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HOW DOMINANT GROUP MEMBERS CAN TRANSFORM WORKPLACE BULLYING

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Over the last two decades, the Communication discipline has become a leader in research that explains, defines, operationalizes, and theorizes bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). Similar to studies of harassment, discrimination, and abuse, the bullying literature has been largely motivated by a desire to analyze this interactional “bad behavior” so that it ostensibly may be eradicated. Less clear, however, is the specification of (1) behaviors that should fill the void when bullying behavior declines and (2) the processes by which “good behavior” might most effectively be inspired and created. This chapter works to contribute to this gap in research by identifying communication actions of dominant group members that may disrupt bullying practices. In doing so, the study extends Co-Cultural Theory (Orbe, 1998) toward the applied conceptualization of Dominant Group Theory (Razzante & Orbe, 2017).

The chapter begins by providing a brief review of relevant workplace bullying research (for additional information on workplace bullying, see Cowan & Bochantin, this volume; Tye-Williams, this volume). The chapter then connects this workplace bullying research to Dominant Group Theory, showing how dominant group members may communicate with targets of workplace bullying (a type of co-cultural group) in ways that result in: (1) reinforcement of oppressive structures, (2) impediment of oppressive structures, and/or (3) dismantling of oppressive structures. We affirm that, through their micro-level interactions, dominant group members have the opportunity to create, maintain, or transform (anti-)bullying practices in the workplace. We demonstrate this key point at the heart of the chapter when we provide a constructed vignette and an analysis that illustrates how dominant members’ specific communicative practices could reinforce an environment of workplace bullying or, instead, inspire environments (both micro-level and macro-level) that are characterized by perspective-taking, compassion, microaffirmations, and effective conversations for action. Focusing on both these micro and macro discursive moves underscores the value of examining anti-bullying practices within the framework of communication as constitutive, wherein dominant group members have particular agency to both reinforce, impede, and/or dismantle oppressive structures and discourses. Finally, as discussed in our conclusion, we designed our analysis to leave readers feeling inspired and informed to practice preferred ways of being so as to disrupt abuse and create humane organizing practices.

Moving From Critiquing the Problem to Inspiring Transformation

Similar to much of the organizational literature that has concentrated on problems and deficits (Sekerka, Comer, & Goodwin, 2014), most workplace bullying research has focused on analyzing



and critiquing problematic features and effects of abusive interactional behavior at work. Primary questions that workplace bullying scholars have studied include (1) how abuse manifests, (2) how employees respond, (3) why it is so harmful, (4) why resolution is so difficult, and (5) how it might be resolved (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). All but the last question focus on its related problems—which, of course, exist many at multiple layers of organizational interaction. Bullying manifests in micro-level interactions when people gossip and spread rumors. Meso-level workplace policies, most of which concentrate on demographic-based harassment (e.g., age, sex, race), have not sufficiently disciplined “equal opportunity” workplace jerks. Macro-level discourses, such as television shows that glorify tough bosses who yell “you’re fired,” normalize harsh behavior. Moreover, corporate climates, built through specific rituals, norms, and communication, institutionalize competitive harassing behavior due to unquestioned (and mythical) assumptions that bullying might increase productivity (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003).

Although scant, some research focuses on solutions for intervention and change. At the macro-level, this work has come in the form of scholars aligning with activists and making the name “workplace bullying” public via news stories, Wikipedia entries, and white papers. The phrase “workplace bullying” entered the English lexicon in the early 1990s and began to gain traction in the United States in the mid-2000s (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). Public scholarship has increased general awareness of bullying and built momentum for anti-bullying laws (Namie, Namie, & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). What’s more, the concept has moved from a state of denotative hesitancy to one that exists in material representations like documentary movies, specialized institutes, and 702,000 Google hits in .36 seconds (as of spring 2018). At this point, it’s safe to say that the term *workplace bullying* has gained popular traction. At the meso-level, and with mixed results, human resource professionals have moved toward incorporating specific anti-bullying language into organizational policies (Cowan, 2011; Cowan & Bochantin, this volume). However, policy changes do not equate with parallel culture modifications. Despite policies that forbid certain behaviors, employees are often confused about the ways they *should* be interacting to create a humane workplace. Indeed, even when employees know that they have witnessed bad behavior and try to help, they oftentimes tell the target of abuse to just quit, fight back, or simply blow it off—advice that many targets of bullying do not view as helpful (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2017).

That said, some types of communication are ameliorative. Co-workers corroborating and reporting workplace bullying lends credibility to targets’ stories. Just talking with and providing social support to co-workers is also valuable, whether or not such talk leads to active resistance. After sharing their stories in focus groups with other bullying targets, nearly every participant said they felt much better and realized the problem was experienced by others (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). Further, conversations with supportive co-workers including collective fantasies about revenge (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015)—even more than talking with family, researchers, or friends—seem to make a positive difference (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Although this talk may not do anything to change the abuse or bully’s behavior, it allows employees to reframe the situation and maintain a preferred identity (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008).

However, is there something beyond *feeling better* that can be accomplished through communication? Can certain communicative behaviors disrupt bullying and create positive change? One promising direction has been the move toward bystander training, in which workgroups learn how to provide immediate feedback in poignant workplace interactions, increase positive communication, and re-source problematic behavior (Foss & Foss, 2003; Scully & Rowe, 2009; Wajngurt & Keashly, in press). Another area lies in sexual harassment research. Researchers have provided specific recommendations in terms of what bystanders can do when they observe harassment, depending on whether they want to correct problematic behavior or affirm positive behavior, and ranging in the immediacy and involvement of the response (Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005). In the face of harassing behavior, a high immediate, high involvement response would be to immediately name the



offense and ask the actor to stop. A high immediate, low involvement response would be to interrupt the incident and redirect the parties. Meanwhile, a low immediate, high involvement response would be to report the offender formally, and a low immediate, low involvement reaction would be to privately counsel the target about the experience (Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005).

This past research shows what to do to stop negative behavior. Yet, what type of behavior should unfold in its place? Some scholars have focused on affirmation. For example, as a correlate to bystander response to offensive behavior, Bowes-Sperry and O’Leary-Kelly (2005) provided a variety of examples of affirming positive behavior, such as public praise, private praise, formal commendation, or simply using body language to show approval. In her work on building a respectful workplace, Tehrani (2001) argued that the importance of recognition and reward in achieving organizational cultural change cannot be overestimated. She suggested that such reward need not be financial and might come in the forms of certificates, medals, and recognition “in the appraisal process where appropriate objectives are set to assess the levels of respect shown to colleagues and teams” (p. 151). Positive organizational scholar Dutton (2003) introduced the framework of high quality connections, which are characterized by respectful engagement, task enabling, trusting, and play. Indeed, work can be a source of positive emotional experiences, allowing workers to feel safe, respected, valued, trusted, and inspired (Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate, & Fletcher, 2011).

In contrast to workplace bullying that can suck the life out of employees, brief interactional encounters have the potential to energize, support, and buffer. That said, little communication research has incorporated studying positive behavior alongside the negative bullying behavior, and that which has done so suggests that the relationship of positive and negative behavior is complex. When negative interactional behavior is low, positive organizational factors have beneficial effects. However, when bullying levels are high, positive relational patterns have decreased effects on mental health, intent to leave, and stress (Lutgen-Sandvik, Hood, & Jacobson, 2016).

In short, workplace bullying research in the field of communication has focused primarily on describing and explaining the sustenance of the problem. Knowing about the negative is certainly important. However, simply recognizing the problem does not guarantee that an organization can survive, much less thrive. An unrealized promise exists in exploring how people may most effectively treat others with kindness and respect and how organizations might promote this type of behavior. As such, we must move our research from exploring the problematic consequences of bullying to how it might be ameliorated. One potential avenue for doing so is when typically powerful and dominant group members step in to transform abusive workplace situations—something we turn to next.

Dominant Group Theory

An extension of Co-Cultural Theory (Orbe, 1998), Dominant Group Theory (DGT) considers the diverse ways in which majority group members—those individuals who are White, male, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, middle- or upper-class, and/or cisgender—communicate within a society where their social location is steeped in privilege. The theory emerged from a synergistic review of key literature (e.g., DeTurk, 2011; Sue et al., 2007) and qualitative data from two recent studies (Orbe & Batten, 2017; Razzante, 2017). Within this section, we outline the key concepts of DGT in order to demonstrate its applicability to anti-bullying.

Five Premises of DGT

Five epistemological assumptions inform the fundamental ideas of DGT. First, a hierarchy exists in each society that privileges certain groups of people based on their majority group standing (e.g., White, heterosexual, and/or male). Second, in contrast, others (e.g., people of color, LGBTQ persons, and/or women) are marginalized as co-cultural group members. Third, dominant group members



may represent a diverse set of experiences; however, they all share a similarly privileged societal position (for related arguments, see also Harris & Janovec, this volume). Fourth, the diversity of dominant group members cannot be ignored with essentialist thinking. Fifth, and finally, dominant group members negotiate their privilege when communicating with others. These five premises inform the other theoretical concepts—factors, communication orientations, and dominant strategies—that comprise DGT.

Six Factors Influencing Dominant Group Communication

As reflected in the five premises, the communication of dominant group members—despite the privilege that they have in common—is not always the same. Instead, it can take multiple forms. Mirroring the concepts of Co-Cultural Theory (Orbe, 1998), DGT describes six factors that influence the communication of majority group members: communication approach, interactional outcome, field of experience, abilities, perceived costs and rewards, and situational context (Razzante & Orbe, 2017).

Like Co-Cultural Theory, DGT identifies two primary factors in majority group communication: communication approach and interactional outcome (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). *Communication approach* focuses on the tone of messages as demonstrated on different points along a continuum. A nonassertive communication approach, which prioritizes others' needs and expectations over one's own, sits on one end. An aggressive communication approach lies on the other end; it signifies instances when individuals put their own needs and expectations above those of others. In the center of the continuum is assertiveness. An assertive communication embraces a balance between attending to the needs and expectations of self and others. *Interactional outcome* involves the effect that dominant group communication has for self and others living in a hierarchical society. According to DGT, three outcomes exist: (1) reinforcing existing oppressive structures (i.e., supporting the status quo in terms of institutional racism, sexism, etc.), (2) impeding existing oppressive structures (i.e., communicating in ways that counter everyday prejudice and discrimination of co-cultural group members), and (3) dismantling existing oppressive structures (i.e., using one's privilege to fight against institutional policy and practice that provides unearned entitlements) (Razzante & Orbe, 2018).

DGT combines the three components of communication approach and interactional outcome to produce nine different communication orientations that dominant group members assume in their communications with others (see Razzante & Orbe, 2017). Adoption of one communication orientation over another is informed synergistically by the other four factors. For instance, *field of experience* (the sum of an individual's life events) includes messages from family and friend and, socialization through various organizations, as well as past and current experiences with co-cultural and dominant group members. *Abilities*, or a person's capability to communicate in different ways, comprises another influential factor in dominant group communication. This particular factor draws attention to the reality that not all majority group members have the same skill levels or opportunities to enact each of the different strategies (discussed in next section). In short, the competency levels of dominant group members—like their co-cultural group counterparts—vary significantly.

The fifth factor influencing dominant group communication is *perceived costs and rewards* (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). Every form of communication, when enacted by a particular person in a specific situation, will have some effect on them as individuals. Not all "costs" (e.g., social isolation, guilt, public condemnation) and "rewards" (e.g., continued social privilege, self-fulfillment) will be perceived the same by all majority group members. Instead, particular perceptions of different costs and rewards depend largely on the field of experience and interactional outcome of particular individuals. The final factor is *situational context*, an important consideration in dominant group communication (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). Broadly conceptualized, situational context involves a number of issues, including physical environment, geographical location, interpersonal and small group dynamics and time



and seasonal circumstances. People do not typically select one specific way to communicate in all situational contexts (Orbe, 1998). Instead, depending on a combination of different factors, different forms of communication may be used in different situations. When responding to bullying in the workplace, a dominant group member's communicative response draws from these six influential factors. Next, we explore how anti-bullying practices manifest in relation to these six factors.

Dominant Group Communication Orientations and Strategies

The final core concept of DGT involves communication orientations that are comprised of different dominant group communicative strategies (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). As described earlier, two factors—communication approach and interactional outcome—intersect to formulate nine different dominant group communication orientations. A communication orientation is a specific stance that dominant group members assume during their everyday interactions. Each communication orientation is primarily defined through the sub-factors of specific interactional outcomes (*reinforce, impede, or dismantle oppressive structures*) and communication approaches (*nonassertive, assertive, or aggressive*). Scholars associate particular dominant group messages with each orientation, as we describe next. Through our exploration of communicative strategies, we agree with and complicate Tye-Williams and Krone's (2017) point that privileged individuals and potential anti-bullies have access to a variety of responses to bullying. DGT helps to understand how power and privilege can be used as a means to disrupt bullying while also recognizing that the reproduction of workplace bullying can occur, too.¹

According to Razzante and Orbe (2018), nine dominant group communication orientations exist. *Nonassertive reinforcement* represents an approach that is covertly complicit in its support of dominant oppressive structures. Remaining neutrally silent is one dominant group strategy associated with this orientation (see Table 5.1). Other majority group members whose communication behaviors reinforce oppressive societal structures might be more assertive in their messages (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). An *assertive reinforcement* orientation works to balance the needs and expectations of both dominant group and co-cultural group members. However, given the inherent advantages of their majority group status, individual communication ultimately reinforces oppressive societal structures. Two strategies, resisting majority group essentialism and redirection, are reflective of this stance. For example, a dominant group member might deflect the fact that marginalized co-workers are being bullied by making known the ways he/she is bullied instead. A final communication orientation associated with reinforcing oppressive societal structures is *aggressive reinforcement*. This stance prioritizes a dominant group member's desire to maintain or strengthen existing power dynamics with little or no consideration given co-cultural rights, needs, and desires. Endorsing the status quo, dismissing co-cultural concerns, and blaming the victim are strategies consistent with this stance. These strategies especially manifest when a dominant group member ignores bullying in order to maintain hierarchical power within the workplace.

Impeding oppressive structures stresses the importance of interpersonal messages that disrupt manifestations of oppression in everyday interactions. *Nonassertive impediment* features dominant group messages that counter existing prejudice and discrimination against co-cultural group members—albeit in covert, indirect ways (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). The primary dominant strategies that are a part of this orientation are engaging in self-reflexivity and recognizing one's own privilege. That is, a dominant group member might impede bullying practices by becoming aware of the ways he/she contributes to bullying him/herself. Alternatively, an *assertive impediment* orientation strives for a balance between self and others' concerns during attempts to counter co-cultural prejudice and discrimination. Several different dominant group strategies, defined in Table 5.1, promote impeding oppressive structures through an assertive communication approach: affirming co-cultural concerns, educating others, and setting an example for others. For more aggressive majority group members,



another alternative exists. Individuals who adopt an *aggressive impediment* orientation are not overly concerned with dominant group perceptions; instead, their priority is their effort to promote change in the everyday lives of co-cultural group members. Scholars associate two particular dominant strategies with this orientation: confronting oppressive rhetoric and microaffirmations (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). As such, assertive impediments can be conceptually aligned with emerging research on active bystander training (Foss & Foss, 2001; Scully & Rowe, 2009; Wajngurt & Keashly, in press).

Nonassertive dismantling seems like an oxymoron: How can a dominant group member dismantle dominant oppressive structures passively? Yet, one strategy has been identified: sacrificing self (see Table 5.1 for definition). This particular strategy prioritizes the needs of co-cultural group members over one's own needs (Razzante & Orbe, 2011). An *assertive dismantling* orientation to dominant group communication maintains a balance of self- and other needs while invoking societal change. Challenging oppressive ideologies, identifying as a co-cultural ally, and assuming responsibility for action are dominant strategies central to this orientation. Furthermore, an ideal dismantling

Table 5.1 Sample Dominant Group Strategies by Communication Orientation

| <i>Sample Strategy Description</i> | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Nonassertive Reinforcement | |
| Ignoring one's privilege | A lack of awareness of, or outright refusal to acknowledge, the societal privilege that comes with dominant group status |
| Remaining neutrally silent | Recognition of oppression but not speaking out to avoid conflict |
| Assertive Reinforcement | |
| Redirection | Highlighting aspects of one's identity that reflect disadvantage as a means to deemphasize one's own privilege |
| Resisting group essentialism | Objections to criticisms by others that generalize majority group members into one large homogenous group |
| Aggressive Reinforcement | |
| Endorsing the status quo | Communicative messages that rationalize, support, and/or endorse existing ideologies, values, and oppressive institutions |
| Dismissing co-cultural concerns | Communicative messages that regard co-cultural concerns as trivial, illegitimate, or outright false |
| Victim blaming | Assigning responsibility to co-cultural groups to remove themselves from oppressed positions |
| Microaggressions | Everyday exchanges that feature denigrating messages to others because of their co-cultural identities |
| Nonassertive Impediment | |
| Recognizing one's privilege | Verbal acknowledgements of one's own societal privilege that increase awareness for others |
| Engaging in self-reflexivity | Ability and willingness to reflect on the consequences of individual thoughts and actions as dominant group members |
| Assertive Impediment | |
| Affirming co-cultural concerns | Acknowledging the legitimacy and magnitude of co-cultural issues and the realities of societal oppression |
| Educating others | Drawing from one's own growth—cognitively, emotionally, spiritually, etc.—to facilitate growth in others |
| Setting an example for others | Communicating in ways that can serve as a model for other dominant group members |

(Continued)



Table 5.1 (Continued)

| | Sample Strategy Description |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Microaffirmations | Everyday exchanges that feature affirming messages to others because of their co-cultural identities <i>when considering</i> others' desires or wishes on how to be affirmed |
| Aggressive Impediment | |
| Confronting oppressive rhetoric | Explicitly naming, without regard to others, dominant group messages as ignorant, hurtful, and/or discriminatory to co-cultural group members |
| Microaffirmations | Everyday exchanges that feature affirming messages to others because of their co-cultural identities <i>regardless of</i> others' desires or wishes on how to be affirmed |
| Nonassertive Dismantling | |
| Sacrificing self | Efforts to challenge institutionalized oppression that come with significant personal cost |
| Assertive Dismantling | |
| Challenging oppressive ideologies | Questioning the legitimacy of policies that unfairly discriminate against co-cultural group members |
| Identifying as co-cultural ally | Communicating in ways that challenge policies that negatively affect co-cultural group members |
| Assuming responsibility for action | Assuming an action-oriented approach that utilizes one's own privilege to work against systems that foster that very privilege |
| Aggressive Dismantling | |
| Forcing | Pushing your agenda to advocate for societal change with little to no regard for dominant group members' concerns |

of oppressive structures may emerge through what Dutton (2003) referred to as “high qualitative connections,” where workplace anti-bullying efforts emerge through assertive strategies that cultivate respectful engagement, task enabling, and trust. The final communication orientation is *aggressive dismantling* (Razzante & Orbe, 2011). Majority group members who are determined to fight institutional oppressive structures with little to no concern for others (including both dominant group and co-cultural group members) enact dominant group strategies, such as using one's privilege and forcing. An aggressive dismantling of oppressive structures may manifest when a dominant group anti-bully uses their position of privilege to advocate and implement anti-bullying norms while not consulting with co-cultural members. Such an approach may ultimately do more harm than good.

Dominant Group Theory (Razzante & Orbe, 2017) provides a useful theoretical framework to illuminate the communicative choices that dominant group members can take in response to workplace bullying. As noted previously, organizational literature has focused on problems and deficits (Sekerka et al., 2014), while workplace bullying research has primarily focused on identifying and critiquing bullying practices. DGT offers a theoretical framework that continues to locate and demystify workplace bullying *while also* identifying ways dominant group members can use their positions of privilege to eliminate workplace bullying. As such, our approach to this chapter addresses the call for looking for ways that workplace bullying can be resolved (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). The following sections provide a constructed vignette that, with its analysis, examines how different dominant group member behaviors could impact, normalize, or transform workplace bullying.



Constructed Vignette: Paws for Love

The following constructed vignette is fictionalized but draws from data contained in existing workplace bully research (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006, 2008; Tracy et al., 2006; Workplace Bullying Institute, 2010). Among other things, this research demonstrates how bullying comprises a ritualized escalatory behavior and often intersects with other identity characteristics (e.g., subordinates, women, and racial minorities are more likely to report bullying, whereas supervisors and dominant group members more likely engage in bullying behaviors). Given our interest in how dominant group members might influence workplace bullying, we include clear reference to demographic and identity characteristics in the narrative. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, many workplace bullying targets describe that part of the challenge in telling their story is that their experience is just too horrific and fantastic for others to find credible. We suspect that some readers will find this case unbelievable. However, targets of bullying report even more extreme tales. We offer the narrative to set up our analysis of how dominant group members perpetuate, but might also intervene in and potentially transform, workplace bullying.

* * *

As Sofia got ready for work that morning, she felt that all too familiar pit growing in her stomach. She had been working as a technician in her small town's veterinarian office—Paws For Love—ever since she had graduated from the local technical college several years earlier. She loved dogs and cats—especially Chihuahuas, since they reminded her of her native Mexico. Sofia had never been that talkative or outgoing and sometimes felt as though she connected better with animals than with people. That said, she had always gotten along with her co-workers despite some self-acknowledged social awkwardness. Up until three months ago, being a vet tech had been her dream job.

So why the change? The highly regarded founder of Paws for Love, Dr. Karen Lewis, had recently retired and hired a new manager to take her place, Dr. Williams. Dr. Sam Williams was a White, burly, middle-aged man who had been the fraternity brother of Dr. Lewis' nephew. He was gregarious, loud, sociable, and he told everyone to call him "Dr. Fun."

Whereas the office had been a place of peaceful pleasantness before, "Dr. Fun" played not-so-funny practical jokes and laughed so maniacally that he immediately made Sofia feel uncomfortable. In his first week on the job, he guffawed so loudly that an injured puppy shrank into the corner of the room. Assuming that he just did not realize his effect on the puppy, Sofia had suggested, "Dr. Williams, I think you may be scaring the animals a little bit." He ignored her comment during the appointment, but, as soon as the client and puppy left the room, his smile turned to a sneer. He said, "Listen, little miss mousy Mexi, I'm the boss around here now. I'm fun. I'm loud. You're quiet, and a bit boring. NEVER tell me what to do." Sofia, shocked and dumbfounded, could not believe her ears.

Several hours later, the now-retired founder Dr. Lewis happened to stop in the office as she occasionally did. Dr. Williams turned on his charm, telling her how well that things were going since she had retired. Sofia tried to pull Dr. Lewis aside, hoping she could talk to her about Dr. William's behavior. However, there was no such opportunity. On the way out, Dr. Lewis said, "Sofia, you look concerned. I hope you'll share any upset you have with your new boss." Over the next few weeks, the surprise insults from Dr. Williams continued to rain down when she least expected it—oftentimes wrapped in the guise of humor. Sofia began to hate work, and she felt powerless. Yet, it was the only vet office in their small town, and, with Dr. Lewis retired, there was no one with authority who might talk to or discipline Dr. Williams.

The only other person regularly in the office was James, who had been working the front desk for six months—a job he took to make ends meet during a "gap year" between college and law school. Sofia had come to appreciate James' friendly demeanor, great attitude, and positive outlook on life.



Plus, with his all-American good looks and easy smile, he was fantastic at calming anxious animals and clients.

One particular morning when Sofia arrived at work, she lingered at James' front desk. Here, she was safe from Dr. Williams's abusive behavior because his offensive insults were reserved for private interactions in the back examination room. However, eventually she knew she had to face Dr. Williams.

As Sofia wandered toward the examination room to set it up for the day, James began to wonder why she seemed to be increasingly on edge. Sofia had always been a woman of few words, but, lately, she had seemed almost scared to go back and start her work for the day. James decided to wheel his receptionist chair so he could see and hear what was going on in the examination room down the hallway. James knew that Dr. Williams was working in the back operating room—an area that had a separate door to the examination room. Suddenly, he heard Dr. Williams enter the room where Sofia was setting up.

Even with her back to the door, Sofia heard it click. Dr. Williams had arrived, and Sofia had no way of knowing his mood for the day. Would he leave her alone, or was she going to be the object of his abuse? She busied herself with sanitizing the thermometer and setting up the scale, refusing to look up. She mumbled, "Good morning," but Dr. Williams managed to get close enough to her to reach over and lift up her chin. Forcing her to look at him in the eye, he half smiled, cocked his head, and said, "Don't you know that it's bad manners to not look your boss in the eye?" She shook herself free and said, "Yes sir." He said, "Please, do not call me sir. I want you to call me Dr. Fun, and I want you to treat me as if I am fun. Not all this moping around. Is that part of your upbringing or something? You're in America now, time to start acting that way!" Sofia could feel tears well in her eyes and sweat break out under her arms. She thought to herself, "Sofia, just endure this, and soon the animals and clients will be here and you will be safe again."

Overhearing this exchange, James knew he had to make a decision. He knew that, technically, he was a low power employee with no formal authority. However, Dr. Williams always treated James with respect, saying how much they had in common, inviting him to happy hour, and asking about James' experience playing college football. Meanwhile, he showed no such interest in Sofia, and James saw Sofia becoming a shell of herself in the face of the racial slurs and sarcastic, bullying behavior. James knew that Dr. Williams would probably listen to him if he said something, but was that really his responsibility? What was he going to do?

The preceding constructed vignette offers an example of workplace bullying at Paws for Love. James and Dr. Williams are both native-born White men, whereas Sofia is a woman of color who immigrated to the U.S. as a young child. While keeping in mind that identity is complex and multifaceted, in the following analysis, we primarily focus our attention on race/ethnicity, gender, nationality, age, and socioeconomic status. Our protagonist, James, is the key figure through which we apply Dominant Group Theory. We ask, as a dominant group member in terms of race and gender, how might James use his positionality to disrupt Dr. Williams' bullying antics? Drawing from DGT, we explore the variety of ways in which James might reinforce, impede, or dismantle the oppressive structure of workplace bullying at Paws for Love.

As a native-born White man, James can reinforce workplace bullying in several ways. First, he could engage in nonassertive reinforcement by *remaining neutrally silent*. In essence, James could recognize that he could, and should, do something, but he might fail to mobilize himself to act. In other words, he could acknowledge that Dr. Williams oppresses Sofia through continuous bullying. However, recognizing that he could be ostracized by Dr. Williams (a significant perceived cost for a young employee) could influence James to keep quiet. James might also engage in aggressive reinforcement through *dismissing co-cultural concerns*. In this case, James might insist that Sofia is being too sensitive and should get



over Dr. Williams’ “playful nature.” His field of experiences, steeped in White male privilege, might fail to spark empathy and understanding of Sofia’s anxiety as co-cultural target of Dr. Williams’ bullying. Even though James may enact two different dominant group behaviors, both communicative choices lead to the same interactional outcome: a reinforcement of workplace bullying.

In addition to his ability to reinforce workplace bullying, James also has the potential to impede a workplace environment that marginalizes Sofia. First, James might assertively impede through *educating others*. That is, James might draw from his experiences being one of the few White players on a majority Black football team to help Dr. Williams realize that not everyone finds the same behaviors as fun. Such communication might be able to teach Dr. Williams about his comments’ implications when coming from a position of power and privilege. Depending on his communication abilities and the specific situational context of Paws of Love, James’ field of experience might also aggressively impede through *confronting oppressive rhetoric*. That is, James might engage in assertive impediment through enacting several *microaffirmations* on behalf of Sofia. For example, James might know that Sofia feels more empowered to confront Dr. Williams’ oppressive rhetoric herself when she is physically in the presence of others, especially with someone like him whose cultural location is similar to the bully. Yet, he also knows that, in the past, Sofia’s assertions alone have not had any impact on Dr. Williams’ behaviors. As such, James might walk over and stand beside Sofia in solidarity when she challenges Dr. Williams herself—making sure that all parties know that he supports her and identifies the doctor’s behaviors as abusive.²

Finally, James might engage in communicative behaviors that work toward the dismantling of workplace bullying. He might specifically engage in nonassertive dismantling through *sacrificing self*. For example, James could sacrifice self by whistleblowing—by finding a way to be in touch with Dr. Lewis, even though she is retired. In whistleblowing, James risks losing his job or being stigmatized as the office snitch. Yet, James might be willing to make this choice, given his commitment to social justice. If James does not feel comfortable whistleblowing, given his understanding of the perceived costs and rewards associated with that choice, he might engage in assertive dismantling through *identifying as a co-cultural ally*. Rather than merely affirming Sofia’s concerns through interpersonal interactions, James might put his empathy into action by approaching Dr. Lewis and advocating for organizational policy changes that condemn workplace bullying and make such behaviors punishable up to termination. While Sofia may understand James’ efforts, she may also see his actions as unnecessary (e.g., she didn’t want Dr. Williams to be fired, just to stop bullying her). Accordingly, she may critique his well-intentioned attempts as enacting change that he thinks is best—with little regard to her own desires. As such, James might valuably instead initiate an anti-bullying campaign around work that raises awareness and mobilizes his colleagues in the eradication of workplace bullying by Dr. Williams and others. Consulting first with targets of workplace bullying is crucial for intervening ethically.

As a dominant group member,³ James could draw from various levels of societal privilege as he negotiates his awareness of workplace bullying. Depending on his abilities, field of experience, and perceived costs and rewards, James could employ a number of different dominant group strategies to reinforce, impede, and/or dismantle workplace bullying. The key element here is the insight that DGT provides in terms of understanding the variety of interactional outcomes possible as a result of a dominant group member’s communication. Of course, each communicative strategy will have its own set of interactional outcomes rooted in the particular set of dynamics present in a specific situational context. No rule of thumb guides every situation.

Conclusion: Advocating for an OPPT-in Approach to Power and Privilege

This chapter employed Dominant Group Theory as a theoretical framework to build upon the research in bullying bystander training (Scully & Rowe, 2009; Sajngurt & Keashly, in press), organizational



strengths (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2012), and positive emotion at work (Avery, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008). Dominant Group Theory can valuably illuminate structures of workplace oppression and how dominant group members can strategically use their positionality for transformative change. We hope that DGT may provide a theoretical launching pad to both explain and inspire individual actions toward more equitable, affirming, and bullying-free workplace environments.

While we assert the utility of DGT for understanding the potential communicative responses to workplace bullying, we also believe that simply “knowing more” about intervention strategies is not sufficient for inspiring new and habitual ways of acting and being. As delineated in Tracy and colleagues’ ontological-phenomenological- phronetic-transformative (OPPT-in) approach, to transform life as lived, our theories and scholarship must provide access to seeing the world anew (Tracy, Franks, Brooks, & Hoffman, 2015). Thus, more so than scientifically proving the efficacy of certain practices, our scholarship holds unrealized promise to inspire people to ask new questions and try out specific ways of being and acting (Tracy & Donovan, 2018). A good test of OPPT-in scholarship and pedagogy is whether, as a result of it, people themselves practice transformed ways of talking or being. This perspective differs from most scholarship that leaves people *knowing* about certain frameworks and equipped to *argue, analyze, or theorize*. It also steps beyond leaving people able to *apply* or *teach* the framework. We hope that this chapter’s constructed vignette and description of potential responses inspires readers to practice new ways of interacting and strive to create just workplaces that promote human flourishing.

In particular, we encourage research that privileges the nuanced voices of individuals whose lived experiences resist easy conceptualizations of “bully” or “bullied.” Accordingly, we call for critical pragmatist research that reveals the complex messiness of context-based individual-personal-cultural identities and their impact on communicative behaviors. Utilizing autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014) to learn about people’s stories regarding workplace bullying, for example, can inspire the type of transformation for which we advocate. Various potential methodological approaches exist; however, the common denominator is to create scholarship that informs and inspires simultaneously. We desire for this chapter to be a small contribution toward that ultimate goal.

Notes

- 1 As Dr. Brenda J. Allen (2017) advises, everyone is response-able, but all responses are responsible.
- 2 James’ communicative behaviors here offer an important point of nuanced analysis. In the context of DGT, all dominant group behaviors are understood in terms of their interactional outcome. As such, the perceptions of James’ use of microaffirmations are receiver-oriented. That is, others in the situational context—both co-cultural group and dominant group members—determine what an affirming message might be. In this example, James’ communicative behavior is affirming to Sofia, due to prior understanding of how Sofia wishes to be affirmed in times of distress. For microaffirmations to be most effective, dominant group members and co-cultural group members should inform each other on how they can affirm one another in times of distress. Without prior communication, James risks reinforcing Sofia’s marginalization through potentially patronizing behavior (see Razzante & Orbe, 2018).
- 3 Within this brief narrative, we have focused on salient identity markers associated with nationality, ethnicity, and gender. It is important, however, to recognize the multidimensional nature of identities, including how individuals negotiate positions of privilege and disadvantage simultaneously (J. N. Martin & Nakayama, 1999). For instance, while James has some privilege in terms of race and gender, he may also be at a social disadvantage based on age, socioeconomic status, and other aspects of his identity. In this regard, his privileged identities must be understood in a particular context; for example, he may be situated as a co-cultural group member (based on age, class) when interacting with Dr. Williams.