Gender, Work
& Organization

Priming, Painting, Peeling, and Polishing: Constructing and Deconstructing the Woman-Bullying-Woman Identity at Work

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Constructing and Deconstructing the Woman-Bullying-Woman Identity at Work

Abstract: Women bully other women at work more than twice as often as they target men, a pattern that has yet to be fully explored or theorized in adult bullying research. This paper theorizes about this gender-based pattern by unmasking the hidden forces behind it, encouraging women's critical examination of what they are doing and why, and highlighting the organizational and social factors that lead to the woman-bullying-women (WBW) pattern. We metaphorically frame WBW as a sub-structure within the larger social construction of professional identity. In positing a metaphoric framework involving *priming*, *painting*, *peeling*, *and polishing,* we intend to open up the dialogue about why women might turn on other women in workplace situations. To encourage critical articulation, we pose two kinds of questions— those for women to ask of themselves to recognize the hidden forces pushing them toward workplace aggression, and questions calling on others to more critically analyze the social and organizational factors that contribute to WBW. We end by suggesting avenues of action to deconstruct aggressive identity constructions.

Keywords: workplace bullying, female bullies, gender, metaphor, paradox

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Women bully other women at work more than twice as often as they target men, a pattern that has yet to be fully explored or theorized in adult bullying research. Popular media, on the other hand, are keen to point out the pattern. Two recent media reports, *Women Bullies Often Target Other Women* (Wild and Brady, 2009) and *Backlash: Women Bullying Women at Work* (Meese, 2009), focus on women's verbal and psychological abuse of other women at work. At least in the United States, in over 70 percent of the female-bullies cases, they target women (Namie, 2007b). The gendered pattern is what *Backlash* called "the pink elephant in the room." Media attention marks an increased interest in women bullying women, and adult bullying data provides evidence of this trend (See Appendix).

The purpose of this essay is to theorize this gender-based pattern and suggest moves toward more constructive organizing. To do this we unmask the hidden forces that underlie women-bullying-women (WBW), encourage women's critical examination of what they are doing and why, and underscore the unintended consequences of WBW. We talk about this same-sex pattern by metaphorically framing it as a structure within the larger social construction of professional identity. In positing a metaphoric framework involving *priming*, *painting*, *peeling*, and *polishing*, we intend to open up the dialogue about why women might turn on other women in workplace situations. To encourage critical articulation, we pose a series of questions so that women might recognize the hidden forces pushing them toward workplace aggression and make more informed choices about their identity constructions. We additionally pose larger organizational, social, and discursive questions so as not to place the sole responsibility of change on individual women. This move allows us to move outside individualized ways of discussing and addressing WBW.

To begin the discussion, we define workplace bullying as "*repeated* and *persistent negative actions* towards one or more *individual(s),* which involve *a perceived power imbalance* and *create a hostile work environment.* Bullying is thus a form of interpersonal aggression or hostile, anti-social behaviour in the workplace" (Salin, 2003b, p. 1214 emphasis original). Namie (2007b, p. 8) reports that "Women prefer to bully other women, 2.5 times more frequently than they target men. Men divide their cruelty showing a slight preference toward same-gender harassment." The WBW pattern is evident in at least six studies[1] (see Appendix) and is commonly explained in two ways: stereotypes of "cat fights" and "bitches" (e.g., J. Doe, personal communication, Montreal Conference on Bullying, June 5, 2008) and gender co-presence, that is, women are likely to work with women (Hoel and Cooper, 2000; Leymann, 1996). Beyond occasional mention, however, there is little attention to or theorizing about the WBW pattern. Of particular interest for our purposes are both the distinctly gendered patterns of bullying, and how it is predominately defined through individual actions and not necessarily organizational or social contexts. We look beyond "bitches" and co-presence to explore WBW through a critical engagement with the literature informing gendered constructions in the workplace.

Fundamentally, our arguments are based on exploring, compiling, and conceptualizing feminist, organizational, and critical-cultural literatures[2] to offer a new lens through which working women (and academics who study them) can view the WBW phenomenon. Our intent, then, is not to study the WBW process per se but to theorize an explanation, on the basis of existing literatures and empirical studies that report this WBW pattern, which may offer new inroads of understanding into the process. We hope this work will serve as the basis for further

studies, both qualitative and quantitative, that test the accuracy and significance of our

theorizing.

The lens that emerged from our review of current literature is a *metaphorical*

construction involving four processes: priming, painting, peeling, and polishing. In other words,

we see WBW as a pattern involving a progression through four metaphors. Metaphors, the

process of "*understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*" (Lakoff and

Johnson, 1980, p. 5, italics in original) serve as a conceptual tool that can function to clarify

meaning, create new associations, raise interest in, and magnify the importance of a particular

subject (Osborn, 2009). Metaphors "give us a handle on things and experiences we have already

categorized, or they may lead to a recategorization" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 124). They

provide a "device for seeing something in terms of something else" (Burke, 1945, p. 503), a

means for shifting perspective. Moreover, metaphors help clarify relationships between things

that are typically unarticulated because "much of our conceptual system is used unconsciously

and automatically, in ways that we don't even notice" (Lakoff, 1987, p. 337).

Metaphors comprise our basic conceptual system as humans, so the metaphors an

individual, group, or culture uses offer clues to dominant, privileged, or preferred forms of

thought and behavior. Ultimately, metaphors provide perspective: "to use significant metaphor is

to frame reality in a certain way and to invite others to share our stance upon it" (Osborn, 2009,

p. 655). Identifying ways a group thinks, through its metaphors, and creating new metaphors by

which a group can reframe an issue can provide a foundation for the group to approach an issue

differently.

A metaphorical interpretation, then, provides an accessible way of understanding why

women might bully other women that can be useful to organizational members and practitioners.

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Metaphor invites critical reflection by providing a different way of looking at and understanding

what is happening while avoiding personalizing too acutely the situations in which women find

themselves. Such a framework might be especially constructive for women who wonder if others

consider their behavior as *bullying*; for organizational members, practitioners, and scholars to

talk about and deal with bullying without demonizing the perpetrators; and for those seeking a

way to understand and move out of destructive patterns in the workplace. Essentially, we came

up with and implemented metaphors here not only to help describe the WBW problem in a novel

way but to also offer solutions that fall outside of much bullying research.

<div align="center">Gender and Workplace Bullying</div>

To position our arguments, we began by surveying and coding literature that attends to

issues of gender in bullying but typically gives WBW little attention. Lee (1998, 2002) was one

of the first to situate gender centrally in the study of bullying, arguing, for example, that a failure

to conform to traditionally gendered roles could trigger bullying at work. Other research

predominantly positions gender as a variable, a rather static category coded demographically as

participant "sex," rather than considering "gender as an underlying aspect of organizing"

(Buzzanell, 1995, p. 328). Variable-oriented research has explored how (or if) men and women's

bullying experiences differ. There does seem to be evidence that women and men experience

different forms of mistreatment from bullies. Women, as opposed to men, experience lower rates

of physical violence and ethnic harassment, and higher rates of exclusion by jokes at their

expense (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty and Freels, 2001; Schat, Frone and Kelloway, 2006).

Regarding responses to bullying, both men and women report using social support networks,

although women did so more often than men (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Ólafsson and

Jóhannsdóttir, 2004; Richman et al., 2001). In one study women reported feeling aggressive

more often than did the men when faced with abuse (Björkqvist, Österman and Hjelt-Bäck, 1994).

Whether men or women are more often bullied is unclear. Some research reports that women are targeted more often than men (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Salin, 2001; Stokes and Klein, 1998), while other studies describe approximately equal rates by gender/sex (Jennifer, Cowie and Anaiadou, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy and Alberts, 2007; Namie, 2007b; Richman et al., 2001; Vartia and Hyyti, 2002). Women appear to be targeted more often in certain professions (e.g., university faculty, nurses) (Cox, 1991; Richman, Rospenda, Nawyn, Flaherty, Fendich, Drum and Johnson, 1999), and female supervisors and middle managers report considerably higher rates of bullying than do men in similar positions (Hoel, Cooper and Faragher, 2001). Both men and women suffer comparable negative affects associated with bullying. They are equally likely to consume alcohol at higher rates than non-harassed workers (although quantities are higher for men, Richman et al., 2001; Rospenda, Richman, Wislar and Flaherty, 2000) and experience reduced job satisfaction, confidence, self-esteem, productivity, mental health functioning, and communication with supervisors (Price Spratlen, 1995; Vartia and Hyyti, 2002). Men and women also similarly report increased stress, depression, and anxiety (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Vartia and Hyyti).

Schieman and McMullen's (2008) work more specifically examines the effects of supervisor-employee gender arrangements on employee health. In this study, women supervised by other women or by supervisory teams including women reported higher levels of distress and physical symptomology than did women working for male-only supervisors. Men, on the other hand, benefited from being supervised by women both when women were supervising

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individually or as a part of supervisory teams. This points to serious disadvantages for women

with women bosses and calls for work to understand the forces behind these patterns.

Very little research focuses on or theorizes about bullies (for a rare exception see Rayner

and Cooper, 2003) aside from establishing bullies' gender/sex. In this vein, targets most often

identify males as bullies, a pattern explained as a function of position: Supervisors are more

often bullies overall, and men are typically found in greater numbers within supervisory ranks

(Lutgen-Sandvik and Namie, 2009; Rayner, 1997; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel and Vartia, 2003). For

women in some professions (e.g., nursing), however, peer-to-peer or within-group bullying (i.e.,

horizontal violence) is more common than supervisory bullying (e.g., Duffy, 1995; Hutchinson,

Vickers, Jackson and Wilkes, 2006).

Although this literature informs our understandings of gender in bullying situations, the

fact that women most often bully other women remains under-studied and under-theorized.

Despite the recurrence of this pattern in numerous studies, (Hoel and Cooper, 2000, Lutgen-

Sandvik, 2007, Lutgen-Sandvik, 2009, Namie, 2003, Rayner, 1997) researchers have been

relatively silent regarding reasons for its occurrence. When scholars have mentioned the WBW

pattern they typically describe it as a function of co-presence. Leymann (1996), for example,

argued that despite the male-male, female-female bully-target pattern, "this should not be

interpreted according to gender." Rather, the pattern "should be interpreted as a structural

consequence of worklife . . . men mostly work together with men and women with women" (p.

175). Hoel and Cooper (2001) echoed this argument in their UK research.

Constructing (and Deconstructing) the Bullying-Woman Identity

As a result of examining, coding, conceptualizing, and evaluating gender and bullying

literatures from organizational, feminist, and critical-cultural perspectives, our first stopping

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point toward constructing a new WBW perspective was to review the literature on identity

construction. In particular, this literature led us to envision WBW as an unintended consequence

of professional identity construction. Identity work is "the capacity *to keep a particular narrative*

going" (Giddens, 1991, p. 244, emphasis in original); it can self-consciously involve "creating

and projecting a particular sort of self to others as well as about avoiding other performances that

are out of bounds" (Hatcher, 2008, pp. 153-54). However, most identity work is relatively

unselfconscious (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) habitual, routinized, and only indirectly

motivated. Women, in other words, do not consciously say to themselves, "I will bully and abuse

other women to keep from being seen as a weak female." In addition to a traditional definition of

bullying that focuses on individual actions, WBW can be understood as a discursive social and

political process that constructs identity and is constructed by identity work drawing upon

societal gender socialization, organizational structuring materials, and relationships among

organizational members.

While it is unlikely that most women who bully other women consciously decide to

engage in practices that destroy other women's professional lives, this is often the result of

bullying (Rayner, Hoel and Cooper, 2002). Despite an apparent lack of intention to be abusive,

bullying is always motivated, although usually indirectly, by social norms and pressures,

personal histories, and unique goals and drives. Our next move, in offering a rationale for and

theory about WBW, is to understand how women's identity work draws on structures—rules,

norms, pressures, beliefs, resources, and so forth—in ways that simultaneously constitute or

transform those structures (Giddens, 1984).

Giddens' concepts of practical and discursive consciousness are useful here, as we

believe building the bullying identity is rooted in the former and deconstructed or dismantled

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through the latter. Practical consciousness includes human actors' stores of knowledge about

social conditions and norms that motivate *day-to-day practices* in typically unrecognized,

unarticulated ways (Giddens, 1984). Day-to-day practices usually operate in an automatic,

routinized fashion but constitute much of social life including the construction of identity.

Discursive consciousness, on the other hand, is what human actors know they can put into words.

Bringing what is practically known into the realm of discursive consciousness means articulating

or talking about it, including the reasons for actions and reactions. An analogy is that practical

consciousness is knowing that one likes the taste of vegetable soup; discursive consciousness is

the ability to describe how vegetable soup tastes.

Women's ability to articulate what they are doing and why is a higher-level skill needed

to build a professional identity that better serves their needs. Thus, women who think they might

be bullying others could become more cognizant of and able to critically reflect on and change

their behaviors. As Tiedens explains, the struggle for status among people is going on all the

time, "and the pernicious effects occur *because we don't talk about it*. Once it becomes an

explicit part of a relationship, we have a lot more control over how it plays out and the associated

benefits" (quoted by Neilson, 2007, para 9, emphasis added).

We argue that WBW is a typically unintended structure that women erect during the

process of constructing professional identities around their jobs. We constructed a series of

metaphors—priming, painting, peeling, and polishing—in order to manage the personal and

societal issues that emerged in the literature around WBW. Again, metaphors can provide clarity

and new perspectives that we hope will encourage further discussion, both practical and

academic, about the phenomenon of WBW. Metaphorically, then, we suggest that women's

identity construction includes choosing available building materials, many of which are not of

their own design. The construction process involves being primed in certain ways, erecting and

painting a specific type of professional identity, potentially having the paint peel and the ill-fated

construction collapse. Conversely, deconstruction can involve peeling away unproductive,

harmful aspects of identity by remodeling with different materials, which suggests another

possible ending—a polishing or reconstructing of one's image more to one's own liking.

A central goal of the metaphorical framing of WBW as a *construction* is to shift the

social moves that build the female bully identity to the level of discursive consciousness without

undue personalization so women have more choice and control over who they are becoming.

Practical consciousness, everyday thinking, and routine habits are structured by conceptual

metaphors, and the choice of metaphors can influence how situations are perceived, addressed,

and resolved (Robins and Mayer, 2000).

Viewing the WBW identity as a metaphorical construction provides women with a way

to understand and then *articulate* what is happening, while avoiding personalizing too acutely the

situations in which they find themselves. It presents alternative explanations and possibilities for

action or deconstructing the WBW identity. We use the term *deconstruction* to mean a process of

dismantling, rethinking, and rebuilding. In what follows, we examine the historically embedded

social forces that encourage building a bullying-woman identity. We follow each area with

questions that interrogate workplace aggression and provide space for moving bullying from

habitual routine ways of responding (i.e., practical consciousness) to articulated behavior (i.e.,

discursive consciousness), a combination of self-, organizational-, and social-critique, and

potential change.

The literature suggests that there are a number of reasons why women might construct

professional identities that involve bullying other women, whether intentionally or

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unintentionally. Aspects of the construction are *priming* that directs women to build in certain

directions using specific products and materials, *painting* the structures of professional identities

with the perceived colors of success, and *peeling* patinas in an identity project gone wrong or

shedding identities that fail to serve women's best interests and remodeling the project in new

directions. *Polishing,* however, offers an optimistic possibility for a shift in identity based on

reconstruction and awareness. If we think of priming, painting, peeling, and polishing as aspects

of identity construction, we can examine the challenges women and others negotiate in

organizational spaces that still remain largely patriarchal.

The WBW Identity: From Priming to Painting

The first two processes of our metaphoric construction of WBW are grounded in the

notion of organizations as gendered. Britton (1999, p. 469) claims that "the designation of

organizations as 'gendered' is needlessly generic; organizations, per se, are 'masculinized.'" She

has argued, and we agree, that generally speaking,

> men will be advantaged in organizational settings over their female coworkers, that skills
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> identified with men will be rewarded more than those associated with women, that male
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> workers and male-dominated organizations will be constructed as ideal types, and that
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> these gendered advantages will be perpetuated in both personal and impersonal ways,
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> through policy, organizational structure, ideology, interactions among workers, and in the
>
> construction and maintenance of individual identities. (Britton, 1999, p. 456)

The following arguments, which we compiled from existing literatures, are rooted in this

perspective. Although each woman has a uniquely gendered socialization experience

compounded by race, class, sexual orientation, and so forth, most enter organizations with ideas

about what it means to be a woman, what it means to work, and what it means to be a woman at

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work in highly masculinized environments. Much like priming wood before painting, socialization prepares and pushes women to choose particular materials and to build their professional identities in certain directions. The various materials for identity construction include general gendered expectations coupled with specific expectations regarding women in organizations. These prime some women to use aggression as a building block for their professional identities. The lower status of other women primes them as the likely targets.

Interrelated processes rooted in social discourses prime women's identity work in specific ways that impel them to bully other women. These include women as an oppressed muted group, women as "not-men" and thus less competent, the women-as-authority contradiction, emotion display rules for women, the notion of women as "sisters," and the limited presence of women in authority. For each we pose questions for critical reflection, both individual and larger organizational and social questions. These questions might help individual women articulate the forces pushing their abuse of power while also allowing co-workers, administrators, organizational members, practitioners, and scholars to see more clearly the structural and social issues that underpin the WBW pattern.

Oppressed group behavior can result in horizontal violence, aggressive behavior by oppressed group members toward others of the same group (Duffy, 1995). This occurs in part from being socialized into "structures and unequal power relations" (Hutchinson et al., 2006, p. 120). As Freire argues (1970, pp. 29-30), "almost always, during the initial stages of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors or 'sub-oppressors' [of others who are similar to them]." Women in workplaces historically defined by masculine values can be the encroaching others, where they do not "naturally" belong (Kanter, 1993; Kramarae, 1999). Thus, in women's identity-building projects they may bully other

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females to disassociate themselves from their own lower-status and, thus, secure male validation (Mooney, 2005). And members of the oppressed group (i.e., females) are typically easier targets by virtue of their power-down status. Women whose identity project is primed by an intense drive for advancement may thus distance themselves from female-stigmatization.

These women may have also become acculturated to anti-female biases and thus think less of women, treat them with less respect, and more readily lash out at them. Their efforts to paint a powerful, successful identity might mean acting more in line with often-rewarded masculinized, aggressive standards—playing the *faux*-male.[3] As one woman described her female bully, "She was 'one of the guys and them some' . . . distancing herself from other women in the office by doing things like badmouthing their decisions to have kid. 'She's a *he-male*'" (Mooney, 2005, p. 107, emphasis added). Additionally, male colleagues may reward, directly and indirectly, those women who distance themselves from female peers (Kanter, 1993).

Women as a muted group (Kramarae, 1981; Kramarae, 1999) also primes the bullying-woman identity. Being muted means that women cannot "say all they would wish to say, where and when they wish to say it" (Ardener, 1975, p. 21). Wall and Gannon-Leary (1999, p. 24) have argued that "women's voices … are rarely heard because they must be expressed in a language system not designed for their interests and concerns." Even when women do speak, their language, failing to conform to male speech expectations, may thus be viewed as less assertive, more uncertain, and lacking in power (Lituchy and Wiswall, 1991). Thus, women may have the same titles as men but command less organizational power (Kanter, 1993). Furthermore, discourses about working often equate bullying with power and success (Salin, 2003a) and anger to dominance (Lerner and Tiedens, 2006). The process of muting, coupled with discourses equating aggression with power, could push some women to ramp up rhetoric and escalate

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aggressive behavior in order to be heard and heeded. Bullying lower-status others is likely one

means for painting women in highly visible colors—for declaring an ascendant, forceful identity.

To recognize whether these meaning systems and biases have impinged on women's

workplace performances, we pose the following questions for individual females to critically

consider:

(a) Are you often more easily irritated by women at work than you are by men?

(b) Do you feel as if you're smarter or more competent than most other women?

(c) Do you feel that people will not listen to you unless you apply pressure?

At the same time, and in keeping with this project's goal not to place the burden on individuals

to change themselves, we pose the following questions for co-workers, organizational members,

practitioners, and scholars to ask in WBW situations:

(d) How might the female bully feel constrained by the context in which she works?

(e) What elements of the female bully's past personal or professional life may have

contributed to her behaviors?

(f) In the organization, what formal or informal "incentives" or "rewards" are there for

engaging in masculine behavior?

Women are often primed in such a way that they fear others' perceptions of them as

incompetent or unable to cut it in a "man's world." Frequently, other organizational members *do*

have this perception, although it is typically unarticulated and resides in practical consciousness.

Discourses and unarticulated beliefs about working regularly disparage women for being too soft

to handle the tough situations that mark the work world (Sachs and Blackmore, 1998). These

meaning systems instill fear, which can be a significant motivating force for bullying (Gault,

2005). The fear of being perceived as incompetent is especially prominent (Crawshaw, 2007).

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When women are concerned that others may perceive them as incompetent, they may become hypervigilant, which only serves to increase fear and associated aggression. Workplace bullies may have an inordinate level of this fear (Crawshaw, 2007; Zapf and Einarsen, 2003). We suppose that women might be more prone to feeling this constant anxiety than men because they are perpetual outsiders in a "man's world." Crawshaw (2007), a consultant working with "abrasive bosses" concludes that for bullies, the fear of being perceived as incompetent "stimulates extreme *aggression designed to defend against the threat of incompetence*" (p. 53, emphasis in original). As one female bully explained, "I knew I was a bully, but I thought I was justified. It is the perfection combined with the urgency that creates a lethal combination" (Wild and Brady, 2009). Thus we pose the following questions, the first three for women to consider and the last three for others to contextualize and better understand her behavior:

(a) Do you hope powerful others overlook your being a woman and just recognize your skills?

(b) Are you infuriated by incompetence, especially from subordinates whose work reflects on you?

(c) Do you feel constantly pressed from all directions to produce and produce perfectly?

(d) What do powerful others in the workplace likely see first in a female, her gender or her abilities? How might her gender overshadow her skills?

(e) When a female bully expresses what is characterized as excessive anger, how might this anger stem from fear? What might she be afraid of?

(f) How might some factors of the organizational and social environment "spark" a female bully's behavior?

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In gendered spheres, being feminine and in a position of authority presents a paradox, regardless of the strides women have made in business (Martin, 2004, Norander, 2008). "Our expectations for how a person in authority should behave are at odds with our expectations for how a woman should behave" (Tannen, 1994, p. 179). If women perform in line with masculine traits, they are respected but not liked. If they perform in line with feminine traits, they are liked but not respected (Ely, 2008). Because the contradiction is typically unarticulated, it constitutes a paradox for women trying to manage their images by being two things at one time. To construct a forceful professional identity, some women might shift toward masculine-trait behavior in order to gain respect and recognition. That is, to survive the contradiction, "many developed thick skins and 'roaring bitch' reputations" (Mooney, 2005, p. 109). They may turn this aggression on other women who perform work selves more in line with feminine-traits.

This paradox implicates emotion rules priming women in certain ways that continue to be painted onto them in organizational environments. "Angry outbursts from male managers are more likely to be tolerated (as 'masculine and assertive') than from female managers" (Fineman, 2003, p. 89). Thus, if women construct identities as bullies, they are often "dealt with by a two-pronged attack: question their deviation from femininity and thereby question their sanity" (Campbell, 1994, vii). At the same time, women are advised to "*never show you can't cope*" (Fineman, 2003, p. 89, emphasis in original), a prescription that suggests anger and aggression are not only appropriate but necessary. In other words, women are expected to suppress anger, but using anger may be an indication that women can successfully play a male game.

There is some evidence that bullies have been socialized to devalue and suppress all emotions except anger (Crawshaw, 2007). Women so socialized may paint themselves successful by using anger as a primary building block for their professional persona. This emotion also

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allows them to better fit into masculine organizational cultures. But it is the conundrum that

stands out above the emotion itself as women continually face conflicting emotion management

demands: Is she too caring, too bitchy, too soft, too hard, too weak, too strong? By virtue of

patriarchal socialization then, organizational women may be primed to be out of synch with both

female and male spheres (Norander, 2008). Given these issues, we these questions for critical

consideration:

    (a) Do you feel "damned if you do, and damned if you don't" in how you deal with people?

    (b) Are you concerned about being seen as too soft or too hard?

    (c) Do women who are too emotional irritate you?

Additionally, contextual and discursive questions are important to consider:

    (d) Are there any "double standards" for behavior in the organization? For example, do

        males have angry outbursts or aggressive behaviors that are treated differently?

    (e) How is emotional expression perceived and expressed in the organization? Is emotion

        shunned or looked down upon?

    Confounding professional women's emotional rules is "a prevailing myth that [they]

should not express, or even experience, negative feelings toward other women" (Mooney, 2005,

p. 53). Not surprising, then, when women do experience negative feelings or thoughts about

other women, they tend to suppress them rather than directly articulate them in face-to-face

conversations because such feelings betrayal "sisterhood" expectations. Indeed, simply

contemplating having such conversations may raise such discomfort that the needed

conversations never take place (Tracy and Eisenberg, 1990). Coupled with the interpretation of

women's anger as "rage," "irrationality," or "hysteria," and attributed to the vagaries of the

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female sex, many women choose to hold back negative feelings rather than articulating them in a

timely manner. As such, negative feelings may build up and then "blow" in the form of bullying.

The notion of sisterhood (despite problems with this generalization) directly conflicts

with the idea of women competing with one another, competition that may feel necessary in the

construction of professional identities. Women are culturally primed as *equals* and

organizationally painted as *competitors*—another paradox. In some cases close bonds between

women may even depend on the professional status of both sides remaining equal. Eichenbaum

and Orbach (1988) argue that women's relationships can be threatened when one accrues more

money, more success, or more status than the other. According to this line of thought, women

may feel that they cannot be friends when power is unequal. Despite the norm of women as

equals, social norms pit women against women (e.g., for men's attention) and organizational

norms propagate women as competitors for scarce resources (e.g., for limited leadership

positions, promotions). Relatedly, the notions of scarcity become priming materials in women's

professional identity constructions.

Messages surrounding work communicate that space for women at the table is limited

(Oakley, 2000). As women move up in organizational ranks, they may feel acutely their own

tokenism, especially in light of seeing fewer and fewer other women around them. These

experiences coupled with oft-publicized data regarding low numbers of highly-placed/paid

women reify women's limited places at the professional table. So despite beliefs that women

should strive for and celebrate equality (with men and with other women), fighting for an

apparently scarce resource can create a conflict. Women may come to believe they have to bully

other women out of their way in order to reserve their own place in the organizational hierarchy.

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Certain questions can help individual women uncover whether they feel these pressures that may

serve to construct a bullying-female identity:

(a) Do you withhold difficult feedback and then blow up over less important issues?

(b) Do you view other women as potential threats to what you've worked so hard to achieve?

(c) Do you feel torn between befriending women and wondering if they are out to get you?

Other questions can also help co-workers, mangers, practitioners, and scholars to contextualize

and better understand these pressures:

(d) How might you look at women in positions of power differently than men?

(e) Do you expect female co-workers and superiors to be more supportive and have more

camaraderie than males?

(f) Why might a female feel they need to be harsher on females than on males?

(g) How do organizations and society in general create or tolerate competition among

members? Additionally, how might competition be "better for business?"

The WBW Identity: From Painting to Peeling

Quite likely, coming to be known by others as a bully is an unintended consequence of

identity work and, like any structure with unplanned additions, the construction results in

unexpected, unpleasant outcomes. Again, exploring and summarizing literature relevant to

gender, bullying, and organizational life, we characterize this phase of the identity building

project as *peeling* to denote entropy and decline, especially for organizational women. When

women bully other women, they paradoxically reproduce at least six different repressive

structures that disadvantage them and press them toward aggression in the first place. These

paradoxical reconstructions include (a) reconstituting limited space, (b) creating perceptions of

incompetence, (c) recreating gender-based oppression and female-denigration, (d) reinforcing

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patriarchy, (e) disciplining gender via concertive control, and (f) deflecting attention from deeper structural issues of gender disadvantage.

First, when women bully other women to achieve position or build status they unwittingly reconstitute the same system against which they struggle to find a place. In the competition for a resource perceived as scarce, especially when an aspect of fighting in that competition is bullying similar others, women actually limit spaces for other women. In a context where success is painted as a limited entity, women then become forces barring other women from workplace rewards, and thus restrict both the numbers of highly-placed women and the potential for female-networks and woman-to-woman mentoring.

Second, when women bully other women it can actually generate perceptions of incompetence, regardless of the female bully's technical competence. If out of the fear of being perceived incompetent women develop a take-no-prisoners professional identity, over time others begin to see these women as *interpersonally* incompetent. Longitudinal studies of workplace bullying and consultant's experiences suggest that bullies ultimately lose their jobs, suffer demotion, or experience transfers to less desirable positions (M. Detry, personal communication, December 4, 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). There is even evidence that expulsion occurs more easily for women than men in these cases (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). So the very thing that women may have feared—being perceived as incompetent—is realized in the behaviors designed to deflect others' perceptions of incompetence.

Third, WBW paradoxically reconstitutes both female-oppressive structures and women denigration of both targets *and* bullies. Women's aggression targeted at other women might be motivated by a desire to direct attention toward an "inferior" other, potentially to deflect attention away from the aggressor. Alternately, women might turn on other women, a way of

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performing the masculine role by playing it rough, being one of the boys (Mooney, 2005).

However, when women abuse other women this paradoxically reconstructs environments that

valorize and naturalize the masculine and subjugate the feminine. Women who have constructed

WBW identities, despite targeting lower-status others of their kind, cannot escape their

membership in the non-dominant group (i.e., women). Regardless of efforts to be one of the

boys, women remain outsiders looking in. If they bully others in their group, they become

complicit in reproducing systems that oppress and denigrate the feminine, further marginalizing

them. Women might be better served by focusing more on advancing organizational goals than

trying to fit in (Ely, 2008).

Fourth, WBW reinforces the values and goals of patriarchy. Patriarchy is rooted in the

notions that the masculine is "inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone

deemed weak … and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain

that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence" (hooks, 2004, p.

18). In an aggressor role against other women, women serve as social dominators, a hegemonic

move that reinforces patriarchal principles. When women attack each other this not only

exemplifies but instantiates the norms of patriarchal domination. Male upper-managers, then, can

easily dismiss WBW as personality conflicts among "irrational" underlings. Rather than women

focusing their energy on systems that oppress them, WBW reinscribes cat-fight stereotypes and

structuring properties marking women as bitches, whiners, and emotional inferiors. Men are

rarely surprised when women bicker; gendered infighting is simply viewed as an inevitable

downside of women in the workforce. And women are not immune to such opinions. In the *Good*

Morning America piece, for example, Deborah Roberts asserted that "sometimes a clash of

coworker personalities, *particularly amongst women*, can make for a toxic office" (Wild and

Brady, 2009 emphasis added). WBW then reproduces the stereotypes of women as petty (i.e., not serious enough to be in the business world), hypersensitive (i.e., prone to female-to-female friction making them undesirable employees), and irrational (i.e., typically respond emotionally instead of rationally). Thus, the dominant masculine is reinscribed as superior and a necessary antidote to offset women's limitations in organizational life (see Britton 1999).

Fifth, when women attack other women at work they discipline gender via concertive control, another peeling process. Concertive control means that workers, rather than supervisors, use means to rule their peers (Barker, 1993); one such means is overt bullying. In the case of WBW, predominantly male upper-managers, then, need not directly discipline women. They may even point to women bullying female workers as female pathology—pettiness and jealousy—and woefully shaking their heads. Exacerbating the opinion of women as over-emotional infighters, male upper-managers loathe to directly discipline female employees may even delegate corrective action to mid-level women (Kanter, 1993). When women bully females at work, they groom, discipline, and mute by putting women in their place and schooling them in the ideal (i.e., subservient) female worker. Certainly, witnesses of others' abuse report feeling terrified that they will be targeted if they speak out or perform in any way that elicits negative notice (Vartia, 2001). And bullies appear to choose specific targets, usually people who speak their minds, show exceptional talent, or are well-liked (Coyne, Seigne and Randall, 2000, Namie, 2007a). Oftentimes, strong women exit these environments, and their voices are lost in the process (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Witnesses who remain typically begin shifting their behavior to avoid targeting. An entire cadre of women can thus be groomed into silence, not by men but by other women. Bullying thus becomes a way that women teach women how to behave in gendered ways.

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Finally, WBW constitutes a deflection or red herring effect. Rhetorically, a red herring is an issue that diverts attention from more pressing subjects. When women bully other women, attention is similarly drawn away from more important institutional problems such as unequal pay, limited opportunities, and systemic gender discrimination. If female workers and middle managers are arguing amongst each other and dealing with infighting and internal conflicts, there is little time to analyze, much less address, systems that drive bullying behavior. The red herring created by WBW masks these systemic drivers. A number of organizational trends trigger, enable, and motivate bullying including poorly planned change, crisis, and inadequate management (Hodson, Roscigno and Lopez, 2006). Additionally, organizations that institutionalize and reward extreme competition among members may even encourage bullying (Salin, 2003a). But when aggression erupts, focus and blame typically shift to the involved parties. The tendency to focus on targets or bullies is great, but operates as a red herring. When organizational members focus on WBW as an individual-level, female-gender linked phenomenon, institutionalized processes and pressures can easily be overlooked and individual women punished for "acting out." Indeed, WBW may even keep employees from "pointing their guns" at upper-management and the systems that drive bullying, since they too are distracted by the skirmish.

The WBW Identity: From Peeling to Polishing

Although aspects of the professional identity project can peel and erode under the effects of bullying, so can women, organizations, and society become aware of, contextualize, and then cast off aggressive behavior over time. Thus, peeling has both positive and negative possibilities. In the positive sense, peeling meaning shedding old ways, habits, and conditions, getting rid of or permuting unneeded exterior pretenses. Peeling and polishing the WBW identity suggests

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stripping away taken-for-granted assumptions, unquestioned practices, and unexamined

behaviors. Women are not simply pawns of the organizational structures in which they find

themselves. They can take steps to become critically aware, insightful, and productive in ways

that positively benefit themselves and others. However, we argue an individual's steps are more

effective when others are able to point the finger at organizational and social issues that

contextualize her bullying behavior.

Women who bully others, the majority of whom are women, eventually face crucial

decisions about their aggressive behavior because they are called to change their behavior.

Women dealing with charges of abusing others face individual-level problems that require a

reassessment of career trajectory strategies. Typically when women perform as bullies in the

workplace targets and witnesses rebel, resist, and report abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). These

resistive processes commonly result in upper-management warning bullies to improve their

communication skills, rethink their management styles, stop alienating people, and so forth

(Crawshaw, 2007). We believe that these events mark key opportunities—watersheds—for

gradually peeling away the bullying identity and rebuilding professional identity in a

constructive direction. For women who find themselves bullying others and then experience

some level of discomfort or confusion because of their behavior, there is rich potential for

deconstructing the WBW identity. Yet, for women to make this move, those who surround her

must also deconstruct by engaging in critical organizational and social scrutiny and change.

We believe destructive-identity deconstruction requires two fundamentally different skills

and knowledge bases. The first includes recognizing the typically unrecognized (e.g., taken-for-

granted) sociocultural, historical, and organizational forces encouraging women to bully other

women (Ashcraft, 2004). Our earlier discussions and subsequent questions were to assist women

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and others in recognizing how these meaning systems could push them toward interactions and

responses that fail to adequately serve their or other women's interests. The second

skill/knowledge base includes critiquing and beginning a slow peeling away of aggressive day-

to-day interactions and responses, especially with other women. Similarly, those who surround

her need to peel away the constraining organizational and social worlds that encourage her

behavior. We believe it is important for women who have built bullying identities, even if

inadvertently, to avoid self-blame and recrimination. These emotions are less than useful for

affecting change. Gaining the first skill/knowledge is key here; changing without self-

pathologizing means recognizing the social nature of humans and the potent constitutive power

of social and organizational norms to channel individual behavior. As importantly, however, is

changing the instantiated, immediate abuse of others—recognizing and "catching" oneself in

abusive interactions and making a decision to act otherwise. At the same time, it is equally

essential for those around her to avoid shunning and retort; while it is important to acknowledge

and discuss the devastating destruction caused by bullying behaviors, is it vital to respond with

understanding, redemption, and empathy.

One strategy for all parties to open space for change is articulating how one responds,

why, and under what contexts the response occurred, particularly after interacting angrily or

aggressively. Women, like all human actors, routinely go about day-to-day interactions drawing

on stores of knowledge (i.e., practical consciousness) that are relatively habitual ways of

managing social interactions. These habits form and sediment over women's lifetimes, so

become ingrained and frequently automatic. By shifting routinized responses and practices into

discursive and social consciousness, *articulating what one is doing and why*, women can open up

spaces for change regarding professional identity, and those who surround them can be open to

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the change. Although articulation does not guarantee that women will stop bullying other women

because the social forces encouraging aggression are robust, articulation does make small shifts

possible. As Tiedens argued, the pernicious effects of status struggles occur because we do not

talk about it (Neilson, 2007).

Articulating what drives aggressive actions and interactions can render knee-jerk

responses amenable to revision. By recognizing and then talking about habitually aggressive

responses, all parties then have the opportunity to deconstruct WBW identities, identities that, in

the end, fail to successfully serve them anyway. The Growth Leadership Center in California[4],

for example, facilitates round table discussions of "bullying broads" to talk about their "tough"

office demeanor in order to redirect and remodel aggressive management (Wild and Brady,

2009). The women from this group expressed hope that by attending group counseling, they

could recognize how their negative behavior affected others and make changes. Articulation,

which is at the root of this group approach, can provide the materials for small changes over

time, which cumulatively results in professional transformation. It is our hope that groups such

as these incorporate the questions we posed above into their sessions to allow additional

discursive issues to surface.

Another key strategy for change is accepting others' perceptions as truth (with

consequences) and releasing the defense that bullying was unintentional ("I didn't mean anything

by it; that's just the way I am."). One way to do this is adopting Miller's law which is: "*To*

understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true and try to imagine

what it could be true of" (Hall, 1980, p. 40). This strategy can be useful because bullying

research and consultancy points to the fact that most bullies have been warned to change their

behavior (Crawshaw, 2007, Wild and Brady, 2009). Thus, most are at least somewhat aware of

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their abrasive conduct. Sadly for themselves and their targets, bullies typically brush these

warnings and blame bullying on targets ("They are incompetent complainers") or claim bullying

is simply an aspect of their personality ("That's just the way I am, I didn't mean anything by it").

Miller's law then encourages women faced with these warnings to consider if they could

possibly be true. Rather than defending against perceptions of being a bully "(and thus

incompetent) and battling the facts" (Crawshaw, 2007, p. 131), women facing these warnings

should accept them as indicative of a bully-identity. Thus, in the moment of interaction with

others, Miller's Law suggests pausing before responding and asking, "How will my actions be

perceived? Is this the result I am after?" As a participant in the bullying broads counseling group

explained, "Like, you never say, 'That is stupid,' but you pause and say something like, 'That is

an interesting idea, and let's talk about it'." Miller's law is an equally valuable tool for those who

surround female bullies. Parties must be open to the "truth" of a woman's claim that she is

viewed and evaluated differently because of her gender, that she feels pressure to perform

differently, or that she may not know why she is behaving aggressively.

The ability to pause in the moment and consider one's own behavior and the structures

that contextualize her behaviors requires a certain level of vulnerability on the part of aggressors

and those who surround them. In organizations that typically perceive vulnerability as

undesirable and bad for business, this puts women, once again, in a paradoxical situation if the

behavior is to change. The vulnerability itself, however, can provide the movement to another

way of acting. Rowe (2008) makes use of the notion of vulnerability in her discussion of ways to

build alliances between women who come from different positionalities. She talks specifically

about finding ourselves in the other and building common ground through mutual places of

discomfort and pain. Targets experience a great deal of emotional pain and negative physical

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symptoms from stress caused by being bullied. We argue that bullies likewise engage in bullying

behavior from similar places of fear, apprehension, emotional hurt, and uncertainty based in

concerns of proving their competence within masculinized organizational cultures.

Understanding that both women are likely coming from a similar place can be used as a starting

point for building common ground. Even when the intersectionalities of gender, race, class, and

sexual orientation are operating, and the women's standpoints are very different as a result,

women can seek common ground on their femaleness pushing back against the dominant

patriarchal organizing structures.

   The processes of articulation, organizational and social critique, self-reflection, accepting

others' perceptions, and finding common ground allow transition into polishing spaces, or

rebuilding environments and experiences in ways that make women succeed and shine. This step

requires those who surround bullies to start seriously asking: How do masculinized systems build

and then limit females? What elements of the organization are hindering people, creating double

standards, and placing the blame of dysfunction on individuals? What kind of organization do I

want this to be? What path will I take to bring these issues to the forefront? At the same time,

this step requires that female bullies start seriously asking of themselves: What kind of person do

I want to be in this organization in relation to men and to other women? How can I begin to

address the pain and frustration that leads to my aggressive and destructive behavior? What kind

of new metaphor and identity narrative can I begin to write and perform? What new picture can I

paint that will lead to less dysfunction? Which path will I take through this organization as I

construct a place for myself within it? Bullying is an unwanted repetitive pattern but one that

fails to serve bullies' best interest and is exceedingly difficult to break. Such patterns are formed

by repeating thoughts about ourselves ("I am better than her") until we believe it. Unless

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something or someone safely invites women bullies to break the pattern, it becomes unwanted

and repetitive. It is our hope that this essay provides both the individual and social seeds for such

an invitation.

Conclusion

This essay theorizes about a specifically gendered sub-phenomenon within bullying

research: the propensity for women to bully other women. Analyzing, coding, and theorizing

published research resulted in our metaphorical conception, a conception we devised to provide

space for women to examine their behavior without undue self-recrimination and those around

her to look at her behavior differently. We fundamentally believe that to reduce adult bullying,

research and critical thought must, in addition to examining targeted workers' experiences, shed

light on bullies' perspectives. Thus, we underscore the typically unrecognized social meaning

systems that press women to bully other women. We pose questions for women who suspect that

others perceive them as bullies so that they might recognize how structuring processes impinge

on their professional lives in ways that ultimately fail to serve their best interests. At the same

time, we asked those who surround bullies to uncover and inculcate the gendered, organizational,

and social factors that facilitate bullying.

In positing a metaphoric framework of identity as a social construction involving

priming, *painting*, *peeling*, and polishing, we intend to open up the dialogue about why women

might turn more on others of their own sex in workplace situations. We underscore the

complexity of this issue and challenge both practitioners and scholars to test the entailments and

explanations that are embedded in the metaphoric progression. Since metaphors clearly organize

our perceptions and practices and affect how we understand and problem solve (Robins &

Mayer, 2000), the primed-painted-peeling-polishing succession could provide a structure helpful

in breaking the bullying pattern.

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Appendix: Women Bullying Women Data

Study	Target	M	F	Total
Lutgen-Sandvik, 2007 (Entry-level)				
	M	39 (69.6%)	17 (30.4%)	56
	F	37 (36.6%)	64 (63.4%)	101
Lutgen-Sandvik, 2007 (Established)	M	28 (82.4%)	6 (17.6%)	34
	F	34 (38.6%)	54 (61.4%)	88
Lutgen-Sandvik, 2009	M	241 (67.3%)	117 (32.7%)	358
	F	211 (39.5%)	323 (60.5%)	534
Namie, 2007	M	534 (53.5%)	464 (46.5%)	998
	F	405 (28.7%)	1005 (71.3%)	1410
Namie, 2003	M	121 (61.1%)	77 (38.9%)	198
	F	299 (37.5%)	498 (62.5%)	797
Wall, 2006	M	17 (65.4%)	9 (34.6%)	26
	F	30 (37.5%)	50 (62.5%)	80

The *Bully* header spans the M and F columns.

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Footnotes

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[1] We found no U.S. data that differed from this pattern, although many studies do not report

bully-target gender.

[2] Our research team was explicitly chosen for the diverse areas of expertise each member

brought to this analysis: one is an organizational communication scholar and practitioner,

another a feminist scholar, and the third a critical-cultural scholar.

[3] Thanks to Jonathan B. Hill for this very appropriate pun.

[4] Featured in the *Good Morning America* episode.