduct, results in emotional harm, and occurs in relationships of unequal power (Keashly, 2001). EEA has also been labeled workplace mistreatment (Price Spatlen, 1995), workplace aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1996), workplace harassment (Bjorkqvist, et al., 1994), verbal abuse (Cox, et al., 1991), psychological abuse (Sheenan, et al., 1990), and psychological violence (IWTB, 2002). These terms and the definitions given by cited authors, fundamentally represent the same form of workplace abuse. The terms mobbing (Leymann, 1990) and workplace bullying (Adams, 1992) are similar in meaning and involve superior-subordinate abuse that sets abuse into motion but also include the phenomenon of workers “ganging up” on abuse targets. Labeling or naming EEA is problematic because a distinct and agreed upon terminology is lacking in the research. Unlike sexual harassment, which is named and defined by law in the United States and other countries, workplace abuse is without a specific, unified vernacular. The disparity of language used by researchers to describe EEA gives us some insight into the difficulty abuse targets face when attempting to describe their experiences (Keashly, 2001). The lack of an established discourse “encoding...experience into the received language of society” (Griffin, 2003, p. 495) serves to mute targets’ experiences.

This lack of available language to express unique subjectivities--individual experiences--is central to muted group theory (MGT), a theory that stems from the critical perspective. MGT is particularly helpful at illuminating the experience of EEA. While muted group theory emerged from the field of anthropology (Ardener, 1975), it was later adopted by communication scholars

to address the barriers to communication of traditionally marginalized groups such as women (Kramarae, 1981) and African American men (Orbe, 1994). According to Kramarae,

The language of a culture does not serve all speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men. (p. 1)

Kramarae (1981) postulates three basic assumptions about men, women and language that are applicable to superior-subordinate communication. First, due to the experiences particular to men and women “that are rooted in the division of labor” (p. 3), women comprehend the world in different ways than men. Second, because of their role as a dominant group, the commonly held male world view obstructs women’s alternative representations. Third, in order to participate in society, women must reframe their own experiences into the accepted male linguistic system, a system that often does not include words to adequately describe women’s experiences.

Additionally, MGT hypothesizes that as women continue to “consciously and verbally reject” (p. 4) the dominant discourse, common public expressions will change. This change is evident in the use of terms like “sexism” and “sexual harassment,” terms that did not exist fifty years ago. As is evident from a look at the basic assumptions of MGT, it does not mean the muted group is silent. For employees, as for women, the issue is whether workers can freely say what they want at any time or place, or whether they must re-encode their thoughts to make them more acceptable and understood in the domain of work (Ardener, 1993).

The linguistic muting described by MGT is exacerbated by a related type of muting common to employees in the workplace. People organize and structure their experiences,

interactions and realities through language (Spender, 1984). In the workplace, organizational language is dominated by persons with access to structural (hierarchical) power. As such, the dominant language is often reflective of productivity or other organizational goals and may not reflect subordinate employees' workplace experiences. MGT is particularly helpful in illuminating the power differences inherent in language between superiors and subordinates. For example, human resource managers, guided by organizational management prerogatives, create the language of personnel policies and employee handbooks that guide and are the basis for evaluation of subordinate behavior. When subordinates fail to perform within these guidelines, the superior's version of reality is primarily spoken or formally documented while the subordinate's is secondarily considered, if at all. As such, the subordinate's workplace experience remains muted. In this and a number of other ways, management's language becomes the dominant discourse defining "truth."

I argue that the workplace mutes all employees to some degree. They enter the organization in a relatively muted state and wait for directions (implicit or explicit) from more powerful or experienced members about appropriate actions, communications, and behaviors, which they acquire through orientation and other forms of socialization. Muting subordinates is inherent to most supervisor-subordinate communication and may be purposely used as a means of control. The most egregious level of silencing occurs when employees experience targeted abuse. Drawing on MGT, the following model of EEA describes how abuse begins, escalates and regenerates once the initial target leaves the organization.

### Developmental Model of Employee Emotional Abuse

I owe the initial stages of this conceptualization to the work of Heinz Leymann (1990), a Swedish physician and researcher, who pioneered research in what he referred to as workplace mobbing, a phenomenon nearly synonymous with EEA. Leymann's definition of mobbing is: hostile and unethical communication [that] is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual. ... These actions take place often (almost every day) and over a long period (at least for six months) and, because of this frequency and duration, result in considerable psychic, psychosomatic and social misery (p.120).

Leymann developed a linear model of workplace mobbing that includes four phases. In phase 1, the original or critical incident, some triggering event brings the target to the negative attention of powerful organizational members. Phase 2, mobbing and stigmatizing, is characterized by consistent, repetitive manipulation of the target by attacks on reputation, social isolation, criticism, and threats. In phase 3, personnel administration, targets go to upper management with their concerns and the target is re-victimized by upper management (e.g., branding the target as a troublemaker). Phase 4, expulsion, is self-explanatory: the abuser fires or transfers the target, or the target quits. While Leymann's model provides a good base for understanding EEA, it does little to highlight the communicative or cyclical aspects of the phenomenon.

My reconceptualization of EEA is a result of analyzing published case studies (e.g. Beasley & Rayner, 1997; Bies & Tripp, 1998; Harlos & Pinder, 1999, 2000; Hirigoyen, 1998; Hornstein, 1996; Keashly, 1998, 2001; Namie & Namie, 2000; Rayner, 1997; Wyatt & Hare, 1997) as well as data gathered during my experience as a management executive. My experience includes eight years as the executive director of two organizations and provides a number of

relevant case studies. Over this period, I informally intervened in over 30 supervisor-subordinate disputes and formally interceded in six major occurrences of EEA. These situations were handled using a variety of interventions that included bringing in outside consultants or personally mediating the employee's complaint of mistreatment. Analyzing these experiences, I began to recognize a cyclical pattern in supervisors' mistreatment of subordinates. It was common for the abusing supervisor to single out a new target once the old target quit or was fired.

By synthesizing published case study data and work experience, I propose an extension of Leymann's model and reconceptualize the cyclical stages of EEA as (a) initial incident--cycle generation, (b) progressive discipline, (c) turning point, (d) organizational ambivalence, (e) isolation and silencing, and (f) expulsion--cycle regeneration. (See Figure 1).

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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In the following discussion, I describe each stage, illustrate the stage dynamics with targets' experiences, and clarify the conditions that move the process from one stage to the next. Each phase can also be conceptualized as a level or degree of EEA since abuse and the effects of abuse on targets intensify over time. The stages are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, may vary depending on the situation, and are intended to be illustrative of the progressive and escalating nature of workplace emotional abuse. Individual circumstances, settings, and actors may of course change the dynamics of this communication pattern of development. Additionally, although some targets may experience EEA for years in their jobs (Leymann, 1990) it is not uncommon for other targets to exit organizations before reaching later stage abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2002; Rayner, 1997). In the ensuing sections, *target* is used to indicate the person experiencing EEA and *abuser* is used to indicate the person perpetrating the abuse.

*Stage One: Initial Incident—Cycle Generation*

Muted group theory suggests that while both superiors and subordinates generate models of the world, when there is a discrepancy between the two, the issue is most likely to be resolved in favor of the superiors' view (Spender, 1984). This is evident in the initial incident, an event that triggers or starts the cycle of abuse into motion. Examples of triggering events include starting a new job or getting a new boss (Rayner, 1997), a conflict over work (Leymann, 1990), clash of personalities or values, increased pressure on managers (Hornstein, 1996), or a change in either the supervisor's or employee's personal life (Hirigoyen, 1998). An employee may argue or disagree with his or her supervisor, fail to carry out an assignment within a required time frame, call in sick on a crucial day to a supervisor's timetable, or get caught talking negatively about the supervisor behind his or her back (author's experiences). A formerly dedicated employee may announce her pregnancy or refuse to give in to a boss's authoritarian procedures (Hirigoyen, 1998). Ultimately, the subordinate behaves or performs in a manner interpreted as unacceptable in the dominant view of management.

*Target experience.* In Rayner's (1997) research, the most commonly reported occurrence coinciding with the onset of abuse was getting a new boss or starting a new job: "A surprising number (19%) are bullied almost immediately on starting their new posts. The recent job change and a change in manager account for 82% of the offered events relating to bullying onset" (p. 203). The following illustrates the changes for one employee, after his transfer to a new job and a new boss. Ron was a 20-year employee at the time of the initial incident:

Ron's [new] supervisor, Raymond, was fifteen years younger than the staff he managed...[and] was on the fast track.... Ron found Raymond to be overly controlling and belittling from the beginning. The supervisor was minutely critical, insisting that work be done over to correct minor errors that would have been acceptable to past

supervisors...Ron could never do the job well enough to suit Raymond. (Wyatt & Hare, 1997, p. 140)

In this situation, it seems that Ron had few performance problems before the initial incident--the arrival of a new manager. After the assignment of his new supervisor, Ron was unable to perform in a manner that avoided criticism.

The initial incident can also be linked to an increase in pressure on supervisory staff that is subsequently translated into employee abuse. For example, downsizing, and the resulting stresses it creates for supervisory staff, can mark the point where a previously fair supervisor becomes abusive. The following illustrates an employee's efforts to speak with his supervisor about the abuse:

I described how desperate the situation was, how he had changed since the downsizing and reorganization. He never denied any of it. You know what he said? "Fuck you! I got pressures on me that you wouldn't believe. I'm dying and you're crying. You count who's being kicked out into the street from this place: guys like me. And I've got to cover what I was doing and whatever gets dropped when they disappear. I've got no time for your bullshit. My ass in on the line and fuck you if you think I'm going to worry about your ass." (Hornstein, 1996 pp. 25-26)

Clearly there are external pressures on organizations that increase internal pressures and contribute to EEA. In my experience, increases in regulatory demands, state or federal funding requirements or accreditation provisions closely correlated with increases in subordinate targeting. For overworked staff members in service agencies, the added pressure of external auditors (e.g., accreditation bodies, funding sources, third-party insurance carriers, Medicaid

representatives) and corresponding increases in reporting requirements triggered frustration and efforts to “pin the blame” on specific employees.

*Progression.* The initial incident becomes emotional abuse when the aggressive communication continues but the substance of the incident is not addressed directly and the issues are not dealt with constructively (Wyatt & Hare, 1997) as is evident in the downsizing experience outlined above. As a result, the emotions related to the conflict may linger and escalate. Typically, this phase is short and the next phase develops as soon as the target notices personally stigmatizing actions (Leymann, 1990). EEA moves from the initial incident (stage one) to stage two when the supervisor repeatedly uses organizationally sanctioned disciplinary procedures that, while intended to improve performance, instead camouflage the abuse.

*Stage Two: Progressive Discipline*

Nowhere is the control of language more apparent than in the formal documentation of unsatisfactory subordinate performance. While Leymann’s (1990) model of mobbing does not address the dynamics of progressive discipline and due process, I argue that this is a key stage in the communicative process of EEA. In the progressive discipline process, the real power of management to construct and control the dominant discourse defining “reality” emerges as the non-dominant subordinates’ experiences are muted and distorted.

In the U.S., at least, because of wrongful termination and other employee lawsuits, organizations tend to follow and document the steps of due process--that is, provide fair warning and opportunity to improve performance--to avoid such proceedings (Kontorovich, 2001; Matusewitch, 1996). Human resource departments are “always very concerned about having justified their actions in terminating an employee” (Heller, 2001, p. 43); they are fearful that if a subordinate is fired without such justification, the likelihood of legal action against the

organization increases (Fairhurst, Green & Snavely, 1986). Because of this concern, “some are trying to force employees out by adopting psychological torture techniques, such as loss of perks or public humiliation” (Lesly, 1992, p. 52).

Emotional abusers appear to be particularly skilled at appearing to provide constructive feedback because the organization formally requires it. The extremes to which managers go to build a verbal and written case against the target suggest that this is done to “make...action *appear* justifiable and reasonable to all parties” (Fairhurst, et al., 1986, p. 569, emphasis in original). They are inclined to systematically distort these communicative processes if they want to get rid of an employee (author’s experience), and since the more powerful member creates the documenting language, they author the formal record of “what occurred.” Rather than improve performance, this form of chronic criticism more often unnerves targets (Lockhart, 1997) and results in further poor performance that substantiates the abuser’s initial claims of incompetence (Wyatt & Hare, 1997).

*Target experience.* Abuse reframed as progressive discipline often begins in a benign manner with casual or offhand comments about work performance. Messages can be verbalized as continued complaints about work without stipulating the desired changes (Tracy, Van Dusen, & Robinson, 1987). Criticism is initially verbal and subsequently followed by written documentation that becomes a part of the employee’s permanent personnel record (Fairhurst, et al., 1986). The following is an example of criticism used to wear down employees and move toward their departure:

He would tell them that their work was of deteriorating quality and needed doing again. Attacking their work went on for some time, during which the individuals would begin to work longer and longer hours, often into the night, in order to produce work that met his

approval, though it rarely did...[I]t would be on personal files that they would be supported and encouraged to “get better.” (Lockhart, 1997, p. 196)

Lockhart goes on to say that the targets of this abuser invariably left their jobs.

When supervisors want to get rid of employees, documentation can be conjured up where it had not previously existed. During my time as an agency director, I intervened with four supervisors who wanted to recreate and document past interactions with an employee (two dating back over the period of more than a year) in order to build a case for employment termination. Supervisors also secretly document employee shortcomings. The following example illustrates such written documentation:

She [my boss] listened as I explained [why I was]...upset.... She assured me that I would get it all back together in due time, and that was the end of our chat....[T]hree months later...I was reassigned to another supervisor. My new supervisor asked me if I was familiar with all the write-ups in my performance binder...I was shocked to find a write up of my frustrated chat months earlier that stated that I was “angry” and demonstrated a “poor attitude.” (Hornstein, 1996, pp. 57-58)

Written disciplinary action that is never discussed with the employee cannot improve work performance. More than likely, such tactics provide justification for future disciplinary actions, should they be needed, and create a “paper trail” used to legitimate punishment or future employment termination. The subordinate’s voice is not only muted in this interaction but, in most instances, completely missing from the formal record.

*Progression.* Continued surveillance as evidenced by numerous verbal corrections and written warnings put the employee on a state of constant alert (Keashly, 2001). While the repetitive quality of critical communication emerges in the beginning of stage two, it escalates

into stage three as targets begin to feel fearful, intimidated, degraded, and manipulated (Beasley & Rayner, 1997; Hirigoyen, 1998). The repeated criticism and misused progressive discipline process pushes the cycle of abuse to a *turning point*.

*Stage Three: Turning Point*

During stage three, the abuser's communication becomes increasingly negative, personal and bombastic. As suggested by muted group theory, the dominant group member (abuser) controls the substance and form of communication with the non-dominant group member (target). The four main communicative dynamics in this stage are escalated repetition, reframing, branding, and support seeking. Repetitive criticism changes the focus of disciplinary communication from performance improvement to targeting for removal (Lockhart, 1997). As any small error becomes the subject of further correction, criticism or negative attention, the target develops a feeling of alarm (Namie & Namie, 2000) and becomes hypervigilant (Wyatt & Hare, 1997). When targets attempt to give voice to their experiences, abusers often reframe the former exchanges and describe the situation very differently than targets' experiences; this experience is central to muted group theory. Reframing challenges the target's experiences of reality and reinforces the dominant discourse of corporate management. Abusers also couple reframing with branding--blaming the target. Branding shifts the blame for abuse to the target by labeling the target as troublemakers or problem employees (Beasley & Rayner, 1997). To defend against the overwhelming negative messages from more powerful organizational members, targets naturally seek the support of people they trust. Peer support seeking is not exclusive to this stage but as supervisory attacks amplify, targets increasingly share their feelings with others to gain emotional support and emotional release (Ray & Miller, 1991), make sense of their

experiences (Andersen & Guerrero, 1998) or diffuse some of the emotional intensity of the situation (Gaines & Jermier, 1983).

*Target experience.* The following illustrates a target's experience with repetitive criticism and how she became aware that things at work had taken a negative turn:

You become aware that something is wrong. You don't seem to be able to do anything right. Though you continue to do the same good job as before, your good ideas are not recognized. Soon, you are questioning whether or not you have the capability to do your work at all. The more you try and improve, the more your boss or co-workers get angry at you. (Namie & Namie, 2000, p. 127)

Other examples of repetition include frequently calling targets at home to discuss work-related issues that do not need immediate attention (Harlos & Pinder, 1999), regularly communicating the abusers' dissatisfaction with targets to the targets' peers (Davenport, et al., 1999), habitually berating targets or the targets' ideas in staff meetings (Keashly, 2001), and persistently scrutinizing targets' work to find small errors (Wyatt & Hare, 1997).

Reframing the situation in the language of the abuser is also a characteristic of stage three EEA. In two different cases during employee-supervisor interventions, I witnessed supervisors' outright denial of the targets' viewpoint (e.g., "That's not what happened at all!"). Research findings parallel this experience and indicate that abusers minimize the target's concerns (Harlos & Pinder, 1999), implicitly question the target's ability to see reality (Keashly, 2001), and reassert the abuser's organizational power (Ashforth, 1994; Leymann, 1990). One woman's experience provides an example of reframing:

He [boss] dismissed [the employee's] concerns regarding his bullying behavior by denying having yelled at her in front of other staff "to get the fucking photocopier fixed

or get it removed!” and telling her, “if *I* say I wasn’t talking to you, I wasn’t talking to you!” (Harlos & Pinder, 1999, p. 110)

Reframing undermines the target’s ability to decode message meaning and subsequently recommunicate their experiences, essentially muting the target’s representations of reality. One of the basic assumptions of muted group theory is that the linguistic system of the dominant group does not include or recognize language that expresses the experiences of the muted group. A muted target in Keashly’s (2001) study notes, “I tried to [explain to my supervisor] but she just told me that I was . . . not seeing it in the way I should be seeing it, and in her opinion, I was wrong and she was right” (p. 244). This example illustrates how the abuser disregarded the target’s view and exemplifies an assumption of muted group theory: The dominant group often obstructs the non-dominant group’s alternative representations of experience. This kind of obstruction can be disturbing since “we typically think an event as real if two or more people see it happen and agree that they saw it happen” (Corman, 1995, p. 5).

Abusers may also couple reframing with branding the target in some negative way. In the following example, the CEO of a nonprofit describes his experience of being branded by the vice president, one of the board members who directly supervised him. “The rumor had been spread that I had had several small strokes and was in the beginnings of Alzheimer’s disease and was no longer competent and able to lead the organization” (Davenport, et al., 1999, p. 42). In this case, the board member aimed the message at involved others rather than directly at the target, potentially in an effort to gain support for the eventual removal of the CEO. In addition to building support for eventual firing, this sort of branding destabilizes and discourages the target. One of my experiences with an abusing supervisor in a clinical (therapeutic) setting was similar to this example. When a female employee claimed mistreatment from a specific clinical director,

the director reframed the issue by branding her as emotionally unstable. (e.g., “She has unresolved issues with her father and is projecting that on me.”)

The combination of repetition, reframing, and branding beleaguers the target and, as a result, targets tend to seek support from their workplace peers and family members (Harlos & Pinder, 1999; Wyatt & Hare, 1997). According to a woman in Keashly’s (2001) study, “You’re only supported by other people who are sympathetic to your situation because they’ve been there themselves” (p. 241). Targets also deal with and determine the meaning of their experiences in interactions with personal support systems (e.g., family members and friends). As Tracy (2000) argues, “Most people make sense of dialogues in light of and in contrast to dialogues from other parts of their lives” (p. 120). For example, Allan, a man interviewed by Davenport et al. (1999), talked about how he left the abusive workplace with his wife’s help: “I could not have done this without my wife. She was very helpful and supportive, and she had some good ideas. I was very fortunate that she was in my life--and that she still is” (p. 125).

Progression. Notwithstanding the support of work and family members, some targets feel compelled to report the abuse despite the professional dangers inherent in speaking out (Keashly, 2001). When targets can no longer tolerate the abuse and make the decision to seek help from upper management, the cycle of abuse moves into stage four.

#### *Stage Four: Organizational Ambivalence*

The point at which upper management--managers above the abuser in the organizational hierarchy--becomes involved marks a new phase in the cycle of abuse. Indeed, past research tells us that bringing in upper management “ups the ante,” increasing the potential losses or gains of participants (Davenport, et al., 1999; Leymann, 1990). This stage of abuse is informed by muted group theory as managers and upper management often join with the abuser to redefine the

abusive situation in ways that diminish or disregard targets' experiences. Some targets blame the organization as much as they do the abuser for continued EEA (Namie & Namie, 2000). When organizations respond by preventing further abuse, targets feel supported, valued and may return to a more optimistic state. This is a crucial juncture in the escalation of workplace abuse; at this point upper management has the potential to interrupt the cycle by giving voice to targets' experiences.

Certainly, not all targets experience this stage since not all targets take their complaints to upper management. Most research indicates that targets usually do not inform upper management (Beasley & Rayner, 1997; Harlos & Pinder, 1999; Keashly, Trott, & McLean, 1994; Lockhart, 1997), believing either nothing will be done (Cox, et al., 1991), or they will suffer retaliation (Harlos & Pinder, 1999; Leymann, 1990). On the other hand, in a recent study by Keashly (2001), the majority of respondents told someone in a position of authority about their experiences. The difference in this finding may be due to the study's self-selected sample; the researcher placed an advertisement in the newspaper and persons responded by volunteering to participate in the study.

When targets inform upper management about abuse, upper managers are nearly always hesitant to intervene in the problems between supervisors and their subordinate staff (Harlos & Pinder, 1999; Namie & Namie, 2000). When employees speak directly to upper management, they break the directional communication rules prescribed by the formal "chain of command." If upper management takes action on the target's complaint, this action can potentially set a precedent in which all disgruntled employees go to upper management and bypass direct supervisors (author's experience). Additionally, complaints about an abuser may imply criticism

of upper managers who placed the abuser in a position of responsibility (Beasley & Rayner, 1997).

*Target experience.* When upper management does get involved, the responses most commonly address making changes in the target rather than in the abuser. Keashly's (2001) study, in which a majority of targets told someone in a position of authority about the abuse, provides a rich variety of organizational responses. Organizational responses included (a) taking no action; (b) admitting there was a problem with the manager but doing nothing about it; (c) promising action but with no discernable outcome; (d) attributing the problem to a personality conflict; (e) asking the target to work around the problem; (f) directing some change in the target's behavior; (g) minimizing the target's complaint, while building up the abuser's abilities and value to the organization; (h) branding the target as a trouble maker or insubordinate; (i) retaliating against the target; and in some cases, (j) formally disciplining or removing the abuser. As mentioned earlier, if upper management successfully intervenes, the cycle subsides. However, most research indicates that upper management fails to take action that stops the abuse (e.g., Davenport, et al., 1999; Harlos & Pinder, 1999; Namie & Namie, 2000; Rayner, 1997).

The following target voices a typical sentiment of those who complain to upper management and do not get satisfactory results:

No one would do anything about him. He's been promoted more than once since this, despite the fact that he has an entirely negative reputation with anyone who is his direct report. . . .But he is carried along by this Mafia of bosses who just defend him. . . . So all the feedback and complaints from workers are dismissed by these people. (Hornstein, 1996, p. 112)

Another woman discusses upper management's efforts to make changes in the targets rather than the abuser:

Constant appeals were made to my boss's superiors for help. . . . Finally, we were all called to a meeting . . . when our boss was away. . . . But we were shocked, [the consultant the organization hired] was going to help us think through ways of dealing with difficult bosses. (Hornstein, 1996, p. 117)

*Progression.* If upper management fails to intervene or interventions fail to prevent further abuse, the cycle progresses to stage five. Targets learn that the organization does not want to hear about the problem and decide to either stop speaking up if they had previously been vocal, or if they had not voiced concerns, to stay silent altogether (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991; Wyatt & Hare, 1997). When the power structure--both the abuser and upper management--have reframed the situation and branded the target as insubordinate, a troublemaker, a problem employee, or even mentally ill, peers may also assume the cause of the problem lies in the deviant personality of the target (Davenport, et al., 1999; Leymann, 1990). As the ongoing emotional dialogue wears out those close to the target, a decrease in social and family support may also accompany the loss of workplace alliances. A culmination of support loss, isolation and silencing moves the cycle to stage five.

*Stage Five: Isolation and Silencing*

While muting subordinates is not uncommon in top-down, supervisor-subordinate communication (Waldron & Krone, 1991), during the final stages of workplace abuse, fear and intimidation effectively silence both targets and audience. The abuser continues to manipulate the target's reputation through rumor, slander, ridicule (Davenport, et al., 1999), and increased efforts to reframe the situation and maintain the support of upper management (author's

experience). Despite the vivid media stories of violent ex-employees, it is at this stage that EEA becomes volatile, and abuser's efforts to push targets out of the organization can escalate into acts of aggression or threats of violence (Leymann, 1990; G. Namie, personal communication, October 20, 2002).

As abuse and fear escalate, public forums for resistance and making sense of abusive communication shrink or disappear entirely (Crawford, 1997; Wyatt & Hare, 1997). Fear of becoming a victim of abuse keeps other employees silent (Beasley & Rayner, 1997). For example, in a study of hotel chefs and support staff, Crawford (1997) reports that "what was striking was that as the bullying took place, the rest of the kitchen staff carried on as if nothing was happening, [which was] one consistent feature of bullying at work" (p. 222). However, MGT and Yamada's (2000) research suggest that when targets and audience do speak up, the cycle can be interrupted. MGT assumes that when the muted group purposefully and vocally rejects the dominant group's models of reality, doing so has the power to create new modes of expression. (Kramarae, 1981).

Unfortunately, most coworkers do not speak up in the face of collegial abuse, so targets are both silenced and separated from support. As abusers gain support and remain unchallenged, coworkers withdraw their support, effectively isolating targets (Davenport et al., 1999). Colleagues may withdraw their support out of fear of jeopardizing their employment (Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000), a fear that may be reinforced by the abuser (Davenport, et al., 1999). In addition to fearing reprisal, providing support for needy coworkers drains energy from workplace peers. Coworkers may become emotionally exhausted and withdraw support from colleagues who are too demanding, too needy, or take too much of their energy (Ray & Miller, 1991).

*Target experience.* In stage five, employees learn that it is not safe to express their views; this is reconfirmed by upper-management's response and the withdrawal of peer support. In an effort to secure personal safety, other employees may side with the abuser or withdraw from workplace interaction, creating an atmosphere of distrust and defensiveness. A support services manager in a large public organization described her observations of an abuser, employees' responses to abuse, and the resulting quality of communication in the workplace. The manager noted that employees spoke little about what was occurring and then only with

the proviso that they would deny what they had said, if [the abuser] found out. Staff relations as a group had completely broken down. No one trusted anyone and communication generally was abrupt and confrontational--a culture of defensiveness. New members of staff came and went, each one attempting to challenge what was happening only to either be singled out for more humiliation and personal, professional insults, or to become one of the "in" gang... The staff suffered in silence, feeling powerless to do anything about it. (Lockhart, 1997, p. 195)

In Harlos and Pinder's (1999) study, a target described her decision and the decision of others in her work team to stay silent: "He [the manager] would question everything and turn it around this way and that. It was like an interrogation of criminals, trying to get us to confess things. We'd get exhausted. We didn't even want to answer anymore" (p. 110). In my experience, when targets argued or otherwise tried to assert their side of a conflict, abusers cut them off, raised their voices to silence targets, and threatened employment termination. In an action that further increases the isolation of abuse targets, abusers may challenge the rare coworker who continues to communicate with and support the target, implying that such

encouragement could be detrimental to the supportive colleague. For example, Davenport et al. (1999) reported an example of an abuser's response when a coworker sided with the target:

I was asked by my boss [the abuser], "Why are you talking to her? You show compassion for her," is the message I got. He ridiculed her. They would all laugh, roll their eyes.

Dehumanizing. Demoralizing. I was a basket case. She was a basket case. (p. 133)

Coworkers and family members can also become emotionally exhausted and withdraw support. The following illustrates the experience of a target's wife:

I emotionally supported him for many years, and then I couldn't do it any longer. I started to ignore him. I wanted to run away. When he was at home, he just sat on the sofa, writing down these incidents. . . . It made me crazy. He became invisible to me because I could not stand to look at him like this. Every day he went into a crazy workplace. And every day I wanted to run away. (Davenport et al., 1999, p. 124)

Whether it is a result of emotional exhaustion, self-interest, or fear, coworkers and family members may distance themselves from the target both physically and communicatively (Cox, 1999; Hirigoyen, 1998). Targets report feeling "trapped and alone in their experiences with no help or understanding from inside or outside the system" (Wyatt & Hare, 1997, p. 13).

*Progression.* When the target can no longer tolerate the situation—that is, when peer support has fallen away, voices of resistance are silenced, and upper management fails to successfully intervene--targets leave the organization if they have not exited at an earlier stage (Harlos & Pinder, 1999). There is some evidence that coworkers purposely urge targets to leave by avoiding them or increasing peer communication with others (Cox, 1999). When targets voluntarily or involuntarily exit the organization, the cycle moves to stage six.

*Stage Six: Expulsion and Cycle Regeneration*

The final stage of EEA, at least for individual targets, occurs when the employee separates from the organization. Expulsion can be either involuntary, in the form of extended suspension or employment termination, or voluntary, in the form of extended sick leave or the target deciding to quit. Of course, this type of “voluntary” separation is not really voluntary at all; it is more correctly referred to as *constructive discharge*, which simply means that intolerable working conditions drove the target to quit (Matusewitch, 1996). Essentially, working conditions are constructed to force the person to leave.

Leymann’s (1990) model ends with expulsion; however, published research and my own experience suggest that expulsion of the target does not end the cycle of workplace abuse for organizations, abusers, or other targets (Davenport, et al., 1999; Lockhart, 1997; Harlos & Pinder, 1999). While a specific employee’s exit may temporarily relieve the tension of an abusive work environment, each removal of an employee increases the silencing and fear levels of the remaining workers. The period of relief is short, however, as the abuser begins to focus frustration and criticism on another target who begins to emerge as an “identified” problem.

This regeneration of the abuse cycle suggests that the problem does not reside in a specific problem employee but is an explicitly or implicitly supported norm of the organizational culture. This norm reflects the organization’s failure to allow and listen to alternative voices. While individual supervisors perpetrate employee abuse and some may have the personality traits of a bully (Namie & Namie, 2000), it seems too simplistic to lay all the blame at the feet of supervisors. Research indicates that effectively interrupting the cycle may require more than just removing, retraining, or disciplining the abuser (Hornstein, 1996; Stohl & Schell, 1991). Ending the cycle means organizations must encourage rather than obstruct the expression of employees’

alternative workplace experiences, despite the possibility that those experiences may not mirror management's perspective. As illustrated by target experiences, the cycle regenerates after a brief reprieve or calm period.

*Target experience.* One employee talked about her colleagues' beliefs that once the offending targets were removed, the abusive treatment would cease. She noted,

Eventually, I think most were sickened by [the abuser's] behavior. But initially they thought it was the CEO's style and it would change after some of the victims were out of the organization...After a calm period, though, he started in on others (Davenport, et al., 1999, p. 61).

Similarly, a human resources staff member in a public organization described expulsion and the regeneration of EEA:

If ...the individual did not somehow manage to recover his/her [formerly favored] position with [the abuser], then disciplinary action would always be started. . . .

Invariably, the individual would go on long-term sick leave, be demoted, fired or moved.

The department would watch and wait to see who would be next (Lockhart, 1997, p. 196).

Thus, the regeneration of the cycle of EEA seems quite common, despite employees' wishes that the abuse end with expulsion. My experience mirrors this period of calm followed by a new target's emergence.

*Progression.* The effect of abuse potentially spreads into other aspects of the targets' lives (Richman, Rospenda, Nawyn & Flaherty, 1997). Considering the long-term psychic damage reported by many targets (e.g., Hirigoyen, 1998; Hornstein, 1999; Leymann, 1990), one could conceptualize an additional stage consisting of communicative repair efforts after leaving

the organization. Such a stage is crucially important yet beyond the scope of this article; however, it is revisited in directions for future research.

### Discussion

The *generation and regeneration* cycle of EEA developed herein synthesizes extant research findings into a comprehensive gestalt of EEA as a communicative process that evolves, escalates and moves to new targets when the initial target exits the organization. This model gives voice to the growing discourse about employee mistreatment at the hands of more powerful organizational members and examines the communicative aspects of EEA. Additionally, this effort expands muted group theory beyond gender to include communication between and among dominant and non-dominant workplace groups.

### *Practical Implications*

This analysis suggests implications for organizational practice. First, we must attend to the communicative structures of organizations that support employee abuse and seek ways to stop employee mistreatment. In part, this means providing space for alternative expressions of workplace experience, those unique to subordinate staff. What we know is that the abuse cycle generally repeats until the work group is restructured (Stohl & Schell, 1991), the abusing supervisor is removed (Davenport, et al., 1999), a concerted audience gives voice to the abuse (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991), or upper management formally intervenes or reevaluates its human resource management philosophy (BNA, 1990). Organizations must examine workplace values and norms, chastise abusers, and develop a zero-tolerance stance toward abusive supervisory behavior. As one report concluded, "Simply firing managers without changing the corporate culture does little to prevent their successors from also being abusive" (BNA, 1990, p. 6). Rather,

upper management must transform the corporate environment from which such abusive behavior emerges.

Second, the model of EEA described herein provides a powerful tool for managers. It illustrates the early warning signs of abuse such as repetition, reframing, and branding; awareness of these signs can facilitate the detection and prevention of abuse. Additionally, the model identifies the dangers inherent in progressive discipline practices, namely that legal requirements for due process have the potential to set the stage for targeted employee abuse. It illustrates the phenomena of isolation and silencing in late-stage EEA. The model and its narrative critically portray the role of upper management in either stopping the abuse or further victimizing employees. Furthermore, the model suggests that the cycle of abuse does not stop when a targeted employee separates from the organization but regenerates in a new cycle with different targets. Finally, it speaks to the importance of employee voice. Managers and coworkers alike need to accept targets' experiences as valid representations of organizational reality. Coworkers' and targets' concerted voice has the power to alter the management-dominant workplace discourse.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The view of EEA outlined in this article extends muted group theory beyond the application to gender and initiates an examination of language formulation and its connection to power in relation to dominant and non-dominant workplace groups. Muted group theory suggests that language is developed and used in a manner that serves dominant groups and may not fully express non-dominant group experiences (Kramarae, 1981). I utilized this theory by investigating the language-based phenomenon of organizational power, specifically in superior-

subordinate relationships, and the ways that power may be enacted to create and maintain an environment that implicitly sustains workplace abuse.

The framework proposed builds on Kramarae's (1981) basic assumptions of muted group theory in relation to the characteristics of superior-subordinate communication. Specifically, I argued that subordinates observe and experience the workplace differently from management because of subordinates' different experiences and activities rooted in the division of labor and in organizational hierarchies. Because of their organizational, political and economic dominance, and the power to provide or deny subordinates' livelihood, management's view and expression of "reality" mutes or obstructs the free expression of the subordinates' alternative experiences of the workplace. In order to safely participate in the workplace, subordinates must transform their own experiences into the acceptable language forms of management's system of expression, even when those forms do not accurately express subordinates' lived experiences. It is only when organizational members at all levels openly interrogate the dominant discourse that the cycle is interrupted.

#### *Directions for Further Research*

The model of EEA proposed and the integration of extant research findings suggest a number of thought-provoking areas for further research. Perhaps most pressing from the standpoint of organizational communication studies is the need to investigate the rhetorical strategies that support supervisor-subordinate abuse as well as those through which targets resist EEA. Also needed are investigations of the organizational/cultural communicative dynamics that contribute to muting employ differences in the communicative constitution of abusive versus supportive organizations. Additionally, targets' communicative strategies to repair the emotional damage of EEA after exiting the organization is another area ripe for study. Finally, examining

the potential reciprocal effects of EEA and targets' non-work (e.g., familial) interpersonal communication should be investigated.

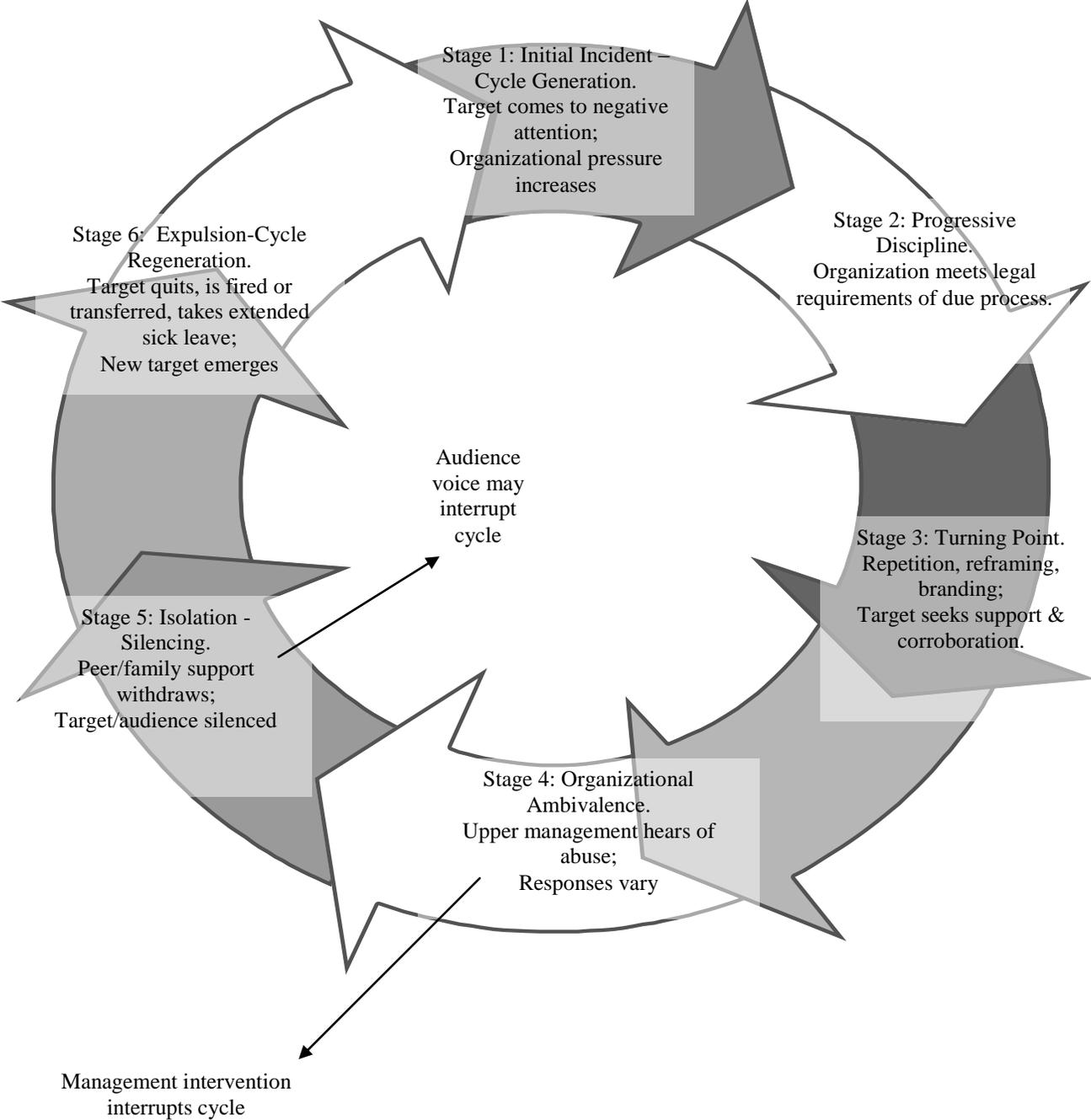
### Conclusion

Employee emotional abuse is not just something that happens in a few workplaces; rather, it is widespread. It is crucial that managers and other powerful organizational actors strive to create humane workplaces and provide just treatment of the persons who carry out the organization's mission. While the call for humane workplaces may not compel all managers to take action, the negative impact on organizations' bottom lines is often persuasive.

Fear, humiliation, intense embarrassment, and emotional cruelty of all kinds are too rarely the subject of leadership models, organizational change, or management training (Bies & Tripp, 1998). The targets' resulting desire for retaliation (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997) and the potential for workplace aggression or violence grows as the problem languishes unaddressed (Waldron, 2000). It is crucial for communication scholars to respond to Waldron's call for action: "We must do more as researchers, leaders and coworkers to attend to the emotional needs of ourselves and others if the humanity of the workplace is to be reclaimed" (pp. 79-80). There will be no meaningful change in either the occurrence or consequence of abuse unless the structure of the workplace is reformed according to a new social and legal contract, one that encourages cooperation, justice, and a heightened and broadened sense of community (Hornstein, 1996).

Figure 1

**The Communicative Generation and  
Regeneration of Employee Emotional Abuse**



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