

9 Emotion and Relationships in the Workplace

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Personal Reflections

Sarah's Journey

I gulped in several breaths of warm evening air from the penthouse suite balcony. It felt good to escape the air conditioning and drama inside. Gazing toward the glowing lights several miles away, I imagined the Friday night West Los Angeles scene—beautiful people enjoying the beginning of their weekend. My watch read 8:12 p.m. I needed to get my face back together before returning to my current reality: working late, *again*, in a toxic environment, under deadline.

My boss had made it clear: if I wanted to succeed, not only did my public relations writing need to be impeccable but I also needed to get used to working long hours and towing the line. Further, I had to conveniently look away from coworkers frequently glossing over ethical missteps. One of my senior colleagues called it “dancing.” I called it making things up. I was 22 years old and absolutely miserable.

Just 6 months earlier, I had been so hopeful and happy. I was serving as guest relations coordinator at my beloved alma mater and had just landed this coveted public relations agency position during the recession of 1993. Sure, I was only making \$21,000 a year, but at least someone offered me a job. What’s more, it was for a public relations agency specializing in socially responsible businesses. What could be better?

My university coursework had trained me to write strategic plans, interact with corporate executives, and craft meaningful community events. The actualities of my job stood in sharp contrast: 60-hour work weeks, a demeaning boss, forced cheerfulness, endless faxing, and unrealistic deadlines. I was burned out, exhausted, devastated.

And so, on that penthouse balcony that summer night, I made myself a promise. I would go to graduate school and make it my mission to somehow help organizations be nicer places to work. And I would get myself the hell out of that “socially responsible” public relations agency.

One year later, I was a doctoral student at the University of Colorado-Boulder. Three classes there fundamentally impacted my research trajectory: organizational identification and control by Philip Tompkins, organizational ethics by George Cheney, and emotion and communication by Sally Planalp. For class projects, I learned everything I could about organizational burnout, wrote a case study on the ethical problems of basing public relations on corporate social responsibility, and was introduced to the research of Arlie Hochschild (1983), a sociologist whose writing style, savvy, and interest in emotional labor shaped my career.

Also during this time, my language and social interaction professor Karen Tracy (no relation) took me under her wing to study interactions between citizens and emergency 911 call takers. She was interested in how conversational particulars resulted in calls that were especially rude (K. Tracy and Tracy 1998), whereas I was intrigued by the ways call takers managed their emotion when dealing with especially frightening, humorous, or irritating calls (S. Tracy and Tracy 1998).

Two years later, I took a break from my Ph.D. coursework to work on the “Radiant Sun” cruise ship. For 229 days straight, I danced the macarena, chit-chatted, called bingo, told stupid jokes, and mostly kept a smile plastered on my face. I took notes and recorded interviews with the idea that I should analyze the emotional labor on the ship when I returned to graduate school. To my excitement, Stanley Deetz started working at CU-Boulder during my year away, and his mentorship helped me critically analyze emotional control in the closed and surveilled environment of the cruise ship (Tracy 2000).

Deetz’s (1998) critical organizational standpoint informed my dissertation and early career studies of correctional officers’ burnout and problematic emotional construction (Tracy 2004). I paid attention to how officers communicatively managed the monotonous, often degrading, and sporadically dangerous work of being “babysitters” and “glorified flight attendants” for convicted felons (Tracy 2005).

Along the way, I designed and taught one of the first communication courses focused on emotion and organizing. Until that time, with few exceptions, emotion and organization scholars basically ignored one another. To make my point on the first day of class, I asked my students to scan the index of the *Handbook of Communication and Emotion* (Andersen and Guerrero 1998) for the word “organization” and the *Handbook of Organizational Communication* (Jablin et al. 1987) for the word “emotion.” Each word was missing from the other book’s index.

Clearly, there was work to be done. Over the next few years, I introduced students to the small but growing scholarship on emotion and organizing. My first doctoral advisee, Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) wrote her semester-paper-turned-publication on workplace emotional abuse, and from there, we partnered on several studies related to workplace bullying

(e.g. Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007). This work attracted attention from the media, international bullying scholars, and the organizational communication discipline like nothing I'd written before. However, the process of qualitatively studying workplace bullying coupled with my past research on burnout and emotional labor was itself emotionally exhausting, and I yearned for something a bit more uplifting.

All this time, I had focused on one guiding notion: if I can describe and analyze the *problems* of emotion in the workplace, then I could help solve these problems and make workplaces nicer places to be. However, focusing on the emotional *problems* was only half-baked. Studying burnout, emotional labor, and bullying certainly gave names to bad behavior. However, it did not create prosocial emotions in their place.

For organizations to be places where generosity, exuberance, compassion, and healthy relationships thrive, I realized that attention was sorely needed for studying desired and especially humane workplace emotional conditions. Along with colleagues, over the last few years I have turned attention to compassion and organizational communication (e.g. Clark and Tracy 2016, Tracy and Huffman 2017, Way and Tracy 2012) and developed new classes such as “Communication and the Art of Happiness” and “Organizational Emotions and Well-being.” I'm indebted to the doctoral students who have collaborated and written emotion and organizational communication related dissertations along the way¹, including this chapter's coauthor, Shawna Malvini Redden.

Shawna's Journey

I found myself studying emotion and organizing somewhat by accident while in line at the airport. At the time, I traveled frequently between my apartment in Tempe where I was studying at Arizona State University's doctoral program and my home in Sacramento where my husband and dog lived. Although I was supposed to be investigating spirituality and workplace relationships, my declared research interests, I couldn't help but notice how weird people acted in airport lines.

In security, I'd see people huffing and puffing, sometimes literally, as if this anxious behavior might help them get through the line faster even if there were still 15 people ahead of them. I noticed people who would act twitchy and nervous while interacting with Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers, but then once they got to the gate area, they would relax. I realized how much anxiety I experienced when I got caught with “contraband” and had my corkscrew/cheese knife contraption confiscated, my bag searched, and my body patted down. It initially shocked me how I'd never really noticed the feelings flying all over the airport before.

It's no surprise to me that my airport line epiphanies started to take shape at the same time I took Sarah's qualitative methods seminar and

began honing my craft as an ethnographer, or as I describe to my students, a professional people-watcher. It also helped that access to my planned research context—a hospital system—fell through at the last minute, and I could fully devote myself to understanding the emotional experience of the airport.

Since then, I've immersed myself in thinking about how emotions influence organizational settings, especially between people and groups, as emotions become shared and evolve in cycles (Hareli and Rafaeli 2008, Scarduzio and Tracy 2015). I'm also deeply interested in the relationships between emotion, power, and identity. In the airport, I noticed that passengers were required to perform a particular type of emotion work that wasn't accounted for in the literature. I call these "emotional taxes" for the way certain emotional fronts have to be "paid" during compulsory interactions (see Malvini Redden 2013). I was especially concerned that certain people—namely people of color and those with differing physical abilities—had to perform more difficult emotion work due to their identities. My friend and colleague Jennifer Scarduzio and I have continued thinking about the relationships between intersecting identities and emotion work for organizational members and patrons alike (Malvini Redden and Scarduzio 2017). We hope our work helps organizations craft policies and practices that make emotion work less difficult.

An Overview of Emotion and Relationships at Work

Work is inherently emotional. Flight attendants calm nervous flyers, waiters smile, teachers inspire, police officers encounter scared citizens, and border patrol agents navigate the tensions of upholding the law while being compassionate to suffering border crossers (Rivera and Tracy 2012). However, only in the last 25 years have organizational scholars treated seriously the role of emotion at work. Before that time, emotion was traditionally written out of organizational studies and considered antithetical to rational organizational goals focused on productivity (Kramer and Hess 2002). In this worldview, emotions were either ignored or measured as variables of job satisfaction, morale, or commitment.

In the last three decades, scholarship examining emotion formation, expression, and control in the workplace has become mainstream in fields including organizational communication, management, sociology, and psychology. Emergent work feelings—which are experienced, shaped, shared, and interpreted through communication—are an integral part of relational interaction at work (Riforgiate and Komarova 2017).

While much organizational research is still influenced by discourses of rationality, "bounded emotionality" is an "alternative mode of organizing in which nurturance, caring, community, supportiveness, and interrelatedness are fused with individual responsibility to shape organizational experiences" (Mumby and Putnam 1992: 474). From this vantage,

emotion in organizations functions not as a commodity to be controlled; rather, feelings are integral to the workplace. Indeed, emotional display, empathy, and emotional intelligence (Salovey and Mayer 1990) are not the opposite of rationality or cognition (Planalp 1999), but function as key parts of good leadership and effective organizing.

Emotion work touches an entire range of occupations including boundary spanners, like receptionists; emotional believers, including hospice workers who really have faith in their work; emotional elicitors, like stand-up comics; resilience builders, such as military sergeants who toughen up their employees; orchestrators who motivate feelings in others; coolers and soothers who ease upset clients; guides and seekers who inspire (or brainwash) followers; moral emoters, such as activists who provoke outrage; and utility players who engage in toxin management and mood shifting (Waldron 2012). In these jobs, we see how emotion can manifest in emotional displays required as part of the job (something called “emotional labor”); emotional reactions that stem from the job, such as stress, engagement, or compassion; emotion related to coworker interactions and relationships, including loyalty or betrayal; and emotions brought to work from home or nonwork spaces (Waldron 2012). Each of these arenas can include positive or negative emotion, and each influences organizational processes in specific ways.

For instance, moral emotions such as guilt and shame can help people make sense of difficult work situations and aid ethical decision-making (Rivera and Tracy 2014). Emotion strengthens workplace relationships (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2011), raises awareness (Waldron 2012), ignites transformation (Krone and Dougherty 2015), and can lead to a variety of preferred organizational outcomes (Barsade and Gibson 2007). At the same time, many organizational problems are emotional in nature, such as dissonance between authentic feeling and emotional display (Tracy 2005), stress (Boren and Veksler 2015), burnout (Maslach et al. 2001), incivility (Kassing and Waldron 2014), and workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy 2012). However, seemingly “negative” emotions can have positive outcomes. Case in point: sarcasm and intimidation can actually function to increase collaboration and camaraderie among employees (Scarduzio and Malvini Redden 2015). For instance, TSA officers and courtroom employees describe using sarcasm to discipline and make fun of patrons in ways that build a sense of “us versus them” togetherness for employees who work “in the trenches” together.

It’s easy to think about emotion and issues connected to organizational well-being as concerns of the individual (Ganesh and McAllum 2010). However, emotion is inherently relational, constituted via collective interaction (Malvini Redden 2013) and cycles of reciprocal influence (Hareli and Rafaeli 2008). For example, Scarduzio and Tracy (2015) demonstrate how different organizational actors’ emotional displays influence others and serve important sensemaking functions in municipal courtrooms.

Courtroom bailiffs buffer emotions between judges and defendants, and the emotional displays of judges “give sense” to defendants in the courtrooms. Likewise, in her study of sexual violence on universities campuses, Harris (2013) shows that while individual feelings and experiences of violence are often foregrounded in discussions of sexual violence, violence is an element of the organizational process.

With the complex nature of emotional processes in mind, we now turn to some important research themes related to emotion in organizations.

Control and Commodification of Emotion at Work

Arlie Hochschild (1983) coined the terms “emotion management,” which refers to personal control over feelings, and “emotional labor,” which describes the commodification of employees’ emotion for organizational use. Hochschild investigated the experiences of flight attendants and bill collectors to understand how labor is not solely about physical productivity but also includes the production and performance of organizationally prescribed emotions. For instance, flight attendants are paid to perform safety duties and provide in-flight comfort, but also to smile at rude customers or hide their fear during flight safety issues.

Subsequent scholarship has focused on the difficulties and negative consequences related to performing emotional labor, such as stress and burnout, which we discuss in the following sections. Some look at the degree to which employees internalize organizational discourses and how that influences their emotional performances. “Surface acting” refers to when people force themselves to show a certain emotion even if they do not feel it (Hochschild 1983), such as performing “service with a smile” to rude customers. On the other hand, “deep acting” involves both feeling and demonstrating the displayed emotion, whether naturally or through reframing.

When employees feel the emotion they are expressing, this is “emotional harmony,” whereas emotive dissonance is a mismatch between felt and expressed emotion—whether that entails emotional amplification, suppression, or masking. Emotive dissonance is associated with negative consequences, such as tension and strain (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993) and reduced immune function (Conrad and Witte 1994). The more employees feel they must “fake it in bad faith”—or generate inauthentic emotions when they do not agree with the mandated emotional labor—the greater the negative consequences, such as burnout (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987), depression and cynicism (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). Employees can also engage in emotional deviance (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987) by expressing an emotion that violates the prescribed emotional performance. This happens when a judge giggles in response to a misbehaving defendant rather than being stoic or disciplinary. Employees who have a lot of power (like judges) have more privilege to deviate

from organizational expression rules than do lower-power employees (like restaurant servers). Indeed, Scarduzio (2011) has shown how judges frequently drop their prescribed neutral expression to show irritation or make jokes at defendants' expense.

The consequences of emotional performances also vary as the complexity of those performances increases. Sometimes employees are required to perform conflicting emotions, like when correctional officers have to care for inmates and demonstrate vulnerability while simultaneously maintaining authority and demonstrating detachment (Tracy 2004) or when TSA officers must demonstrate intimidation and professionalism at the same time (Malvini Redden and Scarduzio 2017). In these situations of paradox, employees may experience even greater stress and burnout, especially if organizational processes limit their ability to cultivate a preferred identity or express themselves in desired ways (Tracy 2004).

Doing emotional labor is especially difficult when its performance conflicts with employees' preferred identities. This is the case with border patrol agents who largely care for a population of stigmatized, undocumented immigrants and manage interactions with a public that views border patrol suspiciously (Rivera 2015). On the one hand, agents are criticized for being too masculine and stoic, while on the other hand, they are demeaned when engaging in the feminized work of being too caring and compassionate. "Emotional taint" is characterized by emotion work that is viewed by others as "inappropriate (not fitting the situation), excessive (too much or too little emotion required for the situation), or vulnerable (causing the person to subject themselves to "difficult" feelings)" (Rivera 2015: 218). In such cases, the difficulty of the work is not as much about faking emotion as it is about creating distance from the emotionally tainted part of the job. A case in point: women who work in legal brothels distance themselves from an identity that some perceive as socially undesirable but align themselves with nonstigmatized aspects of the industry (Wolfe and Blithe 2015).

While much research considers emotional labor in stigmatized or low-prestige occupations, a recent thread of scholarship explores the ways that emotional labor operates in professional and high-prestige contexts, including with airline pilots (Fraher 2017) and health-care executives (Urasadettan and Burellier 2017). Recent work also considers the intersections of emotional management with identity categories, such as race, class, and gender. Malvini Redden and Scarduzio (2017) coined the term "hidden taint" to describe the unexpected emotion work and power dynamics that emerge when identities categories are foregrounded—for instance when employees scrutinize patrons on the basis of their race or class or when customers sexualize encounters and emphasize gender differences with employees.

Thinking about how emotional labor is a complex social process and not just an individual experience moves scholarship in interesting

directions. Emotion management can help groups and families function better. For instance, public safety employees manage their own emotions as well as those of their family members, something Bochantin (2017) refers to as “humorous bilateral emotional labor” (HBEL). Humor allows employees to make light of dangerous work activities and ease the tension of worrying family members. At the same time, emotion management also highlights problematic organizational practices, as when customers in low-power positions are made to pay “emotional taxes” like suppressing irritation in order to navigate compulsory interactions (Malvini Redden 2013).

In summary, emotional labor takes different forms depending on the job. Some key implications of this line of research include: (1) low-status employees, women in particular, are expected to perform more emotional labor than high-status employees, and do not enjoy the “status shield” (Hoschschild 1983) that protects men from the associated difficulties of emotional labor; (2) employees experience emotional labor as more difficult when they feel they are faking inauthentic emotions for an unworthy purpose, when working with stigmatized populations, and when their emotional performance threatens a preferred identity; and (3) over time, expressing organizationally prescribed emotions can lead to disconnection from one’s own spontaneous emotional experience and generate serious consequences. Indeed, one of the potential results of emotional labor is burnout.

Burnout

Stress and burnout are associated with working too hard and too much, managing conflicting expectations, or toiling away at demeaning tasks that do not engage employees’ core interests and skills. In contrast, when employees do work they find meaningful, have regular breaks, enjoy supportive interactions, and are given opportunities to talk about their emotional stressors, they are likely to be much more engaged and productive at work (Tracy 2017).

Stress is the difference between worker satisfaction (represented by individual need fulfillment) and the realities of an employee’s day-to-day work (Tracy 2009). Burnout is a result of that stress and is marked by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, cynicism, and decreased personal accomplishment or sense of efficacy (Maslach et al. 2001). Burnout is especially common in human service workers who interact with suffering clients. Social workers, correctional officers, and many governmental workers must manage and reframe the negative emotions of others, something called toxin management (Frost 1999). Employees who interact with suffering clients can manage burnout, in part, through showing empathetic concern but not swaying to the polar extremes of emotional contagion (which involves feeling parallel negative emotion) or complete depersonalization and aloofness (Miller et al. 1988).

Employees who enjoy strong relationships and feelings of identification with peers, workgroups, and supervisors are better able to avoid burnout and the negative results of stress (Maslach and Leiter 1997). Indeed, when employees feel restricted in talking with their support network about stressful or overwhelming things at work, they are likely to experience communicatively restricted organization stress (CROS) and its associated negative outcomes, such as poor organizational climate, reduced productivity, and increased emotional and physical exhaustion (Boren and Veksler 2015). However, not all supportive interaction at work is created equal. Co-rumination, or excessive negative talk about an issue, is linked to increasing levels of stress and burnout, in part because it forecloses consideration of possible solutions (Boren 2014). Furthermore, identification with the work group is more important than identification with the organization for reducing burnout (Lammers et al. 2013).

Other recent organizational communication research related to burnout includes considerations of communication technology, work-life balance, and the downsides of identifying or having too much passion for work. Hours of work-related use of communication technology outside of regular work hours contributes to perceptions of work-life conflict, and perceptions of work-life conflict predict job burnout and job satisfaction (Wright et al. 2014). And despite the importance of engagement at work, when passion and emotional labor meet, this can lead to burnout, as is the case with nonprofit employees who really believe in the value of their work but feel challenged in accomplishing it (Eschenfelder 2012).

Abusive Workplace Interactions

“Workplace bullying” refers to “persistent verbal and nonverbal aggression at work that include personal attacks, social ostracism, and a multitude of other painful messages and hostile interactions” (Lutgen-Sandvik 2006: 406). Unfortunately, workplace bullying is all too common with up to 35% of employees bullied sometime during their work history and 11% currently witnessing coworkers being bullied (Workplace Bullying Institute 2010). Whereas healthy workplace environments encourage authentic and constructive conflict about work tasks and processes, destructive and abusive emotional interactions focus on the person involved and can range from a series of microaggressions and incivilities to ritualized hazing and violent abuse.

Bullying is characterized by several factors, including repetition, duration of 6 months or more, escalation, significant physical or psychological harm, power disparity between the bully and target, and the target perceiving that the bully purposefully intends to abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy 2012). So, what does bullying look and feel like? Targets talk about bullying as if it is akin to a nightmare, torture, imprisonment, child abuse, or being tricked by a devil (Tracy et al. 2006). If you were

watching a movie of workplace bullying in action, you might see whispering, eye rolls, name-calling, insults, gossip, sneering, and threats. It can also involve the silent treatment, withholding needed information, or refusing to acknowledge a coworker's presence or ideas. Abuse is even more common among minorities or immigrant professionals who face microaggressions related to their ethnicity, culture, or other demographic category (Razzante et al. in press). In such cases, employees deal with abuse by creating alternative selves in some cases and taking ownership or blaming themselves in others (Shenoy-Packer 2015).

Unlike everyday organizational conflict, bullying is quite difficult to disrupt or ameliorate. Bullying persists in part due to macro-level discourses that penalize "thin-skinned" employees, while glorifying tough bosses and linking harassment to increased productivity. All too often, workplace policies intentionally or unintentionally condone abusive behavior (Keashly and Jagatic 2003), as human resource (HR) personnel interpret policies in a variety of unpredictable ways (Cowan 2011). Indeed, in over 70% of cases, bullying targets feel that upper management was complicit in the abuse, by taking no action or making the situation worse (Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik 2010). This is of little surprise when we consider that most workplace bullies are supervisors, and when targets seek help from above, they are stymied by HR professionals who see bullying as a direct manager's responsibility rather than a structural issue for which they are responsible (Cowan 2012). Rather than seeing malicious bullying, some HR personnel simply see competitive behavior, and they must be convinced that the perpetrator is creating an objectively hostile work environment—as evidenced, for example, from reports by bystanders (Cowan 2012).

Bullying is also exacerbated by the fact that targets of abuse often have difficulty articulating their plight. Tye-Williams and Krone (2015) found that the most common type of narrative told by targets of workplace bullying is one of chaos. Such stories highlight targets' loss, isolation, and lack of social support from peers and suggest that coworkers are as likely to ignore or participate in the bullying than to stop it. Unfortunately, these fragmented narratives are much more common than factual reports or quest narratives that frame bullying as a difficult but resolvable journey. Although bystanders feel guilty when they see their coworkers being abused, they are often even more scared of escalating the situation and triggering abusive attention toward themselves (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik and Alberts 2006). When coworkers do try to help, they sometimes give simplistic advice, such as telling the target to simply leave their job, fight back, or ignore it (Tye-Williams and Krone 2017).

Unfortunately, organizational exit from emotionally abusive workplaces is fraught with tension and fear of threats and discipline, especially when employees are highly identified and socially intertwined (Garner and Peterson 2018). Coworkers can help targets feel better by reinforcing

targets' preferred identity (e.g. as a valued coworker) (Lutgen-Sandvik 2008), engaging in collective fantasies of revenge (Tye-Williams and Krone 2015) or conversationally pivoting when they hear an employee being unfairly critiqued (Foss and Foss 2011). Such communicative moves can help targets reframe the situation, feel connected to others, and may even halt some of the bad behavior.

Cultivating Prosocial Emotions in the Workplace

Although a significant amount of scholarship focuses on the repercussions of negative emotions in organizations—how to prevent or resolve burnout, what to do about workplace bullies, and how to deal with difficult emotional labor requirements—increasingly, researchers are analyzing affirmative and prosocial emotions. Of particular interest are emotional processes related to cultivating humor, affirmation, compassion, and resilience in organizations.

Humor provides much more than comic relief at work. Organizational members use humor to manage stress and uncertainty while making sense of job expectations, organizational culture, and organizational affiliations. Humor can enhance job satisfaction, relieve tension, provide ingroup solidarity, help employees to make sense of complex or incongruous work, and reduce burnout and job stress (Tracy, Myers and Scott 2006). Furthermore, through humor, organizational members identify with the organization and co-construct organizational norms and expectations (Heiss and Carmack 2012). For instance, while airport security might not seem like a very funny place, Malvini Redden observed TSA officers joking with passengers. Instead of shouting out reminders about going through the advanced imaging, one officer intoned, “One shoe, two shoes, red shoes, blue shoes, laptops, flip flops, they all must come off!” and playfully reframed a boring task for his and passengers' amusement. However, humor should be used carefully because it can also function to separate workers from one another, trivialize important issues, or simplify complex organizational problems.

Caring interactions at work dramatically influence people's experience of organizations whether they are employees or patrons. Affirming positive behavior can help create healthy organizational cultures, whether through overt public or private praise, formal acknowledgment, or using body language to indicate approval (Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly 2005). Likewise, organizations that foster “high-quality interpersonal connections” involving trust, respect, play, and collaboration (Dutton 2003) are more likely to have employees who feel safe at work and cultures that are learning focused and resilient (Carmelli et al. 2009). When work includes regular positive emotional experiences, people are more likely to feel important, included, and inspired (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2011).

Compassion is an important emotional process in organizations (Miller 2007) that has three primary components: (1) recognizing, which involves “understanding and applying meaning to others’ verbal and nonverbal communicative cues,” including context and subtext; (2) relating, which includes “identifying with, feeling for, and communicatively connecting with another to enable sharing of emotions, values, and decisions”; and (3) reacting, by “communicating in ways that are seen . . . as compassionate” (Way and Tracy 2012: 307). Fostering compassion in organizations can improve organizational relationships, customer service, productivity, and reputation, and can be fostered through transformational leadership (Men 2014). In his study of homeless young adults, Huffman (2017) found that “embodied aboutness”—or the process of making one’s body about the other via physical presence, acts of service, and nonverbal immediacy—is especially compassionate. This type of calming and “I’m in it with you” presence is particularly salient in explosive or dangerous situations, as was the case when a front-desk bookkeeper compassionately talked down a would-be school shooter (Tracy and Huffman 2017).

Employees inevitably face challenges at work. How they cope is a testament to their resilience. Psychologically speaking, resilience is considered to be the ability to bounce back and recover after a crisis, disruption, or set-back, often through the foregrounding of positive emotions, such as hopefulness (Richardson 2002). A communication lens emphasizes that resilience isn’t simply a personal trait but rather a social process that is “fundamentally grounded in messages, d/Discourse, and narrative” (Buzzanell 2010: 2). In the face of significant challenges, resilient people cultivate normalcy, create “affirming identity anchors,” maintain social ties, creatively reframe the situation, and emphasize positive emotions (Buzzanell 2010). Importantly, a communicative focus on resilience accommodates negative feelings. When trauma or challenges happen, those things are often painful and difficult. Cultivating resilience doesn’t pretend otherwise but rather focuses on productive action. Organizing for mindfulness can help organizational members build resilience in times of challenge and an orientation of “non-attachment” has the potential to transform challenging organizational situations into opportunities for compassion and wisdom (Brummans and Hwang 2010).

Many of the prosocial ways of being discussed in this section relate to the concept of emotional intelligence (EI), a combination of several capabilities: emotional self-awareness, emotional self-regulation, motivating oneself and others, and recognizing and empathizing with the emotions of others (Salovey and Mayer 1990). Most of the EI research stems from the fields of psychology and management, and has spurred big business, popular press books, TED Talks, and Harvard Business Review (2015) special issues. Meanwhile, the concept has undergone significant critique

in three main areas, including controversy about its definition and distinction from other concepts, ways to measure EI, and skepticism about the significance of EI for preferred outcomes like productivity and creativity (Murphy 2014).

Conclusion and Future Directions

In this chapter, we have traced our own journeys of studying emotion at work and reviewed four central areas of research related to emotion and organizational communication: (1) the commodification and control of work feeling, (2) burnout and stress, (3) abusive workplace interactions, and (4) prosocial emotions at work. We close with some questions and issues that should spur additional research.

First, although organizational communication burnout research peaked in the 1990s, several areas are ripe for continued exploration. These include bolstering the current dominance of quantitative studies with qualitative case analyses of what burnout looks in time and space, and narrative studies that ask how more current terms—fear of missing out (FOMO) or decision fatigue—are more apropos areas of stress in organizations than depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. Further, in line with the goal of cultivating prosocial emotion rather than just decreasing problematic emotions, researchers should consider examining the opposite of burnout: organizational engagement (Tracy 2009, 2017). Studying positive deviants of organizational activities that bring energy and meaning to work holds promise not only for combating burnout but also for moving toward organizational flourishing.

Second, although many of facets of emotional intelligence are closely connected to topics of concern by communication scholars (e.g. compassion, resilience, mindfulness), there is scant communication research focusing squarely on emotional intelligence. This may be due to the concept's association with using emotions as a means to profit or productivity ends (Dougherty and Krone 2002). Despite these critiques, the concept and related ideas like “emotional agility” (David 2016) continue to thrive in interdisciplinary conversations about creating healthy, happy, creative, and humane organizations. Communication scholars could usefully contribute this conversation, not only to critique the EI concept but also to transform it. Indeed, communication scholars are well poised to highlight how discourse and interaction are vital for identifying and perceiving emotion, developing trust and vulnerable connection, and framing emotions in a way that serves relevant parties.

Relatedly, workplace bullying research could be extended by examining surprising spaces of workplace kindness, flourishing, and joy. Certainly, all too many organizations employ jerks, and some workplaces cultivate stressful and competitive environments. However, workplaces can also cultivate especially moral, heroic, and affirming behaviors.

Although communication scholars have dipped their toe into studying positive interactions and prosocial emotions, there is much uncharted territory in examining courage, generosity, passion, playfulness, connection, engagement, and micro-affirmations in organizations. Furthermore, organizational communication scholars could usefully partner with interpersonal researchers to study the ways that these emotions are talked into being through mindful workplace practices, interactions, policies, and leadership.

Fourth, most of the emotion and organizing research reported in this chapter is related to face-to-face interaction. Given that organizations are increasingly connected via various types of communication technology, future research could valuably explore the way emotion issues occur differently due to employees' reliance on email, video conferencing, text messaging, and social media. Interpersonal and health communication scholars have already examined cyberbullying (Brody and Vangelisti 2016, Danielson and Emmers-Sommer 2017). On the one hand, employees' increasing reliance on technology may result in increased depersonalization, bullying, and abuse. On the other hand, technology might provide a useful emotional buffer between suffering clients and exhausted employees. What's more, technologies such as Skype and Zoom also have the potential to bring employees closer together to foster empathy and connection.

Finally, organizational communication research on emotion, like most scholarly work, is primarily epistemological in nature. In other words, the research analyzes topics of study with the primary goal of leaving readers *knowing more about* a topic. Especially with a turn toward studying prosocial emotions, we encourage researchers to consider ways to leave readers and learners "being" the emotions at hand—something that Tracy and her colleagues have called an OPPT-in approach (Tracy and Donovan 2018). OPPT-in stands for ontological, phenomenological, phronetic, transformative. Such an approach suggests ways that scholarship, through its form and delivery, may trigger humane craft practice and practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg 2001). This may be accomplished through thick, performative representations in which readers see and feel themselves as part of the action, experiential and transformative pedagogical activities, and scholarship that motivates reflection, discovery, and practice of desired ways of being.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the opportunities and constraints of researching emotional problems in the workplace (bullying, burnout, and toxic relationships) as compared to studying the emotional issues we may want to cultivate (compassion, resilience, or generosity)? What are the potential upsides and downsides to each? Which appeals more to you and why?

2. In what ways have you engaged in emotional labor? Did you feel forced or did you do it by choice? Which emotions are easiest to portray? Using concepts from the reading, analyze why you think you felt the emotional labor activities were easy or difficult. What are the ethical implications of asking employees to amplify, suppress, or mask their emotional communication in the workplace?
3. How might organizations unwittingly encourage or condone emotional abuse in the form of microaggressions, harassment, or bullying? What can or should coworkers do when they witness this type of organizational behavior?
4. What types of challenge or setbacks have you faced at work? How did you cope? Did you use humor? Did other people show you compassion? How have you helped others? In what ways is resilience a communicative construction?

Note

1. An incomplete list of former doctoral students who have contributed to Sarah's scholarship and thinking related to emotion and organizations include Lou Clark, Emily Cripe, Elizabeth Eger, Timothy Huffman, Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, Jessica Kamrath, Karen Kroman Myers, Shawna Malvini Redden, Robert Razzante, Sarah Riforgiate, Kendra Rivera, Jennifer Scarduzio, Clifton Scott, Sophia Town, Amy Way, and Debbie Way.

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