
9-9-2013

Breathers, Releases, Outlets and Pauses: Employee Resistance in the Context of Depersonalized Bullying

Premilla D'Cruz

Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, pdcruz@iimahd.ernet.in

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

D'Cruz, P. (2013). Breathers, Releases, Outlets and Pauses: Employee Resistance in the Context of Depersonalized Bullying. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(36), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1471>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Breathers, Releases, Outlets and Pauses: Employee Resistance in the Context of Depersonalized Bullying

Abstract

Drawing on a study rooted in van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, conducted with agents working in international - facing call centers in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, this paper describes employee resistance to depersonalized bullying. Data were gathered through conversational interviews and subjected to selective and sententious thematic analyses. The theme of 'breathers, releases, outlets and pauses' captures both the various behaviours that participants engaged in to gain respite from and to acquire control over their oppressive work environment and the factors that determine their behaviours, namely, their professional identity and their job - related material gains. The findings not only further our understanding of the nascent concept of depersonalized bullying but also retheorize power dynamics in the context of workplace bullying

Keywords

Workplace bullying, power, routine resistance, subjectivity, call centers, India

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Breathers, Releases, Outlets and Pauses: Employee Resistance in the Context of Depersonalized Bullying

Premilla D'Cruz and Ernesto Noronha
 IIM Ahmedabad, Vastrapur, Ahmedabad, India

Drawing on a study rooted in van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, conducted with agents working in international-facing call centers in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, this paper describes employee resistance to depersonalized bullying. Data were gathered through conversational interviews and subjected to selective and sententious thematic analyses. The theme of 'breathers, releases, outlets and pauses' captures both the various behaviours that participants engaged in to gain respite from and to acquire control over their oppressive work environment and the factors that determine their behaviours, namely, their professional identity and their job-related material gains. The findings not only further our understanding of the nascent concept of depersonalized bullying but also retheorize power dynamics in the context of workplace bullying. Keywords: Workplace bullying, power, routine resistance, subjectivity, call centers, India

Introduction

The study of workplace bullying, which originated in Scandinavia in the 1980s with the work of Heinz Leymann who used the term "mobbing" to describe the phenomenon (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011), has now gathered momentum and is being researched in many different parts of the world (D'Cruz, 2012). Workplace bullying is alternatively known as mobbing, harassment, victimization and psychological terror in Europe (Einarsen et al., 2011) and as workplace aggression, workplace incivility, emotional abuse at work, workplace harassment and generalized workplace abuse in North America (Keashly & Jagatic, 2011) and falls under the rubric of negative, dysfunctional and counter-productive workplace behaviors (Fox & Spector, 2005).

Conventionally, workplace bullying has encompassed an interpersonal level of analysis and has been defined as "...harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process, it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal 'strength' are in conflict" (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 22). Target orientation, persistence, power disparity and harm are the essential hallmarks of interpersonal bullying (D'Cruz, 2012) which is manifested through hostile and aggressive psychological behaviors such as making insulting remarks, excessive teasing, spreading gossip or rumors, constant criticism, giving unreasonable deadlines or unmanageable workloads, excessive monitoring of work and assigning meaningless tasks (Einarsen & Hoel, 2001) and which results in victimization (Einarsen et al., 2011). Under such circumstances, bullying is personalized and emphasizes a sociorelational conceptualization (Keashly & Harvey, 2006).

Yet, there is an emergent perspective about depersonalized bullying which is also termed as organizational/institutionalized bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011; Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2001) and invokes a sociostructural conceptualization (Keashly & Harvey, 2006). Depersonalized bullying refers to the routine subjugation, both covert and overt, of employees by contextual, structural and processual elements of organizational design, which are implemented by supervisors and managers who resort to abusive behaviors in an impersonal way to achieve organizational effectiveness. Organizational agendas, directed by extra-organizational demands and intra-organizational aspirations, coalesce to determine the intra-organizational environment, influencing managerial ideology and organizational culture via organizational policies, practices, structure, technology, controls and leadership. Together, these elements of organizational design subjugate employees, ensuring their deference to organizational expectations. Supervisors and managers whose responsibilities lie in ensuring organizational competitiveness, implement organizational requirements across the workforce, resorting to subtle and obvious intimidation and aggression without targeting any particular employee or harboring any intention other than the realization of organizational imperatives. It is the presence of abusive behaviors that distinguishes depersonalized bullying from capitalist labor process, (neo) Taylorized work organization and organizational control (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2009).

This paper draws on an empirical inquiry into employee experiences of depersonalized bullying. Situated in India's international-facing call centers¹, the study explores how employees perceive, are affected by, react to and cope with depersonalized bullying. In so doing, the study addresses a gap in the literature as depersonalized bullying is a nascent area of research and requires investigation. The present paper reports employee resistance to depersonalized bullying, throwing light on issues of power which, in spite of being central to the phenomenon of workplace bullying, have been largely under-studied so far.

¹ The call center industry in India is located within the country's emerging ITES-BPO (Information Technology Enabled Services-Business Process Outsourcing) sector which encompasses the offshoring and outsourcing of such processes that can be enabled with information technology (IT). This sector has demonstrated impressive and consistent growth over time, even in spite of the 2008 global financial crisis. ITES-BPO export revenues grew from US\$ (United States Dollar) 9.9 billion in 2007-2008 to US\$ 12.4 billion in 2009-2010 and domestic revenues increased from Rs. 88.7 billion in 2008-2009 to Rs. (Indian Rupee) 108 billion in 2009-2010 (NASSCOM [National Association of Software and Services Companies], 2010). Offshored services are provided by international-facing Indian and foreign MNCs (multinational corporations) who serve overseas clients and customers located in developed countries especially the USA (United States of America/US) and the UK (United Kingdom) whereas outsourced services are provided by domestic organizations who serve local clients and customers (NASSCOM, 2010). While China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brazil, Mexico and Egypt are emerging locations, India remains the pre-eminent destination for offshored business activities (NASSCOM, 2010, 2011), providing an unparalleled cost savings advantage (NASSCOM, 2011). Though higher-end services and knowledge process outsourcing (KPO) form part of the Indian ITES-BPO industry, the main focus remains lower-end services embodying the mass-customized model (Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, & Tam, 1998), operationalized through call centers (60-65% of services provided) and back offices (35-40% of services provided), situated principally in Tier 1 but now expanding to Tier 2 and 3 cities (NASSCOM, 2011). India's ITES-BPO workforce was calculated at 835,000 in 2010-2011 (NASSCOM, 2011), the industry having become a significant avenue for employment especially for the country's youth (NASSCOM, 2010). Despite ITES-BPO employees being covered by various labor laws as promulgated in various Indian states as well as central legislations, the popular notion held in Indian society (and maintained and promoted by ITES-BPO employers, aided by government apathy) is that Indian labor legislation and related institutional measures do not apply here (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009). On the contrary, the image of the workforce in this sector is that of white-collared professionals (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009). As Taylor and Bain (2005) assert, India remains attractive to companies who wish to capitalize on the possibilities for flexible labor utilization and the absence of trade unions in the Indian ITES-BPO industry facilitates this.

Power and Resistance in Workplace Bullying

Though power dynamics are critical to the understanding of workplace bullying, this dimension has largely been ignored in academic research on the subject (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2001). Where recognized, power is seen as unidimensional and functional, following the notion of sovereignty in which the powerful oppress the powerless (Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). This simplistic presentation of power, which emphasizes a powerful-versus-powerless duality and a commodity perspective, reifies power disparity as an inherent and normal dynamic at work, obliterating the complex nature of power in organizational life and erasing the presence of resistance and of agency with which employees access resources of power (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

Lutgen-Sandvik's (2006) pioneering research on target and witness resistance in instances of interpersonal bullying at work showed that while targets and witnesses voiced impotence and inability to stop abuse, they simultaneously fought back. Five core resistance strategies including exodus, collective voice, reverse discourse, subversive (dis)obedience and confrontation, which subsumed numerous tactics, were used both sequentially and in concert. While resistance was processual and complex, taking the form of collective action and/or disorganized coaction, it arose from a moral imperative that superseded the risks involved and persisted in spite of escalated abuse, unfolding as a motivated trajectory. Resistance brought about change in some instances where bullies were sanctioned and bullying abated but the considerable time involved in effecting change precipitated a sense of powerlessness in targets. Lutgen-Sandvik's (2006) findings underscore targets' and witnesses' sense of agency which allows feelings of empowerment, control and efficacy to permeate their experience. Drawing on Foucault and Giddens, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) advocates that power is better framed as a polymorphous, multifaceted and shifting dialectic, in which all actors have access to certain rules and resources of power albeit to a lesser or greater degree. Mutually constitutive relationships of power and resistance and dialectics of control describe how the powerless may be able to influence the activities of those who appear to hold complete power over them. This dialectic nature of abuse and resistance is currently under-theorized in bullying research. Yet, such a view is critical for retheorizing power in workplace bullying because it allows for a recognition that while power relations between bullies and targeted are often unequally weighted, no absolute power exists in modern workplaces. Power is dialectical and shifting, allowing resistance to emerge and influence bullying, bullying interventions and bullying outcomes.

While Lutgen-Sandvik's (2006) work speaks of the power and resistance dialectic in the context of interpersonal bullying, how power and resistance play out in the context of depersonalized bullying has not received empirical attention. Yet, understanding these dynamics assumes significance given the emerging perspective that depersonalized bullying is an endemic feature of the capitalist employment relationship aimed at making a profit (Beale & Hoel, 2011; Hoel & Beale, 2006). To elaborate, various forms and degrees of exploitation and oppression constitute an inevitable feature of the capitalist labor process as management seeks to control employees and gain employee compliance and commitment to organizational imperatives in order to ensure organizational effectiveness and competitive advantage. With power being fundamental to organizational functioning and to the employment relationship (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996), depersonalized bullying stems "not so much from abusive or illegitimate use of power as from power which is considered legitimate, and tightly related to the labor process and managerial prerogative to manage" (Hoel & Salin, 2003, p. 205). Managerial discourse masks depersonalized bullying (Deetz,

1992), justifying it as behaviors to get the job done (Brodsky, 1976). Globalization furthers the capitalist agenda, reinforcing depersonalized bullying (Beale & Hoel, 2011; Ironside & Seifert, 2003). Under such complex circumstances, attempts to eliminate it are fundamentally problematic and contradictory. Yet, for employees, workforce participation is generally mandatory, linked to the fulfillment of basic adult obligations of providing for oneself and one's family (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997) and hence the interface with depersonalized bullying cannot be avoided. Consequent to this, the issue of employee power and resistance in situations of depersonalized bullying is important to address and forms the basis of the present paper. Reporting the experiences of agents working in India's international-facing call centers which are characterized by an oppressive work environment (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2009), the paper not only deepens our insights into depersonalized bullying but also extends our understanding of power dynamics in workplace bullying.

At the outset, it is relevant for readers to know more about the authors and their interest and involvement in the research inquiry. Both authors are social scientists specializing in organizational behavior (OB). Both authors have worked extensively with qualitative research methods, especially phenomenology but also ethnography and case studies. While both authors share an interest in organizational control, the first author has also been researching workplace bullying while the second author has also been researching industrial relations. Since 2004, both the authors have been jointly studying India's ITES-BPO (Information Technology Enabled Services-Business Process Outsourcing) sector in which international-facing call centers are housed (See Note 1 on the Indian ITES-BPO sector), focusing on employee experiences of work. A phenomenological approach was adopted in which the core theme of being professional linked to socioideological control, hard and soft HRM (human resource management) models and inclusivist and exclusivist HR (human resource) strategies emerged (Study A; readers are referred to Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009, for details; study design and key terms are explained in Note 2²). In the course of this inquiry, the first author observed 2 dimensions of bullying emerging from participant narratives, namely, depersonalized bullying via the presence of an oppressive work environment (Study B) and interpersonal bullying via victimization of individual agents by

² The study of employees' subjective experiences of work in international-facing call centers in Mumbai and Bangalore adopted van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology, focusing on lived experience. With organizations denying access to their employees, snowball sampling initiated via personal contacts and contacts with various associations representing employee interests in India's ITES-BPO sector (which houses international-facing call centers) put us in touch with 59 agents (34 from Mumbai and 25 from Bangalore). Data generated via conversational interviews were subjected to sententious and selective thematic analyses which yielded the core theme of being professional and the major theme of an oppressive work environment (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2009; Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009). Socioideological control refers to efforts to persuade employees to adapt to certain values, norms and ideas about what is good, important, praiseworthy, etc., in terms of work and organizational life (Alvesson & Karreman, 2004). Hard HRM, indicating utilitarian instrumentalism, stresses HRM's focus on the crucial importance of the close integration of human resource policies, systems, and activities with business strategy, requiring that they are not only logically consistent with and supportive of business objectives, but achieve this effect by their own coherence. From this perspective, employees are regarded as a headcount resource to be managed in exactly the same rational, impersonal way as any other resource, i.e., to be exploited for maximal economic return. Soft HRM, indicating developmental humanism, while still emphasizing the importance of integrating HR policies with business objectives, sees this as involving the treatment of employees as valued assets, a source of competitive advantage through their commitment and adaptability of skills and performance. Employees are proactive and resourceful rather than passive inputs into the productive process. Rather than exploitation and cost minimization, the watchwords in this model are investment and value-addition (Legge, 2006). Inclusivist HR strategies encompass the use of employee involvement schemes and human resource initiatives that emphasize employee identification with, loyalty towards and complete reliance on the employer. Exclusivist strategies include transactional psychological contracts that privilege dismissal, closure, retrenchment, layoffs, casualization and outsourcing as well as the outright refusal to recognize and negotiate with unions (Peetz, 2002).

superiors (Study C). Further research was conducted to uncover both these observations. While the present paper discusses participants' experiences of depersonalized bullying (Study B), readers may refer to D'Cruz and Noronha (2010, 2012) for participants' experiences of interpersonal bullying (Study C).

Methodology

As described above, in the course of a phenomenological study seeking to understand the subjective work experiences of international-facing call center agents in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, where the core theme of being professional (Study A) was identified, participants spoke of an oppressive work environment indicating the presence of depersonalized bullying (Study B) and described instances of interpersonal bullying (Study C). Further research was conducted to understand these phenomena and findings from Study B are presented in this paper.

Design

Participants' experiences of depersonalized bullying were captured through the major theme of an oppressive work environment which emerged during the phenomenological study of agents' subjective experiences of work in India's international-facing call centers (Study A). Being embedded within study A, study B (henceforth also referred to as the/this study/inquiry/research) arose from a phenomenological research strategy. Phenomenology derives from the Greek word "phenomenon" which means to show itself, to put into light or to manifest something that can become visible in itself (Heidegger, as cited in Ray, 1994) According to Bishop and Scudder (1991), "phenomenology attempts to disclose the essential meaning of human endeavors" (p. 5). More specifically, the study aimed at grasping the essence of participants' experiences as they were lived. This reflected van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology which studies the world as it is experienced pre-reflectively rather than as it is conceptualized, focusing on the structure of meaning of the experience for the individual, and hence this approach was adopted. Van Manen (1998) portrays the methodical structure of phenomenology as a dynamic interplay between six research activities. According to him, the researcher turns to a phenomenon which seriously interests him/her and commits himself/herself to this abiding concern. The single-mindedness of purpose results in full thinking and deep questioning, so that we can understand life wholly. The experience is investigated as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualized. In other words, the attempt is to renew contact with the original experience and to become full of it. The researcher then reflects on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon. A true reflection on lived experience is a thoughtful grasping of what renders it special. The fourth activity is describing the experience and its essence through the art of writing and rewriting. Language and thought need to be applied to lived experience such that a precise depiction is made. In order to achieve all of this, the researcher needs to ensure a strong orientation to the fundamental question so as to maintain direction and to come out with valid findings. He/she also needs to balance the research context by considering parts and wholes, that is, one needs to constantly measure the overall design of the study against the significance that the parts must play in the total structure.

Selection of Participants and Data Collection

As pointed out before, participants from study A formed part of study B. In line with the phenomenological tradition, participants must be those who have experienced the

phenomenon, and hence we sought to include call center agents in our study. With organizations being unwilling to permit us access to their employees or the operations floor (only 1 inbound Indian third party call center in Mumbai gave us access and this happened through personal contacts), we had to resort to snowball sampling for the entire study. We began our initial data collection by relying on informal contacts such as our former students and our social network as well as associations working in the ITES-BPO sector, namely, ITPF (Information Technology Professionals' Forum), CBPOP (Center for BPO Professionals) and UNITES Professionals (Union for ITES Professionals; henceforth also termed as UNITES) – all these people put us in touch with call center agents and we relied on snowballing to complete our sample.

Essentially, during our initial contact with potential participants, we would introduce ourselves and describe our research mandate. Questions posed by potential participants would be answered. Based on this discussion, once they agreed to participate, a time and a place for the interview was fixed as per mutual convenience. At the time of meeting, interviewer details were once again shared along with information about the purpose and scope of the study as well as emphasis on voluntary participation and confidentiality. Participants' informed consent and option to withdraw from the study at any point marked the ethical protocol of the inquiry. Most interviews were conducted in restaurants/eating places, with a few being held at the ITPF, CBPOP and UNITES offices or at participants' homes.

Van Manen's (1998) conversational interview was used to explore and gather experiential narrative material that would serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of the experience being studied. Though unstructured, the process was disciplined by focusing on the fundamental question that prompted the research. The clarity of the research question did not preclude exploring issues that emerged during the interview, since the researcher was aware that they could generate important insights into the phenomenon under study. The mandate of the interview was to capture participants' immediate pre-reflective consciousness as self-given awareness that belongs to and is possessed by him/her rather than as something that is perceived or represented or exists apart from the self. In this manner, the researchers explored participants' original experience in its full richness, depth and totality.

All interviews were conducted in English. While some interviews were conducted jointly by both the researchers talking to a single participant, there were instances of both the researchers simultaneously interviewing 2 participants as well as of 1 researcher interviewing either 1 or more participants at the same time. All interviews were recorded on audio-cassette with the permission of the participant. No participant objected to the use of the recorder once its advantage of accuracy was spelt out to them, and its presence did not appear to hinder their responses. During the interview, observations about the participants were made and written up after the session ended. Data recorded on the audio-cassette were later transcribed by the research staff.

Fifty nine agents, 34 from Mumbai and 25 from Bangalore, employed in international-facing call centers participated in the study. Thirty nine worked in inbound processes, 12 in outbound processes and 8 in both inbound and outbound processes. While there were 29 women and 30 men whose ages ranged from 20 to 55 years, the largest number of participants was in the 22 to 25 years age group. Forty participants were unmarried and forty were graduates. The average monthly salary of participants was approximately Rs. (Indian Rupees) 12,900, based on a range of Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 25,000. All the participants were employed by either Indian or foreign multinational corporations (MNCs) and served overseas clients and customers. None of the participants were members of any unions.

Data Analysis

The treatment and analysis of data followed van Manen's phenomenological reflection which involved reflectively appropriately, clarifying and making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience. Given that meaning is multidimensional and multilayered, van Manen (1998) advocates the use of thematic analyses. According to him, thematic analysis refers to the process of recovering the themes that are embodied or dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the text. That is, themes touch at the core of the notion we are trying to understand, helping us to make sense. Since they may not always completely unlock the enigmatic aspects of the experience, related sub-themes capturing details and nuances may be required to provide a comprehensive picture. Themes may be isolated through three approaches:

- a. Holistic or sententious approach where we attend to the text as a whole and capture its fundamental meaning.
- b. Selective or highlighting approach where we repeatedly read/listen to the text and examine the meaning of statements which are particularly revealing.
- c. Detailed or line-by-line approach where we study every sentence or sentence cluster to determine what it says about the experience (van Manen, 1998).

In the present study, the attempt to isolate themes involved the first two approaches. In following the sententious approach (van Manen, 1998), each transcript was read as a whole to capture the core/essential meaning of participants' experiences. That is, through a careful reading of the transcript, the fundamental meaning of the experience for the participant as emerging from the text as a whole was identified. Being professional emerged as the core theme that encompassed participants' experiences³.

A selective thematic analyses (van Manen, 1998) was undertaken through which categories/patterns that contributed to the core theme were identified. That is, each transcript was read repeatedly and significant statements relating to and illustrating the various dimensions of the essential theme, were identified and demarcated. Labels were assigned to these categories/patterns and later standardized across transcripts. Within each transcript, categories/patterns were examined for their interlinkages. A comparison across transcripts was undertaken to highlight congruence in the patterns/categories and their linkages across participants. Next, across transcripts, those categories/patterns that dovetailed together in meaningful yet distinct ways were developed into sub-themes. At the next stage, transcripts were compared to identify links across sub-themes and those sub-themes that held together were developed into themes. Following the same process, themes were developed into major

³ The core theme that captured the essence of agents' experiences was "being professional." The notion of professionalism embraced agents' identity, altering their self-concept and enhancing their self-esteem. According to agents, professionals possess superior cognitive abilities, advanced qualifications and a sense of responsibility and commitment to work. They prioritize work over personal needs and pleasure, behaving in a dignified and restrained manner and performing optimally and rationally while on the job. Professionals comply with job and organizational requirements, absorbing emergent strain. Under such circumstances, not only do agents perceive material gains accruing from their job as consistent with the notion of professionalism but also transactional psychological contracts of employment as means of discipline are similarly justified. Though resistance is displayed by some agents a few times, this is described as a temporary outlet to ease job-related strain, coexisting with professional identity – it is not an indicator of anti-work or anti-employer sentiment. Indeed, agents' professional identity precludes engagement with collectivization attempts which are seen both as inconsistent with the essential features of professionalism and as redundant in instances where employers protect employee interests (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009).

themes. Miles and Huberman's (1994) data analysis techniques facilitated the selective thematic analysis. That is, various tools such as charts, matrices, event lists, causal networks and memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used to identify sub-themes, themes and major themes and their linkages as well as their relationship with the core theme.

Proceeding in this manner, the authors developed the major theme of the oppressive work environment, identifying participants' experiences of and responses to the depersonalized bullying they were subjected to in their employer organizations. Ambivalence, through the theme of "bounded benefits" pervaded participants' experience of the oppressive work environment (D'Cruz & Noronha, forthcoming), with resistance described through the theme of 'breathers, releases, outlets and pauses' being displayed. This paper focuses on employee resistance via breathers, releases, outlets and pauses which include various activities and behaviors that participants engage in to gain respite from and acquire control over their oppressive work environment.

Methodological Rigor

Methodological rigor in the study was maintained through prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), investigators triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1999) and consensual validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1999). In terms of prolonged engagement, the authors visited the field every 2-3 months for about 2-3 weeks per visit over a 2 year period, allowing for a deep and accurate understanding of its subtleties and nuances to develop. In relation to the use of interviews, particular importance was given to rapport building with the participants – it was opined that making the participants feel comfortable and establishing their trust would play a critical role in helping them to share their stories. During the course of the interviews, the authors used probes and cross-checks to further their understanding of participants' narratives. Investigators' triangulation ensured that each author kept the other one "honest" (Lincoln & Guba, 1999, p. 412), adding to the credibility of the findings. That is, both the authors shared and preserved the details of their data, observations, analyses, etc., notwithstanding the complexities and contradictions these contained. Neither author attempted to simplify or gloss over the data, observations, analyses, etc., but instead facilitated the research process through probes, alternate viewpoints, cognitive restructuring, etc. Immersion in the data during the process of analysis helped the authors gain insight into participant experiences and perspectives and ensure the rigor of the findings.

Van Manen (1998) proposes formal or informal hermeneutic conversations with other researchers on core themes and themes in order to generate deeper insights. Themes are examined, articulated, reinterpreted, added, omitted and reformulated. The attempt is to derive a common orientation to the experience and to help the researcher see limits in his/her present vision and to transcend them. A collaborative rather than competitive stance is indispensable here. Realizing the significance of this process for incorporating methodological rigor in the research, the authors followed it in all the data analysis phases. Core themes, major themes, themes, sub-themes, emerging conceptual categories and patterns were discussed, critiqued and finalized with two research colleagues and two experts in qualitative research in a process of consensual assessment.

In the findings section which follows, we first describe participants' oppressive work environment to provide the context of depersonalized bullying within which resistance occurs and then elaborate on employee resistance by discussing forms and determinants of breathers, releases, outlets and pauses.

Findings

Experiencing Depersonalized Bullying: The Oppressive Work Environment

Participants were employed in India's international-facing call centers which are housed in foreign or Indian MNC organizations and form an important constituent of the country's ITES-BPO sector, facilitating global offshoring such that overseas clients located in the USA (US/United States of America), the UK (United Kingdom), Canada and Australia provide services to their customers (also located overseas) via Indian/India-based service providers (henceforth also referred to as employer organizations in this paper). Participants described their work environment as oppressive but attributed this to the SLAs (service level agreements) that their employers had entered into with their clients. The SLA entailed a formalized relationship, either temporal or project-based, between participants' employer organizations (the offshored Indian/India-based service providers) and the overseas client to deliver stipulated services to clients' customers who were also located overseas⁴ (See Note 4 for the difference between clients and customers). SLAs laid down the process and outcome requirements of the particular service, the fulfillment of which was critical to the continuity and/or renewal of the contractual relationship between the two parties. With competitive advantage being the key focus, employer organizations diligently implemented client expectations. SLAs formed the basis for organizational practices, setting the work context for participants.

Apart from having to work in shifts and adopt accents and pseudonyms and conceal their geographical location to suit their foreign customers, participants had to meet various performance criteria such as process-linked targets, average handling time of the call, call wrap-up time, call waiting time, call abandonment rates, call opening and closing, customer interaction including sensitivity, politeness, warmth, understanding customer needs and handling irate customers, adherence to the script, fluency in the English language, understanding of the process, use of a neutral accent, maintenance of prescribed procedures including assistance offered and information provided, accuracy of documentation, and other parameters specified by the client, all of which were constantly monitored via technology-based mechanisms.

Participants' breaks, work day and work week as well as leave were determined by SLA requirements. Time-related dimensions of participants' work behavior were recorded via log in and log out data. Participants mentioned how such strict observation of time meant that they could not log out of their systems or leave their seats even to go to the restroom (if it was an emergency, they had to seek permission from the team leader [TL] to do so). During phases when call volumes were high or targets were not being met, agents were made to stretch such that they took back-to-back calls and had to forfeit or shorten breaks and/or work beyond shift hours or on weekly/public holidays. The performance of emotional labor, so central to call center work, engendered that agents empathize with and absorb customer reactions, including abuse and racial and ethnic animosity, apologizing to the latter for any perceived or attributed problem or inconvenience even if it was not their fault. Technology dominated participants' work context and work experience, with automated call distribution (ACD) and predictive dialing (PD) systems setting the pace of work, measuring output and

⁴ The reader must note the distinction between clients and customers. Clients are entities seeking services from Indian/India-based service providers while customers are the clients' service recipients who by virtue of being served by the agents/employees of the service provider are also referred to by the latter as customers.

providing and maintaining performance-related records. Monitoring and surveillance were thus pervasive.

Overall, participants were engaged in jobs that entailed little complexity, variety and autonomy with the completion of high volumes and provision of good quality service proceeding concomitantly in keeping with Batt and Moynihan's (2002) and Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, and Tam's (1998) mass-customized model. Participants worked in teams, headed by a team leader (TL). Performance, which was linked to the award of incentives over and above salary and to promotion opportunities, was evaluated at individual and team levels. Failure to meet the aforementioned expectations resulted in punishments, ranging from warnings, retraining and suspension to termination and dismissal. With termination and dismissal being used even in cases of confirmed employees, the primacy of transactional psychological contracts was evident.

Supervisors and managers routinely resorted to intimidatory and aggressive tactics to ensure the fulfillment of the SLAs. Agents were pulled up privately and/or publicly individually and/or in groups either for poor performance or for performance enhancement. Anger, insults, threats, name-calling, labeling and other negative behaviors featured prominently. Though participants admitted that such experiences were harsh and upsetting, causing them emotional distress, they maintained that superiors' behavior was both involuntary in that the latter had no choice but were merely doing their jobs as well as impersonal in that the latter were not targeting any particular agent but behaving similarly with the entire group. Participants, while acknowledging how SLAs impacted them, emphasized that their employer organizations were merely enacting the SLAs and hence no particular person in the workplace was considered to be responsible for the experience of oppression. On the contrary, the dynamics of doing business in a globalized world played an important role. Clients were relocating their operations to low cost developing countries to maximize revenues, minimize costs and maintain competitive advantage, and their choice of country and of service provider as well as the nature of SLAs were in keeping with these ends. If service provider organizations were unable to comply with the SLAs and to provide a conducive set-up for business to flourish, clients would move to other organizations. Moreover, if the business context in the country did not facilitate clients' success, relocation to other more attractive destinations served as the solution. Under such circumstances, employer organizations took pains to ensure appropriate extra-organizational and intra-organizational business environments and to fulfill SLAs. Delivering on these counts facilitated the continued success of India's ITES-BPO sector and the competitive position of their organizations. Work systems, job design elements, customer service requirements and technobureaucratic controls, as determined by SLAs and implemented by supervisors and managers, together contributed to an oppressive work environment for agents, indicating the presence of depersonalized bullying at work (See D'Cruz & Noronha, 2009, for details).

Breathers, Releases, Outlets and Pauses: Forms and Determinants

Notwithstanding their ambivalence to the oppressive work environment (D'Cruz & Noronha, forthcoming), participants described a range of breathers, releases, outlets and pauses that some of them and/or their colleagues occasionally resorted to. Participants maintained that these activities facilitated their coping, providing opportunities for respite and allowing for a sense of autonomy in spite of the depersonalized bullying. Following a list of the various breathers, releases, outlets and pauses, their determinants are elaborated upon.

Forms of breathers, pauses, outlets and releases

Disorganized coaction, collegial coping and concertive (quasi)supervision constitute the primary breathers, releases, outlets and pauses, subsuming several variants. According to participants, these behaviors serve as means of gaining some relief from and control over their work environment and not as symbols of anti-work or anti-employer sentiments.

Disorganized coaction

Disorganized coaction, which refers to fragmented and dispersed acts of resistance in which individuals are doing similar things independently without explicit co-ordination and often without the awareness of others' resistance (Martin & Meyerson, 1998), were of three types, namely, bounded performance, feedback diversions and vacillations.

a. Bounded performance

Agents limited the quantum of their work in terms of output and temporality in order to gain some breathing space. Their specific tactics included extending the call wrap-up time during which relevant information from the phone conversation is keyed into the system, altering their position in the call distribution queue by pressing the release button on their phone, extending restroom breaks, unnecessarily transferring customers' calls and delaying the disconnection of calls (by giving the impression of being engaged on calls when no interaction is actually taking place).

Team members are all good friends. We will be talking about a good topic. In the midst of the topic, some call comes. By the time I finish the call, the topic will be over and I miss the conversation. So we play some tricks. If we disconnect the call, what happens is that if the call gets monitored, it becomes a serious issue. Better than that, do a double click, you are now the last person in the queue...One can at least get some breathing time that way.

After every call, once you finish, then you press the end button and the call is over. The moment the call is cut, the next call from the queue comes in, so you see a pick call button on the screen. When you click that on the screen, the call comes through. Some guys, what they do is that at the end of the call, when they get that pick call button on the screen for the next call, they won't take it, they just sit. They will just sit quiet and the call is diverted to another person. So one gets a pause.

We have this Avaya phone where, at the end of every call, you have to write notes, saying this number called for this reason and this is what I did. So this has to be written there. For that, it is a temporary log out off the system. It's not exactly logging out, but it's a pause on the calls coming in. So calls don't come in at that time, we just pause. Press the pause again and the calls come in. What these guys will do, even if they don't have anything to write, they just press the pause button, so the pick call screen doesn't come up at all.

b. Feedback diversions

Agents deliberately entered wrong customer email addresses into the system if the call had not proceeded satisfactorily so that feedback could not be obtained from the particular customer.

Here, in this process, customer feedback is taken and this is done randomly. After the call, you are supposed to key in the customer's email and his feedback may be asked for. So if sometimes what happens is that if a call does not go well and that customer's feedback is taken, then you are marked down. So what some agents do is that they fill out the wrong email address in the call wrap-up data.

c. Vacillation

Agents displayed vacillation which entailed alternating between role embracement and role distancing (Goffman, 1961a). Agents were able to decipher when their calls were being monitored either because of an echoing or beeping sound that accompanied such activity or from the call monitoring data sheet, and they would take special care to ensure their optimal performance during that time, indicating role embracement. At other times, when they knew that their calls were not being monitored, they did not perform with as much interest and care, indicating role distancing.

Monitoring times are fixed for each shift and for each team – one can come to know from the monitoring sheet. So whenever I go into a new shift, I keep a watch for this by studying the monitoring sheet. In the monitoring sheet, it will be there. This call is monitored, by this person, on this day, everything will be there. For different teams, different days, calls get monitored. First week, I will make a note. Second week, I will see again and I will find it to be the same pattern. Last shift, we used to get monitored every Monday. So I knew that. So that day, I will be perfect. Otherwise, I would not bother that much.

Collegial coping

Collegial coping implies the active and/or passive sharing of difficult experiences with colleagues in a bid to lessen the adverse impact and to gain a sense of connectedness even when such attempts are not in keeping with organizational expectations of employee behavior on the job. It is the timing and nature of the enactment that provides protagonists with the opportunity for self-protection.

a. Reverse customer abuse

Turning tables on the customer helped agents deal with customer abuse and took two forms. During the course of customer abuse, some agents would place the phone in mute mode and curse the customer aloud. Team members would respond to this either (a) non-verbally from their work stations if they were busy on calls, (b) verbally and non-verbally from their work stations if they were between calls, and (c) verbally and non-verbally by coming to the agents' work station if they were between calls.

Other agents would press the mute button and enable the loudspeaker so that the team could collectively listen to, jeer at and enjoy the customer's tirade. Team members who were between calls would come to the agent's work station to participate while those who were busy with calls would participate non-verbally from their work stations.

Sometimes one gets tired of so much work and then, on top of it, a customer starts abusing. So what some people do – they put the customer on mute and curse him back. There he is thinking that we are listening to the scolding but actually we are giving it back to him.

First time when I listened to bad words, I was very tense. I didn't take calls properly. Then we get used to that and we will say, fine, no problem. We will be cool. If we are so irritated, we will transfer the call to TL or put it on mute. We will be abusing the customer, but he won't hear. At the same time, the customer will continue scolding, thinking that we are listening (to) him. So it is a good outlet for our stress.

b. Created/managed customer baits

While created customer baits involved agents giving customers the impression that the latter had offended the former and hence had to apologize to them and managed customer baits involved agents having to handle customers' sexual advances and flirtatious behaviors, some agents would enable the phone's loudspeaker while continuing the conversation so that team members could listen to and enjoy the exchange. Team members' participation was non-verbal since the phone was not in mute mode, though whether they remained at their own work station or moved to the agents' work station depended on their specific task-related engagement at that moment.

In this process, we expect a passenger call up and ask for the lowest fares from here to there. But some passengers will call up and say, "Can I tickle your feet?" or "Can I go out with you?". It is very weird because the person will keep on saying it then we put it on speaker and call our team members, "Listen, listen to the nonsense.". We all enjoy it.

In contrast to disorganized coaction which was individualistic and largely covert (with the individualistic nature of the activity facilitating covertness), collegial coping had social and more overt features. While engagement in collegial coping generally occurred when TLs and other supervisors were not present on the call floor or when their attention was diverted elsewhere, the latter would sometimes either return or direct their attention to the call floor while the coping activity was in progress. Agents would then immediately stop and disperse if required, with TLs and other supervisors sometimes turning a blind eye and at other times reprimanding the concerned agent and other team members. Participants opined that while TLs and other supervisors did not approve of their behavior, they did not officially punish or warn them because no overt customer affront was involved and because they recognized the coping element in agents' behavior. However, the possibility of being punished always remained since such behavior went against organizational expectations.

Concertive (quasi)supervision

Concertive (quasi)supervision refers to initiatives made by those with (even temporary) supervisory roles to protect the interests of employees, involving subordinate complicity and co-ordination.

a. Selective upward submissions

When agents filled in for TLs who, for some reason, could not monitor calls, they manipulated the entire system by telling their team members to give a list of calls on which they had performed well.

For about three months, I used to complete my shift and used to barge the agents. I have to sit on the TL spot, which the TL has entrusted to me. You won't believe me but I used to barge all the 20 agents on a single process and complete this within two hours. I will come and tell each and every team member before log in, I need four rated calls in which you gave perfect information to the customer. And I would send that in for the performance purposes. Agents get some relief at least.

b. Round-robin substitutions

Similarly, agents filling in for TLs would take team members' calls on a round-robin basis such that they relieved each team member in turn for a short period of time at least once during a shift.

Whenever the TL asks me to substitute for him, I will give each agent in the team a rest turn-by-turn. I will take 2-3 calls for each one so that they get a break.

In both the above instances, agents helped ease their team members' strain.

While concertive (quasi)supervision entailed complicity and co-ordination between the acting supervisor and the agents, it did not embody collectivist sentiments. In spite of the multiplicity of people and synchrony involved, concertive (quasi)supervision remained largely covert and socially fragmented.

Participants emphasized that the aforementioned breathers, releases, outlets and pauses are resorted to only occasionally by some agents. They underscored that these activities and behaviors provide them with means of gaining some respite from and power over their stringent work context and do not symbolize any anti-work or anti-employer sentiment. Specifically, breathers, releases, outlets and pauses not only provide agents with some slack time but also allow them to maintain their performance records. Notwithstanding these activities and behaviors, agents insisted that they were professionals who, being committed to their work and employer organizations, would not indulge in counter-productive work behavior that would harm organizational interests. They go on to state that breathers, releases, outlets and pauses neither detract from nor juxtapose uneasily against agents' professional identity. In other words, agents engage in these activities in spite of their sense of professionalism while also knowing fully well that if their employers discover their behavior, they would face punishment up to the level of dismissal.

It gives us some breathing time...time off from the routine and drudgery. Not everyone does it – just a few agents, some times. And it is just for rest, some release of tension. Otherwise, how can a professional go against the employer? He will be thrown out – he should be thrown out, in fact.

So much stress that you get suffocated. So sometimes, agents do this. But not everyone and not all the time...just to get some stress off. Because otherwise, our noses are in our work only and we cannot even breathe. But there is no bad thought behind all this...No one wants to trouble the company or the client – which professional would ever do that? But one has the right to some relief from all this pressure.

Similar activities in call centers, reported by Bain and Taylor (2000), Knights and McCabe (1998), Taylor and Bain (1999) and Townsend (2005), have been labeled as resistance (Bain & Taylor, 2000; Knights & McCabe, 1998; Mullholland, 1999, 2002; Sturdy & Fineman, 2001; Taylor & Bain, 1999, 2003). Yet, given their largely individualized, covert, informal, spontaneous and reactive as well as sporadic, fragmented and sequestered nature, these activities represent routine and diffuse resistance micropractices (Ashforth & Mael, 1998; Prasad & Prasad, 1998), partially mirroring Prasad and Prasad's (1998) subtle subversions and disengagement and Lutgen-Sandvik's (2006) subversive (dis)obedience. While undoubtedly indicative of unauthorized and oppositional resistance (Ashforth & Mael, 1998), these behaviors stand in contrast to traditional and conventional forms of resistance such as protests and mass movements that are formal, active, organized, overt, targeted, sustained, collective and intentionally disruptive, generally associated with Marxist working class revolutions (Ashforth & Mael, 1998; Prasad & Prasad, 1998).

Determinants of breathers, releases, outlets and pauses

That agents display only breathers, releases, outlets and pauses which operate as routine and diffuse resistance micropractices in response to depersonalized bullying, rather than conventional and traditional forms of resistance, is the result of the critical influence of their professional identity and their material gains from their jobs. Indeed, professional identity and material gains facilitate participants' acceptance of their oppressive work environment, and resistance is enacted against this backdrop.

Participants constantly reiterated that they were professionals who could cope effectively with the oppressive work environment. According to them, professionals possess superior cognitive abilities, advanced qualifications and a sense of responsibility and commitment to work. They prioritize work over personal needs and pleasure, behaving in a dignified and restrained manner and performing optimally and rationally while on the job. Professionals comply with job and organizational requirements, absorbing emergent strain. Clearly, the notion of professionalism embraced agents' identity, working in a pervasive manner to discipline them on the job.

We are professionals. And professionals always deliver. So no matter what is expected, we have to manage. Work, employer, all this comes first. As professionals, we can be counted on to do things properly, to excel.

Interestingly, through agents' narratives, the context surrounding their professional identity came out vividly. Organizations cultivated the notion of professionalism in employees through induction training, on-going socialization, performance evaluation mechanisms and other elements of organizational design. Indeed, interviews that we conducted with call center managers (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009) confirmed that employer organizations inculcated the professional identity in their agents with a view to gain their compliance and commitment to the realization of the organization's agenda. That

professional identity is greatly valued as a symbol of social status and upward mobility in the Indian context facilitated the process.

Agents' professional identity precluded engagement with collectivization attempts which are seen as inconsistent with the essential features of professionalism. Moreover, participants considered collectivization to be redundant in instances where employers protect employee interests particularly through career development and employee redressal opportunities.

Unions are simply for people in factories. ITES-BPO professionals are intellectuals...So making a union and fighting for things - I don't agree with that personally...A professional doesn't need a union.

I have never seen unions in call centers. Probably because in a good company, if you complain, it will be solved. So they don't need to make a union and fight together, because the company is affected. Unions are never seen because they (the company) give you whatever you want. You have some problem with the cab, you can go and tell the TL and TL will take the issue to higher authority. If the cab driver is drunk, they will take him off. That's the way it works.

Agents pointed out the various avenues their employers provided for career advancement. Many organizations had tie-ups with educational institutions for business administration and management courses, and agents availing of this opportunity were usually fully or partially funded by their employers. Similarly, agents reported that organizations created avenues for vertical movement. Through internal job postings (IJPs) circulated every quarter, communication about promotion opportunities was shared. Organizations emphasized that career growth was determined by performance and not by sociodemographic factors, seniority or intra-organizational social networks, emphasizing merit and objectivity. Further, movement was fast-paced in that, for top performers, the transition from an entry level post to a junior level supervisory post occurred within a year of joining the organization.

Numerous grievance redressal avenues existed. Agents stated that, in keeping with a professional style of management, openness of communication in terms of content, form, style and route were valued. Therefore, in addition to periodic employee satisfaction surveys, skip level meetings and open fora with superiors, employees with grievances could approach anyone in the organization whether the CEO (chief executive officer), the TL or someone in between via email, letters, telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings. That the professional atmosphere in the organization precluded the complainant's victimization was strongly emphasized.

We have a very good HR (human resource) department - if you have any issue or problem, you can just walk in. Even at the agent level, you can talk to the HR manager. And the problem is sorted out right there. If they are not given an answer, then they will be given an assurance that by this date, we will solve your problem. So that way, there is no chance for them to form a union. There is no requirement. We have all the rights we want.

Agents opined that collectivization in the Indian ITES-BPO sector would not augur well for its continuity and growth. Currently, overseas clients appreciated India as an offshoring destination not just because of the superior workforce but also because of the macroeconomic-business environment of the country. Collectivization activities would pose a

serious hindrance to this conducive context, resulting in relocation of offshoring to other places in South and South-East Asia and South America. Such a development had microlevel consequences for agents as employment prospects would be severely and adversely affected.

There is no question of this union business in this industry. It will scare all the MNCs away. Unions only cause mess and loss. See what is happening in other sectors. People are coming from all over to India because there are no unions here (in the ITES-BPO sector).

Agents' position suits their employers. From agents' narratives and managerial interviews, it appeared that employers take pains to nurture this stand. Cultivating agents' professional identity is an important step in this direction. Organizations then build on agents' self-concept, highlighting the disconnect between professionalism and collectivization which is strongly associated with blue-collared work in the Indian context. Providing avenues for grievances supports organization's claims, promoting the view that trade unions are redundant under the circumstances. That employer organizations do not recognize unions further complicates the perspective meted out to agents. Agents were told by their employers that their association with unions could result in their being dismissed from their jobs. Finally, organizations' emphasis that unions would hamper the growth of the Indian ITES-BPO sector, with implications for employment opportunities, seals agents' opinions on the matter.

The material gains associated with agent level jobs in international-facing call centers in India operated as the privileges of professionalism, thereby playing an important role in influencing participants' response to the oppressive work environment. Personal remuneration and organizational facilities worked to strengthen participants' compliance with and commitment to work-related demands. This was so because participants were well aware that such returns were not available in other sectors of the economy and hence it was in their interests to meet work requirements in order to ensure the continuity of the ITES-BPO sector.

The money is good. As a fresher in any company, you won't get this much of money initially. And there are good incentives, pick-up and drop facilities, medical benefits, food. We save a lot of money on traveling. Plus you are paid well and other benefits. So I think it is pretty good way to start off. And there are growth opportunities in the company - you can always grow because they are looking for people who can perform well.

Participant narratives underscored the extent to which the ITES-BPO sector, especially global offshoring, had altered India's job market. Employees in this sector, particularly those working for Indian or foreign MNC organizations, received attractive pay packages, performance incentives in financial and material forms, various allowances and facilities such as food allowance, night shift allowance, transport facilities and medical/health services.

Given the limited employment opportunities for those with a liberal arts/science degree as well as the poor returns at the entry level in many technical/professional fields, it is not surprising that the ITES-BPO sector is widely regarded as the most viable means currently available to achieving a decent quality of life. Those who had prior work experience in other sectors, which paid meagerly, compared the returns received from both the sectors, highlighting in the process the reasons why the ITES-BPO sector was so much sought after in spite of the challenges it presented. Participants emphasized the sense of independence and self-reliance that their income allowed them, demonstrating changes in their self-concept.

This boom happening in call centers and BPOs...for a normal graduate, you can't get a job like this. What is this ITES-BPO doing? It's actually getting them jobs very easily. So repeating 10 lines a day, I will get paid Rs. 10000-12000 - amazing, believe me, it is amazing. Because even a guy who works from morning to evening, say in a garment or textile shop, he wouldn't have been paid even more than Rs. 3000 and he can't even live properly. Here you get a good income, plus allowances, transport, good office...So somewhere down the line, independence and self-sufficiency, a good life...

Designations attached to call center agents' tasks such as customer care officer, call center executive, customer care executive, contact center representative and customer support executive invoked images of white-collared, professional work and upward mobility, enhancing agents' self-esteem. Participants experienced status enhancement because of association with overseas clients and customers and employment with MNC organizations, where applicable, as well as opportunities to visit client locations in foreign countries for training purposes, where applicable. The physical infrastructure and material artifacts of the employer organization augmented participants' sense of gain.

Socioideological controls via the identity regulation process (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) thus served as the primary organizational control mechanism, paving the way for participants' acceptance of depersonalized bullying, with important implications for employee resistance.

Discussion

Depersonalized bullying is the unexplored aspect of workplace bullying, though it is considered to be endemic to capitalist workplaces. In throwing light on employee experiences of and responses to depersonalized bullying, the present paper addresses this gap. Specifically, employee resistance to depersonalized bullying retheorizes power in instances of workplace bullying. Contrary to the widely held view in the substantive area that power is unidimensional, sovereign and dualistic, the study findings emphasize its polymorphous, multifaceted and shifting dialectical nature, supporting the contemporary view within the interpersonal bullying domain (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). That employees find ways and means to assert themselves in spite of the subjugation and abuse that depersonalized bullying entails is in keeping with post-Bravermanian labor theorists who emphasize that organizational control systems, far from being complete, are contested relations of power wherein resistance and opposition play crucial roles (Prasad & Prasad, 1998; Spicer & Bohm, 2007), exemplifying Ackroyd and Thompson (1999, p. 47) who state that "control can never be absolute and in the space provided by the indeterminacy of labor, employees will constantly find ways of evading and subverting managerial organization and direction at work." The findings clearly illustrate Foucault's (1982) view that power and resistance are mutually constitutive, operating as a permanent limit for each other and Giddens's (1982) position that human beings are knowledgeable agents who mobilize resources and carve out spaces of power and control for themselves.

Going further than Ashforth and Mael's (1998) position that resistance reflects the struggle for meaning at work as individuals attempt to come to terms with their workplace experiences (Ashforth & Mael, 1998), the study findings take forward the Foucauldian notions of resistance emphasizing subjectivity and localized resistance (Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Spicer & Bohm, 2007; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Socioideological controls operating via the identity regulation process (Alvesson, 2001;

Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), where the appeal of professionalism (Evetts, 2003; Fournier, 1999) is used, indicate employer organizations' attempts to shape employee subjectivity and ensure employee compliance and commitment for organizational effectiveness (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Deetz, 1995; Gabriel, 1999). Yet organizations do not fully realize this objective. Self-pluralism ensures that employees' other selves occasionally surface and assume salience (Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; McReynolds et al., 2001). Resistance emerges from within these multiple identities (Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994) but its nature and scope are limited by professional identity, clarifying this manufactured subjectivity's valued position among participants' various selves (Ashforth & Mael, 1998). Subjectivity thus operates in a highly complex manner: Agents simultaneously endorse yet struggle against particular identity formations, perpetuating the situation while finding spaces that allow them to survive its oppressive demands (Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994). In keeping with Thomas and Davies (2005, p. 687), Foucauldian resistance involves informal and everyday micropolitics which engender the "constant process of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourses" which occurs as "individuals confront, and reflect on, their own identity performance, recognizing contradictions and tensions and, in so doing, pervert and subtly shift meanings and understandings" (Thomas & Davies 2005, p. 687). Labor process theory (LPT), the other ontological-epistemological position on resistance (Spicer & Bohm, 2007; Thomas & Davies, 2005), is relevant only in terms of its aim of reappropriation and its newly associated manifestations of routine resistance micropractices (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Spicer & Bohm, 2007; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Interestingly, socioideological controls limit LPT as an employee reference point even though the capitalist labor process informs the Taylorized nature of call center work. Resistance therefore neither emerges from class-based structural antagonisms and totalizing collective consciousness nor manifests as class conflict and revolutionary struggles (Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994; Spicer & Bohm, 2007; Thomas & Davies, 2005).

While employees' engagement in routine resistance facilitates secondary adjustment (Goffman, 1961b), the effectiveness of such strategies in altering workplace power structures is questionable (Prasad & Prasad, 1998). Undoubtedly, what is also relevant is whether employees wish to effect such change, given the primacy of their professional identity and their material gains from their jobs. Yet, where organizational compliance and commitment and institutionalized job insecurity disallow employees from exercising Hirshman's voice option, routine resistance serves as a viable alternative. Routine resistance offers a more pragmatic, lower risk option by which employees which keep alive workplace opposition and dissent and minimize hopeless passivity thereby maintaining the reality of the workplace as a constantly negotiated order (Prasad & Prasad, 1998). Nonetheless, that resistance micropractices could have a transformative potential (Foucault, 1982) which may be realized over time, if a fateful moment (Giddens, 1984) is reached, cannot be overlooked. Indeed, routine resistance could trigger as well as coexist with conventional resistance while not completing replacing the latter (Prasad & Prasad, 1998).

Though employee resistance, being oppositional and unauthorized, went against both organizational interests and personal interests should they be caught, participants described their behavior as a means of gaining respite and experiencing autonomy that neither encompassed intentional harm nor aimed at any particular workplace entity (Robinson, 2008). Agents' acts illustrated production deviance (Lawrence & Robinson, 2007), but were neither retaliatory (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Tripp & Bies, 1997) nor counter-aggressive (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). The interplay of various forms of organizational power, including influence, force, discipline and domination, paradoxically results in only production deviance (Lawrence & Robinson, 2007), professional identity and

material gains being the key constraining factors. Indeed, the study findings show that while resistance is functional for employees, it involves the risk of discrediting and victimizing them and of intensifying depersonalized bullying (Lawrence & Robinson, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Framing employees as per the former perspective rather than critically reflecting on the organizational dynamics that triggered their behavior reinforces the existing individualistic assumptions that dominate bullying research, privileging simplistic understandings and explanations and serving a political function of target blaming and of removing organizational responsibility for the situation (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). In terms of the latter perspective, agents engage in resistance in the full knowledge that its detection entails counter-controls at the organizational level and termination at their level, reinforcing Ashforth and Mael's (1998) and Mumby's (2005) view that power, control and resistance are embedded in a mutually reinforcing dynamic relationship where power and control engenders resistance and resistance, seen as a threat to organizational hegemony, triggers counter-controls. The greater the perceived threat to the organization, the quicker and more severe the counter-controls. Counter-controls often result in further resistance, setting in motion a vicious circle. Clearly, resistance has positive and negative elements for both employees and organizations and hence represents a dynamic complexity. Taking an evaluative stand with regard to resistance is, thus, a matter of perspective.

Apart from the theoretical generalizability of the findings through which conceptual knowledge is developed and extended, the study has a few limitations. Though snowball sampling was unavoidable to complete the study, it is possible that those included shared similar worldviews and that other forms of sampling leading to a wider range of participants could have broadened and fine-tuned the findings. Further, the duration of the study constrained a long-term insight into the trajectory of resistance, its evolution and its concomitant dynamics and subtleties. While depersonalized bullying is considered to be endemic to capitalist workplaces, the nature of job design at entry level call center positions and the attitudes towards and position of collectivization within India's ITES-BPO sector could influence employee behavior, rendering the findings specific to work organization and sectoral features. Inquiries across a variety of jobs and sectors would have added to the robustness of the findings.

Notwithstanding its contribution, the study raises several areas for future research. First, the trajectory of employees' routine resistance in the long run warrants further investigation. To elaborate, do employees' responses remain individualized, informal, sporadic and sequestered or do they change over time? Second, the likelihood that depersonalized bullying could invoke formal resistance deserves attention. That is, under what circumstances and with what consequences does depersonalized bullying trigger collective, formal, sustained and organized employee responses? Third, the link between depersonalized bullying, resistance and counter-productive work behaviors and their relationship with retaliation and counter-aggression must be addressed. Specifically, does employee resistance encompass anti-social and deviant behaviors that go against organizational interests and/or stem from a standpoint of revenge and vindictiveness? Fourth, organizational reliance on counter-controls in terms of triggers and consequences in order to contain employee resistance should be explored. In other words, when and how do organizations resort to counter-controls and what effects do such measures have on employers and employees?

References

- Ackroyd, S., & Thompson P. (1999). *Organizational misbehavior*. London, UK: Sage
- Alvesson, M. (2001). Knowledge work: Ambiguity, image and identity. *Human Relations*, 54, 863-886.
- Alvesson, M., & Deetz, S. (1996). Critical theory and post-modernism. In S. R. Clegg & C. Hardy (Eds.), *Studying organization: Theory and method* (pp. 185-211). London, UK: Sage.
- Alvesson, M., & Karreman, D. (2004). Interfaces of control. Technocratic and socioideological control in a global management consultancy firm. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 29, 423-444.
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2002). Identity regulation as organizational control: Producing the appropriate individual. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39, 619-644.
- Aquino, K., & Thau, S. (2009). Workplace victimization: Aggression from the target's perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, 717-741.
- Ashforth, B. E., & Mael, F. A. (1998). The power of resistance: Sustaining valued identities. In R. M. Kramer & M. A. Neale (Eds.), *Power and influence in organizations* (pp. 89-120). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bain, P., & Taylor, P. (2000). Entrapped by the electronic panopticon?: Worker resistance in the call center. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 15, 2-18.
- Batt, R., & Moynihan, L. (2002). The viability of alternative call center models. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 12, 14-34.
- Beale, D., & Hoel, H. (2011). Workplace bullying and the employment relationship. *Work, Employment and Society*, 25, 5-18.
- Bishop, A., & Scudder, J. (1991). *Nursing: The practice of caring*. New York, NY: National League for Nursing Press.
- Brodsky, C. (1976). *The harassed worker*. Lexington, MA: DC Heath and Company.
- D'Cruz, P. (2012). *Workplace bullying in India*. New Delhi, IN: Routledge.
- D'Cruz, P., & Noronha, E. (2009). Experiencing depersonalized bullying: A study of Indian call center agents. *Work Organization, Labor and Globalization*, 3, 26-46.
- D'Cruz, P., & Noronha, E. (2010). Protecting my interests: Target coping with workplace bullying. *The Qualitative Report*, 15, 507-534. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-3/dcruz.pdf>
- D'Cruz, P., & Noronha, E. (2012). Clarifying my world: Identity work in the context of workplace bullying. *The Qualitative Report*, 17, 1-29. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/dcruz.pdf>
- D'Cruz, P., & Noronha, E. (forthcoming). Ambivalence: Employee responses to depersonalized bullying at work. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*.
- Deetz, S. A. (1992). *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. Albany, NY: State University of New York (SUNY) Press.
- Einarsen, S., & Hoel, H. (2001). *The negative acts questionnaire: Development, validation and revision of a measure of bullying at work*. Paper presented at the 10th European Congress on Work and Organizational Psychology, Prague, Czech Republic.
- Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., Zapf, D., & Cooper C. L. (2011). The concept of bullying and harassment at work: The European tradition. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and harassment in the workplace: Developments in theory, research, and practice* (pp. 3-39). London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Einarsen, S., & Raknes, B. I. (1997). Harassment at work and the victimization of men. *Violence and Victims*, 12, 247-263.

- Evetts, J. (2003). The sociological analysis of professionalism: Occupational change in the modern world. *International Sociology*, 18, 395-415.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 777-795.
- Fournier, V. (1999). The appeal to professionalism as a disciplinary mechanism. *The Sociological Review*, 47, 280-307.
- Fox, S., & Spector, P. (2005). *Counter-productive workplace behavior: An integration of both actor and recipient perspectives on causes and consequences*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association/APA.
- Frenkel, S., Korczynski, M., Shire K., & Tam, M. (1998). Beyond bureaucracy: Work organization in call centers. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 9, 957-979.
- Gabriel, Y. (1999). Beyond happy families: A critical reevaluation of the control-resistance-identity triangle. *Human Relations*, 52, 179-202.
- Giddens, A. (1982). Power and the dialectic of control and class structuration. In A. Giddens & G. Mackenzie (Eds.), *Social class and the division of labor* (pp. 29-45). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Goffman, E. (1961a). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1961b). *Encounters: Two studies in the sociology of interaction*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Hoel, H., & Beale, D. (2006). Workplace bullying, psychological perspectives and industrial relations: Towards a contextualized and interdisciplinary approach. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 44, 239-262.
- Hoel, H., & Salin, D. (2003). Organizational antecedents of workplace bullying. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and emotional abuse in the workplace* (pp. 203-218). London, UK: Taylor & Francis.
- Ironside, M., & Seifert, R. (2003). Tackling bullying in the workplace: The collective dimension. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and emotional abuse in the workplace* (pp. 383-398). London, UK: Taylor & Francis.
- Jermier, J. M., Knights, D., & Nord, W. R. (1994). Introduction. In J. M. Jermier, D. Knights, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Resistance and power in organizations* (pp. 1-24). London, UK: Routledge.
- Keashly, L., & Harvey, S. (2006). Workplace emotional abuse. In E. K. Kelloway, J. Barling, & J. Hurrell (Eds.), *Handbook of workplace violence* (pp. 95-121). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Keashly, L., & Jagatic, K. (2003). By any other name: American perspectives on workplace bullying. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and emotional abuse in the workplace* (pp. 31-61). London, UK: Taylor & Francis.
- Keashly, L., & Jagatic, K. (2011). North American perspectives on hostile behaviors and bullying in work. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and harassment in the workplace Developments in theory, research, and practice* (pp. 41-71). London, UK: Taylor & Francis.
- Knights, D., & McCabe, D. (1998). What happens when the phone goes wild?: Staff, stress and spaces for escape in a BPR telephone banking work regime, *Journal of Management Studies*, 35, 63-94.
- Knights, D., & Vurdubakis, T. (1994). Foucault, power, resistance and all that. In J. M. Jermier, D. Knights, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Resistance and power in organizations* (pp. 167-198). London, UK: Routledge.

- Lawrence, T. B., & Robinson, S. L. (2007). Ain't misbehavin': Workplace deviance as organizational resistance. *Journal of Management*, 33, 378-394.
- Lee, R. T., & Brotheridge, C. M. (2006). When prey turns predatory: Workplace bullying as a predictor of counter-aggression/bullying, coping and well-being. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 15, 352-377.
- Legge, K. (2006). Human resource management. In S. Ackroyd, R. Batt, P. Thompson & P. Tolbert (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Work and Organization* (pp. 220-241). London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Liefoghe, A. P. D., & Mackenzie-Davey, K. (2001). Accounts of workplace bullying: The role of the organization. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 10, 375-392.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1999). Establishing trustworthiness. In A. Bryman & R. G. Burgess (Eds.), *Qualitative research* (Vol. 3, pp. 397-444). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lutgen-Sandvik, P. (2006). Take this job and...: Quitting and other forms of resistance to workplace bullying. *Communication Monographs*, 73, 406-433.
- Martin, J., & Meyerson, D. (1998). Women and power: Conformity, resistance and disorganized coaction. In R. M. Kramer & M. A. Neale (Eds.), *Power and influence in organizations* (pp. 311-348). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McReynolds, P., Altrocchi, J., & House, C. (2001). Self-pluralism: Assessment and relations to adjustment, life changes, and age. *Journal of Personality*, 68, 347-381.
- Miles, M. S., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mullholland, K. (1999). *Back to the future: A call center and new forms of direct control*. Paper presented at the 17th Annual International Labor Process Conference, London, UK.
- Mullholland, K. (2002). Gender, emotional labor and teamworking in a call center. *Personnel Review*, 31, 283-303.
- Mumby, D. K. (2005). Theorizing resistance in organization studies. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 19, 19-44.
- NASSCOM. (2010). *Strategic review*. New Delhi, IN: NASSCOM.
- NASSCOM. (2011). *Executive summary*. New Delhi, IN: NASSCOM.
- Noronha, E., & D'Cruz, P. (2009). *Employee identity in Indian call centers: The notion of professionalism*. New Delhi, IN: Sage.
- Peetz, D. (2002). Decollectivist strategies in Oceania. *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, 57, 252-281.
- Prasad, A., & Prasad, P. (1998). Everyday struggles at the workplace: The nature and implications of routine resistance in contemporary organizations. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, 16, 225-257.
- Ray, M. A. (1994). The richness of phenomenology: Philosophic, theoretic, and methodologic concerns. In J. M. Morse (Eds.), *Critical issues in qualitative research methods* (pp. 117-133). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Robinson, S. L. (2008). Dysfunction in the workplace. In J. Barling (Ed.), *Sage handbook of organizational behavior: Micro approaches* (pp. 141-160). London, UK: Sage
- Skarlicki, D. P., & Folger, R. (1997). Retaliation in the workplace: The roles of distributive, procedural and interactional justice. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82, 434-443.
- Spicer, A., & Bohm, S. (2007). Moving management: Theorizing struggles against the hegemony of management. *Organization Studies*, 28, 1667-1698.
- Sturdy, A., & Fineman, S. (2001). Struggles for the control of affect: Resistance as politics and emotion. In A. Sturdy, A. Gruglis, & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Customer service, empowerment and entrapment* (pp. 135-156). London: Palgrave.

- Taylor, P., & Bain, P. (1999). An assembly line in the head: Work and employment relations in the call center. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 30, 101-117.
- Taylor, P., & Bain, P. (2003). Subterranean work sick blues: Humor as subversion in two call centers. *Organization Studies*, 24, 1487-1509.
- Taylor, P., & Bain, P. (2005). India calling to the faraway towns: The call center labor process and globalization. *Work, Employment and Society*, 19, 261-282.
- Thomas, R., & Davies, A. (2005). Theorizing the micropolitics of resistance: New public management and managerial identities in the UK public services. *Organization Studies*, 26, 683-706.
- Townsend, K. (2005). Electronic surveillance and cohesive teams: Room for resistance in an Australian call center. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 20, 47-59.
- Tripp, T., & Bies, R. (1997). What's good about revenge? The avenger's perspective. *Research on Negotiation in Organizations*, 6, 145-160.
- Van Manen, M. (1998). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Author Note

Premilla D'Cruz, Ph.D., is Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad. Her research interests include workplace bullying, emotions in organizations, self and identity, organizational control, and ICTs and organizations. Along with Charlotte Rayner, she has conducted the first national level survey on workplace bullying in India. She has recently published *Workplace Bullying in India* (Routledge, 2012). She may be contacted at Dr. Premilla D'Cruz, Wing 14C, IIM Ahmedabad, Vastrapur, Ahmedabad 380 015, India; Email: pdcruz@iimahd.ernet.in

Ernesto Noronha, Ph.D., is Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad. His research interests include labor relations, sociology of the professions, organizational change, organizational control, and ICTs and organizations. Along with David Beale, he has co-authored "India, Neo-liberalism and Union Responses – Unfinished Business and Protracted Struggles" (in *The International Handbook of Labor Unions* edited by Gregor Gall et al and published by Edward Elgar, 2012). He has recently completed a research fellowship at the Rotterdam School of Management, awarded under the ICSSR-NWO program.

Copyright 2013: Premilla D'Cruz, Ernesto Noronha, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

D'Cruz, P., & Noronha, E. (2013). Breathers, releases, outlets and pauses: Employee resistance in the context of depersonalized bullying. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(72), 1-24. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/dcruz72.pdf>
