It's Complicated: Defining Workplace Bullying From the Human Resource Professional's Perspective

Renee L. Cowan

Management Communication Quarterly 2012 26: 377 originally published online

3 April 2012

DOI: 10.1177/0893318912439474

The online version of this article can be found at:

http://mcq.sagepub.com/content/26/3/377
It’s Complicated: Defining Workplace Bullying From the Human Resource Professional’s Perspective

Renee L. Cowan

Abstract
Human resource (HR) departments are typically tasked with hiring, firing, training, managing, and handling other personnel issues. HR professionals carry out many important organizational initiatives, including dealing with employee disputes, serving as a liaison between the employee and the organization, and drafting and enforcing organizational policies and procedures (Bohlander & Snell; Lewis & Rayner). One issue that has started to garner more attention in organizations across the globe and among HR professionals is the communication phenomenon of workplace bullying. Generally, academic researchers describe workplace bullying as an extreme, negative, and persistent form of workplace emotional abuse achieved primarily through verbal and nonverbal communication (Keashly & Jagatic; Lutgen-Sandvik). For HR professionals, the definition of workplace bullying could be much more complex. As workplace bullying is abuse primarily achieved through negative communication, communication researchers seem well suited to explore how HR professionals make sense of this issue.

Keywords
organizational communication, sexual harassment, workplace bullying, workplace relationships

1University of Texas at San Antonio, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
Renee L. Cowan, Department of Communication, University of Texas at San Antonio, One UTSA Circle, MB 2.312, San Antonio, TX 78249, USA
Email: renee.cowan@utsa.edu
Although it has been argued that human resource (HR) professionals in functional roles likely have extensive involvement in workplace bullying situations (Lewis & Rayner, 2003), to date, the extant literature is not reflective of their experiences. Research on workplace bullying is largely reflective of one perspective in the bullying situation, the target (see Porhola, Karhunen, & Rainivaara, 2006). Certainly, the target’s voice is important to engage and the resulting research has provided important knowledge. However, current research has generally ignored two very important actors in bullying situations—the bully and the HR professional. To date, we have very little knowledge of the bully’s perspective beyond personality traits (Seigne, Coyne, Randall, & Parker, 2007), and it is likely we will not be able to understand fully the bully’s perspective because bullies don’t interpret their behavior as bullying (Namie & Namie, 2003) and if they do, most would not admit it as such (Seigne et al., 2007). A more plausible and possibly more interesting voice to engage is the HR professional. Investigating workplace bullying through the eyes of HR professionals could prove very illuminating. Targets report seeking HR’s help regarding bullying situations (Lewis & Rayner, 2003), and many scholars see them as integral actors in bullying situations (Glendinning, 2001; Lewis & Rayner, 2003; Mathieson, Hanson, & Burns, 2006; Namie & Namie, 2003; Salin, 2008). What is workplace bullying to contemporary HR professionals? What is considered a bullying situation? How do HR professionals make sense of bullying behaviors and situations? How do they talk about these behaviors and situations? The answers to these questions could no doubt have a significant impact on how bullying gets talked about and dealt with in the workplace.

Understanding how HR professionals make sense of bullying could help us uncover their unique perspective and further illuminate how they understand the issue, how they deal with it, and why they deal with it the way they do. Sensemaking is literally the making of our understanding on events or situations (Weick, 1995). Weick theorizes that through sensemaking we structure our realities so as to make our interpretations. We attempt to make sense when “someone notices something, in an ongoing flow of events . . . that does not fit” (Weick, 1995, p. 2). He articulates seven properties of sensemaking. Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, retrospective, revealed through enactment, social, ongoing, focused on and extracted by cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995, p. 17). As I will demonstrate in the next section, the issue of workplace bullying is likely an uncertain situation for many HR professionals. It is a situation filled with stress, tension, and ambiguity. The process of sensemaking is necessary because bullying situations disrupt both the environment and the sense of self.
When people encounter situations that are unexpected or out of the ordinary, such as the day-to-day experiences of workplace bullying, the general scripts that guide behavior can fail, causing HR professionals to develop explanations for what happened (Louis, 1980). Thus, the attribution of meaning to that unexpected happening is known as sensemaking. Two key components of the sensemaking model (and this investigation) are that sensemaking is retrospective and focused on and extracted by cues (Weick, 1995). When people encounter something unexplained, they typically shift their focus to that cue in an attempt to understand what might be going on (Weick, 1995). A goal of this investigation is to understand better the “cues” HR professionals attend to and how these cues are retrospectively made sense of concerning bullying. In regard to the idea that sensemaking is retrospective, Weick (1995) contends that “people can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (p. 24) or that HR professionals can only make sense of bullying situations after the fact. It is important to investigate how HR professionals make sense of bullying as this understanding affects how they approach and deal with the issue.

Using Weick’s (1995) theory as a guide, the purpose of this study was to engage HR professionals and begin to understand their sensemaking on workplace bullying and investigate why they may hold this perspective. To that end, I will first discuss two important areas that could influence how HR professionals see and understand this phenomenon: (a) the definition of workplace bullying as informed by academic research and the possible issues with this definition for HR professionals and (b) the general roles of HR professionals in organizations.

Workplace Bullying Definitional Issues and Contemporary HR Roles in Organizations

There are two important factors that could influence how HR professionals make sense of bullying behaviors and bullying situations: the current conceptualization of bullying/definitional state of bullying and the general roles HR professionals play in organizations. I will discuss both of these factors in detail pointing to how they could be affecting HR professionals understanding of bullying situations.

Workplace Bullying Definitional Issues

There are currently multiple labels associated with workplace bullying. These have included harassment (Brodsky, 1976), employee emotional abuse (Keashly...
The use of multiple labels adds to the confusion over what workplace bullying is and what it is not. For example, *mobbing* is a term that refers to a group activity. As the above definition demonstrates mobbing focuses on a group of employees “ganging up” on one individual. This term has a slightly different connotation from “bullying,” which tends to encompass both one-on-one abuse and “ganging up” on an individual (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). *Employee emotional abuse* is a term that highlights the non-physical forms of abuse. Although rare, we know that in some cases bullying can escalate to include physical acts (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). Terms like *victimization* and *harassment* seem to point toward the actions in which bullying is manifested to the exclusion of one or some of the characteristics (persistence, intentionality, escalation, power issues, adverse effects) argued to be so important to the concept of bullying. All of these concepts are very similar and are being used in academic research and popular press articles interchangeably with workplace bullying, which may be affecting HR professionals’ sensemaking on this phenomenon (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005; Keashly & Harvey, 2006).

In addition, current definitions of workplace bullying are primarily articulated from the academic perspective. Although there is no consistent definition of workplace bullying being used in academic research to date, these definitions do have some reoccurring themes. These include verbal and non-verbal behaviors, such as social isolation, personal attacks, insulting remarks, gossip, verbal threats, humiliation, and work interference (Einarsen, 1999), and the five features that turn these behaviors into bullying are persistence, escalation, power disparity, attributed intent, and adverse effects (Porhola et al., 2006; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). Targets perceive themselves as persistently ridiculed, criticized, and badgered by the bully. This bullying goes beyond just one or two instances of low-level incivility and is characterized by many frequent and repeated aggressive communication acts. These acts are seen as persisting over a long duration of time. While often beginning as low-level incivilities, unaddressed bullying behaviors can escalate and become extreme and intense (Leymann, 1990; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). There is often a power disparity between the target and bully. This disparity can be organizationally defined as bullies having more resources than targets; these can include a superior position in the organization’s hierarchy or an informal relationship with power holders in the organization (Einarsen et al., 2003; Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Keashly & Nowell, 2003; Salin, 2003, 2008). Alternatively, an imbalance can develop over time as one party becomes unable to defend themselves (i.e., they become the victim).
Targets perceive the bully’s actions as intentional, malicious, and intended to inflict harm (Tracy et al., 2006), and the bully’s actions result in adverse effects for the target and/or the organization (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Namie & Namie, 2003; Salin, 2003).

Although there are themes in how workplace bullying is defined, to date these do not reflect the voice of the HR professional. Issues associated with these definitions could also potentially hinder HR professionals’ actions in bullying situations. Specifically, current conceptualizations of workplace bullying are often in conflict regarding the intentionality element. Some definitions do not mention intent as a characteristic of bullying, whereas others are very explicit about the idea of bullying being intentional. For example, those who research bullying from a positivist frame would not want to include intent in their definition because it is “normally impossible to verify the presence of intent” (Einarsen et al., 2003, p. 12), whereas researchers who are not concerned with empirically verifying intent may choose to include this as a characteristic of bullying. There are also conflicting ideas on the issue of power and adverse effects. Although both of these themes are seen in most definitions of bullying, inconsistencies exist within these themes (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). For example, although most definitions address issues with power concerning the bully and target, definitions differ on whether the target exerts power or lacks power in bullying situations. In addition, most definitions highlight the idea that adverse effects result from bullying behaviors, but what these effects entail are contested. These inconsistencies and conflicting ideas could make it extremely difficult for HR professionals to identify and deal with workplace bullying. HR professionals may be left with a variety of questions: Does the bullying have to result in adverse effects? If so what kind and how can this verified? Do I have to find evidence of intent to label something bullying? If so, what type of evidence would be needed? These unsettled definitional issues could be affecting how HR professionals understand the phenomenon of bullying and how they deal with allegations of bullying in the workplace.

These variations in definition reflect a difficulty in describing what is indeed going on. In fact, one scholar contends workplace bullying is in a state of “denotative hesitancy” referring to the initial difficulty in naming experiences before there is a widely agreed on language from which to draw (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). Multiple labels for bullying, conflicting definitions, and denotative hesitancy could make it harder for individuals to approach HR with complaints and if they do actually complain it could make it harder for HR professionals to validate and deal with these complaints. Another issue that could affect how HR professionals understand bullying is the roles HR professionals play in organizations.
Contemporary HR Professional Roles in Organizations

A number of researchers have explored HR professionals’ changing roles in organizations (Bhatnagar & Sharma, 2005; Dyer, 1999; Storey, 1993). One model that has been drawn on extensively in research is Ulrich’s multiple roles model (Ulrich, 1997). In an effort to articulate HR as a profession, Ulrich’s (1997) model focused on the outcomes or deliverables of HR work and strongly underlined the changing nature of HR activities. The model posits four different roles for HR professionals based on two dimensions: a strategic or operational focus and a people or process orientation. The four types of roles that emerge from these dimensions are “strategic partner,” which focuses on aligning HR practices with business strategy; the “administrative expert,” which focuses on designing and delivering effective HR practices for the business; the “employee champion,” which focuses on employee needs and issues; and the “change agent,” which helps the organization build a capacity for change. Both the definitional state of bullying and the general roles HR professionals play in organizations could affect how they define and understand these situations. And as I previously argued, how HR professionals understand and interpret bullying and bullying situations is no doubt having a significant impact on how the phenomenon gets talked about and dealt with in the workplace. Because of the HR professionals’ central role, investigating workplace bullying through the eyes of HR professionals could prove very illuminating. With these issues in mind, the following research question was posed:

Research Question 1: How do HR professionals define and make sense of workplace bullying?

Method

Key Informants, Access, and Participants

I drew both my key informants and the majority of HR professional participants from the membership of a large HR management association located in a southern U.S. state. The Anywhere Human Resource Management Association (AHRMA) is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of the HR management profession. I conducted key informant interviews with a past president of AHRMA and the VP of Membership. Both key informants were able to provide me with valuable feedback on possible issues and questions.
associated with workplace bullying. These two key informants also served as access points to the AHRMA membership population.

**Sampling**

I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants for this study (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). I recruited the HR professionals who participated in the study through three main strategies: (a) AHRMA Linked In® group request, (b) tapping into the networks of AHRMA’s past president and VP of Membership, and (c) tapping into my own professional and personal network. I first attempted to recruit current AHRMA members through a message posted on the organization’s Linked In® website; this effort garnered 15 participants. I also found participants by tapping into the professional networks of one of AHRMA’s past presidents and the VP of Membership, resulting in two additional participants. Lastly, I used my personal network; I sent an email to my friends, coworkers, and professional contacts asking them if they would forward the participation request to any HR professional they knew who might like to participate in the study. This snowball sampling technique resulted in 15 additional participants. These sampling techniques resulted in 36 participants, and this sample size proved to be similar to other qualitative research projects (Cowan & Hoffman, 2007; Tracy et al., 2006).

The majority of the participants (n = 19) were considered mid-level HR managers in small to medium organizations. Of the 36 HR professionals, 23 were female and 13 were male. Six of the participants were considered mid-level management in larger organizations and tended to do less administrative work and more managing activities. Six of the participants worked for large organizations and reported they would be considered HR specialists in specific areas including recruiting (n = 4), compensation (n = 1), benefits (n = 1), and training (n = 1). Two of the participants reported they were low-level assistants to HR managers, and three more reported they were executive-level (VP) employees in HR. Twenty-one of the participants had been in the HR industry for 0 to 10 years, and 15 reported 10 to 20+ years. Close to half (n = 17) of the participants reported they had special HR certifications (Professional in Human Resources [PHR], Senior Professional in Human Resources [SPHR]). And the majority (n = 28) reported they were members of some regional or national HRs management association. All of the participants were assured confidentiality and asked to sign consent forms. All research procedures were approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB).
Data Collection

I first conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews with all the research participants. The interviews took place outside of the work environment, when possible, and at a location where the HR professionals felt comfortable talking about their experiences. The majority of the interviews were done face-to-face ($n = 26$). However, because of the snowball sampling technique and distance, 10 of the interviews were conducted via telephone. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min with the majority taking about 60 min. The one-on-one interviews were a mix of what Lindloff and Taylor (2002) describe as “respondent” and “narrative” interviews. The interviews were considered “narrative” in nature because I asked the HR professionals to detail their stories regarding their experiences relating to workplace bullying (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). Specifically, I asked the participants, “Do grown-ups bully each other at work? As an HR professional, have you or someone you know seen this at work? If yes, can you tell me the story?” All participants answered, “Yes” to the first question and all but five of the participants responded they had incidents of bullying in their current or previous workplaces. The remaining five indicated they knew someone who had seen incidents at work. I then asked a series of open-ended questions to gain an even deeper understanding of how they have made sense of the idea of workplace bullying and how they understood and interpreted these situations.

Throughout the data collection process I made code notes and memos to myself about what I was seeing emerge through the interviews. After each interview, I would immediately record my thoughts on the conversation and record areas that seemed to be reoccurring from other interviews. Right away I started seeing reoccurrences of particular areas including bullying behaviors and investigation processes. Once the interviews were completed, a small grant provided by the Texas A&M University Communication Department allowed me to have 22 of the interviews transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. After these transcriptions were completed, I went through each interview checking them for accuracy. I transcribed the rest of the interviews (14) by hand. This resulted in 352 single-spaced pages of analyzable text. As I transcribed, I made more notes and started to see more categories emerging.

Data Analysis

Charmaz (2000) clarified Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) grounded theory approach to data analysis by articulating a constructivist grounded theory which
calls into question the positivist underpinnings of earlier grounded theory techniques. Charmaz (2000) contends grounded theory data analysis strategies should be viewed as flexible and not rigidly enforced. I approached the data analysis with this spirit while using the grounded theory techniques articulated by Strauss and Corbin. During open coding, these data are broken down, and emerging concepts are labeled. I started open coding by breaking down and taking apart sentences and paragraphs, asking questions like “What is this?” or “What does this represent?” and then giving the phenomenon a name. This process generated 65 open codes related to my research question. Some of the codes were clearly bullying behaviors, others seemed to be codes for what turned behaviors into bullying and codes associated with issues in defining bullying.

During axial coding, a researcher further develops the categories identified during open coding by identifying larger themes in the emerging categories. During axial coding, I made “connections between a category and its subcategories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 97). These connections can be made in a variety of ways including comparing the themes uncovered in open coding for similarities and differences. During axial coding, I first printed out the quotations associated with each category and then put these codes into three general topics I saw emerging: behaviors, forms (what turned the behaviors into bullying), and general thoughts on bullying. I went through each pile separately asking myself questions, such as “Are these codes the same?” “If they are the same, how are they the same?” “Are they different? “If so, how?” This process allowed the 65 codes to be further categorized and subsumed into three prominent categories I labeled: bullying behaviors, from boorish to bullying, and bullying: It’s complicated. These categories and their subcategories will be discussed in the next section.

**Results**

**Bullying Behaviors**

The HR professionals I spoke with described a variety of behaviors or cues they felt pointed to bullying in the workplace. Specifically they talked about a wide variety of negative verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors including withholding information, rumors/gossip, undermining, and inconsistent/unfair treatment (see Table 1 for a full listing of these behaviors). These behaviors are similar and at times even identical to the behaviors in targets’ lists (see Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). By themselves, these cues were not what the HR professionals felt constituted bullying in the workplace.
From Boorish to Bullying

The HR professionals mentioned several areas that would help them determine if a situation was actually what they considered bullying. These areas had to do with power, whether the behaviors were persistent or repetitive, if the behaviors had adverse effects, if the behaviors were intentional, and if the behaviors could be proved by outside confirmation. The categories of power, persistent/repetitive, and adverse effects were very similar to existing research from the target’s perspective (see Porhola et al., 2006). The HR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative verbal communication</td>
<td>Negative spoken communication acts (yelling, talking harshly, abusive language)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative nonverbal communication</td>
<td>Negative unspoken communication acts (tone, nonverbal looks, facial expressions, body language)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withholding information</td>
<td>Not giving target information needed to do job or to get work assignments completed</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumors/gossip</td>
<td>Spreading of hearsay or untruths</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undermining</td>
<td>Behaviors that are intended to weaken or undercut the target or others; impossible deadlines, constant criticism, ridiculing work, sabotaging work, false allegations, and so forth</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent/unfair treatment</td>
<td>Treating people differently without reason</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teasing</td>
<td>Poking fun at another at their expense, joking about the target, mocking</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolating employees</td>
<td>Intentionally isolating an employee from others and ganging up on them</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pawning off work</td>
<td>Pushing work onto other people</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty behavior</td>
<td>Behaviors that show little concern for others, are rude and impolite based on societal standards</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belittling behavior</td>
<td>Behaviors enacted to mock, ridicule, or disparage another employee</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidating behavior</td>
<td>Threatening behavior, aggressive behavior, and threats</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
professionals, as did targets, voiced the idea that the bully was always more powerful than the target in some way, the bullying behaviors had to be enacted multiple times before they were considered bullying, and the behaviors resulted in adverse effects for the organization and the target. What was different about the HR professional’s perspective was the idea of intentionality and the need to have outside confirmation. These new areas seem to be influenced by their position in bullying situations and the general roles HR professionals play in organizations. These areas will be discussed in detail.

**Intentionality versus perception.** The intentionality of bullying behaviors versus the perception of intentionality was an important issue mentioned by all of the HR professionals. The issue had to do with whether bullying behaviors had to be intentionally enacted by the bully or if only the perception of intentionality, on the part of the target, was what mattered when determining if a situation was bullying. Some current definitions imply that the target’s *perception* of these behaviors as being intentional is enough to categorize a situation as bullying (Keashly & Nowell, 2003). Others are vague on this issue and simply use terms that imply intention (Namie & Namie, 2003). Although not deeply explored in the target research, this issue proved to be one that was very pertinent to how and if HR professionals made sense of certain behaviors as bullying.

Retrospectively, the HR professionals made sense of bullying as a phenomenon that had to be done intentionally and was thus in need of corrective action. However, not only does the target have to see the behaviors as intentional but also the HR professional has to have some kind of outside confirmation of the intention. In regard to sensemaking, this points to the idea that HR professionals go beyond just the initial cues associated with bullying behaviors and look to more specific cues like those associated with intention when making sense of bullying situations. Most HR professionals felt that bullying was intentionally done by the bully for some outcome or consequence. When asked, “When are behaviors bullying?” one participant I call Tori answered, “I guess I would say when it is intentional” and Mina mentioned she looked for cues on the “intention behind” the behaviors when considering if it was actually bullying. And Stephen commented,

> Just because you think you are being bullied in the workplace whether that is peer or supervisor or someone else, I don’t think that makes it bullying, just the recipients side of things. I think intent has to start with the person who is doing the actions that are construed as bullying.

Stephen pointed to the idea that as an HR professional, he would not make sense of a situation and label it as bullying on just the perception of the
accuser. To determine if it was indeed bullying, he would have to understand better the intention of the accused. This view seems to be in line with the “employee champion” role HR professionals are supposed to play in organizations (Ulrich, 1997). As a champion of all employees, the HR professional would have to explore the situation from both the target and accused bully’s perspective. And to take concrete action against the accused, the professional would need confirmation of intention of the bullying. Along with this, the HR professionals also talked about how complicated it was to determine intention and how they often felt that claims of bullying were really misinterpretations of another’s behaviors.

These HR professionals felt that many “bullies” don’t know what effect their behaviors are having and do not intend to bully. This impression is a main reason HR professionals felt they needed to investigate and get to the bottom of the situation before making a determination on whether the situation was bullying or not. For example, Betty talked about how one employee in her organization was being misperceived by others as a bully: “I think it was her personality, it was unintentional what she was doing and she didn’t realize the effect was having.” And Phyllis pointed to a direct communication style as cues others can misperceive as bullying:

Sometimes, depending on communication styles, people can see someone that perhaps has a high directive style as someone who is a bully, when it is nothing personal. These people don’t wake up and say, “I am going to bully someone today.”

Through Phyllis’s comment we can see that even if some bullying behaviors are happening, without the intention to harm or gain, this behavior was not made sense of as bullying. Jean also pointed to a misperception in these cases when he said, “Many times people think they are being bullied but they don’t recognize it as supervision.” It was clear that many of the HR professionals I spoke with felt that determining a case of bullying was much more complicated than just the perception on the part of the target of intentional harm. In addition, after some investigation on the part of the HR professional, many tended to make sense of these situations as misinterpretations of another’s behaviors, not intentional, malicious bullying.

Outside confirmation. Unlike the target research on defining bullying, an important issue related to identifying bullying for the HR professional was to gain outside confirmation or some kind of proof of the behaviors or intentions, which is part of their sensemaking. This belief seems to coincide with their employee champion and administrative expert roles. As the employee
champion the HR professional needs to have evidence of bullying before accusing or penalizing the bully and as the administrative assistant, the HR professional needs to deliver effective HR practices. It would not be an effective practice to act on accusations without evidence. Outside confirmation consisted of someone other than the accuser verifying the situation as bullying (other employees, the HR professionals themselves). This outside confirmation is seen as lending validity to the target’s complaint. In regard to sense-making, this confirmation points to the idea that defining and labeling bullying is indeed a social act for HR professionals (Weick, 1995). They pointed to varying cues that could signal outside confirmation including general outside confirmation tactics and a category I labeled \textit{getting a feeling}.

\textbf{General outside confirmation tactics.} The HR professionals talked about general ways they could confirm whether bullying was indeed what was happening or whether it was something else. They pointed to two cues, other employees’ complaints and third-party witnesses’ opinions, as general outside confirmation tactics. In regard to complaints by other employees, these cues consisted of other people (in addition to the person who filed the complaint) reporting similar behavior by the bully. Kevin commented on a situation that was determined to be bullying in his organization and stated that “. . . we had other reports as well,” and Alejandra pointed out that “usually when it is bullying there will be a lot more people involved so there is not just going to be one person . . .” Other cues that signaled outside confirmation and validated bullying situations were third-party opinions and witnesses. Third-party witness could include the HR professionals themselves. After complaining about a fellow employee she felt was bullying her, Jackie talked about how her boss validated her claim by seeking his own confirmation of the situation, “but eventually ended up talking to her . . . so he started to see what I was telling him was credible.” Witnesses in these situations are found by HR in a variety of ways including routine audits and through an investigatory process. Donald commented, “The only way you know is you start interviewing people and collecting the facts . . . .” And after doing a routine audit, Alejandra and her department started getting “all of this feedback saying ‘Johnny’ . . . so about 6 people into talking to everyone, everyone is mentioning ‘Johnny’ and the problems with Johnny and Joe.” These HR professionals clearly felt that some sort of outside confirmation is needed to be obtained for them to label a situation bullying when making sense of it as such.

\textbf{Getting a feeling.} The HR professionals viewed elusive cues or just “getting a feeling” about the bullying situation as evidence. They talked about “getting a feeling that something bad was going on” or had to “put two and two together “or “read between the lines.” This was not the only way they determined if the
situation was bullying but an interesting psychological disruption that lent some validity to the target’s complaints. Getting a feeling was attributed to their tenure in the industry and experience dealing with people; for others the behaviors seemed to violate a personal moral code that triggered the feeling. Although the HR professionals were able to articulate what bullying in the workplace meant and looked like to them, they were also careful to point out that determining if and when a situation was bullying was fairly complicated.

Bullying: It’s Complicated

The HR professionals made sense of bullying as hard to pin down; it was oftentimes subtle, and every situation and instance was different. In our conversations, many of the HR professionals had a hard time describing bullying and often needed several prompts to pin down actual behaviors or cues they considered of a bullying nature. They voiced that they knew bullying when it happened (i.e., could identify cues that pointed to evidence of bullying) and had sometimes even been a target themselves. At the same time, they voiced the idea that describing and pinning down bullying was complicated. Charlie commented,

Bullying is much more subtle and much more covert . . . it’s kinda like the old Supreme Court justice talking about hornets . . . you won’t know it until you see it. It is very hard to describe or give a definition of it.

Because of this problem many felt it was hard to prove that bullying was happening (and thus do something about it). Some mentioned that because there is no general consensus on what bullying entails; there are no strict guidelines on how to deal with it, which makes for a wide variety of interpretations on the issue. All of these things make it difficult, in the HR professionals’ opinion, to address bullying. Calvin commented,

I think it is hard to describe because it is more about . . . it’s not as tangible, I think, in the adult environment. Because I think it is really more about things people say, phrasing, and the things that they don’t say

And Kevin said, “I almost want to say that it is kind of a gray area because I guess everybody could have their different opinions on what bullying is and their own personal standards of what bullying is not.” “Gray areas” and “things people don’t say” are not easy situations for HR professionals to verify or act on.
The HR professionals talked about how bullying could be very subtle and covert and therefore hard to deal with and prove. Carol pointed out, “Bullying is subtle and difficult to address”; Stephanie commented, “I think it is a little more covert”; and Tyson felt, “From the HR standpoint, it was difficult to address because you knew what they were doing but it was difficult to prove.” Tyson, after detailing a story about subtle bullying, said, “It was an interesting technique to watch, it was a little disturbing, and it was almost impossible to deal with” and contrasted bullying with another phenomenon that he felt was easier to pin down and address. Jose commented, “It is kinda harder to catch than let’s say, sexual harassment.” Another issue that further complicates dealing with bullying is the idea that bullying is not harassment (which is an idea/phenomenon that we have words to explain and policies to point to when it occurs); however, many of the HR professionals felt bullying was like harassment or a variant of harassment.

**Bullying = harassment?** The HR professionals I spoke with felt that bullying did border on harassment or was harassment. Ted felt that “most HR professionals would liken it to a variance of harassment and would probably deal with it like it was almost a harassment event.” Similarly, Betty commented, “I think what they consider workplace bullying is violence in the workplace and harassment . . . harassment obviously covers sexual harassment, and it also covers almost like a bullying kind of issue.” Trianna made it clear where bullying tends to fall as far as these phenomena are concerned, “well, I think it is very important, in these situations, to just make sure that nothing else is going on, like harassment. Because I think that bullying, at times, could border on harassment.” And Teri described where bullying tends to fall and this “border” a bit clearer, “To me bullying is, or would be right before, harassment.” This is interesting because in effect what these HR professionals believe is that bullying is like harassment, but it is a type of harassment that is not clearly defined and does not, in many countries, legally rise to the level of other types of harassment.

**Degrees of bullying?** Another reason identifying and dealing with bullying seemed to be complicated was the idea that not all bullying was the same. Instead the HR professionals seemed to believe that there were degrees or levels of bullying situations. One HR professional mentioned how bullying behaviors could intensify over time through some kind of process, Jaime commented, “I would suggest dealing with it at the very early stages so that it doesn’t progress into something that could cause a very serious problem.”

The HR professionals seemed to distinguish degrees of bullying by the actual bullying behaviors and the degree of repetition of the behaviors. For example, Tori felt that some types of bullying were more severe than others
and this variation affected what action she took in the situation. She pointed to a complaint about the way a coworker was speaking to another coworker versus a severe complaint like hostility in the workplace: “They can say, I am not really comfortable with their comments made to me or with the way they are treating me . . .” In this situation she would talk to the bully and try to get the behavior to stop. She went on to talk about other situations that rise to the level of grievances: “Hostility in the workplace, the person seems to be scared to be at work. I am scared to be around this person, this person is really creepy or offensive.” And Chelsea also pointed to varying degrees of bullying when she contrasted bullying in a white-collar office versus a blue-collar environment: “I work in a white collar office so I don’t know that I see headstrong bullying that you would see in a blue collar environment.” She goes on to detail an example of bullying in a blue-collar environment that included overt intimidation and then added, “That would be rare in my white collar world.” When asked what kind of bullying happened in the white-collar world, she answered, “bullying would be snide remarks under the breath, figuring out how to get other people on your side.” This bullying seems to be low in intensity in contrast to her description of the blue-collar example. She went on to point to an intensity between these two extremes when she talked about bullying that involved many people ganging up on one person: “They bad mouth people to get other people on board with them until it is bullying on a whole different level because of the number of people.” Chelsea indicates that the intensity of the behaviors has to do with directness of the behavior or the idea that behaviors become more intense the more direct they are (see Baron & Neuman, 1998). Others pointed to more extreme behaviors as overly aggressive or deviant behaviors. Ted even mentioned the idea of degrees of bullying when he said, “I have seen in the workplace where performance comes into play, adults will bully each other in some form or fashion in varying degrees . . .” Charlie points to repetition and the actual behavior as indicators of the severity of the situation,

Threats about making their life difficult . . . either many on a low level or one that is dramatic and sort of over the top . . . veiled things like “remember, I’ve got more work for you to do” or “remember this person who didn’t do very well.” Dropping little hints collectively over time creating a bullying atmosphere.

It was clear Charlie felt there were varying levels of bullying situations based on the actual behaviors and their persistence. Here a “dramatic over the top” comment seems to be on the same level as several less dramatic comments.
These type of comments indicated that HR professionals saw bullying as a phenomenon with varying levels or degrees of severity, which complicated how they dealt with the issue. The remaining section will attempt to make sense of these findings and point to possible implications.

**Discussion and Implications**

This investigation revealed important similarities and differences in existing target and academic definitions of workplace bullying and how HR professionals understand and make sense of bullying. In answer the research question posed, I found that HR professionals, like targets and researchers, make sense of workplace bullying by pointing to several negative verbal and nonverbal communicative cues that had to be persistent/repetitive, had to involve a power disparity between the target and bully, and had to result in adverse effects. Although HR professionals seem to identify similar cues to those of researchers and targets, there were key areas of difference. These differences included the intent to bully, verifying this intent, and the idea that bullying had degrees of severity (based on behaviors and persistence). In this section, I will first discuss these definitional differences and point to important implications of these findings. I will then discuss why HR professionals may hold this view of bullying. Specifically, how the general HR professional roles and the larger context in which other forms of harassment have been defined may be influencing this view.

**Implications of HR Professionals’ Sensemaking on Bullying**

There are several implications of the HR professionals’ sensemaking on bullying that are made clear by this investigation. First, the HR professional’s view that most allegations of bullying were the result of misinterpretation of another’s behaviors could be highly problematic in some bullying situations. One component of the sensemaking model is that it is revealed through enactment (Weick, 1995). This principle refers to the actual production of meaning. As opposed to being acted on by their environments, people create their own environments through their actions. Those environments, in turn, constrain future actions. The view of bullying as a misinterpretation could have resulted from the HR professionals’ experience with past bullying cases (i.e., investigating and not finding enough “evidence”), thus creating the environment that bullying is not a problem in the HR professional’s organization or demonstrating the assumption they start with because of the dominant roles they play in organizations. Whatever the case, this belief may
be why targets complain that HR professionals do nothing in bullying situations (Workplace Bullying Institute/Zogby International Survey [WBI/Zogby], 2007). If HR professionals start from the assumption that bullying is a misperception, it is likely many bullying situations will continue unabated. And this view could be why targets report situations often get worse after seeking help from HR (Namie & Namie, 2003).

Second, some of these HR professionals could be making a fundamental attribution error in bullying situations (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985) as the result of relying on plausibility rather than accuracy to make sense of these situations. An important part of the sensemaking model is that when we make sense of something in our environment (i.e., bullying) it does not have to be accurate so long as it is possible (Weick, 1995). If the HR professional finds no outside confirmation from others or they aren’t “getting a feeling” about the situation, they could be at risk of attributing the situation to the target. Weiner’s (1985) attribution-action model would predict HR professionals would be more likely to punish or see fault with the target if they make a higher internal attribution (the situation happened because of the target). HR professionals may, then, unfairly blame targets if they cannot find what they consider reasonable and accurate outside confirmation. In this situation, the plausibility of the target being to blame seems a more logical way for HR professional to make sense of the bullying situation (or lack thereof) if they are unable to confirm bullying allegations. This sensemaking may explain targets reporting feeling maligned after speaking up and bringing the situation to HR (Namie & Namie, 2003; WBI/Zogby, 2007) and would likely reinforce the view that bullying is really a misperception.

Third, relying on “getting a feeling” as a barometer for detecting and making sense of bullying could lead HR professionals to an imprecise determination of when a situation is likely bullying and when it is not. As detailed previously, cues are a key element of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). When a cue does not fit within the limits of ongoing daily interaction it can redirect our attention to focus on this cue (Weick, 1995). It is possible some HR professionals could have an overactive sense of “feeling” for bullying cases whereas others may never “get a feeling” even in the most extreme cases. It seems HR professionals could be made sensitive (or not) to bullying based on the cues present in their specific organization’s environment with regard to culture, the dominant general role they tend to play in the organization, the HR professional’s own personality, experiences with bullying in the past, and a myriad of other factors. Needless to say, relying on this barometer likely results in mixed outcomes. The use of “getting a feeling” to help determine bullying situations is possibly a result of the undeveloped state of the bullying
definition (we still can’t pin down exactly what it is and what it is not) and a
direct result of HR professionals viewing bullying situations and their identi-
fication as “complicated.” Some HR professionals may resort to “getting a
feeling” as evidence because of this complicated state.

Fourth, part of what made defining and pinning down bullying complicated
was the idea that neither do all bullying situations are the same (i.e., degrees
of bullying) nor do individuals interpret them in the same way. These HR
professionals are not the first to suggest that not all bullying is the same
(Davenport et al., 2002; Leymann, 1996; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts,
(2002) by conceptualizing bullying degree as a “cumulative score reflecting
intensity, frequency, and duration of negative acts that constitute bullying”
(p. 844). Intensity was conceptualized as the cumulative number of negative
acts experienced by the target; frequency was conceptualized as the cumula-
tive number of acts reported to happen on an extremely frequent basis (two
negative acts at least once a week); and duration was set at 6 months. The
current investigation helps to confirm the idea that not all bullying is the same
and does have degrees of severity. The HR professionals suggested, just as
targets did (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007), that repetition (intensity and fre-
quency) made bullying more severe. However, the current findings also sug-
gest that the severity of the bullying behaviors experienced should also be
incorporated into the bullying degree construct.

The HR professionals pointed to the idea that not all bullying behaviors
should be weighted the same. Because of this view I suggest an additional
continuum related to the severity of the negative bullying act. On the low end
are seemingly mild behaviors like not listening, petty behaviors, teasing, and
snide comments (i.e., incivility, see Andersson & Pearson, 1999). On the high
end are more extreme behaviors like threats, intimidation, deviant behaviors,
and threats of physical violence (i.e., aggressive behaviors, see Baron &
Neuman, 1998). Bullying behaviors on the low end would be weighted less
heavily than those on the high end. On a more practical note, developing
these degrees of bullying severity could help HR professionals more easily
identify and deal with mild bullying behaviors before they escalate to severe
cases. Previous research suggests it is these mild covert behaviors repeated
over and over that could be the most damaging (see Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005).

Why HR Professionals May Hold This View of Bullying

Two factors seem to be influencing the HR professional’s view of bullying:
the roles they play in organizations and the larger context in which other
forms of harassment have been defined. It seems clear that the general HR philosophy and general roles HR professionals play in organizations influence how HR professionals understand and define workplace bullying. Due to the strategic role they assume, HR professionals may interpret some bullying situations not as malicious bullying but as competitive behaviors that are helping the organization stay viable and productive. In fact, in some organizations this may be the barometer HR uses to determine if something is malicious bullying or a misperception/misunderstanding. This interpretation is in line with Salin’s (2003) suggestion that bullying continues unabated in highly competitive organizations because of motivating factors including high internal competition, certain types of rewards systems, and expected organizational benefits.

Also, as an administrative expert, HR professionals are concerned with larger organizational processes and outcomes. It is likely these professionals see bullying as the direct manager’s problem until the situation begins to affect the organizational unit as a whole or the larger organization. This view could be highly problematic for targets, HR professionals, and organizations given that previous research has demonstrated that managers are often the perpetrators of bullying activities (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002), and when HR professionals send targets back to the manager to “work out” the situation, bullying often gets worse (Namie & Namie, 2003). In addition, being concerned with larger organizational outcomes could be why HR professionals believe there are degrees of bullying. Those severe situations where there are “dramatic over the top” behaviors and a persistent use of these behaviors would most likely have a larger effect on the organizational unit and the organization as a whole. Also, needing outside confirmation and evidence of mal-intent could be a product of the “employee champion” role HR professionals are expected to play in organizations (Ulrich, 1997). HR professionals are tasked with being an employee champion for all employees, including the accused bully. This role may be another reason they need outside confirmation and report they have to “get to the bottom” of the situation before acting.

In addition, the roles HR professionals are expected to play in organizations could be paradoxical, further limiting their ability to help targets and stop bullying. The general roles Ulrich (1997) articulated seem to suggest that HR professionals need to be an employee champion and get to the bottom of bullying allegations but only in situations where the larger organizational unit or organization as a whole is at risk. This constraint could be one of the reasons they felt identifying and dealing with bullying was complicated.
This investigation revealed another factor that may be affecting how HR professionals understand bullying—how sexual harassment (or more precisely, hostile work environment) has been legally defined. The HR professional’s sensemaking on bullying points to many parallels and disconnects with the legal definition of hostile work environment. Legally speaking, for a situation to be considered a hostile work environment the conduct has to be unwelcome, because of sex, and sufficiently severe or pervasive as to alter the terms or conditions of employment (Willborn, Schwab, Burton, & Lester, 2007). Specifically, the conduct has to create an objective and subjective hostile work environment (Willborn et al., 2007). Obviously, the “because of sex” standard is not reflected in their construction of bullying; however, there is evidence of the other two conditions.

HR professionals’ sensemaking on bullying did reflect the idea that the conduct had to create an objective and subjective hostile work environment. The objectivity standard supports the notion that the conduct has to create an environment that a reasonable person would find hostile (Willborn et al., 2007). The reasonable person standard can clearly be seen in the HR professional’s sensemaking on bullying through the need for outside confirmation. These HR professionals felt if others complained or witnessed bullying behaviors, the situation may be bullying. The subjectivity standard, on the other hand, was reflected differently in HR professionals’ sensemaking on bullying. Sexual harassment law points to the idea that the intention of the harasser (i.e., “I didn’t mean to do it” or “They took my actions the wrong way”) does not matter. It is the subjective perception of the target and a reasonable person that is important when determining if a situation is sexual harassment. This situation is not the case for bullying, as the HR professionals seem to hold these situations to a higher standard such that not only does the target have to feel as if they are being targeted and a reasonable person see the environment as hostile, the HR professional also has to find mal-intent on the part of the bully to label the situation bullying.

Last, the stance that the situation has to be sufficiently severe or pervasive as to alter the conditions of employment is further reflected in how the HR professionals made sense of bullying. First, the consideration of severity and pervasiveness underlied the HR professionals’ constructions of bullying degree. The idea that one “over the top” behavior or several mild, persistent behaviors were both considered bullying reflects the severe or pervasive standard of hostile work environment. Similarly, when the HR professionals mentioned “getting a feeling” (i.e., someone was just scared to come to work or something was wrong) as evidence of bullying, this standard is likely
influenced by the idea that the situation has to “alter the conditions of employment” (Willborn et al., 2007).

It seems the larger legal context surrounding sexual harassment (specifically hostile work environment) is affecting how HR professionals understand the phenomenon of bullying. Another aspect that bullying seems to share with sexual harassment is its historical/legal trajectory. Specifically, HR professionals qualified their efforts at defining bullying by saying the phenomenon was complicated because there is still no general consensus on what it is and how to deal with it. By this, the HR professionals seemed to mean that workplace bullying was not a legally supported or defined term so definitions and ways of dealing with it were complicated. These issues with ambiguity are not surprising as they seem to echo the state of sexual harassment before case law helped to define and make clearer sexually harassing behaviors and what constituted a hostile work environment (Collins & Blodgett, 1981; Gutek, Nakamura, Gahart, Hanschumacher, & Russell, 1980; Pryor, 1988). Research reports that policies/guidelines concerning the prevention of sexual harassment, like bullying, were very hard to construct because of a lack of consensus on sexual harassment behaviors/situations (Pryor, 1988). These HR professionals felt that bullying situations were, at times, hard to pin down and deal with because what is considered by one person as bullying might not be seen as such by another. This issue was also pertinent in sexual harassment situations (specifically hostile work environment) and was not clarified until case law began to make sexual harassment situations clearer for HR professionals, organizations, and victims (Gutek et al., 1980). If bullying is in a developmental state similar to sexual harassment in the 1970s and 1980s, it seems legislation addressing the issue needs to be specific and concrete (see Yamada, 2000, 2008, for an in-depth discussion of bullying and U.S. law). As with sexual harassment during its developmental state, workplace bullying will likely continue to be an ambiguous phenomenon that is hard to deal with for HR professionals until specific legislation is passed to aid them in articulating policies and guidelines meant to deal concretely with the issue.

**Conclusion and Future Research**

This investigation revealed how HR professionals understand and make sense of bullying and possible repercussions and implications of this perceptive. As with any research endeavor, limitations may be noted. As the majority of participants were members of a professional HRM organization, findings have limited transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to those HR
professionals not involved in professional organizations. Those HR professionals who are a part of professional organizations likely have more access to educational programs and activities that allow them to develop their expertise on current HR issues. Because of this access they represent a participant pool that is likely better educated and informed on emerging HR issues such as bullying. In addition, the HR participants were volunteers predominantly located in the south who self-selected into this study. Future research should also seek to determine if these results are reflected in a larger random population of HR professionals. Also the lead question I asked the HR professionals, “Do grownups bully each other at work?” could have affected the HR professionals’ sensemaking. Although there was little evidence of this affect in the responses, this question could have linked child bullying to workplace bullying in the minds of some participants. Further investigation of bullying through the HR professional perspective should help communication scholars shed much-needed light on this damaging communication phenomenon.

In regard to sensemaking, several of the properties are evident in HR professional’s communication concerning bullying including the idea that one’s sense or interpretation of events can be extracted by communication cues and that this interpretation is both retrospective and social (or come to through communication with others; Weick 1995). Identification of these properties helped construct how HR professionals made sense of the bullying phenomenon and contributes to understanding bullying and harassment as experienced in organizations (Doughtery & Smythe, 2004; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). The results of this inquiry point to two important factors that seem to influence the HR professional’s view of bullying: the roles they play in organizations and the larger context in which other forms of harassment have been defined.

The implications of these factors on HR professional’s sensemaking notwithstanding, several questions remain. Is bullying going to be seen as hostile work environment where the perception of the receiver is what matters or will verifiable intention continue to be pertinent? This difference is important to work out because it affects how HR professionals treat and deal with bullying situations and how targets view HR professionals and their role. Another important area that needs further exploration is the specific roles HR professionals play in bullying situations. Although we know the general roles HR professionals tend to play in organizations, we do not know if these roles resonate with actual HR professionals. How do HR professionals see and understand their roles in bullying situations? Do they reflect these dominant roles or is the picture more complicated? Future research should center on
how HR professionals understand their roles in bullying situations as well as what they think other actors (upper management and targets) see as their role in these situations. These findings could prove revealing of how bullying is seen and dealt with in organizations as well as why it is seen and handled this way.

Acknowledgments
The author would like to thank Dr. Charles Conrad for his advice and guidance on earlier versions of this article. An earlier version of this article received the Top Paper Award from the Organizational and Professional Division at the 2010 Central States Communication Association Conference in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References


Bio

Renee L. Cowan (PhD, Texas A&M University) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Her main research interests include work/life integration, workplace bullying, and the use of communication technologies in the workplace.