**Silenced Female Voices: How Institutionalized Avoidance Condones a Culture of**

**Workplace Aggression and Shame in Higher Education**

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**Authorization to Submit Dissertation**

This dissertation of Kathryn Schiffelbein, submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a Major in Education and titled "**Silenced Female Voices: How Institutionalized Avoidance Condones a Culture of Workplace Aggression and Shame in Higher Education**," has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

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# Abstract

Numerous studies describe the harsh realities of workplace aggression. Many of these studies originated in Scandinavia and Australia, but in recent years research in workplace aggression has increased in the U.S. Researchers attribute workplace aggression to negative emotional, physical, and psychological outcomes. More recently, researchers studied workplace aggression in higher education populations such students, faculty, and administrators; however, research on professional staff is insufficient. In this three-manuscript dissertation study, I explored the lived adverse interpersonal experiences of female professional staff in higher education and discovered how they moved through the experiences. I offer an alternative to the male "normal experience" through a feminist post-intentional phenomenological lens of female professional staffs' experiences with workplace aggression in higher education. Tentative manifestations, or themes, and discussion provide insight to the female lived experiences of workplace aggression and shame in higher education. I found the participants' experiences included different types of workplace aggression: incivility, bullying, harassment, and emotional abuse. As a result, female professional staff felt elements of shame such as being trapped, powerless, and isolated. I explored how the participants moved through their experiences utilizing components of shame resilience. The majority of participants' voices were silenced as they sought help. Their institutional representatives avoided reports of bullying and abuse, consequently silencing and shaming their voices. The results of this study contribute to the literature on higher education organizational culture, workplace aggression, feminist phenomenology, and shame resilience theory.

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- To Aaron, my love, my adventure partner, and my *extraordinary* editor. Thank you for being an awesome life partner and for loving me so well through this journey. You were my constant every step of the way. I love you;

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## Dedication

To the courageous and vulnerable women in my life: my mother, Elaine,

and my grandmothers, Novella and Jean.

Thank you for your legacy of hard work, resilience, and faith.

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## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The experiences of females working in higher education has been studied from a variety of perspectives. Past research explored topics such as leadership styles between males and females, faculty collaboration, females in senior management, and promotion. Much of the research pertained to faculty or upper administration, with a focus on positions with formal authority and decision-making power. Few studies addressed lived experiences and perspectives of female professional staff working in higher education.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

This study explores the lived adverse interpersonal experiences of female staff in higher education. A gap in the literature emerged regarding experiences of higher education female professional staff in low- to middle- management positions. I wanted to explore the journey of females at this level—their day-to-day experiences in these positions, who they become through their experiences, and how these experiences affected their future. Themes of resilience, including shame resilience and resilient leadership, emerged from pilot study data. This study explored the connections of every day management, work responsibilities, and the effect of adverse interpersonal experiences on female staff working in higher education.

Significant to this study was understanding female professional staff's experiences in higher education; specifically females with major decision makers as their supervisors. The majority of related literature contained stories and data of upper administrators, such as vice provosts or presidents, or faculty, including department chairs and associate deans (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Neale & Özkanlı, 2010; O'Connor, 2015; Peterson, 2016). Few

studies examined the largely unseen world of lower to middle management (Jarmon, 2014; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014; Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014).

My decision to explore what it is like for female professional staff currently in the middle of their career path in higher education was to understand their journey and discover their movements forward in the midst of an unknown future. Understanding this social phenomenon—the lived experiences of female professional staff and the adversity that arises internally or externally—can empower current and subsequent generations of female professional staff in higher education.

**Research Questions**

Questions guiding this study explored aspects of the lived experiences of female professional staff in higher education. For purposes of the study, professional staff are non-academic ranked employees in higher education institutions between lower to upper management ranks. The primary question leading this study asked, "What is the lived experience of adverse interpersonal experiences for female professional staff in higher education?" This question explored the lived experiences of workplace aggression of female professional staff in higher education. This is a deeply seated inquiry that looked at the career journeys, day-to-day job responsibilities, and critical incidents that affected female personal and professional selves. A secondary research question explored "How do female professional staff move through adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education?" This question explored the emotional, physical, and psychological responses individuals experienced when faced with adverse experiences that arise in organizations.

**Intentional Post-Reflexion Statement**

Vagle (2016) recommended writing an intentional post-reflexion statement prior to beginning post-intentional phenomenological research. A reflexion statement helped identify my personal bias and assumptions related to the topic. As a female professional staff middle manager in higher education, I bring both positive and negative interpersonal experiences that affect my outlook and expectations of data gathering and analysis. By observing my reactions, inner dialogue, connections, and disconnections *throughout* this study, and revisiting my assumptions consistently through data analysis, I was able honor the voices and experiences of the female participant co-researchers. Vagle (2016) advised:

> As we post-reflex through a study it is important to document, wonder about and question our connections/discussions, assumptions of what we take to be normal, bottom lines, and moments we are shocked. For it is in these moments that our post-reflexive work needs to take place, and this means we must constantly interrogate our pre-understandings and developing understandings of the phenomenon. This is important, as one does not want to have the crafted text become an autobiographical account in its entirety. At the same time, a post-intentional approach acknowledges and welcomes the fact that, as researchers, all of our work is, in part, autobiographical. (p. 132)

Prior to the study, I examined my assumptions and experiences, and reflected on my initial connections with the literature reviewed. I used Vagle's (2016) four elements of awareness to guide my intentional post-reflexion statement and on-going post-reflexion journal:

1. Moments when we instinctively **connect** with what we observe and moments in which we instinctively **disconnect**.

2. Our **assumptions of normality**.

3. Our **bottom lines**, that is those beliefs, perceptions, perspectives, opinions that we refuse to shed; and

4. Moments in which we are **shocked** by what we observe. (p. 132)

In reviewing literature on professional staff, female leadership, and higher education culture and structure, I found myself connecting with themes that arose in the lower to middle management literature. A number of studies reported middle managers feel a lack of decision-making power, mentoring, networking and professional development opportunities in their positions. What surprised me was the lack of decision-making power and lack of mentoring for this population. A number of years ago I read *Reframing Academic Leadership* (Bolman & Gallos, 2011) in which the authors captured contradicting feelings of powerlessness and responsibility of being a middle manager.

Since then, I have worked with countless higher education employees, some without management oversight and others in middle management, who display strong emotional intelligence, humility, and leadership grounded in their personal values. However, these colleagues held no formal power or decision-making authority. From my own experiences, assumptions of normality encompassed feeling responsible for vision and strategic planning, morale and team building, fiscal awareness, recruitment and retention, programming, student services, and creative risk-taking. My role also required heightened skills of emotional intelligence, emotional agility, and human resource development. I held the responsibility of enacting top-down directives while helping lift the emotional burden of my team. Middle

managers are sandwiched between the bottom and the top with responsibility to implement change, but little to no formal authority to influence decisions regarding effective change. Bolman and Gallos (2011) shared:

> Academic leaders live with feet firmly planted in two different camps: the world of academia and the corporate-informed world of administrative performance. Each has its own values, beliefs, and expectations…Living in two worlds also means that much of the work and accomplishments of those in the middle are invisible to, or dismissed by, one constituent group or another. (p. 147)

Living in the middle can be stressful, invisible, and unrewarding work. However, staying connected to our students, colleagues, and innovation reinvigorates creativity and curiosity. I take comfort and guidance in Bolman and Gallos' (2011) suggestions (borrowed from systems theory) for leading from the middle:

1. Act like a top when you can

2. Be a bottom when you have to be

3. Enlist and coach others

4. Be a facilitator

5. Find support and solace in peers

Working in higher education as professional staff, my assumptions of normality regularly overlap with moments of shock in what I observe. Over time, observing incivility and bullying behavior has become the norm in interpersonal interactions between staff and, in particular, female staff. Although this behavior startles me, the initial shock has worn off and I have come to see it as a regular occurrence in higher education. Where does this behavior stem from? How is this behavior permitted in a professional setting? These questions have

both troubled me yet inspired me to further study the topic. Does the negative conduct stem from insecurity, lack of power, lack of psychological safety, or perhaps shame? A number of studies reported victim shame as an outcome of on-going aggressive workplace behavior (Connolly, 1995; Heflin, 2015; Lewis, 2004).

**Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, I define the following terms as:

1. Low to middle management staff: non-academic, professional or general staff employees in positions below vice or associate provosts. Common position titles include director, manager, associate director, associate manager, counselor, advisor, and coordinator.

2. Shame resilience: the ability to recognize shame when we experience it, and move through it in a constructive way that allows us to maintain our authenticity and grow from our experiences (Brown, 2007, p. 31).

3. Adverse Interpersonal Experiences (AIE): an experience or observation of perceived intentional or unintentional incivility, bullying, aggression, or harassment behavior toward oneself, colleagues, or other employees. Or a negative experience or observation of perceived intentional incivility or bullying behavior toward colleagues, direct reports, or self [used for written narrative instructions during data gathering];

4. Incivility: mistreatment that may lead to disconnection, breach of relationships, and erosion of empathy (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000, p. 125);

5. Bullying: harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work… bullying behavior occurs repeatedly, regularly and over a period of time (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011);

6. Workplace harassment: repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate or get a reaction from another. It is treatment that persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates, or otherwise discomforts the target (Brodsky, 1976, p. 2);

7. Workplace emotional abuse: interactions between organizational members that are characterized by repeated hostile verbal and nonverbal, often nonphysical behaviors directed at a person(s) such that the target's sense of him/herself as a competent worker and person is negatively affected" (as cited in Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003);

8.  Vulnerability: uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure (Brown, 2012).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations of this study include my personal and professional bias. As a female middle manager in higher education, my perspective and experience influenced the study design, analysis, and interpretation of results. Limitations also included participants self-reporting their experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, I interpreted experiences that the participants themselves interpreted as they responded to interview questions and writing prompts (Seidman, 2013). My relative lack of experience implementing phenomenological research also influenced the study. A delimitation was the population studied. The population included a female perspective and not a male perspective. Participants self-selected to participate in the study, which posed another delimitation.

**Researcher Positionality and Assumptions**

The topics researched in this study were based on my work experiences in higher education. My experiences vary depending on the context: advising, teaching, program

development, and management. These experiences serve as a window to observe how individuals collaborate and communicate. Through first-hand experience in middle management, reading books and articles on leadership, and continuing my education in organizational health and leadership, I have become keenly aware of how tenuous work relationships can be—how they can rapidly and unexpectedly erode—and how the high value placed on power and control impacts the health of an organization.

My experience working with other female middle managers led me to Brene Brown's (2013) research on vulnerability, resilience, shame, and living whole-heartedly. Brown's research interested me in investigating how vulnerability and shame play a part in work relationships, particularly in female professional staff in higher education. Vulnerability is socially interpreted as weakness but Brown argued vulnerability actually demonstrates courage as individuals reach out and candidly connect with others (Brown, 2013). Similarly, Lencioni (2012) discussed how vulnerability-based trust is critical to building teams intended for a healthy and successful organization. Part of his model for building a cohesive leadership team was to ensure individuals feel safe and secure to take sensible risks. When people feel safe to take risks, they open themselves to both positive and negative criticism, a vulnerable step that demonstrates an openness to their ideas being critiqued. In order for teams to collaborate, stay accountable, take risks, and master conflict, individuals must learn to be vulnerable—a trait which must first be modeled and taught by those in leadership positions (Lencioni, 2012).

In this study, I wanted to understand and learn from individuals' lived experiences in higher education. I wanted to listen to their personal stories of vulnerability and resilience by

exploring the inner-workings and shared experiences of being female professional staff in higher education.

**Research Philosophy**

My upbringing in a Caucasian, middle-class family, my gender, my experiences with educational privilege, and my faith influences my research philosophy and conceptual framework. Although I believe in a larger Truth, there are many smaller truths I grapple with on a daily basis, especially concerning knowledge and learning. Major life experiences have shaped my positionality including international travel, working with diverse cultures, public K-12 education, marriage, family births and deaths. My spiritual journey influences and challenges my perspective as a new researcher.

I ground my research interests and perspective in discovering and nurturing relationships in an inclusive environment. My upbringing and my family's outlook on life continues to inspire my research interests. During my childhood and still presently, my parents are involved in ministering to others. With my father's career in ministry, and my mother's career as a nurse and school paraprofessional, my brothers and I grew up welcoming, serving, and focusing on interpersonal relationships. We spent our weeknights and weekends leading youth groups, serving at church events, and hosting in our home.

Coming from a faith-based background, many of my worldviews lean toward an objectivist perspective, at least in regard to believing in a "Truth." Egbert and Sanden (2014) explained that through an objectivist's lens, there is Truth, and everyone sees this Truth in the same way (p. 20). However, where I struggle with this view is that I believe no one sees Truth the exact same way. With different backgrounds and perspectives, and having varying biases, it is hard to believe everyone could see the same Truth *exactly* the same way. At this

moment in my personal journey, I fit on the spectrum between constructionism and objectivism. Egbert and Sanden (2014) write about constructionism saying:

> An individual operating within a constructionist epistemology will *know* that a mountain possesses certain characteristics, based on his or her experiences with it, just as another individual will *know* about the characteristics of the mountain based on his or her experiences. However, the knowledge held by the first person might not be the same knowledge held by the second because the experiences that caused each to know may have been different. (p. 21)

Similar to the constructionist perspective, I believe individuals construct their own knowledge and knowledge is affected by personal experiences, culture, and society. Crotty (1998) wrote that social constructionism signifies culture as a major influencer on making meaning. Crotty explained "…we depend on culture to direct our behavior and organise our experience…Culture is best seen as the source rather than the result of human thought and behavior" (p. 53).

I relate best to the interpretivist paradigm that focuses on learning from others and doing research in real life settings, such as the classroom or workplace. I value learning about individuals' perspectives in their day-to-day interactions with colleagues. It is their daily, lived experiences that influence their perspectives and help them construct meaning.

**Summary**

My dissertation took the form of a manuscript dissertation (MDIS) including three empirically researched studies intended for journal submission. The MDIS is recommended for developing experience writing journal articles in preparation for an academic career (Freeman, 2018). Chapter one introduced the background, purpose and significance of this

study. I proposed research questions to guide my study and shared my research philosophy and assumptions that influenced my analysis and interpretation of the data. Limitations and delimitations were acknowledged. In chapter two, I present the theoretical framework that guided my data gathering, analysis and interpretation. A partial overview of literature is also included prior to data gathering and analysis. Chapter three details the methodological approach, study design, data collection, trustworthiness, and researcher as instrument. Chapters four and five share the study methods, findings, and discussion of the primary and secondary research questions. Chapter six addresses the study methods, findings, and discussion of unexpected tentative manifestations that emerged out of both research questions. The final chapter, chapter seven, summarizes my overall findings, discussion and implications, and offers recommendations for future research.

**CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Context and Literature Review**

Qualitative methodologies follow an inductive research method and approach research with an open and less assuming perspective. Qualitative researchers must acknowledge assumptions and biases to approach a study with a blank slate. The review of literature for qualitative studies is normally less in-depth, to prevent the researcher from looking for a preconceived idea or description of a phenomenon. Phenomenological researchers, philosophers and psychologists, in particular, emphasize the importance of acknowledging, or "bracketing," their assumptions and experiences with a phenomenon prior to gathering data (Finlay, 2009a). Some descriptive phenomenological researchers, such as Husserl and Giorgi, went further to suggest not allowing theory impede analysis, but instead to explore and understand the phenomenon purely as the participants describe their experiences (Vagle, 2016). Hermeneutic and post-intentional phenomenologists see theoretical assumptions as invaluable to the research process, yet practice bracketing, or bridling, their assumptions. Vagle (2016) furthered the idea of bridling, or "suspending" assumptions, through post-reflexivity, where the researcher "doggedly questions" assumptions (p. 74).

Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom (2008) advised partially reviewing literature for an overarching sense of the topic, but warned that a thorough understanding of the phenomenon prior to research can impinge on openness to new understanding of the phenomenon. My partial literature review encompassed three main concepts: higher education structure, middle management and female professional staff, and adverse interpersonal experiences. In reviewing these topics, I identified a gap to investigate – the experiences of female professional staff in higher education middle management. After I completed data gathering

and analysis, I returned to the literature based on discovered themes and findings, or "tentative manifestations," used in post-intentional phenomenology (Vagle, 2016). Using tentative manifestations, I better situated, discussed, and interpreted the findings within the literature.

Based on my pilot study and preliminary review of literature, shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006) surfaced as a theoretical framework to use during the analysis and interpretive steps in my study. I used shame resilience theory as part of my post-reflexive journaling practice throughout the study. If I identified descriptions or elements of shame resilience theory, I became curious and asked more questions to challenge *my* preconceived assumptions and biases, and to question whether these elements were actually the participant's descriptions and interpretations, or if they were merely my own explanations clouding the lens.

**Shame Resilience Theory**

Brown (2006) applied grounded theory research methodology to study cognitive concepts of vulnerability, shame, and living wholeheartedly, that led to shame resilience theory. She developed a conceptual model, a continuum of shame resilience, by using the constant comparison analysis method to examine interviews with 215 females. She defined shame resilience as "the ability to recognize shame when we experience it, and move through it in a constructive way that allows us to maintain our authenticity and grow from our experiences" (Brown, 2007, p. 31). Within the shame resilience continuum, Brown (2012) identified empathy and shame on opposite ends of a continuum, explaining that "empathy is the antidote to shame" because it included elements of connection, power and freedom as essential for building shame resilience. Brown (2006) constructed shame resilience theory

with four continuums: 1) acknowledging personal vulnerability, 2) building critical awareness, 3) reaching out, and 4) speaking shame (p. 47). These continuums, as seen in Figure 2.1, helped individuals uncover their shame resilience by practicing each element and becoming cognizant of personal shame triggers.

Shame triggers contain words, thoughts, and feelings that feed our habit of keeping experiences secret, whether at home, with friends, or in the workplace (Brown, 2009). For example, traditional leadership styles suggest the leader knows best. If a leader were to err, in a traditional sense, they would want to hide the mistake and transfer blame for the error to another. Through the shame resilience lens a leader would acknowledge and admit to the mistake while readily learning from the situation. This approach enables employees and colleagues to follow a leader's example and take sensible risks without being afraid to share their own mishaps.

Shame resilience theory offers a lens to research dynamics of female professional staff experiences in the workplace. Brown (2006) asserted women must understand where their shame, anxiety, resentment,
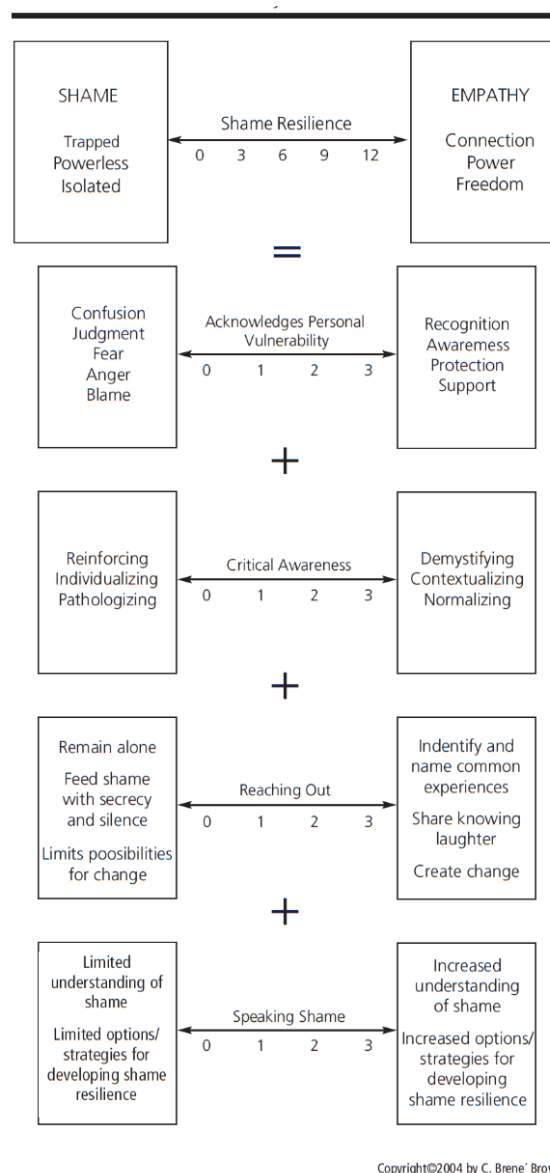


Note: Used with permission. See Appendix G.

Figure 2.1 *Shame Resilience Continuum*

fear, and disappointment stem from. They must trudge through the mess in order to come out stronger on the other side. Brown (2007) argued females experience shame triggers personally, professionally, or socially from which their health, relationships, and career can suffer.

Additional studies showed barriers females face in higher education have a major impact on work relationships, career goals, and everyday management. These barriers included research collaboration and competition (Falconer, 2017), the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Peterson, 2016), heavy workload and lack of training (Floyd, 2016; Peterson, 2016; Preston & Price, 2012), low decision-making power (Pepper & Giles, 2015; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014) and slow career progression (Neale & Özkanlı, 2010; Szekeres, 2011; Tessens, White, & Web, 2011). Barriers create a constant uphill battle that can result in an unstable foundation for responding to negative thoughts and insecurities, which can lead to defensiveness toward others (Brown, 2006). A continuous cycle of shame and blame affects managing others, growing healthy relationships, and the ability to lead with vulnerability. Analyzing female professional staff's stories in higher education through a shame resilience theory lens uncovered stories of strength and resilience when faced with multi-faceted challenges.

### Partial Overview of Literature

My initial review of literature offered foundational understandings of concepts related to the research questions to inform my direction of methodology and analysis. Aligned with post-intentional phenomenology inductive research, I made an introductory review of the literature (Vagle, 2016). A partial review of the literature provided a glimpse into higher education structure, higher education management and professional staff, incivility in higher

education, and female faculty management in academe. To best "craft" phenomenology, as Vagle (2016) instructed, we should become familiar enough with the phenomenon's literature to "get a clear view" of the premise (p. 72). Vagle (2016) also looked to modern phenomenologists Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom's (Dahlberg et al., 2008) recommendations to not read the literature extensively as this might prohibit the researcher's ability to bridle, or set aside, personal assumptions. Prior to my study I followed these literature review guidelines and completed a partial review of the phenomenon (adverse interpersonal experiences), population of study (female professional staff and middle managers), and context (higher education). As qualitative research is inductive and follows data gathering and analysis, I re-examined the literature to understand where and how my *findings* and *tentative manifestations* fit into the literature of this particular phenomenon and population. I wrote about my secondary review of literature in each of the manuscripts, found in chapters four, five, and six.

Research conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s studied the cultural transition made by higher education institutions from faculty governances toward a managerialism-type structure. These and more recent studies focused on a variety of issues related to academic staff (Branson, Franken, & Penney, 2016; Floyd, 2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; O'Connor & Goransson, 2015; Pepper & Giles, 2015; Peterson, 2016; Rogers, 2017), with limited focus on non-academic staff. Over the past decade, research has increased to understand the experience of professional staff in low to middle management (Allee, 2015; Davis, Jansen van Rensburg, & Venter, 2016; Hocker, 2015; Jarmon, 2014; Little, 2016; Mayo, 2014; Pelletier, Kottke, & Reza, 2015; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014; Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014). Studies of female middle managers and professional staff in the United

States are even less common. The majority of studies on females working in academe came from Sweden, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Turkey, Australia and New Zealand. A review of the literature gave me a better understanding of how female management perspectives fit into this complex, traditionally patriarchal system.

**Higher Education Structure**

It was essential to understand the culture of higher education in the context of institutional governance, structure, and middle management in order to study female staff and middle management in higher education. The following review of academic leadership and higher education culture offered a glimpse into the working environment for females in academe.

**Academic Leadership.** Higher education institutions are complex organizations (Bolman & Gallos, 2011), founded in patriarchal structures (Neale & Özkanlı, 2010). Between the strengths, weaknesses, histories, agendas, and interpersonal skills individuals brought to work, the purpose of these complex institutions was to "foster human creativity, and development" (Bolman & Gallos, 2011, p. 1). To understand the unique intricacies of academic leadership and higher education culture is an imposing task as it is not driven merely by budget and revenue; rather, academic leadership is in service to society to educate future generations. Academic leaders face a multi-faceted challenge to build a healthy organizational culture, provide support for constituents, manage crises, and develop effective teams.

*Higher Education Structural Shifts*. Current trends in higher education organizational structure and management show an emergence of studies that transitioned toward a "managerialization" of higher education culture. This trend moved away from

faculty led governance toward a managerial, business-like structure (Davis et al., 2016; Szekeres, 2004, 2006, 2011). Branson, Franken, and Penney's (2016) study emphasized middle management as "multi-faceted and multi-directional, with middle leaders challenged to work up, down and across structures and networks" (p. 129). Those in "middle leadership position[s] in higher education…may well acknowledge it as characterised by tensions associated with constant pressures to simultaneously manage expectations from above and below" (Branson et al., 2016, p. 128). In a traditional sense, higher education organizational structure has been faculty led. More recently, higher education institutions has taken on a managerial organizational structure, hiring outside administrators and focusing on a hierarchical model (Szekeres, 2006). This structure lends itself to increased layers of professional staff management, and "a shift to a service culture" (Szekeres, 2011, p. 685). The change toward a corporate structure and concierge service-oriented system inevitably affected traditional higher education culture.

Differing views exist regarding the cultural shifts in higher education. One review of literature and case study pointed to the change as a natural societal progression (Tsai & Beverton, 2007). Others saw the transformation as a loss of diverse thinking and pressurized planning (Bassnet, 2005). The change in management affected hiring procedures as well. Rather than hiring from faculty ranks, many universities hired from outside the academy, paying higher salaries for often shorter stints of work (Bassnet, 2005). This shift toward increased hierarchical management stemmed from multi-faceted strategic plans, budget analysis, and quality control of teaching and learning (Smith & Hughey, 2006). However, as organizational structures shifted and administrator and middle management positions were

filled, a lack of management training and preparation for professional staff persisted (Graham, 2009).

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, researchers studied the transition to a managerialism culture in higher education institutions (Szerekes, 2004). "Managerialism refers to this increased importance of senior management staff (both academic and general) and decision-making processes that shift from collegiate to hierarchical" (p. 10). Change management has become more common with higher education institutions as they strategize ways to increase funding and effectiveness. Researchers continue to explore managerial-led frameworks versus academic leadership (Taylor, 2017). A study on human resource management in higher education found human resource professionals are increasingly becoming more business-like, often referring to themselves as business partners within the institution (Mansour, Heath, & Brannan, 2015). Participants in the study identified and supported an institutional "shift to a more managerial type role," although they acknowledged the continued need for academic freedom.

**Professional staff in higher education.** In her 2006 study, Szekeres interviewed administrative staff in three Australian universities to understand the marginalized voices of non-academic staff in higher education. The study focused on professional staff's daily work, their working relationships with academic staff, and how their work responsibilities changed over a period of 10 years with transitions in technology (i.e. e-mail) and managerialism in higher education (p. 135). She found administrative staff jobs were most affected by the corporatization of universities including "restructuring, downsizing, commercialisation, functional specialisation, and the increasing use of modern technologies" (p. 143). Szkeres

(2006) noted that although there were limited studies on administrative, non-academic staff at the time, their roles had become increasingly critical in the university structure.

Szekeres (2011) reviewed the literature to explore how life as non-academic professional staff had changed in the time between studies. She identified some shifts but noted the relationship between academics and non-academics remained contentious, and many non-academics still felt unseen or invisible within their work setting (p. 689). The "invisible worker" became a term synonymous with professional staff (Szekeres, 2004), observing that non-academic staff kept day-to-day operations running in an institution but often went unnoticed.

**Females in Higher Education.** In addition to understanding the culture of higher education, understanding roles of females, their perspectives, and their experiences in academe remained critical to this study. Female faculty struggled with isolation and lacked a sense of belonging in academic institutions (Neale & Özkanlı, 2010; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014). Numerous studies reported female faculty encountered barriers working in male-dominated fields in higher education (Maranto & Griffin, 2011; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Settles & O'Connor, 2014). Female administrators felt excluded from decision-making meetings due to being seen as less competent, intimidating, and bossy (Neale & Özkanlı, 2010; O'Connor & Goransson, 2015). Female professional staff felt undervalued (Szekeres, 2004, 2011), lacked mentoring (Jarmon, 2014), training (Graham, 2009, 2012), family-life balance (Hankinson, 2013; Jarmon, 2014; Mayo, 2014), and decision-making power (Davis & Graham, 2018; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014; Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014).

Studies showed a shortage of females in the upper management positions whose decisions guided the vision and direction of higher education institutions (Shain, 2000;

Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014). Less chance for upward mobility may cause female employees to seek out opportunities—often competing with one another—for a few positions and in an already male dominated arena.

   ***Females in Higher Education Management.*** Studies in higher education regularly highlighted the challenges, isolation (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Maranto & Griffin, 2011) and under-mentoring (Floyd, 2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016) of *academic* middle managers below deanship or provost level. Studies of non-academic professional staff were limited (Szekeres, 2011). I reviewed the literature to identify experiences of both academic staff and non-academic professional staff to understand the context of low to middle management in higher education under the assumption that academic and professional staff experiences overlap. A number of experiences were similar for both academic and professional staff including lack of mentoring (Floyd, 2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Jarmon, 2014), family-life balance (Hankinson, 2013; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Jarmon, 2014; Mayo, 2014; Neale & Özkanlı, 2010), and a lack of decision-making power (Davis & Graham, 2018; Pepper & Giles, 2015; Preston & Price, 2012; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014; Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014)

   ***Non-Academic Professional Staff.*** Initially, there appeared to be a notable deficit in studies of non-academic professional staff (Szekeres, 2006, 2011). However, a number of more recent studies about professional staff surfaced after a broader search of online databases including Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, Communication and Mass Media Complete, ERIC, Human Resources Abstracts, Professional Development Collection, and MasterFILE Premier. Females in professional staff positions remained an unseen group which had limited opportunities for upward mobility (Szekeres, 2011) and felt

undervalued in areas of salary, trust, and responsibilities (Ricketts & Pringle, 2014). In recent years, studies focused on specific themes related to professional development and training (Graham, 2012; Graham, 2009), the invisible worker (Szekeres, 2004, 2011), salaries (Jarmon, 2014; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014), and lack of decision-making power (Davis et al., 2016; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014; Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014). After reviewing this literature, I better understood experiences of female non-academic professional staff.

The literature revealed many values, needs, and challenges faced by female professional staff. Female professional staff valued flexibility, family life-work life balance (Hankinson, 2013; Jarmon, 2014; Mayo, 2014), and colleague support (Allee, 2015; Jarmon, 2014). Female professional staff provided higher education institutions skillsets in student services, soft management and leadership (Graham, 2010, 2012). However, they faced many challenges due to changes in institutional structure (Szekeres, 2004, 2006, 2011; White, Carvalho, & Riordan, 2011) and negative work environments (Allee, 2015), that included bullying and incivility (Mourssi-Alfash, 2014; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014; Simpson & Cohen, 2004), low salaries (Jarmon, 2014; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014), heavy workloads (Allee, 2015), and upward mobility restraints (Hankinson, 2013; Mayo, 2014). Upward mobility problems included hitting the glass ceiling (Jarmon, 2014) and facing the glass cliff (Hankinson, 2013). Other challenges entailed a lack of decision-making power within their positions (Davis & Graham, 2018; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014; Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014), and a lack of mentoring, networking, (Jarmon, 2014) and management training (Graham, 2009, 2012). Female professional staff lacked opportunities and guidance in relationship-building (Allee, 2015; Jarmon, 2014), professional development (Hankinson, 2013; Mayo, 2014), and leadership development (Little, 2016).

Simpson and Fitzgerald (2014) focused on various types of non-academic administrative positions females held at higher education institutions in Australia. Their findings showed although females make up the majority of professional staff positions in higher education, the majority of females held low to mid-level responsibilities. Middle management positions were fairly equally held by males and females; however, female salaries were lower even though they generally required more responsibilities. As females were promoted to leadership positions, their new positions regularly had fewer vision-minded responsibilities and focused on administrative and task-oriented duties. This concept was labeled the Glass Cliff. Paralleled with the popular concept of hitting the glass ceiling, the Glass Cliff described how females are appointed leadership positions during organizational strife, dissimilar to their male counterparts (Peterson, 2016). These leadership positions were then transformed, leaving the position, and the female staff, with less decision-making power after they entered the role (Peterson, 2016).

Ricketts and Pringle (2004) examined female professional staff perceptions of their career paths in New Zealand's higher education institutions. They discovered females continued to feel like "second class citizens" when compared to academic faculty. Although many acquired postgraduate degrees, a majority of female staff perceived their roles as stifled, with little opportunity for upward mobile career opportunities in university. This perception stemmed from low salaries, undervalued work by the institution, inflexible working hours, low decision-making power, and lack of relationship with upper management (Ricketts & Pringle, 2014; Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014).

*Academic Staff Middle Management*. A number of researchers studied the experiences of academic faculty in middle management. A recent study explored the lived

experiences of academic leaders, specifically chairs of departments, and described their lived

experience as "associated with feelings of discomfort and uncertainty, at best, but often with

tensions or stress caused by frustration, insecurity, and disappointment" (Branson et al.,

2016, p. 142). Their description of middle leadership connected the tension between meeting

the expectations demanded from top administrators while simultaneously connecting with

academic peers. They also found middle leadership to be relational in essence. The middle

leader's power and authority depended on developing influence through "trust, transparency,

and consistency" (Branson et al., 2016, p. 142).

Floyd (2016) interviewed chairs of departments (CODs) to identify institutional

support. Findings showed minimal guidance and training for new academic middle managers

and as the amount of administrative tasks increased, the perceived time to work on strategic-

based tasks decreased. Floyd (2016) also found CODs needed training based on institutional

values and the individual's needs.

Pepper and Giles (2015) studied the perceived leadership role of females at the

academic associate dean level. They found middle management roles overwhelming with

substantial responsibility and little decision-making power. The participants felt isolated as

they were consistently reacting to situations. The study also identified support structures

associate deans needed including networking, professional development, faculty support, and

being aware of the institution's mission and goals (Pepper & Giles, 2015).

Preston and Price (2012) explored the lived experiences of academic associate deans

in middle management. The findings showed associate deans often went into management to

have a greater influence on strategic planning but ended up focusing heavily on day-to-day

administrative tasks and issues that arose. There also appeared to be a lack of training by the institutions to prepare middle managers for their responsibilities (Preston & Price, 2012).

One study verified male employees hold the majority of upper administrative positions (Gatta & Roos, 2005). As females gradually entered into higher-level positions, their job titles became "gendered" (Simpson & Fitzgerald, 2014, p. 1937). In contrast, males in the same positions began diversifying their job titles to move away from being stigmatized with "clerical task" job responsibilities (Whitchurch, 2004, p. 282). As a result, females reported feeling the necessity to "adopt masculine qualities" to move toward promotion (Shain, 2000, p. 227).

Similarly, a study of two public universities in Ireland showed only one fifth of higher education leadership positions were held by females (O'Connor, 2015). The majority of females in these positions perceived their male colleagues were often uncomfortable with their presence and opinions. The female employees reported their perceptions of male colleagues' feelings toward them as being "awkward," "formidable," or "intimidating" (O'Connor, 2015, p. 312). In contrast, when men shared what they thought their colleagues thought of them, they shared no obvious concern. The men did not perceive differences in their colleagues' opinions of them (O'Connor, 2015, p. 314).

The majority of literature represented women as under-mentored with fewer networking opportunities for promotion compared to men (Neale & Özkanlı, 2010). Often due to there being a "boys club" in higher education, men were mentored from the start of their careers. They were provided networking opportunities, were more likely to apply for promotion sooner, and were not held to the same responsibilities of nurturing students and doing excessive clerical work (Mukherjee & Kearney, 1993; O'Connor, 1996; Shain, 2000).

In addition to these disadvantages, females faced barriers including clerical task overload, a lack of support from administration or colleagues, perfectionism (Shain, 2000; Tessens et al., 2011), lower confidence, few opportunities for promotion (Ricketts & Pringle, 2014), and a lack of realistic work-life balance (Mukherjee & Kearney, 1993). These obstacles were in addition to sustaining quality teaching and an on-going research agenda (Tessens et al., 2011).

**Adverse Interpersonal Experiences**

Studies about workplace interpersonal dynamics found a spectrum of negative interpersonal interactions including incivility, bullying, mobbing, harassment, and aggression. Researchers frequently interchanged these terms (Nielsen, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2017). Some researchers grouped these adverse behaviors within overarching terms such as antisocial behaviors (Powell, 2012; Schilpzand, Leavitt, & Lim, 2016) or workplace harassment (Nielsen et al., 2017). Sometimes the behaviors distinguished between intentional and unintentional behaviors and other times differentiated by physical, psychological or emotional aggression. In this study, the term "adverse interpersonal experiences" encompasses the spectrum of incivility, bullying, aggression, or harassment perceived as intentional or unintentional by participants in the higher education workplace.

**Workplace Incivility.** Andersson and Pearson (1999) defined workplace incivility as "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others" (p. 457). They found "antisocial behavior" harmed an organization or individuals in the organization. Within antisocial behavior laid deviant behavior, violence, aggression, and incivility (see Figure 2.2).

**Antisocial** — Behavior that harms organization
**behavior**     and/or members

**Deviant** — Antisocial behavior that violates
**behavior**    norms

**Violence** — High-intensity, physically
                aggressive behavior

**Aggression** — Deviant behavior with
               intent to harm

**Incivility** — Low-intensity deviant behavior with
             ambiguous intent to harm
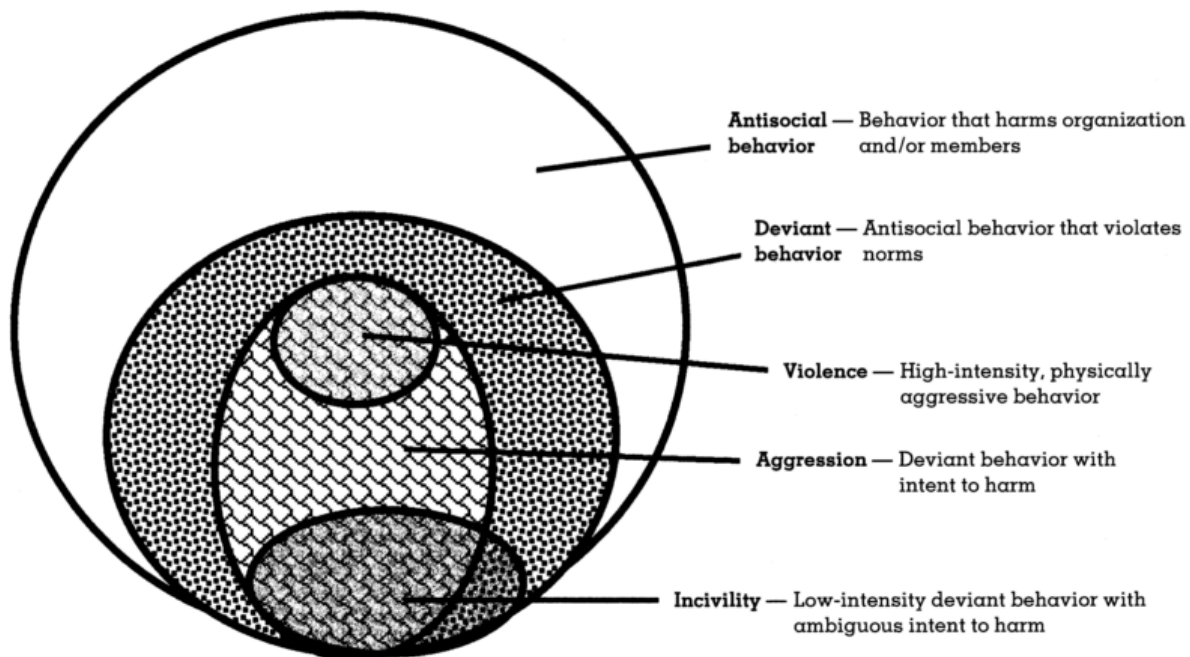
Figure 2.2 *Incivility and Other Forms of Mistreatment in Organizations*

In most studies, incivility was on the calmer end of adverse interpersonal experiences spectrum, but still disrupted polite and courteous work environments. Unlike aggression, acts of incivility—negative side remarks, talking down to others, not picking up after oneself— may not be intentional (Pearson et al., 2000). Pearson et al. (2000) defined incivility as "mistreatment that may lead to disconnection, breach of relationships, and erosion of empathy. Within the work context, incivility entails the violation of workplace norms for mutual respect, such that cooperation and motivation may be hindered broadly" (p. 125).

Often incivility and bullying were used interchangeably or were studied simultaneously. For example, Freedman and Vreven (2016) offered a conceptual framework for workplace incivility and bullying in a university library setting. They explored how institutional structure and precipitating circumstances without belonging and clear bullying policies, uncertainty of personnel roles, tension between employees and hierarchy, and employment status resulted in uncivil and bullying behavior (p. 731). Individuals did not

readily report incidents of incivility to their supervisors or individuals with authority until the incidents increased in frequency and took on characteristics of bullying (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

**Workplace Bullying.** Bullying has been commonly studied in both the general workplace and in higher education. Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2011) defined bullying at work as:

harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work. In order for the label 'bullying' (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction, or process, the bullying behavior must occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). (p. 22)

Bullying behavior manifests through gossip, rumors, intimidation, and harassment (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 1999). On the spectrum of adverse interpersonal interactions, bullying lands between incivility and abusive behavior. Studies showed incivility and bullying in the workplace includes harassment and intimidation (Davenport et al., 1999; Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006) and can result in mental and physical health issues (Ståle Einarsen & Nielsen, 2014), as well as feelings of shame (Connolly, 1995; Heflin, 2015).

**Workplace Bullying in Higher Education.** Research showed bullying behavior is pervasive in higher education institutions (Hollis, 2015). Hollis' (2015) study found 62 percent of female faculty and administrators experienced bullying in an academic setting. Bullying in academia is "systematic long-term interpersonal aggressive behavior" (Sedivy-Benton, Strohschen, Cavazos, & Boden-McGill, 2015, p. 36), and perpetrators most often

targeted individuals who held less formal authority, less power, and identified as a threat (Frazier, 2011; Raskauskas & Skrabec, 2011).

Bullying can lead to negative health and wellness in employees (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006; Qureshi, Rasli, & Zaman, 2014). In some cases, leaders created psychologically unsafe workplace cultures where employees felt at risk to report cases of bullying or incivility (Cleary, Walter, Andrew, and Jackson, 2013; Collinson, 2012; Jackson et al., 2007). Another study revealed higher education institutions did not consistently or proactively respond to bullying (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Bullying in the higher education workplace related directly to negative emotional, physical, and mental health issues including heart problems, depression, and shame (Cleary, Walter, Andrew, & Jackson, 2013; Lewis, 2004).

When workplace bullying occurred, employees experienced shame and then hid this experience from their supervisors (Lewis, 2004). Further, shame experiences tied to workplace bullying hindered professional growth in employees (Sedivy-Benton et al., 2015). Shame is a feeling that deeply affects an individual's well-being (Brown, 2006). In contrast to feeling guilty, where one feels remorse and seeks reconciliation, shame resulted in a feeling of wanting to run away and hide (Lewis, 1971). The more an individual hides her shame the stronger the feeling becomes (Brown, 2007) and begins to take a toll on emotional, physical, and mental health (Brown, 2012; Connolly, 1995; Heflin, 2015). The negative effects of shame on employees connected to higher cases of sick leave, workers compensation, and slower production and results (Anda et al., 2004).

In a phenomenological study of female faculty in higher education, Sedivy-Benton et al. (2015) identified several elements related to bullying behavior in academia including

positionality, accountability/leadership, differences, jealousy, clandestine decision-making, and blaming the victim (p. 37). These themes interfered with the victim's professional growth and collaboration, and often pressed the participants into seeking support and moving their attention outside of their department and career (p. 40). The study illuminated the "prevailing culture of silence and little institutional support for the prevention and intervention of bullying" (p.40).

Similarly, Cowan (2011) brought to light how employees are not always aware of anti-bullying policies even when the policy is in writing. Bullying policies are not always protected by harassment policies and offer little to no protection to victims of bullying. Further, a lack of explicit definitions of bullying added to ambiguous policies. One problem was lack of transparent anti-bullying policies, training for employees identifying and responding to reports of bullying (Cowan, 2012). On the occasion anti-bullying and incivility policies in higher education existed, employees still lacked protection when bullying behaviors in the workplace were reported (Cowan, 2011).

**Relational Aggression.** Studies of relational aggression portrayed females using shame, secrecy, bullying, and manipulation to gain power (Chesler, 2001; Brock, 2008; Mavin et al., 2014). Studies on the "Queen Bee" syndrome (Staines, Tavris, & Jayaratne, 1974), a term synonymous with bullying behavior between females, recurred in organizational research; however, only a handful of studies of female professional staff bullying, showing incivility, and aggression emerged in the higher education literature. Most studies related to the general workplace, academic staff and faculty, or students. Aggression was the underlying issue where "an undercurrent of competition, which, in the workplace,

can result in covert forms of aggression between women, such as undermining, manipulation, betrayal and an underlying struggle for power" (Hurst, Leberman, & Edwards, 2016, p. 66).

Cummins (2012) explored barriers constructed by females, against females in career advancement opportunities at the academic level. She suggested the absence of an "old girls club" and with misogyny reigning in higher education, females continued to struggle with advancement in higher education settings. Females faced challenges climbing the employment ladder, negotiating power, and professional growth alongside other females in the workplace. Cummins discovered adversity and prevention for helping females grow in the workplace were often "un-discussable" topics and frequently ignored. She advocated that females need to learn to help each other and challenged leaders "to build trust, show compassion, provide stability, and create hope if women are to advance in ways that circumvent the socio-structural workplace dynamics in academe" (Cummins, 2012, p. 87).

In a related study, Roebuck, Smith, and El Haddaoui (2013) examined work-life balance and its effects on female leadership opportunities across generations. In contrast to Cummins' (2012) findings, one of the major components Roebuck, Smith, and El Haddaoui (2013) focused on was the willingness of females to help other females in the workplace and changes that took place across generations. Their results demonstrated a positive shift toward the willingness for females to help other females. Younger generations showed greater approval of females helping each other in the workplace than that of older generations, who more frequently reported negative experiences with female colleagues.

## Summary

With changing leadership and management structures in higher education, female professional staff responsibilities and expectations are constantly changing. These changes

may result in overloaded work schedules, lack of management training, and limited mentoring. Professional staff from low to middle management often feel a lack of control over decision-making power and, from these limitations, adverse interpersonal experiences arise. Incivility, bullying, and harassment represent a common phenomenon in higher education. Researchers have studied the victimization and abusive control within higher education climates. A gap in the research showed a lack of studies on female professional staff's experiences with adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education. Further, as a majority of professional staff and middle management studies originate in Australia, New Zealand, or Europe, and bullying literature occurs most commonly in European countries, there appears to be a gap in studies of women's experiences in higher education low to middle management in the United States.

## Pilot Study

Doctoral students commonly use pilot studies as preliminary exams to practice the skill and art of research. Sampson (2004) emphasized numerous benefits of pilot studies including testing research methods and protocols, identifying participants, better understanding the research context, and detecting complications in the process. She accentuated when implementing a pilot study to not stop after data collection and assessing interview questions, but rather to utilize and analyze the data arduously. She wrote, "It is only on a proper interrogation of the findings via systematic coding and analysis of data that a pilot really begins to yield dividends" (Sampson, 2004, p. 399). Similarly, Kim's (2010) phenomenological pilot study emphasized key learning in preparation for a dissertation. She discussed the importance of reflexive journaling throughout the process, debriefing data

analysis with peer researchers, understanding the self as a co-researcher, and approaching participants with cultural understanding (Kim, 2010).

A colleague and I completed a pilot study in 2017 to test my methods, practice my methodology (Seidman, 2013), and identify preliminary themes related to the phenomenon of incivility and middle management in higher education. We focused on the lived experience of incivility by females in higher education middle management. After reviewing the literature, we discovered few studies focused on the experiences of professional staff, incivility and bullying in higher education.

## CHAPTER 3: Methodology

Changing the definition of normal experience to account for women's experience is

one of the radical endeavors of feminist phenomenology. We need more feminist

phenomenology because the experience of the "Other" – which is, in fact, most

women's experience – has not been told enough, and the concept of "normal

experience" (that on offer by classical phenomenology and the natural attitude) has

not been challenged enough; "normal experience" must be rethought and rewritten.

(Shabot & Landry, 2018, p. 5)

### Research Design

I applied feminist post-intentional phenomenology to understand the *lived*

*experiences* of a phenomenon and its interconnection to a specific population. Vagle (2016)

described *intentionality* as "the way in which humans are connected meaningfully with the

world" and introduced the perspective of "*posting*" intentionality, which signifies no

beginning or end—a continuous, ever-fluctuating, changing construct as the subject is being

both "the agent and acted upon" (p. 113). *Feminist* research, and in this case feminist

phenomenology, offered a process for "uncovering and redressing oppression and unequal

treatment of women" (Mathison, 2014, p. 52). One construct that tied phenomenology and

feminist research together well was reflexivity, stepping back from the data to notice and

acknowledge bias. Reflexivity required me to reflect on my assumptions of and experiences

with the phenomenon. Reflexivity is a requisite for feminist standpoint research which stems

from a reflexive, social constructivist epistemology, declaring that females are the prime

population to be sharing and reflecting on the lived experiences of females (Mathison, 2014).

In post-intentional phenomenology, *post*-reflexivity is essential to not only bridle, but also "doggedly question" biases of the phenomenon.

**Phenomenology Overview**

> Phenomenological research is phenomenological when it involves both rich description of the lifeworld or lived experience, and where the researcher has adopted a special, open phenomenological attitude which, at least initially, refrains from importing external frameworks and sets aside judgements about the realness of the phenomenon. (Finlay, 2009b, p. 8)

I chose to use phenomenology as my research methodology, not because it was the most straightforward, but because it best captured the essence of my research questions. My goal was to understand the lived experience of a specific phenomenon, adverse interpersonal experiences, by a specific population, higher education female professional staff. I wanted to look beyond my own experiences and preconceptions of this phenomenon and hear from other female professional staff in higher education. I created Figure 3.1 to orient myself with the various phenomenological perspectives.
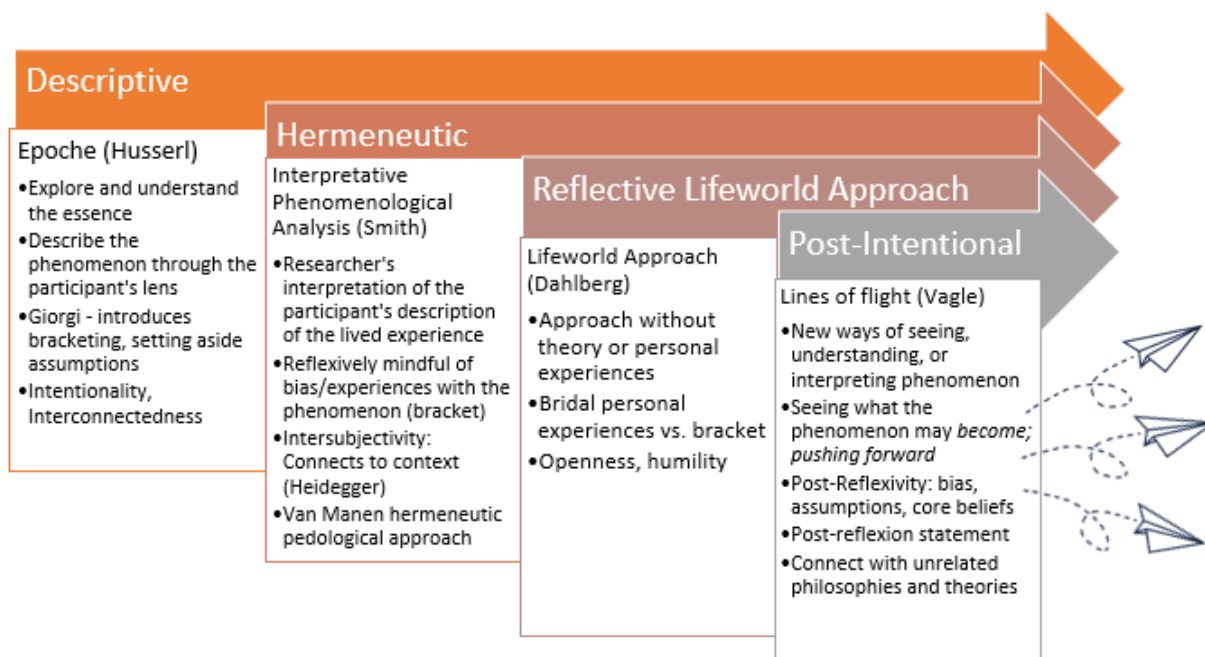
Figure 3.1 *Phenomenological Perspectives*

Phenomenology is founded in exploring the lived experiences of a common phenomenon. Phenomenologists describe, explore, and interpret lived experiences through varied perspectives that have expanded over time. Founding phenomenological philosophies are most commonly organized in two categories: descriptive and hermeneutic (Finlay, 2009c). Framed by Husserlian philosophy, descriptive phenomenology aims to explore and understand the essence of a lived experience. Husserl's (1964) philosophical perspective came from the idea that the individual must separate from self, or the ego, to be open to the meaning and description, the essence, of a specific phenomenon. Husserl wrote:

The epoché can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely: as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for me and is precisely as it is for me. Anything belonging to the world, any spatiotemporal being, exists for me – that is to

say, is accepted by me – in that I experience I, perceive it, remember it, think of it

somehow, judge about it, value it, desire it, or the like. (Husserl, 1964, p. 21)

The researcher uses epoché to separate or bracket his or her experiences, perceptions,

remembrances, and judgements to describe the phenomenon through the lens of a participant.

Husserl further examined human experience through *intentionality* – a concept

threaded through all phenomenological perspectives. Intentionality does not stem from a

western idea of being deliberate, but rather draws from an interconnectedness of humanity. It

is understanding how we connect with a common phenomenon and then exploring how this

phenomenon connects us to each other as humans (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Heidegger moved away from abstract, Husserlian philosophy toward a "worldly,"

"intersubjective" perspective (Smith et al., 2009). *Intersubjectivity* and *worldliness* bring to

phenomenology the idea that we are connected to our context and our experiences cannot be

removed from the context.

Giorgi (1997) reinvigorated the descriptive approach by developing a specific method

of analysis modeled after a number of phenomenological methodologies. His system involves

bracketing assumptions, describing the phenomenon, and identifying the essence across

multiple lived experiences. To bracket assumptions, researchers must identify and set aside

their personal biases of and experiences with the phenomenon. According to Giorgi,

bracketing should be used during the analysis stage, rather than during data gathering, in

order to stay present-minded (Dowling, 2007).

Hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, such as Interpretative Phenomenological

Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), The Lifeworld Approach (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystrom, 2001),

and the lived experience approach (van Manen, 2007); focus on the researcher's

interpretation of a participant's elucidation of the lived experience (Finlay, 2009c). Differing from descriptive phenomenology, the researcher does not bracket assumptions, but rather becomes reflexively mindful throughout the process, frequently returning to and being critically aware of her experiences with the phenomenon.

Along the same continuum as hermeneutic phenomenology, reflective lifeworld phenomenology emphasized how participants experience a phenomenon within the context of their world (Dahlberg et al., 2001). Lifeworld phenomenology follows five concepts: openness, immediacy, intersubjectivity, meaning, and uniqueness. Central to these concepts is openness. Dahlberg et al. (2001) emphasized the researcher must approach the phenomenon with a clean slate, devoid of theoretical frameworks or personal perspective. They stated "openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see, and understand. It involves respect and certain humility toward the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility" (Dahlberg et al., 2001, p. 97). These phenomenologists emphasized the idea of reflecting on our assumptions and biases. Dahlberg (Dahlberg et al., 2008) modified the reflexive process of bracketing assumptions and offered an alternative term and approach called "bridling" (as cited in Vagle, 2016). Bracketing involves accessing prior experiences and assumptions of the phenomenon and setting them aside as to not bias or inform analysis and interpretation. Instead, bridling acknowledges previous experiences of the phenomenon and uses those experiences to steady the balance between empathizing with participants and approaching participant experiences from a distance (Finlay, 2014). Finlay (2014) explained, "Researchers need to hold a tension between their past and present experiences to determine differences" (p. 124).

**Post-Intentional Phenomenology**. More recently, Vagel (2016) introduced post-intentional phenomenology. He emphasized the "post" in post-intentional is not to move away from the core of phenomenological philosophies and methodologies, but rather to be open to new possibilities and ways of understanding a phenomenon. Vagle and Hofsess (2016) borrowed and enhanced the concept "lines of flight" from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987), phenomenological philosophers who introduced the concept. Lines of flight are new ways of seeing, understanding, or interpreting a phenomenon—an avenue to discover something new about the phenomenon no matter how vibrant or modest it might be. Vagle (2016) wrote, "In old phenomenology, the goal was to determine the essential structure a phenomenon 'has.' In post-intentional phenomenology the goal is to see what the phenomenon might become" (p. 119).

Reflexivity is crucial to post-intentional phenomenology. To best remain aware of assumptions and bridle experiences, Vagle (2016) offered four major areas that shade the analytical lens:

1. Moments when we instinctively **connect** with what we observe and moments in which we instinctively **disconnect**.

2. Our **assumptions of normality**.

3. Our **bottom lines**, that is those beliefs, perceptions, perspectives, opinions that we refuse to shed; and

4. Moments in which we are **shocked** by what we observe. ( p. 132)

To be reflexive, Vagle (2016) recommended writing an initial post-reflexion statement when preparing for a research project. Using the four assumptions to be cognizant of data gathering brought awareness to my reflexivity during my study. Recognizing my assumptions opened

me up to new knowledge and new understanding of the phenomenon. In post-intentional phenomenology methods, recognizing my responses to what I heard from the participants and read in narratives, I acknowledged fluidity of the phenomenon. With this awareness, I embraced intentionality (interconnectedness) *through* the way our experiences and perceptions of a phenomenon change in varying life circumstances and contexts. This reflexivity ensured "the crafted text [does not] become an autobiographical account in its entirety" (Vagle, 2016, p. 132). By bridling assumptions and reflexively responding to my reactions, I reached a clearer understanding of participants' experiences of the phenomenon within the context of *their* lifeworld.

Finally, Vagel (2016) introduced post-intentional phenomenology as a way to open up this methodology and philosophy to follow new lines of flight, new ways of understanding a particular phenomenon, and to connect with unrelated philosophies and theories, some of which may address political, social, and gender issues. Phenomenology has traditionally remained apolitical, staying within the boundaries of description and understanding. Researchers customarily refrain from applying a theoretical framework too broadly and limit in-depth literature reviews to approach data gathering and analysis more clearly. Post-intentional phenomenology challenges the status quo by promoting linking with other theories and methodologies. Founded in deep-rooted phenomenological elements of intentionality and reflexivity, post-intentional phenomenology drives the methodology and philosophy forward  where "the goal is to see what the phenomenon might become" (Vagle, 2016, p. 119).

Regardless the approach, the heart of phenomenology is to understand the *lived experience of the phenomenon* over the participant's individual experience (Finlay, 2014, p.

129). Vagle specified "…one is not studying individual participants or the objects of their experience. Rather, one is studying one's participants' intentional relationship with the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 129). The researcher must remain critically aware of his or her own biases of the phenomenon (Finlay, 2014) by acknowledging experiences, opinions, feelings, and observations of the phenomenon before collecting data. During data collection, researchers "need to hold a tension between their past and present experiences to determine differences" (Finlay, 2014, p. 124). The researcher must be reflexively mindful, critically self-aware, before and during a research study. To "allow the phenomenon to emerge" (Finlay, 2014, p. 129),  the researcher must put aside judgment and offer present moment awareness—winging on a pendulum between empathy and disconnection from the phenomenon.

**Feminist Phenomenology.** I approached my research not only from a *post-intentional* phenomenologist methodology, but also with a *feminist* phenomenological perspective. I not only wanted to understand the interconnection of *adverse interpersonal experiences of professional staff* in higher education, but I also wanted to explore the lived experience *from and through a female perspective*. My approach stemmed from an interest in personal stories of females working in higher education.

Having worked in a predominately-female field of study, my management style has grown from the voices, perceptions, and experiences of female colleagues, supervisors, and employees. Through the feminist lens within a historically patriarchal climate, I was curious as to the political, social, and gender issues surrounding workplace aggression for female professional staff working in low to middle management. I explored these perspectives through written narratives and one-on-one interviews to learn individual stories of each

female professional staff. Through a feminist phenomenological methodology, my goal was to understand the experience of professional staff in low- to middle- management in higher education.

When studying the lived experiences of female professional staff, it was essential to acknowledge their stories through a feminist lens. Aligned with post-intentional phenomenological approach, the researcher must acknowledge the power relationship between herself and the participant (Oakley, 1981). Fisher (2010) argued that the female voice has rarely been heard in western phenomenology and only recently have feminist theorists recognized phenomenology in their work. Fisher (2010) brought to light how the phenomenological voice is frequently "louder" than the feminist voice in feminist phenomenological research. She stated these two methodologies need to speak as one and feminist phenomenology needs to advance toward social, gender, and political issues. Oksala (2016) even proposed that "phenomenology can provide a fruitful theoretical and methodological framework for feminist philosophy, but only if it is radically modified to the extent that it might no longer be recognized as phenomenology" (as cited in Shabot & Landry, 2018, p. 17). Although my study did not go beyond phenomenological recognition, I found feminist phenomenology aligned with Vagel's (2016) post-intentional phenomenological because I was looking for new ways of knowing a phenomenon: through the eyes of female professional staff. Fisher (2010) concluded that in bringing phenomenology and feminism together equally, a researcher must capture the present moment lived experience to help with understanding the phenomena, while simultaneously "recalling the lived context" of the social and political climate.

Feminist scholar Sullivan (2000) believed some types of phenomenology are beneficial to a feminist perspective, but not all. Specifically, Sullivan (2000) considered the aspect of projected intentionality in some forms of phenomenology to be too one-directional. From a feminist perspective, the voice, perspective, and interpretation of a lived experience by the participant is equally important to the researcher's interpretation. In feminist phenomenology, the participant's role must be co-researcher (Sullivan, 2000). Sullivan's (2000) account of feminist phenomenology aligns well with post-intentional phenomenology, which stems from a double-hermeneutic attitude toward intentionality and interpreting lived experiences. "The researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of *x*" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). However, "posting" intentionality also signals a new era of making connections with other theories and ways of researching in that it offers an opportunity to hear the voices of women through a feminist *and* phenomenological lens (Vagle, 2016).

My goal was to find a sense of balance between the two methodological approaches. Applying both phenomenological and feminist lenses, I explored stories told by individuals as one part—one perspective—of the whole story. Likened to bifocals, I strived to analyze and interpret female professional staff's stories as living and fluid phenomenological experiences, subject to change with new life experiences. Conjointly, I listened for the distinct voice of each participant to understand their stories as unique and monumental in their higher education journey. Learning the stories of female professional staff working in the midst of low- to middle- management was unique and significant to this study.

**Researcher as Instrument.** The researcher acts as the instrument (Stewart, 2011) in qualitative research and as such, I brought assumptions, biases, and preconceptions to my

phenomenological study (Vagle, 2016). As a female professional staff in middle

management, I wanted to learn experiences of other female professional staff working in

higher education. This curiosity affected my choice of the model participant. I was curious if

other females experienced and/or witnessed bullying. If so, how did they move through these

experiences? Did anyone help them? Did anyone notice their pain? From my own experience

as a middle manager and female professional staff, well-being of my employees and

colleagues is critically important. I believe in vulnerability-based trust, where the leader must

model sensible risk-taking before she can expect her team to do the same. When a leader

goes first, opening herself up to critique and feedback, it sends the message that employees

are safe to take risks as well. Therefore, my data analysis was filtered through my beliefs and

experiences. I focused on supervisor responses toward the participants' reports of bullying

and incivility. I remained keenly aware of possible missteps or misdirection given the

participants by those with authoritative power. I noticed language-ing participants used to

portray not feeling safe in their jobs or working creatively. Themes related to supervisors'

and institutional representative responses appeared on my radar when analyzing the data.

Along with using shame resilience theory as a theoretical framework, my lens also

included my personal experiences with shame and resilience. Using shame resilience theory

to analyze my data brought up my current and past experiences of shame. I faced

vulnerabilities and shame triggers—"You're not smart enough," "You're not academic

enough," "You're not a good enough writer," and "You're too much a novice." I practiced

critical awareness of my context—reflecting on my role as a doctoral student while

developing my research repertoire. I remained cognizant of reaching out to individuals I

trusted to speak my shame and vulnerabilities. My personal experience with shame

inextricably shaped my perspective and data analysis. Through this personal and theoretical lens, I noticed themes when participants were ignored, not listened to, and avoided. Their experiences mirrored my shame triggers of not being enough, not being heard, or not being listened to. Acknowledging my personal experiences with shame influenced the data analysis.

My feelings and experiences of shame and vulnerability directly connected to the feminist phenomenological lens I used as a methodological approach. My everyday lived experience in higher education is through a female lens. Working in higher education as a young, female professional staff, I have frequently been mistaken as an undergraduate student. One time, I was mistaken as my boss's child, receiving a gentle pat on the head from an older international male. That story starts stepping into cultural differences, but it demonstrates an attitude toward females based on general social assumptions about what professional staff and leaders look like. In my work on committees and major initiatives, I notice when my voice is recognized and heard versus when it is talked over and dismissed. I notice male voices are listened to immediately and held with high regard, while female voices are easily interrupted, or flat out ignored. At times I recognize myself falling into the cringe worthy trap of attending to the male voice, while quickly rushing by a female colleague's story. This automaticity concerns me: female voices easily become background noise; easily interrupted; and quickly dismissed.

It was important to me as a feminist research to actively listen to the female voice, acknowledge, and understand the female experience in higher education without interruption. Too few stories and studies focus on female professional staff's lived experience keeping their voices silenced, disregarded, and dismissed. Consequently, higher education institutions

fail to gain an essential perspective from actively listening to the female voice and learning from her experience. I wanted my study to make a difference, even if that just meant illuminating stories of female professional staff. If other women could hear their stories, they would know they are not the only ones. Stories of workplace aggression could add to the academic #MeToo movement as a bright light shining in the dark, secretive corners of higher education where staff, supervisors and institutional representatives uncomfortably ignore the obvious aggression against their female colleagues and employees. In these workplaces most individuals know there is a problem, but too few intervene. Regardless of the themes and categories in my findings, my hope is to start a conversation acknowledging workplace aggression and take practical steps toward solutions. My hope in starting and moving through my study is that some day in the future the response to "I study workplace aggression and shame in higher education" will no longer be "Oh, bullying? I've experienced that in higher education. *You get used to it*." I want stories of bullying and abuse to inspire change that betters the future for female professional staff working in higher education. My perspective, practical hopes and questions informed my data gathering approach in listening to female professional staff voices, and in my data analysis. I needed to start by hearing about lived experience of adverse interpersonal experiences for female professional staff in order to learn if/how they moved through the experiences.

To best listen to and understand the female lived experience in higher education, I used semi-structured interviews. Stemming from the feminist lens, I built rapport and offered a space for participants to participate as co-researchers. Although the power differential between me as the interviewer and the participant as the informer is not perfectly neutral, I used various strategies to create a safe place for self-disclosure (Mallozzi, 2009). In the first

interviews I shared my educational and professional background, along with why I was interested in the topic. I shared first to model vulnerability and openness with my co-researcher participants. I also stated in the informed consent that although few risks were expected, participants would be asked about personal experiences that they might not be comfortable sharing. They could stop the interview, stop participating, or refrain from responding to questions at any time.

**Post-Reflexive Journaling**. I used bridling tactics to reflect on and recognize my assumptions and biases, and acknowledged when my perspectives connected or disconnected with the participant's interpretation of their experiences (Vagle & Hofsess, 2016). I kept a post-reflexive journal throughout my research to bridle assumptions and capture my personal experiences through my doctoral journey.

*Reflexivity.* Post-reflexive journaling gave me space to reflect on the data and connect with the participant's experiences (see Appendix J). I wrote questions or noted my thoughts in the margins of my bound secondary data. Sometimes my thoughts stayed written in ink, never developing into themes, while other times my notes would connect and develop into a tentative manifestation. For example, I noticed and highlighted language related to participants wanting to be seen such as "I see you, I acknowledge you." I continued to notice this type of description emerging which turned into a theme related to feeling unseen and unheard.

Another example of reflexive journaling, I empathized with a participant. The participant wrote "…I had no desire to paint him [supervisor]as the ineffectual manager I now think he likely is in front of HR. "Likely" – how interesting that I can't just see him as what he is and accept that he let Greta unfurl herself on me for 1.5 years before doing

anything." The participant described the challenge in realizing her supervisor did not take action or support her for over a year. Below this quote I scribbled "Katie's thoughts: I find myself doing the same thing. I don't want to speak poorly of a supervisor, but often their actions don't support me or my employees. Blind loyalty? Fear?" I connected to my participant's struggle to criticize or question her supervisor's authority. This type of bridling helped me analyze the data and the emerging themes. Bridling made me aware of how my personal value of loyalty affects my lens as the research instrument. I started noticing the courage it took participants to speak their shame and reach out to their institutional representatives for support.

In another section of my bound data, I related the experiences to the 1980's film *The Neverending Story,* an influential film in my life. In the film, a young boy hiding from his bullies enters a fantastical world through a dusty, old book. In the book, a great Nothing, a dark, black emptiness is destroying the land and all the creatures within it, and the only way to stop The Nothing was to believe he was a part of the story and give the princess a name. It was similar to what I found in my data. The participants experienced a great Nothing that was destroying their psychological safety, and no one was helping them. No one believed their stories enough to take action, call it by its name, or help stop the destruction. Although this metaphor did not make it into my manuscripts, the theme of not feeling believed did. Participants expressed just wanting to be believed. One participant shared, "…so I wait until I'm completely weary and then nothing happens and I just then grow despondent. 'Cause now, not only have I asked for help, the help's not coming." In my reflexive notes I wrote "The Nothing – Neverending Story – The nothing grew because no one did anything – no hope".

***Researcher's lived experience of workplace aggression.*** My lived experiences as a witness to incivility, bullying, and shame in higher education drew me to this topic and informed my research. I was both curious about and frustrated with how administrators handled bullying reports from their employees. As I delved into literature review and data gathering, I felt affirmed I was not the only one seeing bullying in the workplace. I received over 120 responses from female professional staff who shared stories of witnessing or experiencing bullying in the workplace in higher education, which affirmed my interest in pursuing research on this phenomenon.

As I listened to my participant's stories, at times I felt challenged to hold back shock or surprise. I connected with elements of each participant's account. I wanted to build rapport and relate to the participants, but I also needed to limit my immediate reactions through balancing and bridling. As a manager, their accounts led me to question my responses to reports of bullying from employees and colleagues. In particular, hearing how one participant's supervisor immediately fought to protect her led to this journal reflection: "This is what I didn't do. I didn't fight enough. Why did I hesitate? Was it fear? Perhaps fear of additional retaliation? Was I assuming there would be a lack of upper administrative support? Would raising an alert backfire?" [personal account]. My research into this topic forced me to face my own past mistakes in how I responded to reports of bullying.

As I gathered and analyzed data for this study, I continually asked myself, "how was the participant's experience different from my own?" It was essential to consistently bridle my personal experiences, beliefs, and reactions with those of the participants and as I did, I noted my responses and kept in mind how the phenomenon of adverse interpersonal experiences created new lines of flight, or ways of thinking, about the phenomenon. During

data analysis I sought to keep an open mind for what the phenomenon might become. I wrote, "…when reflecting on possible lines of flight in the data I've analyzed, I thought up the following trends/questions/points that stood out to me" [personal account].

*Preliminary lines-of-flight post-reflexive journal excerpts.* The following excerpt from my post-reflexive journal connected to my experiences and opened new ways of thinking about the phenomenon. It provides an inside look at my bridling and preliminary themes:

*Preliminary lines-of-flight #1.* "Lack of formal authority or authentic power"—One participant felt she did not have the formal authority or "authentic power to call someone out" and report them. She had formally been a colleague of the bully, but the bully was now her boss's counterpart. She explained she didn't want to put her boss in a weird position by bringing the situation to him. She also didn't feel she had the power to call him out directly. This led me to ask myself (inwardly): what is enough formal authority or authentic power to speak up? At what point does someone have the authority to call another out on their behavior? At what point can they report the person to human resources or to their boss and know that the situation will be investigated? What prevents people from reporting or calling out bullies?

This made me think of my own experience as a manager. A number of female colleagues, at different times, bullied multiple colleagues and employees of mine. I reported the issues to my boss, but reflecting on my response, I could have done much more. I could have been direct and called the aggressors out. I could have gone to human resources when my boss did nothing. In the end, I believe this bullying situation caused some PTSD for my employees. It has affected the way they respond

in situations – much less trusting of others, and more protective of themselves and our team. Why didn't I act more forcefully? Why didn't I step up and report the problem to human resources? What was I waiting for? What was I afraid of? I think much of the time I was hoping it would just blow over and stop. This is the same way one of the participants felt – she kept waiting for it to just get better, and it never did.

*Preliminary lines-of-flight #2.* "It will get better"—the previous possible line of flight leads to this next one. One participant in particular just kept waiting for the situation to get better. She couldn't believe that the incivility, bullying, and abusive (her words) behavior could continue. At times, her bully would be friendly and she felt like things were turning a corner, and then it would get bad again.

This led me to question: How do employees identify when to reach out? At what point should someone reach out for help? Report the situation? When is the situation "bad" enough? In some cases, participants *did* report the issue and human resources couldn't do anything because there was no hard evidence. One participant reported the issue as age discrimination—there is no protection for young people, just those near retirement. If she had complained about gender discrimination, which later she reflected and realized it had been, then human resources could have investigated.

*Preliminary lines-of-flight #3. "*Proof"—This again leads to the issue of evidence. What is evidence? What is "good enough" evidence to call someone out? Must evidence and documentation be in writing? Recorded? Physical evidence? A number of the participants couldn't "prove" bullying because it was so covert. It was behind doors, in undertones, or the bullies had cronies who would not speak up for the target. One participant complained to human resources and the human resources

representative was able to listen, console, provide tissues, but not actually help in a tangible way to call out the bully. There wasn't any hard evidence. [personal account]

Post-reflexive journaling and bridling allowed me to check my biases, remain open to new ways of thinking about the phenomenon, and listen to the voices of my participants throughout my research. As I connected with parts of their stories and at times felt surprised or taken off guard, I continued to bridle my judgments by remaining curious and open-minded in my questions.

*Researcher's lived experience with shame and shame resilience.* My doctoral journey required me to face my personal encounters with shame, particularly with my use of shame resilience theory as my theoretical framework. I found it impossible to avoid reflecting on and feeling constructs of shame and resilience as I analyzed and interpreted data. At times, feelings of shame flooded my thoughts and beliefs regarding my role as a novice researcher. To practice shame resilience, I wrote these thoughts down to acknowledge and critically think about my shame triggers. In one journal entry I wrote: "I feel like I might be making this all up. I feel alone in the mess" [personal account]. I felt isolated and as though I were an imposter. I reached out to friends and family—individuals I trusted and knew would empathize with me and help me not feel alone in the process—to work through these shame triggers. In response, I usually received more than a quick text back or an emoji. My major professor, friends, and family reached out to meet in person or FaceTime. I discovered the practice of shame resilience as a researcher and instrument of my study gave me added empathy and increased awareness of my biases, as well as the same courage my participants displayed as they shared their stories.

As my participants modeled vulnerability, I found it helpful to overtly empathize and mirror their vulnerability. One participant at the conclusion of our final interview asked about my experiences with bullying. Below is an excerpt from that exchange:

Participant: Well, I'm actually coming back at you…what was triggering for you? What did you identify with? Now, I'm curious.

Researcher: What's been triggered for me the most is I'm a supervisor and I've had employees who have been bullied. So what's triggered the most for me is reflecting on how I responded and how I could have responded better.

Participant: Ah.

Researcher: What I could have done differently to support them. And it's been interesting to hear your perspective of your supervisor of going and asking for help, and then kind of thinking about how my employees probably felt in the ways that I responded. Not that I responded necessarily poorly, but what I could have done more on, and then it starts making me think, "What kind of preparation do people have, supervisors have, to respond to reports of this?" 'Cause if it is endemic, and people like you who have enough guts, for lack of a better term, to go and ask for help, then what happened? And so, I even had another participant ask like, "In your research, what tips do you have of what to do in these situations?", and all I really could say was, "A lot of research describes what's going on, but I haven't seen a lot of research that says, 'Here's a fix.'" And so, I'm hoping that we can get somewhere… you women sharing your stories, is going to start... Something's gonna come out of it that goes, "This is what we need to do. This is the change we need to see."

Participant: Wow. It's in the same way of any victim of anything….you need to believe them. Listen to that whole emotional first-aid thing that so few people know how to do. You have to be skilled up to do that. You also have to... And we are about to do this and I'm about to do this tomorrow for the next two days, we're gonna be talking about creating a culture of consent in the university proper, like the whole university…

Showing vulnerability with my own experiences enabled me to connect with participants as co-researchers. As I interpreted their interpretation of their experiences, the participants and I processed through our journeys with workplace aggression in higher education. Our similar experiences allowed me, as the instrument, to offer a platform for them to share their voices and their stories. Many of the participants saw this study as a way to process through the pain and shared their hopes for this study and future research:

Kayleigh: My hope is just that there are more good examples out there that help women feel empowered in academia a bit…I would hope that we can just enable women to aspire to great things and do great things.

Alice: We need to speak up and say, "This is not appropriate and it needs to be stopped."

Meredith: I think that the process of being introspective, and really thinking on a deep level about what it meant to me, why it happened, why I felt the way I did was really interesting to me. So I appreciate that, and thank you.

The process of post-reflexive journaling gave me space to reflect, learn, and understand the phenomenon through the stories of my participants, interpreted through my (bridled)

experiences. My research gave voice to the female professional staff who experienced bullying, harassment and abuse in higher education.

**Method**

I followed a feminist post-intentional phenomenological qualitative approach to data gathering methods. While quantitative research observes behavior and focuses on "what happens," qualitative research "tends to focus on meaning, sense-making and communicative action. That is, it looks at how people make sense of what happens; what the meaning of that happening is" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 45). The post-intentional qualitative approach "chases the lines of flight" or invokes new ways of understanding phenomena by connecting with other theories and philosophies such as feminist theory (Vagle, 2016).

**Participants.** Participants were selected based on homogenous purposive sampling (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Purposive sampling identifies a specific population to study— in this case, professional staff in higher education. Homogenous refers to the same type of individual, such as female participants. I identified participants according to the purpose of the study, which was to learn the lived experience of female professional staff in higher education.

I recruited participants by e-mailing a survey to several listservs of regional and national professional organizations in the field of higher education. I created a survey questionnaire using Qualtrics to send to these listservs and recruit participants. The questionnaire collected demographic and background information including gender, ethnicity, age range, institution classification, number of supervisees, general experiences in management, and an invitation to participate further in the study. In the end, I received a total of 125 responses within North America.

Of the 125 responses, 118 were female, 72 respondents *experienced* adverse interpersonal experiences and 32 *witnessed* adverse interpersonal experiences. Fourteen respondents experienced *and* witnessed adverse interpersonal experiences (including those who selected yes or maybe). Overall, 77 percent experienced or witnessed adverse interpersonal experiences during their higher education career. Table 3.1 illustrates survey respondent responses with adverse interpersonal experiences.

Table 3.1

*Survey Responses to Adverse Interpersonal Experiences (AIE)*

| Response | Experienced AIE | % Experienced | Witnessed AIE | % Witnessed |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 72 | 61% | 32 | 27% |
| No | 10 | 8% | 5 | 4% |
| Maybe | 36 | 31% | 59 | 50% |
| No Response | - | - | 22 | 19% |
| *Total* | *118* | *100%* | *118* | *100%* |

Table 3.2 explains the number of surveys received by gender, the number of surveys completed, and the number of respondents willing to participate in the study. I received 125 total survey responses, 83 of which were fully completed by female respondents. I removed male respondents from further inquiry as I wanted to focus on the female experience. After a review of the completed questionnaires, I contacted participants who volunteered to participate in the study. Nine respondents volunteered to participate in the study and seven participants completed the entire study.

Table 3.2

*Recruitment Survey Responses*

| Gender | Respondents | Completed Surveys | Willing to Participate in Study | Completed Study |
|--------|-------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| Female | 118 | 83 | 39 | 7 |
| Male | 7 | 5 | 3 | N/A |
| *Total* | *125* | *88* | *42* | *7* |

I planned to include six to nine females working in public higher education middle management. In the end I met my goal with seven participants completing the study. However, I found during the recruitment process fewer female staff in middle management acting as supervisors at the time of their adverse interpersonal experiences willing to share their experience. I modified my study to include female staff in frontline and student services positions (such as student advisors), who held low to middle management responsibilities. For purposes of this study, low to middle management included professional staff in non-academic positions below the associate vice provost level. Common titles included director, associate director, manager, counselor, advisor, or coordinator. I invited participants who held low to middle management positions in non-academic departments such as student enrollment, registrar, housing, international services, and academic colleges (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3

*Participant Demographics and Higher Education Work History at Time of Adverse*

*Interpersonal Experience (AIE)*

| | | | At time of AIE | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Name | Age Range | Ethnicity | Institution Type | Supervisor | Department |
| Alice | 50 - 59 | Other | Public | No | Registrar |
| Meredith | 50 - 59 | Caucasian | Public | Yes | Immigration Services |
| Ariya | 35 - 39 | Asian | Private | Yes | Resident Life |
| Deborah | 35 - 39 | Caucasian | Public | Yes | Education Outreach |
| Kayleigh | 35 - 39 | Caucasian | Public | No | Admissions |
| Rosa | 30 - 34 | Caucasian | Public | Yes | Admissions |
| Tessa | 30 - 34 | Caucasian | Public | No | Advising |

**Data Gathering.** Following a phenomenological, qualitative research approach, I gathered data using semi-structured interviews and written narratives. Seidman (2013) and Vagle (2016) recommended using semi-structured interviews to give the participant more of a co-researcher role in the study. I prepared interview-guiding questions based on my literature review, research questions, and theoretical framework. The participant as co-researcher permitted each to drift into tangents and expand on parts of their story that were meaningful and poignant to the phenomenon as they reconstructed their experiences (Seidman, 2013). In feminist research, the participant as collaborator balances the researcher-

participant power relationship and empowers the participant's voice to share their lived experience (Mathison, 2014).

I originally planned to interview participants in close geographical proximity to one another; however, the listservs I used were national and international. Final participants hailed from seven different higher education institutions across North America. I communicated with participants via e-mail, provided additional study plan information, and requested they sign a consent form before setting up initial interviews.

I used Zoom to video interview six participants and a digital recorder for the other participant. Zoom offered a platform to video conference and record the interviews. After each interview, I submitted them to Scribie, an online transcription service. During the initial interview, I shared my background information and the participants shared their initial experience with and interest in the topic. I felt it important to create a safe space for the participants to open up about their adverse interpersonal experiences. Feminist phenomenological methodology involves building rapport and treating the participant as a collaborator (Mathison, 2014). I engaged in this type of collaboration by interviewing each participant twice, dialoguing via e-mail for clarification, and at the conclusion of data gathering and analysis, through a summarized vignette of their story I shared to verify accuracy and voice.

After the first interview, I asked participants to reconstruct their adverse interpersonal experience through a detailed, written narrative. Dahlberg, Drew, and Nystorm (2001) described narrative as a "powerful form of human communication" (p. 150) that offers the lived experience, "precisely as it is lived," with limited interruption from the researcher. They recommended giving the participant precise instructions for reconstructing a critical

incident concerning the phenomenon. Following these guidelines, I provided participants a written prompt with definitions of key words, three main prompts, and optional follow-up questions to guide their narrative. I e-mailed both the recorded and written instructions to each participant. Below are the three question prompts that guided the written narrative:

1. Describe the beginning of the adverse interpersonal interaction.

2. Describe the adverse interpersonal interaction at the time it happened.

3. Describe how the experience ended and how it affected you and others.

To embrace more than one learning style, I also recorded a three minute video of myself giving an overview of the study and a review of the written narrative instructions. I then corresponded with the participants to determine a timeline for writing and returning their written narratives. As I waited for the return of their narratives, I reviewed the first interviews, and then as I received back each narrative I reviewed and analyzed the written narratives.

The purpose of the second interview, and final data gathering method, was to follow-up with questions after I analyzed the first interview transcriptions and narratives. I also made connections between each participant's background and adverse experience, and understood how she was doing in the present moment after reflecting on her past adverse experiences. If I did not initially get a clear description of the experience or developed additional inquiries as to how the participant moved through her adverse interpersonal experience, the second interview served as the time to ask follow-up questions.

**Data Analysis.** Critical awareness of one's own biases and assumptions with regards to the phenomenon is essential in post-intentional phenomenology. Prior to data gathering (collection), I wrote an intentional post-reflexion (self-aware) statement to acknowledge and

reflect on my initial assumptions, biases, beliefs, perceptions, and experiences with the phenomenon before beginning my study. The statement included a description of my background in higher education middle management. I returned to this statement throughout my dissertation journey to frame my on-going commitment to post-reflexive journaling and to bridle my assumptions as I listened and reacted to my participants' stories.

I used NVivo 12 software, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), to store, organize, and analyze my data. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and stored in NVivo 12 for data analysis. I gathered and review data on a continual basis to follow a post-intentional and whole-parts-whole analysis process, a central component of all phenomenological approaches (Vagle, 2016). This process allows the researcher to become submerged in the data, draw close to the language and descriptions sentence-by-sentence, and then step back again to review the analysis and interpretation holistically. Data analysis from a phenomenological perspective relies heavily on immersing oneself in the data gathered, reflecting critically on interpretation influence (how I, as the researcher, am understanding and elucidating the information) and finding the voice of the participants as they make sense of their experiences of the phenomenon in the lived world.

During the first step as I read the interviews and familiarized myself with the data, I took note of the overarching sense of the participants' experiences and began to describe the phenomenon from the participants' perspective. When I sensed my feelings and connectedness to participants' experiences influencing my analysis, I bridled my thoughts and responses through post-reflexive journaling. As I noted myself making assumptions about how a participant felt or thought about a specific part in their story, I paused, wrote questions, and noted my curiosity. I found it essential to remain connected and empathetic

toward participants' stories, and to simultaneously sideline my perceptions and assumptions for later analysis and interpretation of emergent themes.

The second step delved into the data line-by-line. Vagel (2016) suggested reading the transcripts line-by-line a minimum of three times for several purposes. From a reflexive phenomenological approach, the first line-by-line read was to take careful notes related to the meaning of the phenomenon—in this case adverse interpersonal experiences—and the participants' description and explanation of the phenomenon. Part of my notations asked questions or made statements about participants' experiences. As a follow-up step, I gathered my questions and statements to develop additional questions to ask participants in a follow-up interview (Vagle, 2016). Vagel (2016) wrote "the questions should be designed to clarify intentional meanings that one predicts, at the early stages of analysis, might be important to describe/interpret/represent the phenomenon" (p. 99). Vagel (2016) further suggested completing these first two steps for each participant.

The second line-by-line reading involved "articulating the meanings, based on the markings, margin notes, and the follow-up with research participants" (Vagle, 2016, p. 99). After further analysis, I separated the highlighted and marked text from the original text to inform the interpretation and discussion phase of research. Finally, a third line-by-line reading reviewed the annotated sections to make further sense of its meaning. Vagle (2016) suggested adding analytical thoughts regarding the data at this point.

The final stage of the whole-part-whole process concerned a review of the narratives, interviews, annotations, and personal reflexivity again from a wide angle (Vagle, 2016). A review of the notes and highlighted sections enabled me to identify themes, or "tentative manifestations," to make meaning of the phenomenon and lived experiences. I used these

themes to aid in the interpretation of participants' lived experiences in higher education and

to learn how participants described their experiences in terms of the physical, emotional, and

psychological.

After whole-part-whole analysis, I reviewed the data again using Nvivo 12 software.

As I analyzed the data based on my research questions I created nodes, or preliminary codes.

I highlighted phrases, words, and dialogue that related to my research questions. These codes

turned into headings and subheadings, or preliminary themes and codes (see Table 3.4). To

better read and analyze the data, I printed and bound the preliminary codes in hard copy

form. During secondary coding, while I highlighted, underlined, and noted in margins, I

began to detect themes. It was during this analysis tentative manifestations began to emerge

(see Table 3.5). At the advice of my major professor and Vagle (2016), I scribbled ideas,

wrote down preliminary titles, and drew charts to help organize the ideas that interconnected

between the phenomenon and the participants' experiences.

Table 3.4

*Nodes and Sub-nodes from Preliminary Review of Data*

| Primary Review of Data | Sub-Nodes |
|---|---|
| Description of Adverse Interpersonal Experience (AIE) | Description of: decision-making power; AIE behavior; bully; feelings of AIE; institutional support; launching a complaint; not getting help; relationship with bully; relationship with supervisor(s); seeking support/help; supporting others; work environment; feeling helpless; physical response; response to AIE bullying; self-blame/questioning self |
| Gender and Race | Race Tax |
| Individual vs. Collective | |
| Lived Experience of AIE | Lived experiences of each participant – quotes, examples |
| Moving through AIE | Belonging; leadership style; new position; self-talk; self-care; struggle after; support from others; supporting others; trauma informed; triggers; value and appreciation; voice |
| What if/What could happen | |
| Comments on this research | |

Table 3.5

*Nodes and Sub-nodes from Secondary Review of Data*

| Secondary Review of Node Data | Sub-Nodes |
|---|---|
| Bully description | Covert; gossip, micro-aggressions; on-going/continuous; overt; personality; power/formal authority (abuse cycle, blame, emotional intelligence, management insecurity, micromanaging); uncivil |
| Earn Privileges | |
| Feelings and Responses to AIE | Checked out; documentation; hands tied; hyper aware/on guard; lack of trust; self-blame; trauma/emotional first-aid; undervalued; unheard |
| Feminist Lens | Gender lens; political lens; social lens; voice |
| Institutional Support (or lack of) | HR/EEO; immediate action; no action; sideline support; supervisor; trust |
| Moving Through | |
| Psychological Safety | Job safety |

# CHAPTER 4: Manuscript One

A Psychologically Aggressive Minefield:

Adverse Interpersonal Experiences in Higher Education

## Abstract

Although researchers have studied workplace aggression in higher education for many years, few studies explore the experience of female professional staff. Using post-intentional phenomenology, I studied the *adverse* lived experiences of female professional staff working in higher education. Though they make up over half of the higher education work force, researchers have overlooked female professional staff. I found participants experienced a spectrum of workplace aggression including incivility, bullying, harassment, and abuse from colleagues and supervisors. Findings suggest female professional staff experience overt and covert aggression through gossip, yelling, cursing, microaggressions, and diversity tax. These experiences weighed heavily on the participants as they relied on their institutions to support and advocate for them. This study describes the adverse interpersonal experience of each participant and the lack of support from their institution.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived adverse experiences of female professional staff in higher education. As a hierarchical system, higher education offers an opportunity for unrecognized bullying. Adverse interpersonal experiences include treating colleagues with incivility, bullying and harassment behavior, and abusive power. Bullying behavior leads to stress, poor physical and mental health, and employee turnover (Lewis, 2004). Past studies analyzing workplace aggression focused on the general workplace or on faculty and administrators in higher education. These studies described the existence of bullying in the workplace, as well as the outcomes from negative interactions. Few studies exploring the experiences of female professional staff in higher education exist in the literature. In this article I report findings of workplace aggression female professional staff experienced working in higher education. Resulting tentative manifestations contribute to the literature, focusing specifically on how female professional staff experience and perceive interpersonal adversity in higher education.

## Overview of Literature

Studies in workplace aggression commonly focused on the general workplace (Allen, Holland, & Reynolds, 2015; Attell, Kummerow Brown, & Treiber, 2017; Murphy, 2013; Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). Research on workplace aggression in higher education included studies of faculty and administrators (Cleary et al., 2013; Condon, 2015; Cummins, 2012; Freedman & Vreven, 2016; Mourssi-Alfash, 2014; Sedivy-Benton et al., 2015), and students (Salin, 2011; Schilpzand et al., 2016). Few studies explored the lived experiences of female professional staff in higher education, although researchers are beginning to study this population.

Workplace aggression literature identifies incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999;
King & Piotrowski, 2015), mobbing and bullying (Attell et al., 2017; Freedman & Vreven,
2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Mourssi-Alfash, 2014),
harassment (Holm & Bäckström, 2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Ricketts & Pringle,
2014; Torkelson, Holm, Bäckström, & Schad, 2016), aggression (Hurst et al., 2016) and
workplace abuse (Cowan, 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) (see Figure 4.1). Definitions of the
terms often overlap in the literature. The following is an attempt to define.

Communication researchers define aggression as perceived intentional "efforts by
individuals to harm others with whom they work or the organizations in which they are
employed" (Baron & Neuman, 1996, p. 161). Workplace aggression focuses on verbal and
behavioral forms of incivility, bullying, and harassment rather than physical violence.
Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Hjelt-Back (1994) discovered:

> Aggressive behaviors that disguise the identity of aggressors and their aggressive
> intentions, are often described as covert in nature, and are distinguished from
> aggressive behaviors described as overt which do reveal the identity of the aggressor
> and the person's aggressive intentions. (as cited in Baron & Neuman, 1996, p. 163)

Aggressors get away with adverse interpersonal behavior for a number of reasons: employees
feel at risk reporting bullying (Cleary et al., 2013); institutions do not readily respond to
reports of bullying (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010); and due to poor leadership and
communication styles, interpersonal run-ins, and an overall unhealthy work culture (Cowan,
2013).
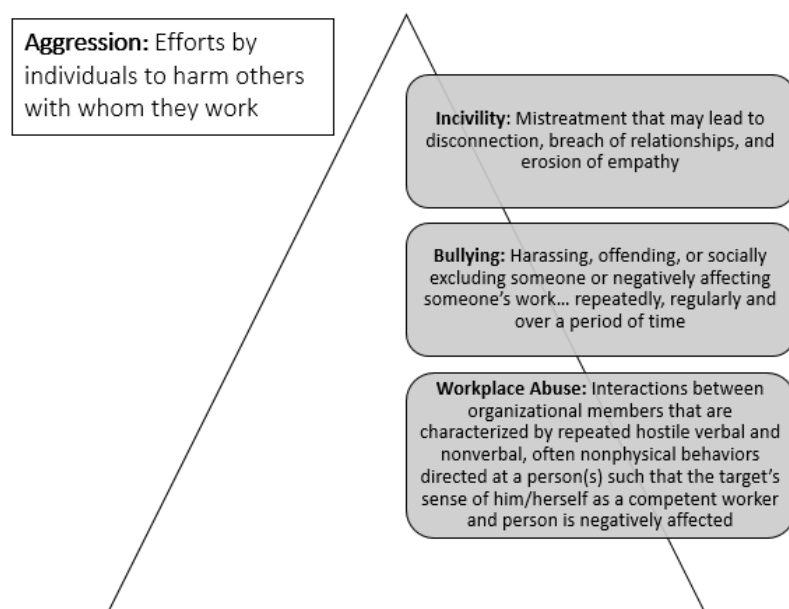
Figure 4.1 *Workplace Aggression*

Incivility is "mistreatment that may lead to disconnection, breach of relationships, and erosion of empathy" (Pearson, Andersson & Porath, 2000, p. 125). Since incivility is "rude" behavior and more ambiguous than bullying or overt discrimination, it is easier to hide (Cortina, 2008). Targets of incivility experience paranoia, poor physical health, betrayal, and shame (Condon, 2015). Cortina (2009) found incivility to include intimidation from supervisor to subordinate, and as a result, employees did not feel safe to report the aggression for fear of retribution. The term incivility is used widely in bullying literature, often interchanged with the term bullying (Condon, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2004).

Bullying is defined as "harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work… bullying behavior occurs repeatedly, regularly and over a period of time" (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011, p. 22). One study described bullying behavior as "cruel, tactless, mean-spirited, insensitive, …[a person who] has

absolutely no empathy or ability to feel remorse" (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011, p. 353). In higher education, student affairs staff were more likely to report bullying than faculty (Gerstenfield, 2016).

Overlapping with bullying, Brodsky wrote about *The Harassed Worker* (1976) and defined harassment as "repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate or get a reaction from another. It is treatment that persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates, or otherwise discomforts the target" (Brodsky, 1976, p. 2). Although bullying is often interchangeable with harassment (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006), organizations have policies prohibiting harassment, while few organizations have anti-bullying policies (Cowan, 2011). Consequences of bullying in the workplace include low employee job satisfaction and absenteeism (Lutgen-Sandvik & Scheller Arsht, 2014).

Workplace aggression also includes emotional abuse. Keashly (2001) defined emotional abuse as "interactions between organizational members that are characterized by repeated hostile verbal and nonverbal, often nonphysical behaviors directed at a person(s) such that the target's sense of him/herself as a competent worker and person is negatively affected" (as cited in Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). Escartín, Rodríguez-Carballeira, Zapf, Porrúa, and Martín-Peña's (2009) study on the severity of workplace aggression found emotional abuse was "considered to be the most severe category, manipulating information, abusing working conditions and professional discredit…" (p. 200). Emotional abuse included "disrespect, humiliation or rejection of the person" (Escartín et al., 2009, p. 194). In connection to higher education, organizational cultures with formal hierarchical structures cultivate abuse (Pilch & Turska, 2015).

**Research Design**

I drew from qualitative research methods and used phenomenology (Vagle, 2016) to explore the lived adverse experiences of female staff and their perceptions of aggression toward themselves or a colleague. Phenomenology offered a framework to learn how individuals in higher education interconnect through intentionality, "ways in which humans are connected meaningfully with the world" (Vagle, 2016, p. 112), in a given adverse experience.

**Post-Intentional Phenomenological Methodology**

I used post-intentional phenomenology to explore participant's experiences while simultaneously bridling my own post-reflexive experience (Vagle & Hofsess, 2016). I interwove traditional descriptive phenomenology to describe experiences related to the particular phenomenon, through individual participant vignettes while attempting to stay true to their experience and voice (Giorgi, 1997). My methodology also pulled from interpretative phenomenology, as I was curious how the phenomenon of adverse interpersonal experiences interconnected between peers, subordinates, and supervisors (Smith et al., 2009). I wanted to understand the participant's role in her institution and her work relationship to her aggressor—the individual perpetrating the aggression.

**Methodology.** I employed feminist post-intentional phenomenology as my methodology to learn about the phenomenon and to see it through a new lens. It was essential to understand the phenomenon through the female voice of women working in higher education. Deriving from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept "lines of flight," Vagle (2016) borrowed lines of flight, focusing on "what the phenomenon might become" (Vagle, 2016, p. 119) in post-intentional phenomenology. The phenomenon, in this case adverse

interpersonal experiences, became fluid interpretations rather than just descriptions of a stagnant state. Rather than describing the phenomenon from a "male normative" perspective, we learn what this phenomenon can look and feel like over time, from multiple female perspectives, within one context. Each participant experienced adversity in different ways, offering varied female perspectives of what adverse interpersonal experiences felt and looked like.

During data gathering, analysis and interpretation, I practiced post-reflexivity (Vagle, 2016) to bridle my personal experience and biases (K. Dahlberg et al., 2008). Both post-intentional and feminist phenomenology utilize reflexive journaling (Mathison, 2014; Vagle, 2016). Post-reflexivity, adapted from bridling and bracketing bias, focuses on questioning presumptions rather than just setting aside what we hold as truth (Vagle, 2016). Throughout the study process I kept a post-reflexive journal to stay aware of my assumptions: where I felt connected or disconnected to the participant's perceived interpretations of their experience; what I believed to be normal or abnormal; to maintain awareness of my beliefs, opinions and perceptions; and instances that surprised me (Vagle, 2016, p. 132).

**Data Gathering.** Aligned with post-intentional phenomenological methodology, I gathered data from two sources: interviews and written narratives (K. Dahlberg et al., 2008; Vagle, 2016). Vagle (2016) encouraged using unstructured or semi-structured interview questions to promote line of flight ways of thinking. As the purpose of phenomenology is not to experiment or correlate results, interviews are exploratory learning, understanding how the phenomenon connects to various participants (Vagle, 2016).

To recruit participants, I created a survey questionnaire using Qualtrics, an online survey system. The survey collected information from the respondents including

classification of higher education institution, position title, number of supervisees, and gender. I included two open-ended questions asking if respondents had 1) experienced or 2) witnessed adverse interpersonal incidents toward themselves or others. These open-ended questions included definitions of adverse interpersonal incidents, incivility, and bullying. The respondents provided a brief written description of these incidents. The final survey question requested respondents to participate in the study. If the respondent selected yes, an e-mail address was collected; if they selected no, the survey software jumped to the final portion of the survey. The final section requested voluntary demographic information to follow best practices of survey development (Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2014).

I distributed the survey via e-mail to four higher education-based listservs focusing on areas of admissions, international education, small colleges, and universities. I opened the Qualtrics survey starting May 10, 2018, and collected responses through June 21, 2018. Within 42 days, I received 125 surveys with 88 fully completed. One hundred and eighteen of the 125 surveys came from respondents identifying as female, and seven identifying as male. Since I focused my study on females in higher education, the surveys completed by male respondents were set aside.

After recruiting participants, I used Zoom, an online video conferencing software to interview, video and audio record sessions. I sent each recorded interview to an online transcription service to transcribe the audio recorded. I then reviewed each transcription and listened to the audio recording to correct errors. Following the first interview, I asked participants to write out their adverse interpersonal experience in narrative form. I provided written instructions, questions, and definitions of incivility and bullying to help guide their responses. While they wrote their narratives over the next three to four weeks, I reviewed and

analyzed the interviews, and then I analyzed the written narratives. Throughout analysis, I wrote additional questions to inform the second interviews. Following the submitted narratives, I schedule a second Zoom meeting with each participant. These interviews were again transcribed through an online transcription company. After writing individual participant vignettes, the participants reviewed them for accuracy and offered feedback.

  **Participants.** After reviewing initial survey responses, 48 respondents reported a willingness to participate in the study. The process of participant selection was mostly self-selection. I first identified higher education organizations with female professional staff and invited them to complete a survey. I reviewed responses to ensure participants were professional staff, had worked in higher education for at least three years, and if they had supervisory experience. Not all the participants I chose were supervisors at the time of their adverse interpersonal experience. Participant self-selection had implications to my study. For example, participants who self-select may initially have a bias toward the study topic. The participants in my study were interested in participating because they experienced or witnessed bullying in higher education. One participant shared her interest in the psychological aspect behind workplace aggression, and another volunteered because she had recently completed her Ph.D. and wanted to give back, but they both still had experienced workplace aggression.

  I created an informed consent form in Qualtrics and e-mailed it along with a message providing additional details and expectations of the study. Nine female respondents signed up and began the study; seven participants completed the entire study. This number met my original goal of six to ten participants. Participants worked at seven different North American higher education institutions. All participants identified as female. The participant

biographical information ranged from 30 to 59 years of age. Five participants identified as Caucasian, one as Asian, and one as "other". All participants had at least a master's degree or higher.

At the time of their adverse interpersonal experience, six participants worked in public institutions and one worked in a private institution. They worked in the following departments: admissions, registrar, academic advising, international services, education outreach, and resident life. Five participants directly supervised employees, either student employees or full-time staff, during the time of their adverse interpersonal experience (AIE).

**Data Analysis.** Following common phenomenological analysis processes, I implemented a whole-part-whole analysis (Vagle, 2016) of each interview and narrative. Whole-part-whole analysis includes a step-by-step process of zooming in and zooming out of the data; reviewing the data as a whole and then line-by-line. For example after each interview and written narrative submission, I read and listened to the content holistically (Vagle, 2016), correcting transcription errors and becoming familiar with each participant's voice and story. The reason for a holistic reading is to get a big picture understanding of all the data gathered, and as Vagle (2016) suggested, for "the researcher not take notes and simply spend some time getting reacquainted with the data". Upon second review of the data, using line-by-line review, I focused on highlighting and taking notes related to my research questions (splitting the first question into two sections): 1a) the lived experience of adverse interpersonal experiences; 1b) descriptions of the adverse interpersonal experiences. I created a hand-written chart for note-taking, question asking, and journaling as I read each data source (see Appendix H). I later transcribed my handwritten notes into Nvivo 12 software. I continued reading each participant's interviews and narratives in this way, holistically

reviewing the data, reading line-by-line, noting sections with greater meaning, and asking questions to clarify later. After the first holistic and first line-by-line review, I continued narrowing down the data, creating preliminary and secondary findings to read line-by-line again. While reviewing the first interview and narratives, I developed a line of inquiry for the second interviews.

I reviewed the data a third time using Nvivo 12 software. While analyzing the data related to my research questions, I created nodes, or preliminary codes, with primary headings and subheadings (see Appendix I). I then printed and bound the preliminary codes and began coding a second time, analyzing for emerging tentative manifestations (see Appendix J). I continued reflecting and bridling my assumptions, biases, and beliefs by noting my reactions and memories of my experiences in the margins, and in my reflexive journal. After entering my notes and secondary codes, I began to see themes and categories emerge related to my research questions.

Prior to my study, I tentatively developed an incivility spectrum based on workplace aggression literature. I refined the spectrum to mirror the lived experiences of the participants after data analysis. In doing so, I developed an aggression spectrum to situate the experiences within the literature, ranging from least to most notorious and repetitious incidents of aggression. The seven participants' adverse experiences ranged from incivility to emotional abuse. I placed each participant's experience on a spectrum with three aggression types: incivility, bullying/harassment, and emotional abuse. The participants experienced a wide variety and frequency of adverse interpersonal experiences. One participant experienced a single incident of overt aggression, while other participants experienced on-going, covert and overt forms of aggression. The *type* of aggression appeared to have less effect on the

participants than how frequent the incidents occurred. Specifically, the longer the aggression continued, the greater the effect it had on the participant. Further, the aggressive behavior had more effect on participants if it was permitted to continue. Figure 4.2 shows a spectrum of the type of adverse experience based on the participant.

| Incivility | | | Bullying/Harassment | | Workplace Abuse | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Meredith | Rosa | Ariya | Tessa | Kayleigh | Alice | Deborah |
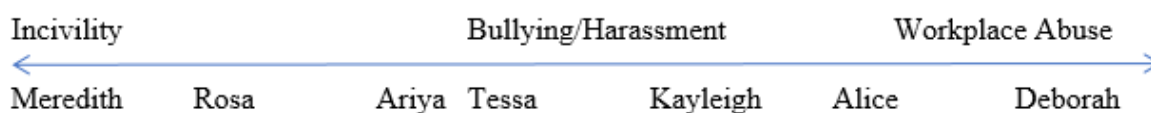
Figure 4.2 *Interpretation on Effect of Adverse Interpersonal Experiences*

The initiators of the adverse interpersonal behavior, the aggressors, were colleagues (staff and faculty) or supervisors. The aggressors ranged from having formal authority over the participant to no authority. In some cases, the aggressor was a peer with equal decision-making power to the participant. Four aggressors were male: two faculty members, one staff member, and one faculty administrator supervisor. Three aggressors were female: one supervisor and two staff members. These partially align with bullying literature; it was more common for victims to be targeted by coworkers than supervisors (Holm & Bäckström, 2016), although one study indicated leaders participated in bullying behavior (Cleary et al., 2013).

Table 4.1

*Workplace Aggressors*

| Participant | Aggressor Gender | Aggressor's Work Relationship to Participant | Position Type |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alice | Female | Peer | Staff |
| Deborah | Male | Supervisor | Faculty/Admin Role |
| Rosa | Male | Peer | Staff |
| Kayleigh | Male | Peer | Faculty |
| Meredith | Male | Peer | Faculty |
| Ariya | Female | Peer | Staff |
| Tessa | Female | Supervisor | Faculty/Admin Role |

## Findings

I wanted to capture each participant's voice throughout my data analysis and interpretation. Each story offered a courageous and vulnerable glimpse into a specific moment in each female professional staff's life. Most of the women recently lived, or were still living, these adverse interpersonal experiences. I did my best to preserve their voice and interpret their experience.

### Lines of Flight: Vignettes of Lived Adverse Interpersonal Experiences

Using a feminist post-intentional phenomenology, I focused on capturing the lived phenomenon of adverse interpersonal experiences through the female lens of several female professional staff. Thus, each of the following sections include sub-headings guided by descriptions and interpretations of an individual's *adverse lived experience*, and the *adverse interpersonal behavior* their aggressors portrayed. These vignettes offer lines-of-flight perceptions of the phenomenon, meaning the adverse interpersonal experiences described are not necessarily a lasting description, but rather offerings of what the phenomenon was at one

point in time. The vignettes give voice to female professional staff experiences in higher education, an organizational culture that commonly frequents the male experience as the "normal" experience. Each story of adverse interpersonal experiences provides higher education literature and practitioners a female "normal" experience. Likened to a cut diamond, there are multiple facets or features of a particular phenomenon. The female participants not only experienced a negative interaction with a colleague or supervisor, they experienced adverse interpersonal behavior in a variety of forms including micro-aggression, avoidance, abuse, and harassment. In their future, the participants may define their experiences differently. The resulting interpretation depends on their personal and professional journey, as well as the response of the institution where they worked. The next section includes findings that emerged throughout data gathering, analysis, and interpretation through the lens of post-intentional feminist phenomenology. This section shines a spotlight on several female professional staff's lived experiences in higher education, giving voice to women who are often sidelined and silenced.

*"It must be endemic": Microaggressions and Avoidance.* Alice's adverse interpersonal experience included incivility and bullying behavior in the form of microaggressions from a colleague along with subsequent avoidance from her supervisors. Her colleague, Greta, demonstrated microaggressions by withholding information, taking long periods to respond to e-mails, and failing to take into consideration Alice's hearing impairment. Greta was abrupt, uptight, and took an unreasonable amount of time to review Alice's work. Alice described Greta's bullying behavior as on-going, covert, micro-aggressions that left her feeling paranoid and exhausted:

Thing after small thing after small thing: "put the binders back on the shelves THIS way, not like you just did, Alice." "Write your e-mails in this exact way." "Fill out the forms this way." "You can't move onto evaluating other countries until you master THIS one, Alice." "No, we can't take our lunch break together." "Why don't you join me and my gang at 7:30 to play cards every day" [my starting time was 8:30, though I routinely show up early]. "Why did you put on your time board [the very thing she won't use] that you were taking lunch after a staff lunch-and-learn. Don't you know you can't do that?" The last was so frustrating to me, as she remembered the whole thing wrongly but if I tried to correct her, she would just stop talking to me about it by stating: "Fine. It's not worth arguing over." It was worth picking on me about, but not worth resolving with me.

Alice advocated for herself by reporting Greta's behavior to her two supervisors. The supervisors took 22 months to respond, leaving Alice to continue documenting the adverse behavior while feeling more undervalued and powerless as time passed.

At the same time another colleague, one of Greta's "cronies," became upset at Alice for requesting the same information twice. The colleague cursed at Alice in the office with witnesses present. Alice reported this verbal abuse to one of her supervisors as well as to her union representative. The union representative advised her to report the incident to human resources (HR) since Alice's supervisor did not respond to the negative work behavior. Alice scheduled a meeting with her supervisor, the HR representative, and the union representative. She described the meeting as a deflating experience where she was "grilled like a witness at a trial, sifting through the same details over and over." The HR representative continually interrupted the union representative when trying to speak with Alice. Alice felt like the HR

representative made matters worse. She agreed to meet with the colleague who swore at her but never heard back about any meeting, so she suspected her colleague declined or her supervisor chose not to hold the meeting.

Alice continued to receive uncivil responses and directives from her peer, the original aggressor. The on-going bullying and negative work environment continued. Alice described Greta as a "tomb" of information. Greta would wait long periods to respond to e-mails and engaged in other blocking methods. Alice shared "the steady drip, drip, drip of ugly went on and on until I reached an internal break point." Six months after the first HR meeting (regarding the cursing incident) Alice went directly to her supervisors and requested an intervention between Greta and herself. Her supervisors ignored the problem, the complaints, and the bullying behavior. Alice described the delay:

"Then I waited.

And waited.

I grew despondent and weary."

After waiting two months for her supervisors to respond, Alice requested an intervention again. The intervention finally came with both her supervisors and Greta in attendance. The outcome of these three meetings were general and placed the problem back in Alice's hands. Greta complained about Alice's character and responsibility for the conflict. Alice did not feel safe giving a truthful report. In the end, Alice and Greta were told to get along because it was affecting the whole office.

Alice identified her supervisors' (lack of) response and the three meetings as the *actual* adverse interpersonal experience. Alice felt disappointed and re-victimized. Not only had she reached out for help for almost two years, she also had to regurgitate her story

repeatedly, and then felt unable to share her story accurately. Her concerns were never directly addressed and instead of correcting the aggressive behavior, she was required to meet with a supervisor and aggressive colleague, Greta, bi-weekly to discuss basic job responsibilities. Not one individual overtly recognized or addressed her aggressor's behavior. Alice shared her perspective of higher education culture:

>  My colleague who's been with the institution for... a long time talked about her *own* long period of abuse. And I've heard it from other people as well… a lawyer involved and investigating ... So it's like all of this stuff is going on, and so it cannot be an epidemic. It's not isolated. It's not unusual, so *it must be endemic* [emphasis added], as in, it must be part of and normal to this institution of higher education.

Alice continues to work in the same office and in the same position where she wrestles with feeling alone, undervalued, and emotionally worn-out.

> **Savvy Aggressor: Abusive Power and Lack of Advocacy.** Deborah experienced bullying and harassment from her abusive supervisor, a faculty administrator, and encountered a human resource department characterized by avoidance and non-advocacy. In a new position as an associate director, Deborah did not receive support going into the job. She worked mainly with international employees and, having lived in a similar culture for eight years, was the go-to person to interpret culture and advocate for change. Soon after being hired, Deborah began to notice unhealthy patterns in the office. Her supervisor did not get along with his associate director and the international staff and faculty feared her supervisor.

Organizing event responsibilities began to occupy much of Deborah's workload. She interacted frequently with the community at large to build partnerships but her supervisor

would often intervene, change plans, and re-direct. She found herself apologizing to the

community members for sudden changes and took the blame. Her supervisor fluctuated

between charming and manipulative and the constant change of demeanor weighed heavily

on the office staff. Deborah likened his behavior to an abuser. When interacting with campus

colleagues and community partners he would be fun and charming, but behind closed doors

his character changed:

> …he was just sort of your stereotypical definition of an abuser. You read the cycle of
>
> abuse, you can tick off each step. It's just who he was. The lying, the controlling, the
>
> demeaning, the making you feel small and taking the truth and twisting it just enough
>
> to make you look guilty and him look like a star. The kind of person who everyone
>
> thinks is so great like, "Oh! He's so fun to work with..." Meanwhile, all of the staff
>
> are like owl-eyed with fear. The kind of guy who would haul you into his office and
>
> scream at you for two hours so that everyone could hear because he was upset that
>
> something wasn't going his way.

Deborah became physically ill, depressed and felt unsafe in her stressful and abusive

work environment. Deborah reached out to her university human resources (HR) for help. An

HR representative listened and empathized, but admitted there was nothing she could do

other than have a meeting with Deborah and the supervisor. She prepared to share her

experience and hoped HR would intervene to stop the abuse directed at her from her

supervisor. However, her supervisor came to the meeting with his own meticulously prepared

evidence *against* Deborah's work performance. He hijacked the meeting with his own

agenda, painting a false picture of Deborah's performance as insufficient and offered no

explanation or context to his complaints. The HR representative only allowed Deborah to

confirm or deny her supervisor's accusations, with no time to explain the context. Deborah described the experience: "I felt like I had…walked into a firing squad. My thoughts scattered, and my emotions—fear, anxiety, embarrassment, anger—flared…" Deborah felt "shell-shocked." She trusted the system and wanted someone to at least listen to and believe her. She felt unprotected and unsafe. The HR representative made no attempt to advocate for her. Deborah was given a job performance warning by HR, and her supervisor. Her supervisor continued to make threats against her job, while continuing to blame her and pile on additional work. The supervisor "walked away without a scratch." Deborah elaborated:

> I think that people like my boss are more savvy than we give them credit for, they
>
> know better than to put things in writing. That's how they've gotten to where they are
>
> now. Now they don't rise to the level of the director of an institute, they don't rise to
>
> the level of tenured professor without knowing... I mean look at... Look at Matt
>
> Lauer. Look at Harvey Weinstein, look at Kevin Spacey. All of them got to those
>
> levels because they were savvy enough to do the horrible things they did without any
>
> evidence. And to find the places that would institutionally support them. Matt Lauer
>
> had a button under his desk that would remotely lock his door

Deborah reached out to other employee support service programs for help. She contacted the equal employment opportunity office (EEO) and the university diversity office. She was repeatedly told they could do nothing to help her. She either lacked sufficient evidence or her supervisor was just a "bad boss." Some people did try to help by giving policy advice or writing reference letters, but their efforts had little effect.

> Everyone within the university could see pieces of the problem, but no one was
>
> listening when I tried to explain that there was a much bigger issue at play. I begged

for anyone to listen, but no one did. Those who heard me out expressed their

sympathy, but no one ever made the abuse stop.

The institution never addressed the adverse behavior. In the end, Deborah took a new job

(with less pay and poor hours) to escape the abusive work environment.

      *"How stupid are you…?": Gender Discrimination, Harassment, and Negligence.*

Throughout her adverse interpersonal experience, Kayleigh, new director of admissions for a

large university department, experienced harassment and discrimination from a faculty

colleague, and negligence from both her human resource counterparts and supervisors.

Kayleigh experienced overt discrimination and harassment from a faculty peer named Fred

shortly after being hired. At their first one-on-one department meeting where she shared

about her former tenure-track faculty position, Fred responded by exclaiming how stupid she

was for giving up such a coveted position. Kayleigh described her response:

> I was stunned. I knew exactly how rare those positions are, but I also knew that my
>
> family was more important than any job, no matter how prestigious. I could not
>
> believe that someone who had just met me [two] minutes prior would treat me so
>
> disrespectfully.

Kayleigh characterized Fred as a bully – "a long-time professor who had always gotten his

way through bullying others. Fred also had a posse of other male, tenured professors, upon

whom he would call whenever he didn't like something. He would also start battles for the

members of his posse, whenever they didn't like something." For example, while reviewing

admission applications, one faculty member advocated for a student to be admitted but

Kayleigh explained the student did not meet the academic requirements. The faculty member

expressed initial understanding and left, but moments later Fred:

…stomped into my office to plead for this student. The other faculty posse member

trotted behind him, but let "Fred" fight the battle with me…Fred accused me of being

on a power trip and stormed out of my office when I told him we could not admit the

student. He eventually went to the chair and the dean, but the student was not

admitted.

This was a second occurrence where Fred challenged Kayleigh's position and

decisions. These incidents led to a third adverse interpersonal experience. Kayleigh sent

students admission letters and provided the faculty with the list of students accepted to the

program. Soon after, Fred "stormed" into Kayleigh's office because she had not admitted a

specific student he wanted in the program. He wanted to approve the final decisions.

Kayleigh described the incident: "He began yelling and berating me using a variety of curse

words throughout his speech. He was furious that the faculty had not been given the list prior

to the letters being sent out." But the decision had already been made based on faculty review

of applications. Fred did not get the answer he wanted, so again he went to the chair and then

to the dean of the college. The admission decision remained unchanged. She described how

Fred's confrontation affected her personally and professionally:

My foundation was completely shaken and cracked. I felt like a failure and an

imposter. Fred had told me that I was a young idiot, who didn't know what I was

doing. I began to wonder if he was right. Truly, I didn't know how to move forward

professionally, after failing so dramatically.

After this episode, Kayleigh's chair encouraged her to submit a report to the university's

equal employment opportunities (EEO) office. She reported age discrimination because

throughout Fred's bullying, he often connected her inexperience and incompetence to her

age. However, when she filed the complaint, they explained age discrimination laws only protected individuals close to retirement. The EEO employee asked if the case was gender discrimination or harassment, for which they could submit a formal case, but at the time Kayleigh only recognized the age-related discriminatory remarks from Fred.

Equal employment opportunities (EEO) staff could not help, nor did they pursue the case. Kayleigh's chair backed her when he could: "He validated the quality of my work and intervened with Fred, to the extent he could." Yet, no one pursued Fred's on-going harassment and bullying behavior. The EEO office did not take any additional steps, the chair only indirectly supported Kayleigh's decisions, and the college dean never confronted Fred's behavior. After Fred's behavior went unaddressed for two years, Kayleigh decided to resign and pursue a doctorate in a related field where she felt fulfilled and valued. Kayleigh accepted a new position at the same university and continued to hear reports of Fred's harassment toward female employees. Her former chair even asked her to talk with other females Fred harassed. Kayleigh successfully continued her career in higher education and she found healing in the process.

***Mother May I?: Emotional (un)Intelligence and Job Threats.*** Tessa, an academic student advisor, experienced adverse interpersonal interactions in the form of bullying from her supervisor, an administrative faculty member, and avoidant inattention from upper administrators. Tessa described how she felt disconnected from students and felt she did not have enough projects during her training period. During a meeting with her supervisor, she became tearful while expressing her feelings about the lack of creativity and connection in her job. Her supervisor instantly became quiet and moved to other agenda items. Tessa felt

her supervisor was awkward around vulnerable moments and lacked emotional intelligence. Her supervisor struggled to empathize or at the least, sympathize:

> She seems to actually want to engage in a conversation with me, but it usually has to do with nothing work-related, or she will use, even my one-on-ones with her, to just talk about her own problems with her own position…but the two times this summer where I've had an emotional moment in our one-on-ones, where I've been frustrated or stressed, and I started to get a little tearful, she shuts down and doesn't want to deal with it.

Tessa also thought her supervisor felt threatened by her previous advising experience, an area in which her supervisor lacked experience. Tessa's supervisor would frequently micro-manage and control Tessa's work, making minute changes to minor tasks such as catering, flyers and student activities. Tessa shared:

> I was getting very little guidance, and then when I would try to follow my position description and try to move forward on projects, then my supervisor would say, "No, you need to ask me for permission for all these things."

It appeared to Tessa that her supervisor would often interrupt and micro-manage when she was feeling insecure or lacking direction in her administrator role.

Tessa described another adverse interpersonal experience, which occurred during a one-on-one meeting. In the meeting, Tessa updated her supervisor on her Institutional Review Board (IRB) research approval and asked to obtain the program's student listserv to contact students for her study. Immediately her supervisor responded negatively and said this would not be permissible. Tessa felt shocked and betrayed when recalling her supervisor's promise to her, upon being hired, she would be given opportunities to conduct research in

their department. Tessa explained to her supervisor: "I would not have wasted my time including the [university] in my IRB paperwork if I knew that it was not a possibility to do my research with the…students." Tessa teared up and was visibly upset. Her supervisor responded defensively, wrote down the interaction, and told Tessa "doesn't know anyone who would speak to their supervisor that way." Tessa immediately shut down and quit talking. Her supervisor changed the topic and then left the meeting. Tessa described the aftermath:

> It became even worse when my supervisor came into my office the following week and read off a handwritten script that I was being written up for crying and having a bad attitude in my one-on-ones. She told me one of the consequences could be termination…

Instead of termination, her supervisor advised Tessa get training and develop her "communication and civility" skills. She gave Tessa an opportunity to respond and then left the room. Tessa immediately contacted human resources (HR) as her colleagues had advised her. In the meeting with HR, an HR representative listened and took notes and suggested Tessa meet with her supervisor's boss. Although this made Tessa uncomfortable, Tessa followed the instructions. The meeting with her supervisor's boss helped bring partial awareness to the situation. Her direct supervisor was more careful with her words and responses. However, this response led to the office environment taking on an air of uncertainty, like having to tip-toe around, and led to increased micro-management.

Tessa's work environment soon became like an emotional roller-coaster. She never knew when her supervisor would arrive to work or become upset at her. Tessa felt belittled, talked down to as though an inexperienced child, and undervalued by her supervisor.

Although her supervisor would sometimes speak highly of Tessa publicly, in private, she would act the opposite. The supervisor increased one-on-one meetings with Tessa to twice each week to "improve communication." The staff conducted themselves as though they were walking on eggshells. Her supervisor, although in the office more often, continued to struggle with emotional situations. Another outcome came when the supervisor began directing bullying behavior toward Tessa's colleague. The colleague resigned, the third employee to resign under the supervisor's tenure. Tessa continues to work in the office, but struggles to feel safe in her job and to trust her supervisor.

*"It was a tokenized kind of role": Diversity Burden and Lack of Advocacy.* Ariya, an associate director of residence life, experienced adverse interpersonal behavior through carrying an institutional diversity burden, bullying by her colleagues, and lack of advocacy from her supervisor. Upper administration frequently asked Ariya to serve on university committees to fill diversity requirements. This additional work wore on Ariya. She identified the extra work as a diversity burden. She gained extra responsibilities without support or protection from her supervisor and colleagues. She explained the burden:

> When the provost asks you to be on a committee, as an associate director, I can't say no, I just don't... But for my supervisor to say, "Her plate is full, she can't take this on right now," would have been a different kind of conversation, would've felt like someone had seen that I'm overwhelmed and overworked and that kind of thing.

Her two colleagues were fellow co-associate directors. The two colleagues began to meet and make decisions without Ariya. She soon found herself blocked from taking part in decision-making meetings. Being a person of color and identifying as queer, Ariya had a different lived experience than her white, heterosexual colleagues and these differences

became a noticeable barrier to their working relationship. Her colleagues were jealous of Ariya being tapped to serve on committees and to mentor *their* designated students with diverse backgrounds. Ariya found her work environment full of toxic relationships and gossip. Her colleagues would report lies and slander to her supervisor and her supervisor never questioned their word or advocated for Ariya.

The only people Ariya could rely on was one colleague, her family, and her partner. Ariya never complained or advocated further beyond venting to her safe circle of friends. Rather, she took this experience as a sign to find a new job at a higher level. Ariya described the reason for moving on: "I think the race tax, the gay tax, whatever, that I was paying for being the token person, just came to be a little bit too much." She eventually left the university and accepted an upper administrator role in a different university.

***"I hated that feeling of having my hands tied": Power and Passivity.*** Rosa first witnessed her colleague bullied by a supervisor and former peer, *and* she experienced bullying by the same individual. She experienced passive avoidance by her supervisor when reporting the bullying. The aggressor, Edward, used his political charm to quickly move up the ranks. Rosa's colleague, Helen, soon became the target of his bullying behavior.

The first adverse experience occurred when Rosa, Helen, and Edward were peers and made a decision together in private, but Edward later publicly disagreed with the decision in order to better his prospects for promotion:

> Both Helen and I stared at him in disbelief; he had just taken a blatant about-face. I was honestly confused, thinking I had missed something critical in our previous conversation. I sat in the rest of the meeting somewhat embarrassed and dumbfounded about what had happened.

This incident set the stage for Edward to quickly climb the ladder and rise from peer to supervisor. Rosa transitioned to working only in domestic admissions and left Helen as subordinate to Edward in international admissions. Rosa became Helen's confidante as Helen began to have negative interpersonal experiences with Edward. Rosa never invited these conversations, but she provided a safe space for Helen to vent when incidents occurred. During this time, Helen reported to Rosa she felt targeted by Edward. Her negative experiences with Edward happened most often behind closed doors and were verbal in nature. Twice Helen described to Rosa how Edward delayed international travel reimbursements because he believed Helen submitted them incorrectly, even though she had them verified with the accounting office.

A second incident occurred when Rosa decided to recognize Helen for her many years of service to the institution. She nominated Helen for a prestigious award and asked colleagues to assist with the nomination. Rosa informed Edward and his supervisor of the nomination. Helen did not receive the award, but felt honored to have been nominated. Later when Helen met with Edward he acknowledged she had not been selected for the award and told her, "I actually don't think you deserved it."

As a witness to covert bullying incidents, Rosa felt powerless to affect change herself. She shared:

> I felt frozen. All I could do was empathize with Helen. I could not offer her any
> solutions, nor could I conjure any reasonable way to take my own actions. This was
> the hardest part for me to deal with, since I'm a person who looks for solutions
> immediately when I see a problem. I hated that feeling of having my "hands tied."

She had no formal authority to report the incidents to her supervisor. Instead, she offered advice to Helen. She suggested documenting and going to human resources.

The third incident took place while Rosa was on vacation. Edward advised one of Rosa's employees to go above her head and request a promotion directly to the director of admissions. To not include Rosa in the conversation resulted in distrust between herself and her team. In addition, Edward complained to human resources that Rosa created a "negative work environment" by nominating his employee for an award. Human resources advised Edward to go to Rosa's supervisor, so when Rosa returned from vacation she met with her supervisor. Her supervisor asked for her side of the story and found no reason to further investigate. The meeting resulted in Rosa and her supervisor discussing how to respond to accounts of bullying. Rosa offered to no longer provide advice to her colleagues. She would continue to listen and empathize, but she would hold back on giving suggestions. Rosa shared:

> I told my supervisor if there's anything that I'm willing to do differently is to refrain from giving advice. I'm not gonna stop listening, I'm not gonna stop being a support person, but I can certainly attempt to refrain from giving any sort of advice on taking action which again, kind of ties my hands, but still...He was like, "Okay, that's probably a good thing to try for now."

In the end, there was no real resolution. Helen continues to work for Edward, and Rosa is permitted only to passively listen.

***Got your back: Harassment and Institutional Support.*** Meredith experienced harassment by a faculty member after she began a new position in international education at a public higher education institution. She was the only study participant to experience

immediate support, action, and protection from her supervisor, resulting in resolution. Her immediate mandate, upon entering the position, was to repair a mistake her team had made that negatively affected a number of faculty.

After learning the state of affairs in her department, Meredith recognized her team lacked resources and training in the policies and procedures required to do their jobs well. These deficiencies resulted in mistakes that would take eight to twelve months to correct. It was Meredith's job to meet with the departments and faculty affected by this particular mistake and begin reparations. After Meredith met with each department affected by the error, all, except one responded cordially, and accepted the plan Meredith proposed to move forward and correct the situation.

Meredith met with this college faculty committee to acknowledge the error, empathize with the frustrating circumstances, and share required next steps according to regulations. During the meeting, a faculty member responded aggressively and began attacking her personally and professionally:

> One faculty member…shoved his chair back from the table, stood up, and tipped the chair over. He leaned over me at the table pounding his fist, and asked me why the University had hired me as director if I couldn't fix these issues immediately. He asked what my legal background was and how I could prove that I was competent to do this when to all appearances I was incompetent. He railed at me in front of the committee for several minutes. I attempted once or twice to try to calm him down and remind him that under the regulations there was nothing we could do but refile the case. Each time he would yell me down, saying I was incompetent and should never have been hired.

She returned to her office and shortly after, her supervisor checked in with her to learn how the meeting went. Meredith described the incident:

> I sat down with her and she said, "Well, how was the meeting?" I'd never done this before. I burst into tears, and I said, "I have never felt so threatened and attacked before in my entire career." And she [the supervisor] didn't hesitate. She turned around and she called the dean of that college. And she said, "My director of immigration is here and she's just briefed me on the meeting." And he said something, and she said, "Well, how about this? If you need anything from our office as far as Visa sponsorships go, you must talk to me. You may not call my director, you may not call any of her advisors. You go through me, and I will determine if you will get services from this office. You may not treat my staff like this." And then she hung up the phone.

Meredith described her boss's response being "incredible." She had never had a boss "cover her so well." She credits this immediate and supportive response as being the reason she was able to move through the adverse interpersonal experience so quickly. She felt heard, acknowledged, and supported. She learned from her boss that she could stand up for herself without attacking others. Meredith continued to be successful in this position. The level of support she found from her supervisor, encouraged her to think about her own role as a supervisor, and advocate for her staff.

## Tentative Manifestations and Discussion

In the subsequent discussion, I share tentative manifestations (Vagle, 2016), or themes, that emerged in data analysis. Each participant's connection to the phenomenon, adverse interpersonal experiences, led back to different forms of workplace aggression:

incivility, bullying, harassment, and abuse. Participants offered new ways of seeing and understanding aggression in the workplace. They spoke up and reported offenses, pursued multi-level chain of commands, and stood up for themselves by reaching out and seeking help. Their unique perspective as female professional staff gave voice to a nationwide higher education workplace aggression endemic. Female professional staff experience different forms of workplace aggression that belittles, demeans, and silences their voices and value in higher education. The participants' vignettes illustrated not only how women experience adverse interpersonal experiences, but also several overt and covert methods in which female professional staff voices are stomped on, disempowered, and silenced. By not speaking up for a female colleague or threatening job safety, the female voice, perspective, and lived experience is ignored or blatantly trodden upon in higher education. Table 4.2 categorizes the participant's lived experiences within the spectrum of workplace aggression. These stories offer us new ways of seeing the phenomenon of adverse interpersonal experiences through the lens of the female perspective.

Table 4.2

*Lines of Flight: New Ways of Seeing Adverse Interpersonal Experiences*

| Lines of Flight | Participant |
|---|---|
| Incivility | |
| *Harassment and Institutional Support* | Meredith |
| Bullying | |
| *Microaggressions and Avoidance* | Alice |
| *Gender Discrimination, Harassment, and Negligence* | Kayleigh |
| *Emotional (un)Intelligence and Job Threats* | Tessa |
| *Diversity Burden and Lack of Advocacy* | Ariya |
| *Power and Passivity* | Rosa |
| Abuse | |
| *Abusive Power and Lack of Advocacy* | Deborah |

***Incivility.*** I placed Meredith's experience within incivility because the aggressive behavior occurred one time and her supervisor immediately addressed the behavior. Bullying and harassment require on-going incidents (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). At a meeting to discuss how she was going to help correct a mistake made by her department, a male faculty member stood up, knocking a chair over, and aggressively yelled and blamed her for the mistake. He questioned her qualifications and belittled her in front of many colleagues. Not a single person in the room came to her defense. The aggressor and witnesses exhibited immediate mistreatment and breach of relationship, yet demonstrated no empathy. However, when Meredith reported the interaction, her supervisor immediately came to her defense, protected her, and called out the adverse behavior. The supervisor's proactive confrontation of the behavior possibly prevented additional future incidents of harassing and bullying behavior. This response supports one study where employees reported fewer negative physical symptoms and job stress when they experienced incivility in the workplace if they felt emotionally supported by their organization (Miner, Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Brady, 2012).

***Bullying.*** Participants recalled bullying displayed through on-going micro-aggressions, withholding appreciation and value, undermining authority and responsibilities, micro-managing, threatening job security, gossiping and backstabbing. Kayleigh experienced on-going aggression in the form of bullying and discrimination. Her aggressor would burst into her office questioning her decisions and degrading her qualifications. The ever-present fear and uncertainty of when the aggression would again present itself, took a toll on the emotional health and well-being of the participants.

The fear of bullying became a heavy burden, as the participants had to be vigilant of their work, verbal and written communication, emotional responses, and constant documentation of the steady abuse. Another participant, Alice, experienced bullying in the form of micro-aggression. Micro-aggressions "can signal a hostile or invalidating climate that threatens the physical and emotional safety of the devalued group, assails self-esteem, and imposes forced compliance (oppression) upon them." (Sue, 2010, p. 16). Alice described the micro-aggression on her every day mindset:

> It makes everything harder, makes everything harder, like everything I do is hard anyway, but it just... I don't get to just be a relaxed human being at work, I have to be this hypervigilant, paranoid actor, constantly watching people, to watch the interplay and trying to figure out what's gonna happen next. Like, who's gonna throw the shoe next? What's gonna break next? Just like that. It's like a psychologically violent minefield. That's what it feels like…Exhausting. It's just exhausting. Like you should be able to relax and enjoy your work, right?

Similarly, Tessa experienced regular bullying from her supervisor through micro-management, psychological unsafety, and emotional unintelligence. Every directive was closely monitored and her boss used Tessa's tearful emotions as a cause for job termination threats. This treatment relates to intimidation and threats, causing the participant to shut-down and feel shame (Dzurec, Kennison, & Albataineh, 2014).Tessa lived in a constant state of fear and apprehension of her supervisor's erratic moods. Her supervisor held sporadic hours, interrupted tasks, and doubled-down on meetings to "improve" communication. Tessa hoped the job would get better and that her supervisor would trust her judgment. She wanted to ask her boss, "Why can't you just appreciate what I can do, and we can work together as a

team, and we all have these different skills sets." Her boss could not handle a spectrum of emotions from her employees and, as a result, acted threatened by them. Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2011) identified this type of bully as showing "incongruous emotional displays" and "changeable mood and affect," whereby a supervisor displays arrogant behavior, while feeling terrified of losing power, or their moods change suddenly and without warning from exuberant to angry.

Rosa experienced bullying directed toward herself and a colleague. She observed how the aggressor used interpersonal charm to obscure maladaptive behavior. Rosa expressed, "His charisma and political acumen also meant that he was smart enough to get away with subtle bullying without others easily noticing." He moved up the career ladder while engaging in covert, verbal aggression and no one took steps to address the bullying. Cultures that "breed" bullying and hostility are characterized as competitive, adversarial, and highly politicized (Hoel & Salin, 2003).

*Workplace Abuse.* Deborah experienced aggression in the form of continuous bullying and emotional abuse from a male administrative faculty member. The aggression manifested in private and public outbursts of yelling, name-calling, cussing, and personal and professional degradation. In a review of workplace abuse, researchers discussed the consequences of workplace abuse and bullying. They found targets of workplace abuse experience negative health problems, trauma that can lead to PTSD, and physiological problems such as fight or flight response (Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011). Deborah felt trapped in a cycle of abuse. She recalled her faculty-administrator supervisor lying to damage her character and to counter her allegations of abusive behavior.

Human resources attempted mediation in response to Deborah's complaint but this led to secondary trauma and shame. This outcome contradicted studies on the use of mediation as tool to address aggression against university faculty (Keashly & Neuman, 2010), and it supported Namie's (2003) research on workplace violence, which found mediation is the wrong tool to use to address workplace aggression. Deborah reached out to other offices for help as well. She contacted equal employment opportunity office and the university diversity office. Each time she was told nothing could be done due to insufficient evidence or unchangeable managerial incompetence. Either she did not have enough evidence, or her boss was just a bad boss.

## Summary

This study on the phenomenon of adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education institutions showed pervasive examples of aggression in the forms of incivility, bullying, harassment, and abuse toward female professional staff. Seven females spoke up and shared their stories of adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education. They courageously offered their stories to highlight the female experience and voice in higher education. With few studies addressing workplace aggression for female professional staff, I found it critical to share each of the seven participant's experiences as individual but connected perspectives of the phenomenon. This study offers a platform for women working in higher education to voice their "normal" experience working in higher education, and declare workplace aggression exists and is part of their daily life.

Participants described their lived adverse interpersonal experiences as on-going, constant, overt, and covert. Aggressors took the form of male and female colleagues, and supervisors with and without formal authority. This study adds to the literature that female

professional staff in higher education experience workplace aggression, jobs threats, physical illness, self-blame, and feeling unsafe in their work environment. In support of previous research, targets do not always feel comfortable reporting bullying, and when they do, their organizations do not actively respond (Cleary et al., 2013; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010).

This study's tentative manifestations offered insight into the experiences of female professional staff. Participants experienced and witnessed a spectrum of workplace aggression through microaggressions, gossip, yelling, cursing, belittling, and threats. Consistent with workplace and higher education incivility and bullying literature, the participants' experiences aligned with experiences of faculty, academic staff, and upper administrators (Freedman & Vreven, 2016; Hollis, 2015; Tessens et al., 2011). This study suggests endemic bullying and harassment exist in higher education toward female professional staff, an under-studied population in academia.

Future studies could analyze the emotional and physical effects of bullying on female professional staff. Studies could explore how female professional staff respond to and move through adverse interpersonal experiences. This might offer strategies for training employees on how to best combat bullying in the workplace. Researchers might examine the steps taken by both supervisors and institutions as a whole in response to bullying and harassment.

This study offers a new description and ways of seeing, or lines of flight, adverse interpersonal experiences of female professional staff in higher education. The participants' vulnerability showed courage in sharing painful moments from their past and/or current experiences. Many participants told me that the data gathering process, through interviews and a written narrative, helped them process their adverse interpersonal experience. By

sharing their experience, they helped start an open conversation about workplace aggression. Their stories give hope to other women that they are not alone.

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# CHAPTER 5: Manuscript Two

Just Believe Me: Shame and Aggression in Higher Education

## Abstract

Workplace aggression continues to affect higher education employees' physical and psychological health and wellbeing. Studies show workplace bullying leads to shame, which leaves employees feeling trapped, powerless, and isolated. This study explored higher education female professional staffs' experience of moving through adverse interpersonal experiences, including incivility, bullying, harassment, and abuse. I used feminist post-intentional phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of female professional staff and their connection to workplace aggression, and shame resilience theory as a framework to learn how participants move through adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education. Overall, I found female professional staff experienced constructs of shame during adverse interpersonal experiences, and they utilized elements of shame resilience theory through expressing vulnerability, critically assessing their organizational culture, reaching out for empathy, and speaking up. Findings suggest female professional staff continue to experience shame even after seeking help from their institution. Participants experienced retaliation, avoidance, and re-traumatization from their institutions. I argue bullying in the workplace leads to shame which disempowers female professional staff, and though they speak up, higher education institutions disregard blatant signs of an unhealthy workplace.

Research supports the negative effects of workplace aggression on employees and organizations (Hollis, 2015; Lewis, 2004); however, research on the effects on female professional staff in higher education is limited. The lack of studies exposes a gap of a necessary and essential perspective and voice in higher education institutions and literature. Without the female professional staff perspective, studies fall into a single-way of thinking, an un-mindful understanding that there is one "normal" experience in higher education. Studies, societies, and cultures abound with violence (emotional, psychological, and physical) against women, and women are pressured into believing this is normal. The belief that they must care for the emotions of individuals in their lives and have concern for the pleasure of those in power over their own. Related to the #MeToo movement, Shabot and Landry (2018) wrote:

> The social pressure and its disciplinary measures to ensure women remain passive, objects in service of others. However, the #MeToo movement aims to break this pattern, this way of moving through the world. It shows us that the experiences of women as sexually harassed and assaulted are not extraordinary experiences. It shows us that women have not spoken enough, have not been listened to enough, and consequently, we do not know enough. (p. 4)

This study shows that workplace aggression is not unusual for female professional staff in higher education. From my survey to recruit participants, over 125 responders claimed to have either experienced or witnessed workplace aggression in higher education. Seven of the 125 responders were willing to speak their truth and share their experience so we could listen and know more.

Aggression presents in many forms including incivility, bullying, harassment and abuse and is commonly found in higher education (Hollis, 2015). Shame results from workplace aggression and can be connected to a wide range of psychological, emotional and physical issues for employees (Cleary, Walter, Andrew, & Jackson, 2013; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, 2011; Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006; Hollis, 2015; Lewis, 2004). Elevated levels of workplace aggression in higher education negatively affect employee productivity, health and psychological well-being (Namie, 2007). With limited research on female professional staff in higher education, less is known about their lived experiences with workplace incivility, bullying, and harassment. This study uses shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006) as the framework to explore how female professional staff move through shame experiences related to highly aggressive interpersonal interactions in higher education.

## Overview of Literature

The construct of shame has been studied since the early twentieth century. In the 1940s, many researchers held that a situation or context, known or unknown to others, caused either a shame or guilt emotional response (Benedict, 1946). This "public versus private" perspective gained popularity as an explanation of shame as an outcome of a public situation, and guilt as an outcome of a private or personal experience (Gehm & Scherer, 1988).

In the early 1970s, researchers in psychology and education began to more closely examine the topic of shame. Lewis (1971) was the first to critically examine shame as a construct. She distinguished differences between shame and guilt, two emotions commonly used interchangeably. People often struggle to differentiate the two emotions and tend to equate them when describing feelings or emotions (Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994). Lewis (1971) identified shame as "I am bad," whereas guilt is "I did something bad." Lewis'

(1971) influential work changed the context of how researchers study, measure, and analyze shame. Brown (2006) expanded Lewis' idea from a narrative perspective, asserting shame tells a story about who a person is, while guilt tells the story about an individual's behavior. Shame is deeply connected to, and may significantly affect, an individual's core view of themselves—their identity—resulting in feelings of brokenness and unworthiness of acceptance and belonging (Brown, 2006). In contrast, guilt is tied to behavior—words and actions that result in feelings of remorse, leading to further behaviors such as apologies and efforts toward reconciliation.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, researchers began to measure the shame construct in contexts involving mental and medical health issues such as depression, eating disorders, addiction, suicide and sexual assault (Heflin, 2015). A number of researchers continued to study shame in a variety of contexts and populations including nursing, higher education staff, undergraduate students, children, and adults (Loveday, 2016; Sedighimornani, 2015; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Other researchers focused on developing shame measurements and instruments (Rüsch et al., 2007; Sedighimornani, 2015).

**Shame**

Kaufman's (1992) foundational study of shame emphasized three constructs necessary for employees in their workplace. They need "power, identification, and affirmation" (p. 201) to engage in a healthy interpersonal work environment. Without these three elements, individuals feel disconnected and alone. Kaufman (1992) asserted disconnection inevitably leads to feelings of shame.

**Workplace bullying and shame.** Bullying behavior often manifests through gossip, rumors, intimidation and harassment (Davenport et al., 1999). Research shows bullying is

common in organizations and tends to be highly aggressive in higher education institutions (Hollis, 2015). Bullying in academia is "systematic long-term interpersonal aggressive behavior" (Sedivy-Benton, Strohschen, Cavazos, & Boden-McGill, 2015, p. 36) and most often targets individuals with less formal authority, less power and those identified as a threat (Frazier, 2011; Raskauskas & Skrabec, 2011). Researchers also found bullying leads to negative health and wellness in employees (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006; Lewis, 2004).

Workplace bullying negatively affects emotional, physical and mental health and can lead to heart problems, depression, and shame (Cleary et al., 2013; Einarsen et al., 2003; Heflin, 2015; Lewis, 2004). When employees become victims of bullying, they often experience shame. Shame acutely affects an individual's health and well-being (Brown, 2006) and often results in a feeling of wanting to remove oneself from an emotionally distressing situation or environment (Lewis, 1971). Lewis (2004) studied bullying experiences of adjunct lecturers in higher education and found these individuals experienced shame when bullied but did not reach out to supervisors. The adjunct lecturers instead sought out colleagues to share their experiences, and often chose to hide their shameful feelings from supervisors (Lewis, 2004).

The more an individual hides personal shame experiences, the stronger the feeling becomes and begins to take a toll on emotional, physical, and mental health (Brown, 2012; Connolly, 1995; Heflin, 2015). Negative effects of shame on employees correlates with higher cases of sick leave, worker's compensation, decreased productivity, and poor performance (Anda et al., 2004).

**Shame Resilience.** Few researchers have studied the practical and theoretical application of shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006). Constructs of shame, guilt, trust,

compassion and mindfulness make up the themes intertwined throughout Brown's (Brown, 2006; Brown, 2007; Brown, 2012) research. Brown studied the human experience with these constructs by analyzing stories and experiences using grounded theory. In Brown's (2006) shame resilience theory, empathy is the remedy to shame. Empathy grows connection, power, and freedom, and opposes feelings of being trapped, powerless, and isolated. Shame continues to grow with silence and secrecy (Brown, 2006). By sharing shame experiences with trusted people, individuals can help one another increase resilience and remove the shackles of emotional bondage (Brown, 2007) caused by shame.

Corresponding with Brown's research, Van Vliet (2008) completed a grounded theory study identifying shame as an attack on self-concept, social connection, and sense of power and control. This study framed shame as a powerful weapon against living authentically and wholeheartedly. Van Vliet (2008) explained shame attacks an individual's emotional core, comprised of self-concept, self-efficacy, and relationships with others. These attacks result in self-blame, withdrawal, and avoidance of interaction and interdependence on others.

Van Vliet proposed managing shame attacks using a shame management approach called self-reconstruction, similar to shame resilience theory. Self-reconstruction builds on five properties: connecting, refocusing, accepting, understanding, and resisting (Van Vliet, 2008, p. 233). In order to be resistant to shame through self-reconstruction, individuals must first share experiences and connect with others, they then can refocus priorities and remove negativity from their lives. The third and fourth properties involve accepting the shame experience, but also understanding the external factors, and ensuring the experience does not define the person. Lastly, individuals must resist self-blame and judgment. Van Vliet's

(2008) grounded theory research leapt directly to identifying connection with others and understanding context surrounding shame experience to fend off a shame attack.

**Empathy**

Brown's (2006) findings presented empathy as the opposite of shame, or the "antidote" to shame. Empathy is recognized as an essential behavior in helping relationships and a concept widely accepted in social work (Miller & Striver, 1997). Early empathy researchers at the Wellesley-Stone Center (Miller and Striver, 1997) defined empathy as "the capacity to feel and think something similar to the feelings and thoughts of another person that exists in all people" (p. 27). Feedberg (2007) expanded on the relational-cultural perspective of empathy by focusing on the mutuality of empathy and the important part social context plays in worldview.

Wiseman (1996) analyzed empathy in a variety of settings and posited four attributes of empathy: 1) see the world as others see it, 2) be non-judgmental, 3) understand other's feelings, and 4) communicate the understanding (p. 1165). Wiseman (1996) believed empathy necessary for working with people. She explained people must recognize and acknowledge their personal worldviews before truly seeing another's perspective (Wiseman, 1996). For example, shame can trigger thoughts such as "I'm not _____ enough." An empathetic response might be "That sounds really hard. Tell me more." Empathizing means understanding and *acknowledging* an individual's feelings, even when not feeling that way in the moment. Wiseman (1996) argued that being non-judgmental is critical to feeling and understanding another individual's emotional status.

Brown (2013) described empathy as connecting with others by communicating understanding. She defined communicating understanding as "recognizing the emotion in

other people, then communicating that" (Brown, 2013). When an individual is in a "deep hole and they are stuck," an empathetic and compassionate response is to get down into that hole and say "I know what it's like down here, and you're not alone." Empathy enables individuals to move from isolation to connectedness and empowerment toward growth and change.

## Research Design

The purpose of this study was to understand how female professional staff move through adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education. Moving through can sometimes make us assume the problem was fixed or there was resolution, however, I intentionally used this terminology to stay open to various endings to participant's stories. I could not know, entering into data gathering, whether there had been resolution to the participants' experiences. Throughout my study I stayed open to the possibility of happy or unhappy endings.

I used post-intentional phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of female professional staff in higher education. Post-intentional phenomenology focuses on what the phenomenon could become, acknowledging that feelings and experiences change over time (Vagle, 2016). Seven female professional staff participants shared adverse interpersonal experiences working in higher education. Adverse interpersonal experiences pertain to experiencing and/or witnessing aggression in the workplace. Aggression encompasses acts of incivility, bullying, harassment and workplace abuse. This article discusses the experiences of female participants moving through their adverse interpersonal experiences.

**Methodology**

Feminist post-intentional phenomenology as a methodology offers critical insight into the female lived experience and rejects a traditional sense of the male lived experience as the norm (Stawarska & Simms, 2013). Stemming from a long history of male established phenomenological philosophies and methodologies, feminist phenomenologists must carve a path for females to express the essence of a phenomenon with their voice. In this study, the overarching context is set within a male dominant patriarchal system (Neale & Özkanli, 2010), but the participants and I offer a new normal from a feminist perspective.

I found feminist post-intentional phenomenology an appropriate methodology to express the female lived experience because Vagle (2016) developed post-intentional phenomenology to bridge multiple theories, such as queer theory and feminist theory. As female professional staff in my study shared their stories of how they moved through adverse interpersonal experiences, whether they experienced it five years ago or were currently moving through it, the phenomenon of living through workplace aggression took multiple forms. The phenomenon did not have a single facade, description, or essence, but rather constantly shifted as women persisted through the experience. The following quote describes critical feminist phenomenologist's pursuit for sharing an ever-changing female lived experience:

> Feminist phenomenology finds itself having to balance the hermeneutic discipline of suspicion (of existing discourse structures) with a hermeneutic discipline of affirmation and empowerment (of the complexity of individual, situated, gendered life experiences) in order to find a place for ethical, non-patriarchal political action on behalf of women, men, and children. (Stawarska & Simms, 2013, p. 11)

In traditional phenomenology, a researcher explores lived experiences of a particular phenomenon to understand its essence (Vagle, 2016). Husserl's (1964) époche required understanding how social context and belief systems interfered with understanding phenomena. Stawarska and Simms (2013) summarized:

> For phenomenologists today the époche or bracketing implies that we have to be suspicious of our own cultural prejudices and accept that we will never be able to perform a complete reduction and see phenomena in their transcendental purity. (p. 11)

Post-intentional phenomenology takes this bracketing concept and widens the lens to explore not only the lived experience of the phenomenon at a given time, but also to understand its potential (Vagle, 2016). Finlay (2014) described this process as an effort "to push away any certainty that something has a certain meaning and then look to be surprised" (p. 124). When understanding phenomenon, we are capturing a lived experience of the phenomenon in a given moment and acknowledging that, with time, the meaning of that phenomenon will grow and change over time into something different.

Post-intentional phenomenology differs from the traditional phenomenological approach of bracketing assumptions, setting them aside and trying not to let them interfere with data interpretation and instead suggests bridling assumptions. To bridle assumptions is to check in with our biases and beliefs on a consistent basis as we gather, analyze and interpret data (Vagle, 2016), and understand we are always interconnected to our experiences. As we post-reflexively tune into personal experiences with a phenomenon, we can more easily interact and be aware of surprises, differences, and agreements with the data (Vagle & Hofsess, 2015).

**Theoretical Framework**

      I used Brown's (2006) shame resilience theory as my theoretical framework. Brown (2006) initiated a grounded theory study on the construct of shame which identified four continuums toward building resiliency in relation to shame: vulnerability, critical awareness, reaching out, and speaking shame. Brown (2007) explored how shame disconnects and isolates individuals from one another, and she proposed shame resilience as a way to articulate hurts and failures, and respond with empathy and compassion. Her research illuminated the common fear of being exposed and feeling "not enough"—for example, not smart enough, not pretty enough, not thin enough, or not strong enough. She expanded on the concept of vulnerability—a courageous and necessary step toward finding connection and strength and being "all in" (Brown, 2012). By practicing vulnerability, showing compassion and experiencing connection, individuals can live wholeheartedly. Brown (2015) expanded on her previous research of shame and vulnerability affirming that to understand emotions, individuals must be curious and live in the uncomfortable moments. She asserted individuals must understand where shame, anxiety, resentment, fear, and disappointment stem from to increase their resilience (Brown, 2015).

      **Data gathering.** I gathered data by first recruiting participants using a survey in Qualtrics, an online survey software. I sent the survey to four higher education related e-mail listservs. Out of 118 completed surveys, seven responders agreed and fully completed the study. Following Vagle's (2016) data collection recommendations, I gathered data through semi-structured interviews and written narratives. This method gave participants an opportunity to share their experience and voice without restriction. Questions were then used

to guide and structure the interviews and narratives, and participants were provided space to expound on their individual lived experiences.

Throughout data collection, I kept a post-reflexive journal to bridle my personal experience with adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education as I listened to and interpreted the participants' personal recollections and interpretations of their experiences. It was essential for me to monitor my reactions to the stories as I connected them to my personal beliefs, biases and assumptions.

**Participants.** To understand the feminine voice in higher education, I selected female professional staff working in higher education. Female professional staff include mid to low management and frontline staff, including academic advisors and counselors. After narrowing down respondents from my Qualtrics survey and requesting volunteers participate in two interviews and a written narrative, seven female staff from public and private institutions in North America agreed to participate in the study. The participants worked in a variety of student services departments including resident life, admissions, registrar, education outreach, and advising. Five of the seven participants identified as managers and held supervisor responsibilities.

**Data analysis.** In phenomenology, data analysis follows a whole-part-whole strategy (Vagle, 2016, p. 98). I followed this approach by reading the written narratives and interviews (transcribed by an online transcription company) as they came in taking a broad overview perspective of the data. Having my data transcribed through another source did have an effect on my data analysis. I did not transcribe the interviews or spend time on each nuanced phrase or emotional pause. Yet, I did review the transcriptions while listening to each interview to notice intonation and catch errors made in the transcription. At times it was

helpful to go back and watch and listen to the recording to get a better sense of the raw data. I further examined the data through a line-by-line outlining of the experiences of each participant while writing preliminary notes related to the research question. After a second review of the data, I wrote follow-up questions for the next round of participant interviews. As I continued my analysis, I re-read the data part-by-part, making notes in margins and questioning meaning. I entered my notes, along with questions and responses, into Nvivo 12 software to organize the data into preliminary findings. Using the preliminary nodes (or codes) related to my research questions, I printed and bound the data to review line-by-line. This secondary review helped me narrow my focus, engage deeper with the data and identify emerging tentative manifestations. I continued bridling my assumptions and biases, making notes of such instances in both the bound notebook and my post-reflexive journal.

After reviewing my primary codes, I re-entered and coded the data, developing secondary codes. Themes began to emerge offering insight into the phenomenon as I worked with the data. The research questions guided my analysis and helped me maintain focus, while remaining open to what the tentative manifestations might become. I eventually developed a category that included codes that demonstrate what it looks and feels like for female professional staff to move through adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education. When I examined the data within shame resilience theory, the constructs of shame emerged. I came to understand the phenomenon, the adverse interpersonal experiences of female professional staff, through the lens of shame and resilience. Female professional staff experienced shame while moving through adverse interpersonal experiences. My next step was to explore the data within the continuums of shame resilience theory.

## Tentative Manifestations

Study findings showed participants' feelings as they moved through adverse interpersonal experiences strongly corresponded with elements of shame. Brown (2006) defined shame as "an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging." In Brown's (2006) grounded theory study of shame resilience, she identified three constructs women feel when experiencing shame: trapped, powerless, and isolated. This study asserts *trapped* as having or perceiving unrealistic expectations with few solutions, *powerless* as a "lack of ability to effect change," and *isolated* as feelings of disconnection, hopelessness, and desperation. Feeling trapped, powerless, and isolated leads to feelings of shame, which becomes internalized behind secrecy and silence, and results in an underlying sense of being
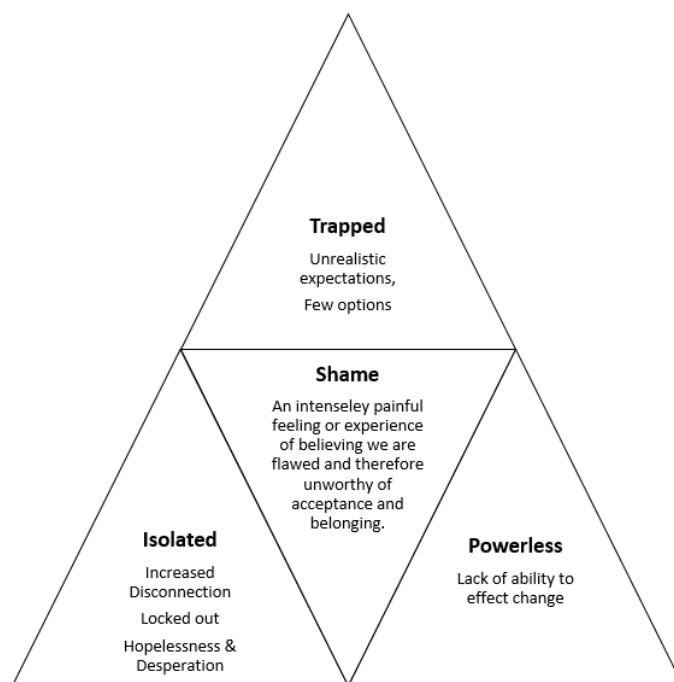


Figure 5.1 *Shame Construct*

unworthy of love and belonging (Brown, 2006, 2007). It should be noted few participants in my study identified feeling shame specifically; however, the language of feeling trapped, powerless, and isolated presented throughout their descriptions.

**Trapped.** The first construct associated with shame is feeling trapped. Brown (2006) likened feeling trapped to Frye's (2001) double-bind concept whereby women feel cornered when they experience unsurmountable expectations but have few options or solutions for

resolving or meeting the expectations. In this study, participants felt overburdened and undervalued, taken advantage of, and controlled.

***Undervalued and overburdened.*** Three participants felt undervalued during their adverse interpersonal experience. Kayleigh reflected how in two departments she worked in, both as a faculty and a staff member, "You didn't get praise. You were just kind of a grunt worker, and if you didn't hear anything negative, that was essentially your praise."

As a person of color who also identified as queer, Ariya felt both undervalued and overburdened. She worked in resident life and supervised resident hall staff. Most of her staff valued her work but two peers gossiped and undercut decisions she made. Ariya shared, "I hated going to work most days when all of this was going on. It felt like a constant cycle of criticism despite my four years of excellent work..." Ariya continued to serve her students amidst the gossip and unhealthy work culture, but she felt a burden she described as a gay tax and a race tax. She particularly felt the weight of this burden when her supervisor and vice provost regularly selected her to serve on various committees to meet diversity requirements. Ariya felt she could not say no when a person of higher power selected her and she felt this burden went unnoticed by her peers and her supervisor:

> It was this sense of being disposable and not being valuable…No one was paying
>
> attention, and I almost felt like it was taken for granted, like, "Of course you're gonna
>
> do this. You're brown and you're queer, and so that's what you're gonna do." And
>
> without paying attention to the toll it took on me in addition to my day-to-day job.

Ariya was trapped in a system where she wanted to serve her students well but felt undervalued and overburdened with few other options than to endure or find a new job.

A third participant, Deborah, felt undervalued and trapped, while shouldering

unrealistic expectations in her position. Her supervisor frequently changed his expectations

and instructions, which, in turn, significantly increased her workload as she was forced to

make adjustments or start over on projects. Deborah described the feeling of being trapped:

> Essentially, he started to control everything about my working environment—what
> projects I was working on, how I did those projects (every detail was discussed in
> weekly meetings, and he told me precisely what to do), with whom I could meet (no
> meetings with anyone outside the [program] without his prior approval), and when I
> was allowed to take time off work. At one point, at least 6 months into my tenure
> there, the Director told me he expected me to work and answer work e-mails even late
> into the night. When I told him I was not able to do that every night, he pointed to the
> Vice Provost and said, "Look at him!  He answers e-mails at all hours. Don't you
> want to succeed in this profession? You have to work like him! I'm teaching you,
> coaching you, and you do not appreciate it." (The Vice Provost was levels and levels
> above me in both status and pay.) When I explained that I was not trying to climb the
> ladder…he told me if I could not get all my work done, then perhaps they did not
> need me at the [program].

The participants felt overburdened by their supervisors and colleagues. Their institutions

overwhelmed them with unrealistic expectations and provided no emotional support.

Deborah identified an unhealthy pattern of abuse, and Ariya realized her institution's culture

disregarded her overloaded responsibilities.

> ***Taken advantage of and controlled.*** Tessa experienced another aspect of feeling

trapped as she described being controlled and taken advantage of by her supervisor. Her

supervisor asked for help from staff to collaborate on projects, but then ignored feedback and

took credit for ideas. The supervisor's mannerisms swung back and forth. Publicly, she praised Tessa at meetings but then privately criticized her work. In one-on-one meetings, her supervisor expressed value for Tessa's ideas but proceeded to take credit for them or even outright ignored her contributions. Tessa described one example:

> We're trying to redo our website, and she asked all of us as staff members to rewrite certain sections of our website, and we all spent quite a few hours on our certain sections, and then when we had our meeting with the website person, when we saw the document that she put together, she didn't take any of our written stuff. So we spent all these hours doing all this stuff, and then she just went ahead and did whatever she wanted anyway. So that was very frustrating too, it just felt like a waste of time.

She expressed feeling trapped and stifled when she tried to be creative:

> I feel like there's been so many instances where I've tried to go above and beyond in my job to improve processes in our department, or a program that she's put the kibosh on, that I feel like anything I do is not going to be the greatest.

Tessa couldn't use her creativity and advising expertise to grow in her position. She had to run everything she developed past her supervisor and, in most cases, her supervisor took credit for Tessa's work.

**Powerless.** The second construct associated with shame is the feeling of powerlessness. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defined power as "the ability to act or produce an effect" (as cited in Brown, 2006). Brown (2006) asserts when "experiencing shame, it appears that it was very difficult for the participants to produce an effect that could effectively counter shame" (Brown, 2006, p. 46). Feeling powerless stems from being less

able to identify emotions of shame because shame causes such powerful feelings of "confusion, fear, anger, judgment, and/or the need to hide" (Brown, 2006, p. 46). Brown (2006) found that even when participants could identify shame as a primary emotion from their experience, they struggled to assert change because of the "silencing and secret nature of shame" (Brown, 2006, p. 46). The participants in my study described several forms of feeling powerless when sharing their adverse interpersonal experiences.

*Hands tied.* Rosa described the feeling of powerlessness as having her hands tied. She witnessed and experienced bullying in her workplace. Her colleague, Helen, experienced bullying from a supervisor, Edward, who was Rosa's peer. Rosa felt she could not report Helen's experiences for a number of reasons: 1) it might make the problem worse, 2) Rosa's supervisor didn't have control over the matter, 3) it removed the responsibility out of Helen's hands, 4) and it felt like a breach of confidence. Rosa felt her only option was to empathize, sympathize, and offer advice. After one vent session from Helen, Rosa described how she felt:

> In this moment, I felt frozen. All I could do was empathize with Helen. I could not offer her any solutions, nor could I conjure any reasonable way to take my own actions. This was the hardest part for me to deal with, since I'm a person who looks for solutions immediately when I see a problem. I hated that feeling of having my "hands tied." After she left, I had to sit with an "icky" feeling... It made me feel cynical and sad, but most of all, angry. I was angry at Edward for being so mean and for abusing his power. And I was angry that he was so easily able to get away with it.

Rosa felt powerless to effect change for her colleague and for herself. When Rosa did finally speak up, her supervisor did nothing to address the bullying allowing the aggressive behavior continued.

      ***Unheard and unseen.*** Deborah experienced bullying and workplace abuse from her supervisor. Deborah reported the accounts to human resources and other support services; however, no one stopped her supervisor's abusive behavior. Through this experience, her sense of power deteriorated. She participated in mediation meetings between human resources, her supervisor and herself, but instead of finding resolution she was issued a warning regarding her work ethic. Deborah continued to seek support but found none. The stress of being bullied affected her mental state:

> As my stress levels rose, my ability to keep a clear head and fight for myself deteriorated, as well. I was less and less able to articulate my experiences, and with a total lack of proof (written proof, physical wounds, etc.), I just kept receiving shrugs and being told that no one could help me.

The university employee support services attributed her problem to "just a bad boss."

      Ariya also felt unseen and unheard. With her overloaded work responsibilities and service on multiple committees as the "token person of color," she felt invisible to her supervisor and colleagues. She explained: "…I think it was almost a sense of…feeling invisible, and that's how I felt, like I'm working my ass off, but I feel invisible to the people around me who should be…paying attention." She wished her colleagues and supervisor had supported her and offered empathy, "But there wasn't a willingness to come alongside and partner and help me carry some of the things that I was carrying."

***Psychological (un)safety.*** Participants experienced overt job threats and psychologically unsafe work environments. When participants' jobs were threatened, they felt silenced, shut down and hyperaware of their actions and the actions of others. This led to feeling psychologically unsafe. Psychological safety "describes people's perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a particular context such as a workplace" (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In order for employees to develop trust, take risks, be creative, and speak up with new ideas, they need to feel safe from fear of retaliation from their organization (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). As participants spoke up and reached out for help, their real or perceived psychological safety decreased. They experienced overt and covert methods of job threats and retaliation for speaking up. Alice's supervisor threatened her job, and the jobs of her colleagues:

> …at one point when the team was negotiating for changes in the documents I was producing, Alex grew visibly upset (his face went red and he leaned in) and stated, "I should just shut down the whole unit and start over."

Alice illustrated the psychological impact of bullying and lack of support from her organization:

> It makes everything harder…like everything I do is hard anyway, … I don't get to just be a relaxed human being at work, I have to be this hypervigilant, paranoid actor, constantly watching people, to watch the interplay and trying to figure out what's gonna happen next. Like, who's gonna throw the shoe next? What's gonna break next? Just like that. It's like a psychologically violent minefield. That's what it feels like…Exhausting. It's just exhausting.

Rosa reported her colleague Helen experiencing anxiety at the possibility of losing her job due to bullying from her supervisor. Rosa explained:

> She [Helen] expressed her fear that his [Edward] desire for more power and a higher position, combined with his awareness that neither of us were supportive of his hire, could put her job security at risk. At the very least, it did not bode well for her morale. In her words, he would be "watching her like a hawk," ready to pounce on any little mistake that he could fault her for that would give him ammunition to fire her. His charisma and political acumen also meant that he was smart enough to get away with subtle bullying without others easily noticing.

Another participant, Tessa, also experienced job threats from her supervisor. When Tessa showed vulnerability and emotion, her supervisor took Tessa's remarks of disappointment critically and personally. As a result, her supervisor documented the meeting and commented how there could be possible job termination because of Tessa's behavior. Tessa described feeling unsafe in her position:

> I just felt like something was coming, but I don't know what that would be, or if we would just move on and ignore it, but I don't know if I was expecting to be written up. I think I was saying that to my family, like, "I don't know. Is she gonna write me up?"

Deborah experienced threats to her job as her supervisor continued to bully her. After reporting his abusive behavior to human resources, then receiving a warning for reports he made against her, he continued to harass and pile on work:

> … it was very stressful, because I felt like my job was always on the line. And he would say that too, he would say things like, "I'm not sure that we need someone in

the position that you're in," or "I'm not sure your position is really crucial to the institute," things like that.

His threats continued as time went on:

I asked what his expectation was for my work time, and he said (and yes, he literally said this), "You are not 100% efficient at work; no one is. So you have to make up for that inefficiency when you leave. I expect you to work 24 hours a day, if you have to, to complete the tasks I give you. If what I give you is too much, it may be time for you to leave." From that point, he began piling more and more work onto my desk and telling me to complete it or lose my job. Without a union to protect me, I did what I could.

Deborah felt powerless to affect change with her supervisor's behavior and powerless in the face of her institution's lack of willingness to help. She described the lasting effects of feeling psychologically unsafe and powerless after finding a new position at a different university: "It took me at least 6 months to fully release all of my fear of losing my job and my reputation, of being hollered at and embarrassed, of being threatened and intimidated. I just kept waiting for it to happen…"

Participants continued to feel powerless as they experienced bullying, harassment, and abuse from their colleagues or supervisors. Although they tried to reach out for help, their institutions responded poorly to their reports. This powerlessness gradually affected their since of belonging and connection.

**Isolated.** According to Brown (2006), the third construct associated with shame is isolation. By feeling there is no way out, which can lead to no effective solution, individuals begin to feel disconnected from others, hopelessness and despair. In my study, participants

experienced isolation in the form of disconnection from and a lack of trust in others. In some acute instances, participants went so far as to either checkout or shut down in response to their adverse interpersonal experiences.

*Lack of connection and belonging.* The more participants felt isolated, the less connected they felt and the less they felt belonging in their departments and institutions. Participants used words such as desperate, isolated, unnoticed, distrust, and diminished to describe their isolation. Deborah found herself in a dire situation after she realized her institution would not take steps to help her:

> I, however, was desperate for someone to help get me out of the situation, to believe me and to reprimand him, to do more than just say, "We're going to train him." That was what I never received, but which I was so desperate for—an escape hatch from a miserable situation.

Ariya found herself isolating from others. With few peers to confide in, due to their habit of telling lies and gossiping about her and along with a supervisor she did not trust, she felt alone and unsupported. Additionally, as a person of color who was frequently selected to serve on committees, she felt her diversity burden went unnoticed. She began to question her institution:

> …it made me question the values of the institution. We say we're committed to diversity inclusion, but you're treating people in this way that just marginalizes them further. Are we really committed to diversity inclusion?

The lack of awareness regarding Ariya's diversity burden, the gossip and dysfunctional work environment, along with cliques that divided allegiances within the department led to distrust and a lack of belonging. With only certain staff invited to non-work events, Ariya began to

notice a clear "who belongs, who doesn't belong," distrustful culture as bullying and exclusionary behavior increased. As dynamics changed, Ariya never felt safe to be vulnerable and ask for help.

Similarly, other participants experienced distrust and disconnection. Alice's isolation and distrust linked directly to disconnection. As relationships between herself and her supervisors eroded, distrust filled the void. The longer it took her supervisor to respond to her reports of bullying and harassment, the less safe she felt sharing her experience, and the more isolated she became. Similarly, Tessa felt a lack of trust between her supervisor and herself because her supervisor had "experienced people burning her before in this position" and she took this out on Tessa. Tessa began to take on guilt and negative feelings from former employees.

*Dissociation*. As participants experienced and reported adverse interpersonal experiences to their supervisors, human resources or other support services, very few received the response they anticipated. Each institution took different steps to document the report, but only one participant experienced resolution in a way that addressed the aggressive interpersonal behavior. Consequently, as participants felt more isolated, they began to mentally check out or emotionally shut down. For example, Alice began to distance herself when conflict arose. She explained, "Psychologically, it's likely dissociation. I can't believe what's happening, so I just check out and am gone in the worst of it." Later she shared:

> In those moments, I just check out because it's just so overwhelming... I can't stand being in it, and so... I just vacate for a while. I'm still there trying to attend to it, visibly forcing myself to look like I'm engaged, even though inside, I'm freaking out, and I've checked out.

Tessa described feeling numb. "At work, I just have tried to just be numb to it all, so I'm just like, "Whatever, this happens all the time." She decided it best to "just shut up and not say anything else" as she continued her work pretending everything was fine. This perpetuated isolation as she was unable to be her authentic self with her supervisor. Tessa described how this felt:

> I feel like I have to be so "on" and so, "La la la, I'm so happy and nice, and I'm going to smile, and I'm gonna laugh at your jokes, even though I don't think you're funny..." It's just not the person I wanna be.

Participants felt trapped, powerless and isolated in their jobs. When they reached out for support, they received little acknowledgement. Ariya felt so trapped and undervalued she devoted her time to her students and to finding a new job rather than report a complaint against her colleagues. The vice provost talked to Tessa's supervisor, but this conversation only shifted the bullying behavior to a different target. Deborah felt powerless when she reached out to human resources, but in the end her supervisor had more power and evidence against her than she did him.

## Discussion

In the midst of shame and disconnection stemming from adverse interpersonal experiences, participants moved through their experiences in various ways. Using shame resilience theory as a framework, I used shame resilience continuums to understand the participants' experiences. The shame resilience continuums include: 1) recognizing shame and vulnerability, 2) practicing critical awareness, 3) reaching out for empathy, and 4) speaking shame (Brown, 2006, 2007). In this section I discuss ways participants moved through, or did not move through, their adverse interpersonal experiences and shame within

the SRT framework. The idea of *moving through* an experience assumes there is resolution, however, I found the participants were stalled in the shame of their adverse interpersonal experiences. While analyzing the data, there were glimmers of shame resilience and attempts to move through the shame of their adverse interpersonal experiences, yet empathy they received from friends and family did not appear to be enough. Participants needed empathy from the context they lived their experience in. They needed to be heard and listened to by their institution in order to help them successfully move through and move forward from the aggressive experiences. Some participants found a stronger voice, while others continued to feel unheard. When participants were supported by their supervisors or colleagues who witnessed the adverse experiences, they grew more resilient (van Heugten, 2013). When their shame went unacknowledged by their institution, they felt less resilient.

Table 5.1

*Shame Construct Themes*

| Shame Construct and Themes | Participants |
|---|---|
| Trapped | |
| *Undervalued and Overburdened* | Kaleigh, Ariya, Deborah |
| *Taken Advantage of and Controlled* | Tessa |
| Powerless | |
| *Hands Tied* | Rosa |
| *Unseen and Unheard* | Deborah, Ariya |
| *Psychological (un)Safety* | Alice, Rosa, Tessa, Deborah |
| Isolated | |
| *Lack of Connection and Belonging* | Deborah, Ariya, Alice, Tessa |
| *Dissociation* | Alice, Tessa |

**Acknowledging Vulnerability.** In shame resilience theory, individuals know their vulnerabilities as when they are most "capable of being wounded" (as cited in Brown, 2006), they are able to recognize shame without being too caught off-guard. At one end of a

spectrum knowing and acknowledging one's vulnerabilities builds shame resilience in the areas of awareness, recognition, protection and support. At the other end of this spectrum, lies, confusion, judgment, fear, anger, or blame when caught-off guard by one's vulnerabilities (Brown, 2006).

In reviewing my data, it was difficult to place the participants firmly at either end of the spectrum because acknowledging vulnerability is an ever-shifting process of awareness. Some participants reflected on how their personal vulnerabilities connected them to their shame experiences. They shared how they began to shift the blame to themselves and wonder if they were too emotional or too sensitive. Yet even in the midst of their reflections, some were able to articulate how, in the middle of their shame experiences, their self-awareness enabled them to monitor their responses and reach out for help. Several participants reported they continued to experience shame triggers or flashbacks even after taking steps to address the problem. Some participants recalled trying to "explain away" their adverse interpersonal experience; others tried to sidestep the harassment and move on to new jobs, while others continued to struggle with the underlying feeling of a lack of psychological safety in their workplace.

*Stigma.* Kayleigh recognized her vulnerability when she struggled how to explain her resignation to future employers. Instead of referring to the harassment as the reason for leaving, she explained her resignation was to focus on her career aspirations and education. Although she was aware of her vulnerability, there was still fear of judgment from future employers. She described her caution:

> While true, that's not the whole truth. I never know if I should mention that I was harassed repeatedly. Would that make me look bad to a potential employer? Would

they think less of me? There's this stigma that seems to make women feel like they

should have persevered and worked through it, whereas men can just move on. I don't

know if that's a real or perceived stigma, but it keeps me from speaking freely about

why I left that position.

Kayleigh also felt uncomfortable sharing how motherhood played a part in her resignation.

She saw that the 1950s stereotype still existed regarding stay-at-home moms. She said "there

seems to be the stereotype that stay-at-home moms are poorly educated, had no career

aspirations, their only aspiration was to have children and stay home with them..." Kayleigh

did not want that stereotype interfering with her career trajectory. She chose to have seasons

for work, education and motherhood, often simultaneously. Kayleigh found healing in her

spiritual and immediate families, as well as pursuing her Ph.D. and finding a career where

she is valued and successful.

     ***Physical, mental, and emotional response.*** Tessa experienced a physical response to

being vulnerable to shame. After a vice provost spoke to her supervisor, Tessa saw small

changes, but the same micro-managing and neurotic behavior persisted. Tessa remained

hyperaware, not knowing if she would be reprimanded or praised. She felt her depression

return and she felt physically sick when in the office. In response to shame or shame triggers,

it is common to experience a physical, mental. or emotional response (Brené Brown, 2007).

She described the constant swing of emotion:

…is it resolved to the point where I can function at work? I mean, technically, yes.

But it's still racking my brain every day. Recently, in the last two weeks, she came

into my office for a one-on-one or something, and she seemed off, and then I

immediately had a physical reaction, like, I thought I was gonna throw up, and I'm

like, "How do I get out of here gracefully to throw up..."

Similar to Tessa, Alice felt on edge and "a constant fear of them [aggressors] trying

some way to chip away at me." Not knowing what the reactions would be if she did

something wrong or different, she continued to feel fearful, alone, and stuck between

expectations for innovation and disapproval for doing things differently. Her emotional state

worsened as she continued to feel unheard, trapped, isolated, and powerless. She felt

depressed, she binge ate, and she isolated from others.

*Self-doubt.* Ariya noticed her vulnerability and shame triggers connected to her

diversity burden and ethnicity. Ariya experienced self-doubt most often when meeting with

white female colleagues. After her adverse interpersonal experience with two white female

co-directors who used their majority power and influence to spread lies about her, she

became highly aware when women show disrespect toward her. She noticed their non-verbal

eye rolls and body language, as well as their passive verbal cues of talking over her that

communicated no respect for her or her ideas. Ariya described how, despite being in a new

position with more formal authority, she still encounters situations that triggered self-doubt

and shame:

> Particularly with white women, I'm sitting in spaces where it's just very clear that
>
> there's no respect for me or what I'm saying is the stupidest thing people have ever
>
> heard of. It takes me right back to that and I feel like that I'll start apologizing for
>
> what I'm saying, I doubt myself, although, taking something in a different direction...
>
> I don't function from a place of confidence and I think that's when I noticed…

Although Ariya had more formal authority in her new position, she came across similar situations to her former job.

**Practicing Critical Awareness.** The continuum of practicing critical awareness connects personal experiences with critically analyzing the surrounding context. Brown (2007) proposed we "move toward resilience by learning how to contextualize (I see the big picture), normalize (I'm not the only one) and demystify (I'll share what I know with others)" (p. 99). My study aligned with this continuum. As participants moved through their adverse interpersonal experiences, they began to question their organization's expectations, their supervisors' and peers' behavior, as well as their role in how others perceived them.

*Organizational Culture.* Some participants in the study chose to pivot from self-blame to a bigger picture focus on unhealthy organizational culture. Ariya became critically aware of tokenism occurring across the institution. While she experienced tokenism through the diversity burden, her institution appeared unaware and avoidant of these concerns. Ariya acknowledged this was an institution-wide problem and knew she was not alone in her experience, but chose to stay silent and instead found a new job at a different institution. Kayleigh believed she was experiencing age discrimination and reported it but was told nothing could be done. Years later, she came to understand she had, in fact, experienced gender discrimination, yet her institution did not investigate. Instead the culture of the institution was to ignore the bullying behavior. Alice also was critically aware of her organization's bullying and avoidant culture. She witnessed her supervisor's ignoring her cries for help, and human resources' meek mediation.

Namie's (2003, 2008) research on workplace bullying argued organizations need to be better trained and prepared to handle reports of bullying. Namie (2003) asserted once an

individual has been targeted, the situation is past mediation. The behavior must be stopped, and the organization must help the target develop healthy coping strategies. Within shame resilience theory, when people recognize signs of discrimination in the organizational culture, they become critically aware they are not to blame. Participants in this study experienced shame at various points in their adverse interpersonal experiences—feeling trapped, powerless or isolated—but as they analyzed their situations and began to ask questions, they understood the problem to be an institutional one.

*Job Turnover.* Some participants moved through their adverse interpersonal experiences by being critically aware of their social context and deciding to remove themselves from the unhealthy work environment. Three of the seven participants found new jobs and another continues to seek new employment. The decision to find new employment is a common response to workplace aggression. Incivility, bullying and harassment can result in employee turnover and absenteeism in organizations (Namie, 2007), leading to high turnover costs to an institution (Persky, 2018). The three other participants remain in their positions. One participant received immediate support from her institution and moved through her adverse interpersonal experience more quickly than the rest. The other two participants continue to work in the same unhealthy environment, with little to no changes.

*Trauma-informed organizations.* Another way participants practiced critical awareness of their situation was to notice how the experience affected them once they left their position. Deborah found a new position in a supportive and healthy work environment, but continued to struggle with the psychological effects from her previous job experience. She often worried she would get yelled at or fired for making a mistake. She shared:

…I find I still have some of the same fears. When I make an error, I still grow fearful.

I ramp myself up with worry and tear up when I am corrected. It is hard to help my

colleagues understand what I have been through, and even though they are

compassionate people who ascribe to the idea of believing the accuser, i.e. me in this

situation, I think it is hard for them to have compassion over the long-term or to want

to understand why I respond to some things the way I do. I have had to learn to

toughen up and try not to show how much fear I have building inside of me—I alter

my behavior to make sure everyone else is more comfortable.

Deborah continued to feel anxiety after she took the new position. She recognized how difficult it was to truly leave the traumatic experience behind. In her new job, she feared losing her job and found it difficult to explain past experiences to her new boss and colleagues, but she recognized she needed support and chose to share those experiences to help facilitate safer communication strategies from a trauma-informed perspective. Deborah now works in a unique position advising students in support of their mental and emotional health and well-being, something she connects to well after her adverse interpersonal experience. She is currently advocating for higher educations to train their employees to be trauma-informed.

Hallberg and Strandmark (2006) studied the health consequences of workplace aggression. They found bullying to be a "serious psychological trauma" that can take years to recover from and return to "normal life." From the stress of their trauma, their participants reported "experiencing difficulties in concentrating, thinking and, in some cases, finding the right words when expected to talk" (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006, p. 117). Namie (2007) reported victims of workplace aggression experience trauma when their supervisors "nit-

pick" their work, sending a silent message of self-doubt to the victim. Namie (2007)
discovered "unremitting exposure to stress from a toxic workplace can harm an individual's
psychological well-being. Problems include inordinate anxiety, clinical depression (in 39
percent of targets) and post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD" (p. 46).

Organizations are starting to implement strategies to respond appropriately to
employees with past trauma. Trauma-informed care originated from a study of adverse
childhood experiences (ACEs) by Kaiser Permanente in the early 1990s. This study showed
the lasting effects on the health and well-being of children with ACEs, stemming from
different forms of trauma, such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. Most ACEs
research is focused on children (Walkley & Cox, 2013); however, research on the long-term
effects of ACEs on adults is becoming more prevalent (Anda et al., 2006, 2004). There are
few studies exploring the effects of ACEs on adults in higher education institutions, focusing
mostly on college age students (Khrapatina & Berman, 2017). A trauma-informed approach
for working with adults is also much less common than its application to children.

**Reaching Out.** According to shame resilience theory individuals who reach out to
others for connection and experience empathy from those around them develop shame
resilience. Brown (2007) explained:

> We all need to feel valued, accepted and affirmed. When we feel worthless, rejected
> and unworthy of belonging, we feel shame…When we find the courage to share our
> experiences and the compassion to hear others tell their stories, we force shame out of
> hiding and end the silence.

Findings in this study showed participants reached out to individuals personally close to
them, such as family and friends. They also reached out to individuals at their institution.

Although the support from their family and friends helped their emotional well-being, the lack of support from their institutions continued to hinder their resilience. Employees need to feel belonging and affirmation within their interpersonal work settings. Without it, they feel devalued and discouraged (Kaufman, 1992).

*Empathy from friends and family.* My findings partially correspond with shame resilience theory. When participants reached out to individuals they trusted, they experienced belonging and connection. Participants reached out to family, friends, and mentors. This community listened, empathized, and offered a safe place for the participants to share their story and feel belonging. Their friends and family offered advice, strategies for staying unemotional at work, and a safe place to process their adverse interpersonal experience. Research showed women are more resilient against anxiety and hopelessness when in community (Attell et al., 2017). By reaching out, participants experienced some relief and empathy to help them build resilience.

*Empathy from the institution.* In contrast, when participants reached out to individuals within their institution, whether a supervisor or department, they continued to experience isolation and powerlessness. Debebe's (2011) study of safe organizational learning environments, or holding environments, asserted "the aim is to help learners take risks in a safe environment so they may develop the capacity to handle the demands, challenges, and pressures of the external environment" (p. 685). Participants did not receive the empathy they needed to relieve their shame, even after reaching out to friends or family. Their health deteriorated and they continued to feel trapped and alone. At an organizational level, most participants' experiences of reaching out to individuals with power did not reflect Brown's theory that if an individual shares their shame experiences, shame resilience grows

(Brown, 2006). This could be because departments are not always a well-known or trusted individual. Findings suggest that in order for participants to gain shame resilience, the context their shame occurred in needs to be part of the healing. The participant's institutional representatives need to offer empathy, actively listen, and take action in helping resolve the workplace aggression. Without this empathy and without believing the participants, the female professional staff struggled to move through their experience and build shame resilience.

Participants in my study found some departments offered sympathy, but most often resolution was not obtained, nor were adequate steps taken to address the adverse behavior. In short, the behavior was allowed to continue. This brings into question whether feeling empathy from a colleague, supervisor, or even human resources is enough to heal and move forward. Only one participant described feeling free from the shame, guilt, and embarrassment of her adverse interpersonal experience. Participants continued to express feeling trapped, powerless, and isolated even after their institution met with them and offered empathy.

*Witnesses.* Notably, none of the participants observed a peer report bullying or incivility to someone with higher power. Some peers offered a listening ear or vented alongside; however, no one reported the problems. According to research by the Workplace Bullying Institute (Namie, 2008), 28.4% of witnesses or bystanders provide moral and social support, 7.1% give advice, 15.7% did or said nothing. The rest of the bystanders either distanced themselves from the target, or supported the perpetrator by following their instructions, siding with them, or betraying the target. In my study, none of the participants

had colleagues speak up for them or report the aggressive behavior. Consequently, participants reported they continued to feel isolated, trapped, and powerless.

**Speaking Shame.** Six of the seven participants spoke up and asked for help from individuals with power and authority above them. Following the shame resilience theory continuum of speaking shame, they spoke their shame. One participant's experience shifted from department to department—human resources, equal employment opportunity, diversity, and inclusion—but the answer was always the same: "we can't do anything." The six participants each spoke up, shared their stories, and advocated for themselves but found they were unable to meet the institutional requirement for adequate proof of bullying and/or incivility. In some instances, it appeared the behavior was not egregious enough. In others, the perpetrator benefited from a position of higher power. Despite all their efforts, participant voices were shut down and the aggressive behavior continued.

*Voice.* Participants held different power of voice as they moved through their adverse interpersonal experience. Some women felt empowered with confidence to speak up and voice concerns. One participant felt enabled to speak up after she began to recognize how modern U.S. culture continues to suppress the female voice by teaching women "to be nice, and be quiet, and play by the rules." Although it was intimidating to report to her supervisor's supervisor, she felt enabled to be strong and brave. She began to recognize her voice and gave herself permission to "break the mold" of silence.

Other participants felt the opposite effect. Many felt unheard and silenced. Participants who spoke up for policy changes received complaints and chastisement in return. One participant felt her voice muted and another her authority and expertise questioned. Participants who spoke out against bullying and harassment were told there was nothing that

could be done and in these cases, participants reported speaking up and speaking shame only further silenced their voices.

*Institutional response.* The institutions responded poorly and passively to reports of bullying. In each of the participant's stories, the institutional response, at best, acknowledged the participant's concerns but made no effort to address the aggressive behavior. Six of the seven participants did not find any resolution. In the literature, it was common for organizations, and in particular the human resource departments often tasked with handling such reports, to respond negatively or not at all to complaints of bullying in the workplace. Cowan's (2012) research explored higher education human resource (HR) employees' sense-making of bullying reports. She found HR employees assume miscommunication as the reason for bullying reports. Persky (2018) found human resource employees are often unaware of the misery bullying causes.

Another researcher found reports of bullying are frequently ignored or made worse by the organization, including human resources (Namie, 2003). In a survey of human resource and non-discrimination employees, "17 percent took positive steps to stop the bullying, 32 percent reacted negatively, and 51 percent did nothing" (Namie, 2003, p. 2). These statistics parallel my findings. In comparison to my study's participants, only one participant saw the institution take positive steps toward resolution. Another participant saw attempts to address the bullying behavior but to no avail. The remaining participants experienced no action or negative actions from their institution.

In the end, only one participant felt she had been able to move through the experience with the support and action of her institution. Other participants had to discover alternative methods of moving through the experience. They moved through by relying on the empathy

of their family and friends or focusing their efforts on finding new jobs. Still others have not fully moved through their experience and continue to work in the same environment, plagued by the same aggressive behaviors. They continue to carry the effects of their adverse interpersonal experience and the lack of adequate institutional response.

## Summary

This study offered insights on how female professional staff in higher education experience and move through adverse interpersonal experiences. The participants in my study experienced at least one, if not all, constructs of shame. Tentative manifestations showed participants experienced shame including feeling trapped, powerless and isolated (Brown, 2006). The feelings of shame occurred while they experienced bullying, harassment, and abuse from colleagues and supervisors. In their experiences of shame, they felt unheard and unseen, silenced, threatened, re-traumatized, and disconnected. Through being shame their voices were silenced. Their perception of power, or the ability to affect change dissipated, leaving them feeling isolated and alone. To further this shame, there was silence around them. No witnesses or colleagues spoke up for them or reported the incidents. The lack of empathy from their supervisors and institutions minimized their attempts to reach out and move through their adverse interpersonal experiences. By being silenced, they were less empowered to speak up and feel heard and valued.

Evidence of shame resilience partially emerged as participants practiced acknowledging vulnerabilities and critical awareness of higher education as a social construct. Participants reached out for empathy and connection with family, friends, and colleagues. They demonstrated vulnerability and courage in speaking shame by sharing their story to their institutions and in this study. They broke patterns of silence to better empower

other women to share similar experiences, however, their voices were silenced and their

stories were shut-down by their institutions.

Table 5.2

*Shame Resilience Themes*

| **Shame Resilience Themes** |
| --- |
| Acknowledging Vulnerability |
| *Stigma* |
| *Physical, Mental, and Emotional   Response* |
| *Self-Doubt* |
| Practicing Critical Awareness |
| *Organizational Culture* |
| Job Turnover |
| Trauma Informed Institution |
| Reaching Out |
| *Empathy from Friends and Family* |
| *Empathy from Institution* |
| *Witnesses* |
| Speaking Shame |
| *Voice* |
| *Institutional Response* |

The findings suggest female professional staff in higher education experience shame

when trying to move through adverse interpersonal experiences. Participants partially

developed shame resilience, but the response from their institutions doubled the shame and

prevented them from experiencing freedom and belonging within their institutions.

Participants shared their experience with trusted individuals and although six of the seven

participants spoke up and reached out for help from an individual with formal authority, they

continued to experience shame. Each participant found seeking help in their institution did

little to alleviate the shame they experienced, and in some instances, worsened their work

experiences. They continued to experience shame and its effects as their institution's lack of response avoided the problem.

These findings offer insight to how female professional staff move through adverse interpersonal experiences, including using elements of shame resilience theory. My study also adds to literature in the topics of bullying in the workplace, shame, and empathy. In this study, institutional response was negative. Institutions appeared to lack the ability to offer a safe holding environment for female professional staff to share their adverse experiences and find resolution. As a result, they continued to experience residual trauma, self-doubt, and silenced voices.

**Recommendations.** This study focused on constructs of shame experienced by female professional staff in higher education that stem from encounters with adverse interpersonal behavior. Additionally, the study examined how female staff used shame resilience to move through these experiences. Future research could expound on the individual continuums that make up shame resilience theory, including acknowledging vulnerability, practicing critical awareness, reaching out and speaking shame within the context of higher education. This study touched on how higher education institutions' response to adverse interpersonal experiences affect the female voice and lived experience. Additional research could be undertaken to look at how higher education institutional response to female staff's reports of bullying and harassment. Participants shared the effects of the #MeToo movement and its empowerment for women to share their stories of bullying and harassment. I suggest researchers look closer at female professional staff's voice in higher education, particularly from a feminist perspective. Researchers could also explore

modern discrimination and its connection to trauma-informed institutions through a shame resilience theory lens.

**Limitations.** This study cannot be generalized to the larger population as it only considers a female professional staff perspective. Another limitation was the experiences of the participants took place at different points in time. Some participants experienced the adverse interpersonal experiences a number of years ago or later in their careers; others are still walking through their described experience. I also did not look closely into potential effects of age, timeline of incident, and length of career – all possible influences on the participants' experiences and interpretations. The participants also self-reported their experiences, which in turn I interpreted through my own bridled experiences.

**Theoretical and practical implications.** Important theoretical implications came out of this study in understanding the female professional staff's lived adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education. The higher education context has a rich history in patriarchal systems establishing the male lived experience as the norm. It is essential to study the female lived experience within a feminist framework to move toward a new normal. This study offered a platform for female professional staff to voice their stories of workplace aggression, describe the experiences, and offer new perspectives of their daily "normal", working in higher education. The platform further enabled female professional staff to speak and be listened to so we can know more. Shame resilience theory also added to the feminist framework, as it was developed primarily through the lens of the North American female perspective.

This study also holds practical implications. My review of the literature found limited research on female professional staff experiences with bullying and harassment. The tentative

manifestations showed shame as an outcome of aggression in higher education for female staff, as connected to emotional and psychological well-being. By being aware of and taking action on aggression in the workplace, higher education leadership can explore avenues for relieving externally imposed shame on their employees and training employees at all levels in being trauma-informed and in shame resilience.

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**CHAPTER 6: Manuscript Three**

Institutionalized Avoidance: Female Voices Silenced in Higher Education

**Abstract**

Previous research has shown high levels of bullying in the workplace, with poor organizational and institutional responses to workplace aggression. However, there are limited studies on institutional responses to bullying in higher education. This study explored the adverse interpersonal experiences of female staff working in higher education in North America through a post-intentional phenomenological lens. I explored how higher education institutions respond to reports of workplace aggression (i.e. incivility, bullying, harassment, and abuse) from female professional staff. Findings pointed to a pattern of institutional avoidance and silenced voices. Discussion in this paper focused on endemic workplace aggression toward women in higher education employment, lack of support for professional female staff who experience workplace aggression, and outcomes stemming from institutional avoidance. The results of this study contribute to literature on workplace aggression, higher education institutionalized culture, and female professional staffs lived experiences in higher education.

The recent emergence of the #MeToo movement brings renewed attention to immense struggles women continue to endure in the form of workplace assault, harassment, and bullying.  Women are finding their voice and demanding acknowledgement and change to the way they are treated in the workplace. Stories seem to emerge on a near constant basis of women and the harassment and abuse they face in their places of employment. In the aftermath of these accounts, it is increasingly clear despite prior and subsequent awareness of the misconduct, CEOs and other administrators do little to address the problem and in many cases choose to engage in outright avoidance. This study examines endemic workplace aggression (i.e. incivility, bullying, harassment, and abuse) toward female professional staff in higher education institutions, lack of support for female staff who experience workplace aggression, and outcomes stemming from institutionalized avoidance.

## Overview of Literature

Numerous researchers have studied workplace aggression, which takes the form of incivility, bullying, harassment and emotional abuse. A contemporary dialogue surrounds the idea of the role human resources, as institutional representatives, plays in bullying reports, as well as the need for and justification of anti-bullying policies. Literature on workplace aggression points to many related topics.

### Workplace Aggression

General workplace aggression is a topic of extensive research over the past two decades in the United States. While studies on workplace aggression in higher education exist, they are mostly limited to faculty experiences revealing a gap in the research related to the experiences of higher education professional staff (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Researchers in this subject area use various terms including bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf,

& Cooper, 2003), mobbing (Davenport et al., 1999), harassment (Hollis, 2015; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Ricketts & Pringle, 2014), emotional abuse (Keashly, 1998), and workplace violence (Namie, 2003) to typify workplace aggression. Einarsen et al. (2003) defined bullying in several ways: bullying occurs "systematically", "repeatedly" and "regularly"; it includes "mistreatment of a subordinate, a colleague, or a superior", "harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks"; and it causes "severe social, psychological and psychosomatic problems in the victim" (p. 15).

Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy (2012) defined workplace aggression as "a toxic combination of unrelenting emotional abuse, social ostracism, interactional terrorizing, and other destructive communication that erodes organizational health and damages employee well-being" (p. 5). In the U.S., bullying, one type of workplace aggression, is sometimes simple to identify, but difficult to address because it does not fall within illegal harassment policies and laws. Bullying is difficult to protect against because the target or victim of the aggression is generally not part of a protected class. This non-protected classification is referred to as "status-blind harassment" (Namie, 2007). Workplace aggression arises from all directions in an organization – peer to peer, supervisor to peer, and occasionally employee to supervisor (Namie, 2007). Employees tend to speak up and report on-going bullying (Cortina & Magley, 2009) if their overall work environment is psychologically safe and where they feel safe to take the risk (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Strandmark and Rahm (2014) implemented a grounded theory study to test a workplace bullying intervention program. They found it was necessary for all levels of the institution to adopt an anti-bullying policy and participate in focus groups and trainings. The

intervention was partially successful because the researchers discovered it was essential for immediate supervisors and upper administration to engage in preventative steps (Strandmark & Rahm, 2014) in order to send an anti-bullying policy message organization-wide. Without a clear message, bullying continues to be part of a work culture.

Supervisors who direct aggression toward their employees get away with bullying due to their hierarchical position (Finck, 2014). In an organizational communication study, Lutgen-Sandvik (2011) found bullying at the root of organizational culture and permissible through "normalizing," "allowing and ignoring" bullying behavior, and through an aggressive "trickle-down affect" from upper management  (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011, p. 355). Targets of bullying found that colleagues who bully work their way up the hierarchical ladder, covering up their covert aggression from upper management (Strandmark & Halberg, 2007).

**Workplace Aggression and Institutional Response**

Cowan (2011) identified a gap in workplace aggression literature, specifically bullying, and studied it from the perspective of human resource employees. This population was the focus due to the frequency that human resource departments become involved with bullying and harassment complaints. The study focused on written policies related to workplace aggression and how human resource employees interpreted the policies. Findings indicated written harassment policies often did not include the term bullying or specifically identify it as a behavior to monitor.  Instead, harassment policies focus on more general, illegal forms of harassment. Workplace code of conduct policies regularly mentioned behavior related to bullying (i.e. "be respectful"), but lacked specific descriptions and definitions of bullying, and often omitted formal instructions for how to report instances of

bullying. Despite the lack of formal written policies addressing bullying behavior, human resource employees interpreted workplace policy to include bullying and believed their institutions cared about the employees who experienced bullying (Cowan, 2011).

Cowan and Fox (2015) further explored the roles human resource employees take on when processing reports of bullying and found they primarily: 1) listen to reports and empathize with the target, 2) investigate the report through interviews, 3) advise upper management of findings and suggestions for next steps, and 4) act as mediators between individuals involved in the bullying complaint. Conversely, Namie (2007) found once individuals become the target of bullying or workplace aggression, mediation is no longer a viable option. Namie's (2007) research supported mediation as a step to address and move toward interpersonal conflict and resolution, but asserts bullying should not be considered interpersonal conflict, but rather interpersonal violence and harassment (p. 49).

Human resource employees frequently felt stuck between upper management expectations, their own beliefs regarding the reported situation, and the victim's expectations of outcome (Cowan & Fox, 2015). Additionally, human resource employees lack the power or authority to take meaningful steps to address the workplace aggression and were only able to provide recommendations to superiors based on their investigative interpretations. Hence, human resource employees are placed in an ethically contradictory expectation to both investigate and provide recommendations stemming from reports of bullying and to protect the interests of the organization (Cowan & Fox, 2015).

A recent study (Hollis, 2019) found "the presence of ethical leadership governed by empathy and genuine care for employees would diminish primary bullies" (p. 12) as well as their "henchmen". She found, when the institution applies ethical leadership, bullies are

unable to "thrive" and negatively influence potential aggressors. Without ethical leadership and zero tolerance of aggression from top administrators, bullies get away with their behavior, get promoted, and flourish in higher education. There appears a need for institutional representatives to actively respond with ethical leadership to workplace aggression.

## Research Design

Changing the definition of normal experience to account for women's experience is one of the radical endeavors of feminist phenomenology. We need more feminist phenomenology because the experience of the "Other" – which is, in fact, most women's experience – has not been told enough, and the concept of "normal experience" (that on offer by classical phenomenology and the natural attitude) has not been challenged enough; "normal experience" must be rethought and rewritten. (Shabot & Landry, 2018, p. 5)

The aim of my study was to deeply listen to the voices and stories of female professional staff working in higher education and to recognize a female normal through the eyes of women. Phenomenology is traditionally based in a patriarchal perspective with most pioneering researchers in the field contributing through a male "normal experience" (Shabot & Landry, 2018). Shabot and Landry (2018) argued:

Our normal experiences are still not visible enough, not loud enough—not only because we have been compulsorily silenced but also precisely because this experience has always been normal, we have inherited these choices and these ways of choosing. We have all gotten too used to it. (p. 5)

Husserl (1964) founded his philosophy of phenomenology through epoché, the concept of

setting aside one's ego and worldview in order to understand the essence of a phenomenon.

Other founding phenomenologists include Heidegger's (Vagle, 2016) interpretive

phenomenology, Giorgi's (1997) descriptive phenomenology, van Manen's (2007)

hermeneutic focus of phenomenon, Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) interpretative

phenomenology, and more recently, Vagel's (2016) post-intentional phenomenology. Each

contributed unique adaptions to phenomenology and each did so through a male lens.

    I used Vagel's (2016) post-intentional phenomenological methodology from a

feminist perspective. This methodology emphasizes crossing theoretical boundaries and

supports combining phenomenology with other theories, including feminist theory. Vagle

challenged the idea of setting aside, or bracketing our experiences, and instead promoted

Dahlberg's (2008) concept of "bridling" our assumptions and biases as we journey alongside

the storytellers, our participants or co-researchers. This progressive approach to

phenomenology allowed an avenue to discuss my participants' experiences through a

feminist post-intentional phenomenological standpoint.

    I sought to discover new ways of knowing and understanding the phenomenon of

workplace aggression, outside my experience, from the perspective of female professional

staff in higher education. Using feminist post-intentional phenomenology, I bracketed the

traditional patriarchal storyteller norm within higher education to better hear, understand, and

learn the female professional staff lived experience in higher education. By "learning and

creating through feminist phenomenology, we may reveal our own 'normal,' challenge it,

and work to change it" (Shabot & Landry, 2018, p. 6). This study not only challenged the

"normal experience" attributed to male storytellers, but it also revealed a new normal: the female professional staffs' voice in higher education.

**Researcher's Positionality.** Feminist post-intentional phenomenology served as the methodology for my study and helped me understand the phenomenon, workplace aggression, from female professional staffs' experiences in higher education—at a single point in time during their journey. I used lines of flight (Vagle, 2016), or fluid ways of becoming, to enhance my understanding of the phenomenon. I recognize over time with each participant's ongoing daily interactions, continued reflections and new experiences, their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors connected to the phenomenon will likely shift. Each story, as presented in my study, is a glimpse into what the phenomenon was at a specific point in time, and indicates what the phenomenon could become.

When I began this study, I assumed workplace aggression and shame were linked and I expected to find the participants' supervisors and colleagues lacking shame resilience and with obvious, unhealthy interpersonal patterns. However, through post-reflexive bridling, I held in check my experiences with, and assumptions about, workplace aggression in higher education. I analyzed and interpreted the experiences of each of my participants from a perspective with space from my own assumptions. Consequently, by being open to new interpretations, I discovered three compelling tentative manifestations from the data.

**Data Gathering.** I gathered data through semi-structured interviews and written narratives. The first interview with each participant built rapport and a foundational understanding of their background with workplace aggression. I shared my educational interest in the research questions and asked questions to gauge the participants' interest in taking part in the study. I limited dialogue to learning about the participants' position in

higher education at the time of their adverse interpersonal experience. They explained their responsibilities and roles within the context of the institution, as well as what they saw as their part in supporting their institution's mission and vision.

Participants then wrote a narrative based on a prompt, which asked them to describe and reconstruct their adverse interpersonal experience. I provided definitions of incivility, bullying, and adverse interpersonal experiences. The prompt included three overarching questions to guide their narrative:

1. Describe the beginning of the adverse interpersonal interaction.

2. Describe the adverse interpersonal interaction at the time it happened.

3. Describe how the experience ended and how it affected you and others.

These prompts were used to help structure each participant's narrative with a beginning, middle, and end to better learn valuable insight pertaining prior to, and moving through, the experience—and how, or if, it ended in resolution.

I concluded my data gathering with a follow-up, semi-structured interview with each participant comprised of questions developed as I reviewed both their interview transcripts and written narratives. The final interview gave me an opportunity to fill in any gaps, clarify information, and offer the participant time to correct factual errors or give updates to their story if they were still in the middle of the experience.

**Participants.** All participants were female professional staff each working at a different higher education institution in North America within various student services departments including the registrar, admissions, resident life, and academic advising. I invited participants through an online Qualtrics survey that was sent to multiple higher education professional organization listservs. Participants who qualified were required to be

female professional staff who experienced or witnessed any type of incivility or bullying experience during their time working in higher education. After a month, 118 female respondents completed the survey, nine of whom volunteered for the study, and of whom seven followed through to the end of data gathering.

**Theoretical Framework.** From a feminist perspective, it was essential to use a theoretical framework that encompassed the female experience, given that much past research on higher education institutions originates primarily from the male experience. In a study on feminism in higher education journals, Hart (2006) found the study of women and feminism noticeably lacking. Furthermore, she found most studies which pertained to feminism and the female voice in higher education were limited to only students and faculty, and few explored the topic as it connects to the experiences of staff and administrators (Hart, 2006).

My study focused on understanding and normalizing the female experience. I used shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006) as the lens to review and analyze my data. At the core of shame resilience theory is the idea that sharing one's story, giving voice to one's shame, and embracing courage through vulnerability breaks down individual shame constructs and fosters resilience to moments when one feels trapped, powerless, and isolated. Brown (2012) found that shame grows in secrecy and silence. If individuals do not share where, when, and how they experience shame, shame grows and leads to external and internal blame, judgment, fear, and confusion (Brown, 2006, p. 47). I used shame resilience theory as a framework to understand different ways participants engaged with and moved through their adverse interpersonal experiences. It also helped me examine the impact to each participant stemming from how their institution responded after reporting their experience.

**Data Analysis.** To track preliminary and secondary codes throughout data analysis, I used Nvivo software. I wrote in a post-reflexive journal to bridle my assumptions and make note of my internal reactions as I reviewed participant interviews and narratives in chronological order of collection. I wrote questions and highlighted quotes pertaining to the research questions: 1) the lived adverse interpersonal experiences of female professional staff in higher education, and 2) how female professional staff moved through these adverse experiences. I also created a chart responding to each research question for individual participants. This visual enabled me to track details of each story and develop summarized vignettes of their lived experiences. After capturing preliminary codes using Nvivo, I printed and bound the codes and reviewed them a second time, developing secondary codes. While reviewing the secondary codes, specific themes, categories, and lines of flight began to emerge. As I reviewed the data alongside my reflexive journaling, three tentative manifestations emerged from the participants' institutional responses.

## Tentative Manifestations and Discussion

This study explored higher education institutional responses to participants after reporting their adverse interpersonal experiences, made up of adverse interpersonal *behaviors*. Adverse interpersonal behavior is covert and overt workplace aggression including incivility, bullying, harassment, and emotional abuse. Six of the seven participants who reported an adverse interpersonal experience to a supervisor saw little to no response or action taken. In some cases, a supervisor, human resources representative, or equal employment opportunities (EEO) liaison acknowledged their reports. From Table 6.1, the term "acknowledged" includes having a meeting with the participant, having a meeting with the participant and the aggressor together, and/or documenting a complaint. No other actions

were taken. "Addressed" reports included upper management speaking with the participant and the aggressor separately or together, with no other actions taken. "Resolved" reports included upper management meeting with the participant and taking immediate action to call out and reprimand the aggressive behavior. Only one participant reported experiencing immediate action and resolution.

Table 6.1

*Adverse Interpersonal Experiences (AIE)*

| Participant | AIE Experience | Institutional Response | End Result to AIE | Resolution | Type of Aggression |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alice | Direct | Acknowledged by supervisor; HR | On-going; Same institution | Unresolved | Covert; Bullying and Harassment |
| Deborah | Direct | Acknowledged by HR | New Job; Different institution | Unresolved | Covert and Overt; Emotional Abuse |
| Rosa | Indirect and Direct | Not Acknowledged or Addressed | On-going; Same institution | Unresolved | Covert; Incivility and Bullying |
| Kayleigh | Direct | Acknowledged by supervisor; EEO | New Job; Same institution | Unresolved | Overt; Bullying and Harassment |
| Meredith | Direct | Addressed by supervisor | Same job; Same institution | Resolved | Overt; Incivility |
| Ariya | Direct | Not acknowledged | New Job; Different institution | Unresolved | Covert; Bullying and Harassment |
| Tessa | Direct | Acknowledged and addressed by upper administration | On-going; Same institution | Partially resolved | Covert; Bullying and Harassment |

Participants reported two significant elements about their adverse interpersonal experiences. First, they each experienced feelings and emotions connected to the initial adverse interpersonal experience (i.e. incivility, bullying, and harassment). Second, they each received a response from their institution, from a supervisor, upper administrator, human resources (HR), or equal employment opportunity (EEO) office. Two tentative manifestations emerged when I reviewed the data from the institutional responses.

**Tentative Manifestation #1: Institutionalized Avoidance**

In analyzing and interpreting the data, an unexpected tentative manifestation emerged. I categorized this tentative manifestation *institutionalized avoidance*. Whether the participants kept silent, reported the incident(s) to their supervisors, reached out to human resources or equal employment opportunity offices, or even met with the antagonist for mediation, the adverse interpersonal experience in six of the seven participants' experiences went unresolved. The employees, supervisors, or leadership representing the institution's decision-making powers found ways, whether consciously or subconsciously, to avoid the workplace aggression report.

Consistent with literature, higher education institutions do not consistently or proactively respond to bullying (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). Employees feel safe to speak up and share concerns or mistakes when they work in a psychologically safe environment (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Edmondson and Lei (2014) reviewed the psychological safety literature and found that "by speaking up to those who occupy positions to authorize actions, employees can help challenge the status quo, identify problems or opportunities for improvement, and offer ideas to improve their organizations' well-being" (p. 37). When organizations engaged in institutionalized avoidance of workplace aggression,

employees did not feel safe. I found institutionalized avoidance did not appear to come from

a place of purposeful negligence, but rather found its origins in indifference, naivety, and

unhealthy coping mechanisms—summed up as *benign neglect*. This, in turn, further

condoned adverse interpersonal behavior leading to a protective environment for

interpersonal aggression to continue unabated. My participants' stories provided several

examples of institutionalized avoidance, which ultimately brought attention to the meager

actions taken by higher education institutions as they responded to workplace aggression

toward female professional staff.

      **Avoidance through blatant disregard.** Many participants experienced institutional

avoidance after none of their supervisors or institutional administrators took steps to confront

the issues, despite their awareness of the workplace aggressions being directed at each

participant.

      *Tokenism.* As a woman of color who identified as queer, Ariya reported feeling

unseen and undervalued in a position overloaded with responsibilities. In addition to being

responsible for overseeing resident hall staff and student advisees, her supervisors requested

she serve on multiple university committees to fill diversity requirements—an experience

known as tokenism. Moses (1989) described tokenism in the context of higher education:

      In higher education administration, as in society, the numerically dominant group

      controls the academy and its culture. The small number of people from other ethnic or

      racial groups are often seen by the dominant group to be "tokens" and are thus treated

      as representatives of their group or as symbols rather than individuals. (p. 16)

For example, one study found Latina midlevel professional staff in higher education

experienced tokenism and microaggressions resulting in feeling isolated and "boxed into

diversity roles" (Pertuz, 2017). Ariya's supervisor knowingly did not stand up for her as Ariya continued to take on additional tokenized workloads:

> When the provost asks you to be on a committee, as an associate director, I can't say no, I just don't... But for my supervisor to say, "Her plate is full, she can't take this on right now" would have been a different kind of conversation, would've *felt like someone had seen* that I'm overwhelmed and overworked... [emphasis added]

Ariya endured microaggressions and overt incivility from her colleagues who became jealous of her *advantaged opportunities* to serve on extra projects and committees. Her colleagues also complained when their designated students went to Ariya for support because of their similar lived experiences. Ariya knew her supervisor was aware of these issues because her aggressors openly engaged in bullying behaviors in front of him, which led to a meeting between Ariya and her supervisor, only to find he often sided with the aggressors.

Ariya identified a need for resilience training for minority populations – whether by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender. However, the institution continued to exasperate the issue by focusing primarily on cultural competency training of the majority. Training the majority continued to ignore and burden the minority – pushing the emotional labor and diversity burden to employees with diverse identities. Ariya felt her supervisors were blind to her diversity burden and ignored her coworkers' bullying behavior. She shared: "I almost felt like it was taken for granted, like, 'of course you're gonna do this. You're brown and you're queer, and so that's what you're gonna do.'" Her supervisors never identified Ariya's diversity burden as a problem and avoided her lived experience.

***Evade giving advice.*** Rosa first witnessed bullying from one of her peers that was directed toward his supervisee (her colleague), and later she experienced bullying from the

same perpetrator. As a colleague and university advisor, she felt responsible for listening to her coworker vent about the bullying. Rosa offered advice and ideas for responding to the adverse behavior, but felt uncomfortable reporting the aggressive behavior. She felt her hands were tied and did not want to get involved out of concern that she would report in error or miscommunicate the details. Rosa also did not want to breach confidentiality. Additionally, she had a new supervisor, and if she reported the bullying, she worried she would be perceived as an informer.

When a second major incident occurred with her colleague, Rosa felt it was time to report the incident to her supervisor and get advice. At the same time Rosa started experiencing incivility and bullying from the same aggressor. The aggressor went behind Rosa's back and complained to her supervisor and human resources about her leadership. He also encouraged one of Rosa's employees to go over her head and submit a proposal to Rosa's supervisor while Rosa was on vacation. After these incidents, Rosa met with her supervisor, but the supervisor instead questioned her about the aggressor's grievances. These accusations surprised and upset Rosa, especially given the aggressor's well-known aggressive and bullying behavior in the office. Notwithstanding, Rosa maintained an unwillingness to stop listening to her coworkers if they felt bullied and she wanted to continue providing a safe holding environment for their cares and concerns. However, Rosa ultimately offered to refrain from giving advice to colleagues. She described the conversation:

> I told my supervisor if there's anything that I'm willing to do differently is to refrain
> from giving advice. I'm not gonna stop listening, I'm not gonna stop being a support
> person, but I can certainly attempt to refrain from giving any sort of advice on taking

action which again, kind of ties my hands, but still...He was like, "Okay, that's

probably a good thing to try for now."

Rosa's supervisor had multiple opportunities to address the active workplace aggression but

chose to disregard it by directing Rosa to limit the advice she gave. Instead of directly

addressing the reported behavior, and further investigating, her supervisor encouraged Rosa

to avoid the bullying reports and stop offering advice and suggstions to bullied colleagues.

    ***Destructive neglect.*** Alice witnessed institutionalized avoidance in the form of lack of

support from her supervisors and felt her job threatened after she reported her colleagues

bullying behavior. Her institution's human resource office only offered mediation, which

gave the *aggressor* a formal voice to do more harm. Alice described how it felt working in

the office knowing she did not have support: "Questioning myself and hyper-vigilance is a

definite outcome of this ongoing incivility… [and] outright bullying/hostility."

    Three months after no response to her request for an intervention, along with e-mails

containing reports of bullying and reminders she sent to her supervisor, Alice reported a

separate overtly aggressive incident targeting her by a different colleague. Only at this point

in the process did Alice's union representative and human resources step in. However, after

several meetings with HR and the union representative, Alice felt less heard and more re-

victimized than before. Alice identified these meetings and response of her institution more

so as the adverse interpersonal experience than prior incidents involving the aggressor. She

described these meetings:

    It took place in an airless, hot, glass-walled interview room in a distant part of the

    campus. It was a horrible experience: I was grilled like a witness at a trial, sifting

    through the same details over and over. When my union rep wanted to say something

to me, HR would cut the rep off and ask if…we needed to speak alone. I got angry at

HR - the union is there for me and to help you: why are you making a bad situation

worse, HR?

Alice opened up during a second meeting, and suggested taking steps to repair and restore

trust, but her supervisor commandeered the conversation and did not allow Alice opportunity

to speak. In these meetings, her aggressor presented information meant to portray Alice as

the abuser. At another meeting, her supervisor warned Alice about pursuing the complaints

against her colleague. Alice explained:

Alex [supervisor #1] never laid down the law with Greta [aggressor]: his general

blah-blah-blah about code of conduct went completely unheeded. Betty's [supervisor

#2] bringing up the effect Greta's and my relationship was having on the rest of the

staff was specious at best: how had SHE contributed to it by hatching solutions with

either of us? How does the rest of the staff even matter when this was about me being

abused by someone who thought she could get away with it? They both failed me, but

Alex's failure was worse - I had held off on the confrontation because of what I now

know were ideal "threats" of "*Be very sure you want to do this, Alice.*" I have not

acted perfectly but I have not abused my colleague. [Emphasis added]

In the end, Alice continued her regular job responsibilities, but grew less creative and more

alert to her supervisors' and peers' actions. The bullying and incivility continued unchecked

while her supervisors required more one-on-one meetings to improve communication.

*Indifference.* Meredith witnessed institutionalized avoidance after experiencing

gender discrimination and a lack of support. A male faculty member did not like her decision

and resolution for a mistake made by her department and proceeded to yell, stomp, get in her

face, and dramatically questioned her qualifications. As the only female in a room full of men, not a single person spoke-up against the behavior or defended her. They completely avoided the incident and ignored the behavior.

**Avoidance due to failure to address the root problem.** Tessa witnessed an example of institutionalized avoidance after reporting several incidences of workplace aggression from her direct supervisor to human resources (HR). Her HR representative listened, sympathized, and suggested Tessa speak to her supervisor's supervisor, a step which made Tessa feel hesitant. After the aggression continued, Tessa scheduled a meeting:

> I spoke with my supervisor's supervisor and she was a very good listener and was very concerned about what I was experiencing. She took very swift action. She told me that she would meet with my supervisor but she didn't know exactly what would happen. She told me she would keep me in the loop.

Her supervisor's supervisor met with Tessa's supervisor but the meeting appeared to have little effect on the behavior. Tessa began to feel like she was walking on eggshells around her supervisor and felt unsafe to be creative or express new ideas. The institution's response helped redirect her supervisor's aggressive behavior away from her, but the behavior was redirected targeting Tessa's colleague instead. Her supervisor's behavior continued and was never fully addressed. The colleague resigned shortly thereafter.

**Avoidance through lack of investigation.** Some participants' institutions avoided confronting workplace aggression by simply not investigating the reported problem. In a recent 2017 survey by the Workplace Bullying Institute, 71% of employers responded to reports of bullying in a way that resulted in negative change (i.e. retaliation) or no change at all (Namie, 2017). Individuals with authority to investigate occasionally met with a

participant affected by the harassment and asked questions about the type of reported harassment or discrimination. However, the line of inquiry generally ended there. Consequently, this lack of investigation placed an additional emotional, physical, and psychological toll on the participants.

Kayleigh experienced institutionalized avoidance through gender and age discrimination. When Kayleigh reported on-going bullying behavior from a tenured, male faculty member, she thought it was age related. The faculty member often made comments about her incompetence, which she correlated to her being young. Her chair supported her by reporting the behavior to the college dean, but the bullying behavior was never admonished. Kayleigh shared, "He [chair] validated the quality of my work and intervened with "Fred," [aggressor] to the extent he could." However, she found the extent limited. Fred often ignored the hair and complained to the dean. When she reached out to equal employment opportunities (EEO), they informed her that age discrimination only covered individuals who are retirement age. EEO asked Kaleigh if the incidents were gender discrimination, but at the time Kayleigh did not recognize the harassment behavior as gender discrimination and EEO did nothing to further investigate the complaint. They did not use their expertise about discrimination and instead left it up to Kayleigh to determine the nature of the discrimination. Kayleigh continued to experience bullying and harassment until she resigned her position. Years later, she recognized it as gender discrimination after learning of additional reports of harassment toward other women in the department from the same faculty member.

Deborah reported her abusive supervisor to human resources, EEO, the diversity office, and as she described, "I begged for anyone to listen, but no one did. Those who heard me out expressed their sympathy, but no one ever made the abuse stop." When she agreed to

mediation with her supervisor and a human resource representative, her supervisor was given more time to talk and shared evidence against Deborah, evidence based on lies and half-truths. In the end, human resources wrote her up based on Deborah's supervisor's allegations against her work behavior and gave her a warning. Deborah wrote about the meeting: "By the time he had gone through his list, our hour was up. I was issued a warning; he walked away without a scratch. Then, back in the office, he retaliated with more work, more criticism, more professional threats." The bullying and verbal abuse from her supervisor continued. When Deborah reached out for additional support from the university, the answer was the same – they could not help, she just had to deal with having a "bad boss," or she did not have enough or the right evidence.

**Tentative Manifestation #2: Silenced Voices**

Six of the seven participants' institutions engaged in one or more forms of avoidance when confronted with a report of workplace aggression. As a result, the participants felt silenced in different ways: Ariya, through diversity burden and feeling invisible and disposable; Tessa, through being written up and micromanaged; Alice, through overt avoidance after her requests for help went unanswered for months; Rosa, through being advised not to give advice to a bullied colleague; Deborah, through an abuse of power used to discredit her work ethic; and Kayleigh, through a lack of sufficient evidence to merit further investigation by her equal employment opportunities representative. Consistent with literature, higher education has a "prevailing culture of silence and little institutional support for the prevention and intervention of bullying" (Sedivy-Benton et al., 2015, p. 40). All seven participants experienced a form of silence or silencing from their institution. Participants who

reported adverse interpersonal experiences to individuals holding more formal authority and power were silenced. Fisher (2010) described the importance of voice:

> Presence, intentionality, and expressiveness are thus important markers in the broader identification of voice with subjectivity and identity: denoting representation, agency, selfhood, and discursive power, while the lack of voice is the emptying of such possibilities in the multi-dimensional character of silence, and silencing. (p. 84)

Participants found their voices silenced and diminished. Meredith described her experience as a female in higher education:

> I've been silenced and I've been ignored, and I've been specifically told to shut up. I've had my credentials questioned due to things beyond my control and I would love to simply educate the people who are in those positions of authority that there's a better way to communicate. There's a better way to engage and solve problems. Just because I'm a woman, it doesn't mean that you shouldn't listen to me.
>
> Although the participants kept speaking up and reaching out to various departments (human resources, EEO, diversity and inclusion), they continued to be silenced. Tessa described feeling forced into silence when her supervisor wrote her up for expressing emotion and disappointment: **"**When she said that she was writing it down, I definitely felt like I just shut down at that point, and I'm like, 'Well, I better essentially just shut up and not say anything else.'" Tessa felt scolded and reprimanded as though she were a child and not a highly-skilled professional.
>
> **Silenced by shame.** A consequence of institutional avoidance arose when reviewing

data through a shame resilience theory (SRT) lens. As I bridled my assumptions, I assumed shame might stem directly from the adverse interpersonal behaviors of those bullying or

harassing. Instead, I found institutionalized avoidance produced feelings and constructs of shame in the participants in the form of being *double-shamed.* Participants first felt shame when they experienced workplace aggression, and felt shame a second time when their institutions ignored distress calls. For example, Alice described feeling shame during her mediation meeting:

> The woman that I think I should be should not be putting up with this. And I think that's what the shame is, and I feel it... It's like victim-shaming, like I'm a victim here, but I feel doubly victimized and shamed because, "What is wrong with you?" in the intervention, "What is wrong with you? Why didn't you do this and that and the other thing?"

Shame is the idea something is wrong with an individual and they are to blame (Lewis, 1971; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). In this study, each participant experienced shame. Even Meredith, whose supervisor immediately advocated for her, felt a sense of, and self-blame for her adverse interpersonal experience. The participants whose supervisors avoided their reports or harassed them and threatened their jobs, felt shame and self-blame more acutely.

Additionally, as their institutions avoided their reports of adverse behavior, the participants who spoke up found their voices silenced. Brown's grounded theory study on shame and resilience tells us that shame grows in silence. Brown shared "If you put shame in a Petri dish, it needs three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence and judgment…" (Brown, 2012). As institutions continued to shift around the issues and not take action against the bullying behavior, they silenced, judged, and as a result, shamed the participants. The institutions communicated the participants were *not enough*. They were *not important*

*enough* to further investigate and to take immediate action against adverse behavior. They did *not have enough evidence*, did *not document enough*, and they did *not report discrimination correctly enough*. From an inverse point of view, *the women were too much*. They reported *too much*, they gave colleagues advice *too freely*, and they *too often* brought up topics of inclusion. Being silenced and told they were not enough or too much, consequently sent a message of shame – a message there was something wrong with them. As a result, the participants were pushed back into the shame petri dish of feeling trapped, powerless, and isolated (Brown, 2006).

A final outcome of shame and adverse interpersonal behavior in the workplace is linked to mental and physical health issues (Attell, Kummerow Brown, & Treiber, 2017; Cleary, Walter, Andrew, & Jackson, 2013; Lewis, 2004; Namie, 2003). Research shows bullying in the higher education workplace relates directly to negative emotional, physical, and mental health issues including heart problems, depression, and shame (Cleary, Walter, Andrew, & Jackson, 2013; Lewis, 2004). Tessa described feeling physically ill whenever she met with her supervisor. She felt hot and flushed, her heart raced, and she experienced terrible stomach pains. With the stress of her job and abusive work situation, Deborah quickly became ill with a month-long sinus infection. Alice, Deborah and Tessa experienced depression and often cried when they went home as result of stress caused by their experiences. Meredith also felt shaky, uncertain, and emotional after her experience.

**Tentative Manifestation #3: Institutional Action**

My third tentative manifestation emerged as institutional action. Only one of seven participants experienced resolution of her adverse interpersonal experience. Meredith was the lone participant that experienced institutional action, the opposite of institutionalized

avoidance. The institution's representatives supported, followed-through, and protected Meredith against continued adverse interpersonal behavior. Her experience was also the only story where the aggressor's behavior was immediately admonished. Meredith described the aftermath of her adverse experience:

> She [her boss] picked up the phone and called the dean of the college. I couldn't hear his end of the conversation, but her message to him was clear. She told him that if his college required any immigration sponsorship services in the future that he would need to contact her as the Associate Provost to request such services. She said that the way that her director of immigration had been treated by him and by his faculty was reprehensible and that she would not allow it to happen again. As a result she would be the contact for their college and she would deem whether it was appropriate for us to provide those services.

With immediate action from her boss, Meredith felt safe and supported to go about her work, learning her new job, and supporting her team. She felt incredible, "I've been in difficult situations before, but I've never had a supervisor cover me like that." Meredith was empowered to support and enable her staff, and develop her own leadership skills.

Throughout these lived experiences, the majority of responses from those with authoritative power, such as supervisors, human resources and equal employment opportunity office, merely went through the motions of offering help to the participants. They followed policy, asked for evidence, spoke with the participants and the aggressors, yet in the end, only one participant experienced effective change. Three participants continued in their positions and tried their best not to make trouble, three participants resigned and found

new jobs, and one participant, Meredith, continued in her job knowing she had the support of her supervisor, and knowing bullying behavior would be directly reproached.

## Summary

This study focused on understanding the institutional response to workplace aggression experiences of female professional staff in higher education. Through participant stories, I learned institutional representatives avoid reports of workplace aggression that include incivility, bullying, and emotional abuse. Whether the institutional representative was a supervisor, human resource representative, equal employment opportunities office, diversity office, or vice provost, participants experienced avoidance and silencing of their voice.

Participants witnessed institutionalized avoidance in many forms, including disregard; failure to address the root problem; lack of support; threats; and nonexistent investigation. Institutionalized avoidance resulted in the silencing of participants' voices, double-shaming—first by the aggressor and second by the institutionalized avoidance—and the condoning of workplace aggression in higher education. By ignoring and deflecting workplace aggression aggressors' are often empowered and even promoted. One participant experienced immediate resolution to her adverse interpersonal experience when her supervisor actively admonished the aggression.

Each participant expressed similar reasons why they were interested in this study and why they volunteered their time and stories: they wanted something to change and they wanted their voice to be heard so other women do not have to live through what they experienced. A couple participants likened their stories and their speaking up to the #MeToo

movement, established in 2017. They wanted their voices heard and their lived experiences shared to see change to the culture of higher education.

**Limitations and Recommendations**

Limitations in this study included participants' self-report of their perception of their experiences, and for a couple participants, their adverse interpersonal experiences occurring in the past. As a qualitative study, findings are correlational, not causal, and cannot be generalized over the entire population of female professional staff. One delimitation was opening the study to participants who did not have supervision responsibilities at the time of their adverse interpersonal experience. Originally, I intended to have female professional staff in mid-level management with at least three employees; however, I did not receive enough participants meeting these qualifications. Thus, the findings include experiences of low to middle management female professional staff.

My recommendations for future research include more exploration surrounding institutionalized avoidance and silenced voices in higher education. Higher education leadership need to understand how these specific problems affect diverse populations, specific departments of professional staff, and individuals with various levels of authoritative power. Reviewing current training trends and practices in higher education institutions would help inform human resource processes and communication. Further, researchers could study how institutions are practically applying anti-bullying policies and trauma-informed trainings to improve higher education work culture.

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**CHAPTER 7: Conclusion**

Using feminist post-intentional phenomenology as my methodology, I was able to understand and focus on the lived experience of female professional staff working in higher education. I wrote an initial and on-going post-reflexive journal to bridle and question my assumptions and experiences with the phenomenon of adverse interpersonal experiences. My lived experience with bullying and workplace aggression in higher education made it essential to practice self-awareness of how I related them to my participants' stories. I began my study with a partial review of the literature regarding the higher education context, the female experience working in higher education, and workplace incivility and bullying. This laid the foundation to refine my research questions and develop my research design. Two central research questions guided my study:

1. What are the lived adverse interpersonal experiences of female professional staff working in higher education?

2. How do female professional staff *move through* adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education?

I found research on this particular topic, especially connected with the population of female professional staff, to be notably lacking. I wanted to understand the intentionality, or interconnectedness, of adverse interpersonal experiences and female professional staff, as well as how they move through these experiences of workplace aggression. This topic interested me initially because of my experiences witnessing and feeling the consequences of workplace bullying in higher education as a female professional staff. The significance of this study touches on the individual, internal consequences, as well as the contextual community, or external ramifications, of the phenomenon.

In chapter four, manuscript one, I explored the lived experiences of adverse interpersonal experiences of female professional staff in higher education. I learned female professional staff's lived adverse interpersonal experiences entail incivility, bullying, harassment, and emotional abuse, categorized within the general term "workplace aggression." Workplace aggression came in various forms directed at the participants from peers and supervisors, male and female, staff and faculty. Their stories offered a glimpse into the lack of support, abusive power, diversity burden, and avoidance that feeds workplace aggression. Aligned with the literature, female professional staff experienced workplace aggression in similar ways to faculty and the general workplace population. The findings showed experiences of workplace aggression, and in some ways acceptability, of this phenomenon in higher education toward female professional staff. No two stories were alike: the aggressors were never the same and the aggression varied, yet each story described the phenomenon's hardship on female professional staff. As one participant pointed out, workplace aggression is not epidemic, isolated from within one or two institutions; rather it is *endemic*, and widespread throughout higher education.

In chapter five, manuscript two, I examined how female professional staff move through adverse interpersonal experiences in higher education, using shame resilience theory as my theoretical framework. Knowing female professional staff experience workplace aggression from the findings in manuscript one, I sought to understand how, and if, my participants pressed through adversity and how their experiences ended. Using shame resilience theory as my theoretical lens to analyze the participant's stories, I found female professional staff experience shame in their adverse experiences and they move through their experiences within the theory's shame and empathy continuums. Participants moved through

adversity by 1) recognizing their vulnerability and shame triggers, 2) reflecting on their thoughts and feelings within their context, 3) reaching out for help and for empathy, and 4) speaking up and sharing their voice with others, including sharing their stories in this study. Each participant moved through the continuums in different ways, and experienced varied levels of resolution. Most of the participants never experienced the resolution and empathy they had hoped for and many utilized this study to process through their experiences. The significance of this portion of my study gave voice to female staff's feeling trapped, powerless, and isolated in higher education due to workplace aggression, and their steps toward shame resilience.

The final section of my study, chapter six, manuscript three, I discussed three tentative manifestations that emerged while analyzing data for the lived adverse interpersonal experiences of female professional staff in higher education, and how they moved through their experiences. I found when female professional staff speak up and voice their concern by seeking help from their institution, their institutions end up avoiding the reports. Story after story ended with the participant feeling unheard, alone, and powerless. This first tentative manifestation, institutionalized avoidance, came in different forms such as disregard, negligence, lack of investigation, and lack of addressing the root problem of workplace aggression. The second tentative manifestation emerged as the repercussion to institutionalized avoidance: silenced voices and shame. When the institution's representatives failed to address the root problem of workplace aggression, the participants were handed back the responsibility to cope with the aggression. As a result, they felt silenced and in this silence, experienced a second episode of shame. They again felt trapped in the aggression, powerless to affect change, and isolated. These findings are significant to the literature in

understanding the emotional, physical, and psychological consequences to avoiding workplace aggression in higher education. A third manifestation demonstrated the power of actively listening and taking action. One participant found resolution for her adverse interpersonal experience. The way she found this was by her direct supervisor taking immediate action. Her supervisor believed her story of workplace aggression and then her supervisor addressed the behavior head on. This stopped the behavior and communicated far and wide that this behavior was not acceptable.

In conclusion, female professional staff experience workplace aggression in various forms and by different aggressors in higher education. These experiences trigger shame responses, resulting in female professional staff feeling trapped, powerless, and isolated. Although elements of shame resilience emerged, if institutions avoided the workplace aggression reports, female professional staff voices were silenced and they experienced additional shame. As a result, shame leads to emotional, physical, and psychological ailments that negatively affect the individual and the institution.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

My recommendations for future research are based on my study and support suggestions made in workplace aggression literature. Employees, and supervisors in particular, need to be trained to understand policy, properly document, and promote healthy coping strategies. A common recommendation put forth in the literature was to implement anti-bullying policies and/or a zero-tolerance bullying policy in higher education institutions. Recent studies and surveys from Namie (2018) on workplace aggression have promoted the creation and implementation of bullying in the workplace policy legislation. Opinions vary

on the degree to which formal anti-bullying policies positively impact organizational health, so additional research could inform institutions of the effectiveness of these policies.

Trainings that prioritize a shift in organizational culture are necessary to affect real change. Future research could be conducted on the implementations and outcomes of *in-depth* trainings such as shame resilience training, non-violent communication, and mindfulness training for employees to develop healthier coping and communication strategies. Some universities provide professional development seminars that touch on interpersonal communication; however, implementing more in-depth trainings that incorporate multi-week courses within departments or university-wide could have a greater effect.

Studies need to explore the effects of ACEs on adults working in higher education, the effects on institutions (fiscal, cultural and well-being), and the effects on interpersonal communication in higher education. As the ACEs studies have shown, children who experience trauma frequently face major health issues later in life. These adults are our colleagues, peers, supervisors, managers, and administrators. Their health and coping strategies affect their decisions, their responses and reactions, and the way they communicate and behave in the workplace.

**Implications for Higher Education Institutions**

As shared throughout my literature review and manuscripts, workplace aggression leads to major health issues. Poor employee health leads to increased turnover and absenteeism. Turnover entails job searchers, on-boarding new employees, and losing effective employees. Through my personal experiences in higher education, my research, and

ad hoc conversations with colleagues nationwide, I offer suggestions to improve the health

and well-being of higher education institutions, related to workplace aggression.

My primary recommendation concerns the institutionalized response to workplace

aggression. I urge higher education institutional decision-makers to *believe* targets of

workplace aggression. Listen, empathize and engage with female professional staff who

report workplace aggression, and actively respond to reports of workplace aggression to

demonstrate zero tolerance of incivility, bullying, or emotional abuse. To avoid reports and

complaints of workplace aggression, and to thereby permit the behavior to continue, sends

the message to all employees that this behavior is acceptable. Senior leadership, supervisors,

human resources, equal employment opportunity personnel, and other departments with

decision-making power and expertise in policy need to protect the health of their employees

by not tolerating aggressive behavior.

My second recommendation concerns higher education employees and supervisors

with limited decision-making power or formal authority. Throughout my study and in my

own experience, it was clear employees and supervisors are often uncertain of who to talk to

when workplace aggression arises, how to properly document, and how to interpret specific

discrimination and harassment laws in relation to workplace aggression. My recommendation

is for institutions to train their employees to understand their roles and institutional policies.

Employees need to become conversant with university policy against workplace harassment

and bullying to better understand how to protect themselves against workplace aggression.

They need to speak up in response to witnessing or experiencing workplace aggression. I

encourage higher education staff to find trusted colleagues, supervisors, and administrators to

share your story, and to speak your shame so you can develop resilience against feelings of

being trapped, powerless, and isolated.

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**Appendix A: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Assurance Approval Letter**

University *of* Idaho
Office of Research Assurances
Institutional Review Board
875 Perimeter Drive, MS 3010
Moscow ID 83844-3010
Phone: 208-885-6162
Fax: 208-885-5752
irb@uidaho.edu

| | |
|---|---|
| To: | Laura B. Holyoke |
| Cc: | Kathryn Schiffelbein |
| From: | Jennifer Walker, IRB Coordinator |
| Approval Date: | May 09, 2018 |
| Title: | Lived Experiences of Adverse Interpersonal Interactions by Women in Higher Education Middle Management |
| Project: | 18-093 |
| Certified: | Certified as exempt under category 2 at 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2). |

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Idaho, I am pleased to inform you that the protocol for the research project Lived Experiences of Adverse Interpersonal Interactions by Women in Higher Education Middle Management has been certified as exempt under the category and reference number listed above.

This certification is valid only for the study protocol as it was submitted. Studies certified as Exempt are not subject to continuing review and this certification does not expire. However, if changes are made to the study protocol, you must submit the changes through VERAS for review before implementing the changes. Amendments may include but are not limited to, changes in study population, study personnel, study instruments, consent documents, recruitment materials, sites of research, etc. If you have any additional questions, please contact me through the VERAS messaging system by clicking the 'Reply' button.

As Principal Investigator, you are responsible for ensuring compliance with all applicable FERPA regulations, University of Idaho policies, state and federal regulations. Every effort should be made to ensure that the project is conducted in a manner consistent with the three fundamental principles identified in the Belmont Report: respect for persons; beneficence; and justice. The Principal Investigator is responsible for ensuring that all study personnel have completed the online human subjects training requirement.

You are required to timely notify the IRB if any unanticipated or adverse events occur during the study, if you experience and increased risk to the participants, or if you have participants withdraw or register complaints about the study.

To enrich education through diversity, the University of Idaho is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer

**Appendix B: Participation Recruitment Survey Questionnaire**

| English | ▼ |
|---|---|

**SURVEY INSTRUCTION**

**Informed Consent**

**Welcome to the Survey!**

Thank you for taking this survey! My name is Katie, and I am a doctoral student and professional staff in higher education. I am interested in the health and well-being of women working in higher education. A study in 2015 found 62% of female faculty and administrators experienced bullying in an academic setting. I want to learn how women experience these adverse interactions, and explore how they move through them. I ask that you take five minutes to share your experience working in higher education.

The survey is anonymous and should take you around 5-6 minutes to complete.

(Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible for use on a mobile device.)

Thank you for your time! If you have questions, feel free to contact me at kschiffel@uidaho.edu.

Katie Schiffelbein
Doctoral Candidate,
Leadership and Counseling,
College of Education, Health and Human Sciences,
University of Idaho

What type of higher education institution do you work?

◯ Community or technical college
◯ Public higher education Institution

○ Private higher education institution

My position/title is:

○ Faculty (instructor, lecturer, professor)
○ Non-academic/professional staff (director, associate director, manager, associate manager, coordinator)
○ Administrator (provost, vice provost, dean, president, vice president, chancellor)

I oversee/supervise:

○ 1-2 direct reports
○ 3-4 direct reports
○ 5-6 direct reports
○ 7-8 direct reports
○ 9-10 direct reports
○ 11+ direct reports

Gender:

○ Male
○ Female

Please answer the following questions with the definitions below in mind. Your responses should be related to workplace interpersonal relationships within the higher education context.

Definitions:

**Adverse Interpersonal Incidents**: Witnessing or experiencing a form of **incivility** or **bullying** within the higher education context as a professional staff member.

**Incivility**: Acting rudely or discourteously, without regard for others, in violation of norms for respect in social interactions.

**Bullying**: Harassing, offending, or soically excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work...bullying behavior occurs repeatedly, regularly, and over a period of time.

## Have you personally experienced an on-going adverse interpersonal incident toward yourself from a peer, supervisor, or direct report (employee)?

O Yes

O Maybe

O No

## Briefly describe the adverse interpersonal incident you experienced.

Definitions:

**Adverse Interpersonal Incidents**: Witnessing or experiencing a form of **incivility** or **bullying** within the higher education context as a professional staff member.

**Incivility**: Acting rudely or discourteously, without regard for others, in violation of norms for respect in social interactions.

**Bullying**: Harassing, offending, or soically excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work...bullying behavior occurs repeatedly, regularly, and over a period of time.

Have you witnessed an on-going adverse interpersonal incident toward a direct report (employee)?

○ Yes
○ Maybe
○ No
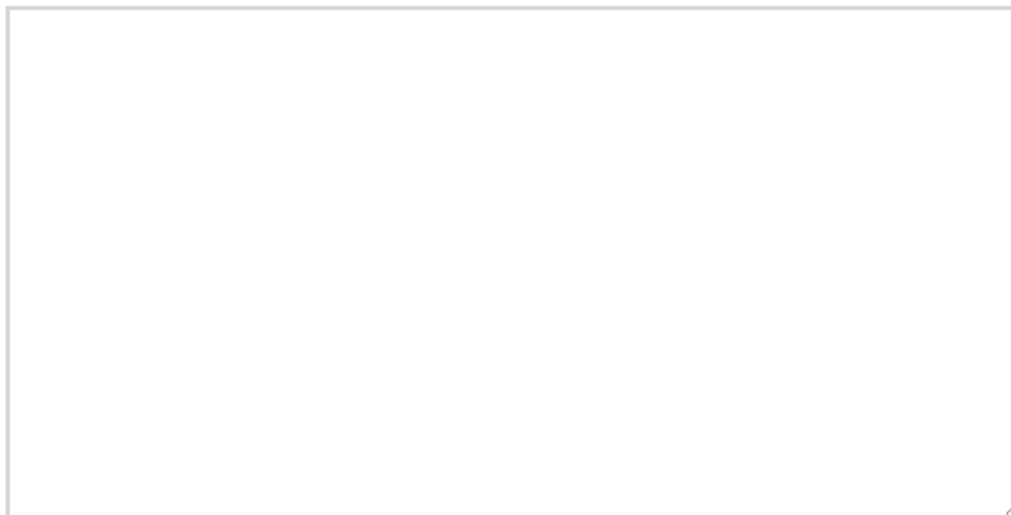
Briefly describe the adverse interpersonal incident you witnessed.

Definitions:

**Adverse Interpersonal Incidents**: Witnessing or experiencing a form of **incivility** or **bullying** within the higher education context as a professional staff member.

**Incivility**: Acting rudely or discourteously, without regard for others, in violation of norms for respect in social interactions.

**Bullying**: Harassing, offending, or soically excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work...bullying behavior occurs repeatedly, regularly, and over a period of time.

Would you be willing to further participate in this study?

○ Yes
○ No

E-mail you can be best contacted:

[                                                                                    ]

Just a couple more questions and then you're done. Thank you!

Ethnicity:

○ Black or African American
○ Native American
○ Asian
○ Hispanic or Latino
○ Caucasian/White
○ Other

Age:

○ 18 - 24
○ 25 - 29
○ 30 - 34
○ 35 - 39
○ 40 - 49
○ 50 - 59
○ 60 - 64
○ 65+

Highest educational degree completed:

○ High School

○ Associate's Degree (2 year)
○ Bachelor's Degree (4 year)
○ Master's Degree
○ Doctoral Degree

**Appendix C: Participant Recruitment and Invitation E-mail**

Dear Colleagues,

My name is Katie, and I am a doctoral candidate and professional staff in higher education. I am interested in the health and well-being of women working in higher education. A study in 2015 found 62% of female faculty and administrators experienced bullying in an academic setting. I want to learn how women experience these adverse interactions, and explore how they move through them. <u>I ask that you take five minutes to share your experience working in higher education.</u>

The survey is anonymous and should take you around 5-6 minutes to complete.

[Survey Link](https://uidaho.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5hwyDlhquFEBtLn) (Qualtrics:
https://uidaho.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5hwyDlhquFEBtLn)

Thank you for your time! If you have questions, feel free to contact me at[kschiffel@uidaho.edu](mailto:kschiffel@uidaho.edu).

Warm Regards,

Katie

**Appendix D: Participant Informed Consent E-mail**

Dear Survey Study Participant,

Thank you for being willing to participate in my study regarding women's experiences with adverse interpersonal incidents in higher education. The survey was the initial introduction to the study. My goal is to learn about and understand *your* personal experience. To do this, I ask that you participate in: 1) a brief introduction interview, 2) a written narrative, and 3) a follow-up interview. Interviews will be completed either in person (depending on proximity) or via Skype/Zoom/FaceTime.

Your story is valuable toward creating a healthier culture in higher education management. Thank you so much for being willing to share your story. I remind you that your name, institution, and any other personal information will be kept confidential.

**Next Steps:**
1. Please confirm your participation by responding to this email and/or by completing the Informed Consent
   Form link: https://uidaho.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_80TptS2OCNDwoTz
2. After confirmation, I will contact you to set up our introductory interview.

If you have questions, do not hesitate to email me.

Warm Regards,

Katie

**Appendix E: Informed Consent Qualtrics Form**

English ▾

**SURVEY INSTRUCTION**

**Informed Consent**

# Informed Consent Form

The University of Idaho Institutional Review Board has certified this project as Exempt.

**Purpose.** The purpose of this study is to explore women in higher education middle management's lived experiences with adverse interpersonal interactions and how they moved through the experience.

**Interview Procedure.** You will be asked to participate in 1) a brief introduction interview, 2) a written narrative, and 3) a follow-up interview. Interviews will be completed either in person (depending on proximity) or via Skype/Zoom/FaceTime.

Each interview will last 30-90 minutes. The total study should be within a 3-6 week time-frame. During the interview, I will sit down with you in a comfortable place of your choice (private space in the library, your home, a friend's home, or other), or via Skype/FaceTime. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and the interviewer will move on to the next question. No one else but the interviewer will be present unless you would like someone else to be there. The entire interview will be recorded, and then transcribed by me or by a paid professional transcription company who ensures confidentiality. The interview recordings will be saved on my computer and in my password protected qualitative research software (Nvivo). The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except my major professor and myself will have access to the interview transcripts and recordings.

**Possible Risks.** This study offers minimal risks, however, I am asking you to

share some personal experiences and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the interview if you do not wish to do so, and that is fine. You do not have to give us a reason for not responding to a question or for refusing to take part in the interview. You may stop taking part in the study at any time. If we find the interview is creating stress or emotional difficulty for you, we will stop the interview.

**Benefits of the Study.** Although this study will not provide a direct benefit for you, this study will help inform higher education female staff, supervisors, and leadership the experiences and effect of adverse interpersonal interactions on female managers.

**During the Study.** Throughout the study, I will continue to provide you with the development of my findings. I will share the interview transcript for your review, as well as my findings.

**Confidentiality.** Confidentiality of your participation in my study is of utmost importance. To protect your confidentiality, I will:

·   Give you (the participant) the choice of where to meet for interviews.

·   Use pseudonyms for your name, position title, and department.

·   Refrain from using the institution's name and instead will use "A research university in the U.S."

·   Save the interview transcripts and recordings in Nvivo under my password-protected account.

**Withdrawal from the Study**. If you do stop your participation in the study, there will be no penalties associated with your withdrawal. All you need to say is that you no longer wish to participate.

**Questions**. If you have questions about the study, interview or narrative, you can ask me during the interview, when the interview is complete, or at a time you feel is appropriate. Below is my contact information.

Katie Schiffelbein, kschiffel@uidaho.edu, 253-740-4274, Moscow, Idaho, 83843 Major Professor: Laura Holyoke, holyoke@uidaho.edu

**Consent.** I am 18 years old or older and have reviewed this consent form and understand and agree to its contents.

○ I consent to participate in this study

○ I do not consent, I do not wish to participate
Just a couple follow-up questions. Thank you!

E-mail:

Name

Title of your current position:

Title of the position you held when you experienced the adverse interpersonal incident (if different than your current position):

**Appendix F: Data Gathering Protocol**

## Data Gathering Protocol

**Primary Research Questions and Objectives:**

Q1. What is the lived experience of adverse interpersonal interactions for women in higher education middle management?

a. Objective: To *describe* women's adverse interpersonal interactions in higher education middle management.

b. Objective: To *understand* how adverse interpersonal interactions affect women in higher education middle management.

Q2. How do women move through adverse interpersonal interactions in higher education middle management? (I expect this question will elicit themes (or lack of themes) of shame resilience.)

a. Objective: To *explore* how women move through adverse interpersonal interactions in higher education middle management.

**Step 1: Participant recruitment survey**

First, I will send a Qualtrics survey out to a number of professional organization listservs (student services, admissions, registrar, and international education) to recruit participants. The survey asks for demographic information, professional experiences background information, and brief examples of their experience with adverse interpersonal interactions in higher education. They will also opt-in to participate in the rest of my study.

Next, I will review the responses who are interested in being part of the study. I will propose to find six to eight participants (to start with) who are female, work in a public institution, supervise a number of direct reports (I am hoping for 4+ direct reports – more would be preferable), and have personally experienced an adverse interpersonal interaction.

**Step 2: Semi-Structured Interview #1**

The first interview will be an opportunity to introduce myself, share my background, build rapport and begin learning the participant's journey into higher education and in her current position, as well as learn more about her background and personal history. I will ask about

her career path and ask about what she does in her position. I want to learn how she sees her role at her institution.

Questions:

1. Share why you are interested in participating in this study. What drew you to this topic?

2. What does a typical day look like in your position?

   a. Follow-ups: What do you do? Who do you report to? What positions do you manage? What is your relationship like with your direct reports, peers, supervisor? What are the positive and negative aspects of your position?

3. What prepared you for this position?

   a. Follow-ups: How did you come to be in this position? Who supported you? Do you like what you do?

4. Describe how you feel your position supports the vision and mission of your institution.

   a. Follow-ups: What is your level of decision making in the institution? How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor? How often do you interact with your supervisor? How long has she/he been your supervisor? How many supervisors have you had while in this position?

**Step 3: Written Narrative**

The purpose of the narrative is for the participant to think through her adverse interpersonal interaction at her own pace. She will reconstruct the incident using first person. I will provide the prompt in two ways: 1) verbally through a recorded/filmed segment explaining the purpose and process, and 2) through written instructions. This way she will have two methods of understanding the purpose and instructions. I will analyze her narratives to understand and describe her experiences of adverse interpersonal incidents (incivility/bullying), as well as explore how she moved through the incident.

**Instructions: Using the three prompts below, please share your experience of an adverse interpersonal interaction. Describe each aspect of a specific adverse interpersonal experience during your time as a manager in higher education.** This could

be a time where you experienced incivility or bullying. Be specific about what happened and write in the first person as you reconstruct your experience.

Definitions:

*Incivility*: Mistreatment that may lead to disconnection, breach of relationships, and erosion of empathy

*Bullying*: Harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work…the bullying behavior occurs repeatedly, regularly and over a period of time

*Adverse Interpersonal Interaction*: A negative experience or observation of perceived intentional incivility or bullying behavior toward colleagues, direct reports, or self.

4. **Beginning**: **Describe the beginning of the adverse interpersonal interaction.** Where did it happen? How did it start? Who was involved? What were the surrounding circumstances? What happened? How long did it happen? When did it happen?

5. **Middle**: **Describe the adverse interpersonal interaction at the time it happened.** Did you talk to anyone? How did others respond (peers, direct reports, supervisor, other)? How did it affect your day-to-day job? How did it affect your personal life? How did you frame the interaction in your mind? Did you spend time thinking about it? How did it affect you immediately? How did you feel in the moment – as it happened or right after? How did it affect the way you managed your team? How did it affect the way you interacted with peers, direct reports, or your supervisor? What part of it was really hard for you – what did you struggle with the most?

6. **End: Describe how the experience ended and how it affected you and others.** What happened at the end? How did it end? Did it ever get resolved? Did anyone help you? How did it make you feel about going to work every day (during and after)? How did it affect you a month later? If you had to do it all over, what would you differently? If you were to give advice to yourself back then, what would you say?

**Step 4: Semi-Structured Interview #2**

The purpose of the second interview, and final data gathering method, is to follow-up with questions after I analyze the narrative, make connections between the participant's background and her adverse experience, and understand how she is doing now in the present. If I do not get a clear description of the experience, or am still curious about how she moved through the situation from the written narrative, this will be the time to ask those follow-up questions. After this follow-up interview, I will review and analyze the transcripts to further inform my study.

Questions:

1. Share how you moved through this experience.

    a. Follow-up: Who did you talk to? Did it affect your personal life?

2. When this experience is triggered (you remember it), what stands out the most?

    a. How does it feel? Where do you feel it in your body? What is your visceral reaction?

3. How did this incident affect the choices you made each day?

    a. Follow-up: Did your behavior change? Did your find that any habits or patterns changed?

4. Are there situations that make you feel anxious or immediately bring you back to that time and how you felt? Please share/tell me more.

5. At what point did the situation feel resolved (if any)?

6. What happened to the persons involved?

    a. Follow-up: Where are they now? What is your relationship like with them?

7. How do you see yourself now?

    a. Follow-up: How do you feel about your skills? How do you feel about going to work now?

8. How does this experience affect your current work interactions?

    a. Follow-up: Do you ever talk about the experience with others? Did you journal about this experience?

9. What did you learn from this experience?

10. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

## Appendix G: Permission E-mail to Use Shame Resilience Model

**From:** Brené Brown Team <connect@brenebrown.com>
**Sent:** Tuesday, May 1, 2018 1:29 PM
**To:** Schiffelbein, Kathryn (kschiffel@uidaho.edu) <kschiffel@uidaho.edu>
**Subject:** RE: Permissions - Shame Resilience Theory Figure 2

Hi Katie,

Thanks for connecting and sharing about your research. It is great to hear that Brené's work has resonated with you. You are welcome reference Brené's work as long as it is appropriately attributed and not used to imply Brené's endorsement of your own work. We wish you wholehearted success with your dissertation.

Sincerely,
Teresa - Brené Brown Team

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Dear Dr. Brown,

Thank you for your incredible research on shame and vulnerability. It has made a great impact in how I communicate with others, and in my own self-talk. I am emailing to request permission to use your Shame Resilience Theory Figure 2 from your *Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame* (2006) article for my dissertation and subsequent manuscripts. I am planning to use shame resilience theory as my theoretical framework. The figure would be a helpful visual.

Thank you for your consideration.

Warm Regards,

Katie Schiffelbein

# Appendix H: Data Analysis Chart Sample

Black: notes from written narrative
**Bold blue: notes from 1ˢᵗ interview**
<span style="color:red">Red: Katie's anecdotes/notes</span>

| Lived Adverse Experience | Description of Adverse Interpersonal Experience | How they moved through |
|---|---|---|
| **Background/Position in the Office of the Registrar:** <br> - **started as a consultant with undergraduate admissions; applied for and got a permanent position – int'l admissions consultant** <br> - **responsibilities: evaluate files/credentials, learn/find out how to do it and then train staff; no positional/authoritative power, lots of influence, no direct reports** <br> - **train other evaluators** <br> - **60% research and development; 40% evaluate applications** <br> - **Two types of staff – 1) uneducated = long, long term (lots of power); 2) over-educated (like Alice)** <br> - **Self/position: p. 19, huge influence because intelligent, fast at work, accurate; disrupter – bring change, "influence resisted", lone position because responsibility is "threatening in a way" p. 20, hired to fix processes** <br> - **No positional power; influence determined on audience** <br> - **Hired to research, synthesize, create – good at this (new to int'l admission processes)** <br> - **Been in student services since 2000 – registrar, domestic admissions, student advising – "I'm a phenomenal advisor"** <br> - <br> Previous experience: "supervisor made sure I would fail" <br> - Why? How? What does it look like to make you fail? <br> Relationship w/supervisors: | "like poison had infected me" p. 1 <br> Work environment: <br> - "sterile due to white walls and rules about not decorating with personal items" p. 2 <br> - **Open workspace** <br> - **"Appreciation poor"** <br> - **"deprived environment"** <br> - **Must model appreciation if Alice wants it** <br> Description with bully (Greta): p. 4 <br> - **Describes bully as a "harasser"; "bully" emotionally charged word** <br> - She felt under-valued, fearful of for her job, was the only one doing the job (int'l admissions); clang to work for a sense of control/to feel essential <br> - Institutional capital/relational capital p. 9 <br> - **Greta – superior to Alice in terms of length of time doing work; Alice superior to Greta in terms of education and ability.** <br> - **Bully is the "shittiest part of the job" p. 25** <br> **Description of how Alice knows people don't like her/are hostile:** <br> - **No eye contact** <br> - **Don't say hello** <br> - **"really in your face"** <br> - **Hostility** <br> - **People ignore her** <br> - **Attack directly in packs <span style="color:red">(how?)</span>** <br> - **One colleague was hostile to her, went on maternity leave, upon return she apologized to alice and now they work well together.** <br> Job application process: <br> - Bully's response to Alice applying and then pulling application to similar job: tearful and upset p. 5 | Entered the position hopeful, p. 1 <br> **Physical space: raised up a couple papers on the partition to not see the bully p. 26** <br> Self-described personality: p. 3 <br> - Charming, introvert, slow to trust others, firm personal/work boundaries (doesn't want to know about family, etc.), small talk is difficult, socially difficult – don't trust easily, charming – talking about non-personal stuff? <br> - Core values: status, economic security <span style="color:red">(what are other top ten values</span>?) <br> - Loyal to #1 supervisor (Alex) p. 6 <br> - **Interested in: psychology, psychopathy, sociology, work culture, people** <br> - **Curious** <br> - **Love to train others** <br> - **Wants to be appreciated – p. 24 – recently was thanked – received an in-person thank you and follow-up e-mail – lives for this (2 thank yous in two months); "It's what I live for [appreciation]. I get so little of it"; means a lot because it shows confidence in her.** <br> - **Will not make friends with colleagues because some day, she might be their manager. P. 28** <br> Kept a work journal – 450 pages |

Alex remained supportive at the beginning, 2007 originally
- "ditherer" takes a long to get things done

Job application process:
- Alice applied for an int'l admission job, then pulled her application. HR didn't send the message to admissions, so she ended up being called for the interview.
- She kept this from her boss, told him she didn't want that type of work …., he knew she had applied for other jobs as well.

Beginning of incident:
- Secrecy of research project p. 3 (names/positions were removed so no one knew who took part in the research)
- Colleague (greta) read into the closesness between Alice and her supervisor Alex and felt frustrated p. 4

Relationship w/Bully (greta):
- Started positive – friendly chatter coffee, "laugh and talk" – Jan – April 2016
- Greta shared backstories of colleagues, mostly positive p. 5
- "put out at not being privy [to the research information] p. 5
- Scrubbed, she only read 6/15 in 3 months
- Alice felt she didn't care as much since no names were attached to the research
- When the bully relationship started to get negative, entering a new job, she was not honest w/her supervisor, Alex, when he asked her how things were w/Greta p. 7
- P. 17 Bully's "cronies" were long-term employees; would not say hello, not smile, shunning behavior (what did this look like?)

Relationship w/supervisor:

- Bully's response to Alice interviewing for the similar job: indifferent, just stared p. 7
- Bully's response to Alice deciding to take the job: all non-verbal response, paced, didn't say anything – Alice took this as supportive (tell me more – how was this "supportive"?)

Description of relationship with supervisors:
- #1 – Alex: Associate Registrar- Alice was loyal, positive, comfortable picking his brain, candid w/ one another; "had my back" p. 8/12?; long standing support since 2007; relaxed, comfortable, safe to argue point p. 9; experience with Greta – she was "hired to be the blade on the snow plow of change" p. 8; Boss "agreed w/statement, appeared to understand with situation, then back-pedaled.
- #2 – Betty: Admissions manager, 30 years - distant, no reason to interact; "smile never met her eyes", didn't like how close Alice and Alex were p. 8; taking "personal" – felt like Alice was questioning her as a person, not the process as intended p. 12; Betty has cliques – babysits for subordinates children (against Alice's values); Alice thinks this is inappropriate

Description of not getting help during bullying:
- Lonely, embarrassing – could not hide
- Tired from vigilance
- Retreat into silence
- Moody resentment – no one was helping p. 12
- "I would get very tired from the vigilance and retreat into silence and moody resentment about how no one was helping me. Perhaps I could have helped myself by calling her out far sooner than I eventually did." (p. 12, narrative)

- To track "stupid crap that happens in jobs"
- Reference document to measure documents/completion of projects p. 7

Reached out for help to supervisor p. 12

**Fighting it [bullying] meant enduring it – lonely embarrassing**

Wanted to hide, but couldn't (very public space)

"Should have called her [Greta} out sooner"

Documented with emails – copied supervisor p. 16
- Document questions/clarification to Greta (bully)
- Track responses/non-responses

Ways of documenting:
- Email
- Journal
- Union rep

Critical Incident:
- Colleague e-mailed to share disbelief of being yelled at
- Wish had reported incident to HR via "whistle blowing line"
- Requested meeting/intervention
- Took ownership of some issues
- Detach –show compassion
- Reached out to colleagues p. 27 One had held good boundaries with Greta, the second had gone on maternity leave
- Self-harm – binge eating, +50 lbs
- Public shame – p. 30
- What's the point? P. 31

In the end:

"I struggle a lot with the public shame of it. How can an educated, intelligent, generally likeable woman in her 50s let this happen? How can others stand by and watch it and do nothing? How can Greta's cronies aid and abet her? How

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| - Relationship w/ #1 different than #2<br>- Alex #1: started out well, by the end, Alice saw Alex as ineffective; Alice reported to Alex for contract job<br>- Betty #2: started poorly. Betty didn't like how close Alex and Alice were; Alice reported to Betty for fully-employed admissions specialist job<br>- Betty reported to Alex<br>Work experience:<br>- After contractor work w/uni, took int'l admissions job with misgivings p. 10; took due to past job losses; took job due to failures in 2015; felt tainted<br>- Issues when taking new job: #1 didn't announce her job for months, #2 was frustrated; felt awkward<br>- Ex. of on-going incivility/bullying: Alice made a typo, colleagues shared w/supervisor (all the way up the chain) first instead of going straight to her – data entry to admissions (found error) to Greta (bully) to Alex (#1) to Alice. (triangulation?)<br>- P. 16 greta removed from approval queue but continued to be part of reviewing on her own accord<br>- Incident that broke the camel's back in a sense – reported to HR: colleague of greta's yelled at Alice in public about continually asking for some information – greta was there and only smiled, other colleagues just watched; the colleague did apologize later (the one who yelled?); another colleague emailed to empathize in a way<br>Hearing problems:<br>- To hear greta (bully), Alice was "forced to walk | Description of on-going bullying from bully and "cronies": p. 14<br>- They had "impassive faces"; showed resentment at having to train Alice<br>- Lack of communication (break/holiday)<br>- Felt angry and frustrated – felt like her work didn't matter when ignore for a month for approval/review<br>- Bully didn't follow the same rules as was expected of herself (putting a sign up when on break/sick etc. p. 14 – As a response, Alice responded "tit for tat" by putting up a "home sick" sign when Greta was home – questioning self "overreacted"? sensitized?<br>- "Microaggressions" p. 15: micro-managing; nit-picking; lack resolution<br>- Bully fear of being let go; though Alex and Alice were against her p. 16<br>- "blocking behaviors" – deliberately wait for long periods of time to respond to e-mail (what does the literature say about this?)<br>Description of "launching a complaint":<br>- Felt re-victimized p. 20<br>- "This is a persistent theme I now see in my history: others "make" me do the right thing and then I end up angry at them as I then have to endure all of the fallout from the decision to act in a certain way. It's like being re-victimized, actually." P. 20<br>Description first meeting with HR: p 20<br>- Horrible experience<br>- Grilled like a witness at a trial<br>- HR cut off union rep<br>- Felt/got angry<br>Description of being bullied:<br>- Harassment<br>- Persecution<br>- Wanted to bring up her gaslighting technique but never did get to it.<br>- "She does systematically withhold information, leaving me anxious, confused and less able to trust my memory, | can Alex not protect me? I sincerely do not "get" it.<br><br>So here I am—over 2 years later dealing with this defensive, hostile co-worker who wants whatever it is she wants and Alex wanting something else and me caught between them. Right after the adverse interpersonal experience (the ending of the intervention) I had vivid dreams of work and Greta and trying effortlessly to correct things. I am still angry and this is the most upsetting part of it all. By being angry, they still have an effect on me. I have no indifference to this yet; I have not detached. I struggle with sleeping and I make myself go to work. In fact, in some ways I have "doubled down" and produced even more work. It's like I'm trying to prove to "them" that no matter what? I'm going to be the professional. How is that really helping me recover and take care of me?<br><br>That's the final piece: what would it look like if I recovered from this? What would I do, say or think differently? How will I move forward? Greta continues to run to Betty with her petty grievances and I have stopped doing that—what's the point?" pgs. 30/31 |

around partition to hear" greta better; felt humiliating, constant activity [moving about] p. 13; dignity undermined; greta wouldn't accommodate
- Self-described: hostile

Outcome of on-going incivility: hyper-vigilance; questioning self

Stonewalled – p. 14
- training halted after completing a project, but the files had to be reviewed by greta before moving forward.
- Greta took vacation (didn't let Alice know) and didn't review files for one month.

"microaggressions":
- Greta tracked Alice's sick days p. 14
- Greta not following same "out" signage as she expects Alice to
- Nit-picking office etiquette – how to file binders, etc.

Breaking Point and critical incident was actually how the intervention went down, everything else lead to this point:
- P. 17 – background --
- Referencing in project, greta was unhappy how this happened
- Alice's work "challenged a cornerstone problem" p. 18 with how international students were admitted and transcripts reviewed

Critical Incident: check timeline/info w Alice

1. Another colleague/staffer was upset at multiple "asks" by Alice and publicly stood up and said "fuck off" then left the room. greta only smiled (was this the same incident?); e-mail from another colleague witness gave Alice "hard evidence" to report the incident.
2. Alice shared with her supervisor #2 Betty (which one?) – Betty was "astonished" but didn't do anything
3. Alice shared with her union rep, who had been updated w the on-going incivility throughout. The rep encouraged her to report to HR, but

perception and awareness."
P. 22, para 2

Feel:
- Angry – last minute meeting, business items added, bully withholds information, stolen weekend to prep;
- P. 27 tired
- Lipservice p. 28
- Struggle to sleep, make self go to work p. 30
- Gained weight (50 lbs)
- Bully – manipulative, false, p. 26
- Bully = barrier

Alice didn't want to, but did so anyways.

4. HR meeting included Alex, HR, union rep, and Alice; HR offered to mediate a meeting w/ Alice and colleague who yelled, Alice accepted but the colleague declined (Alice assumed, she never heard back from HR about this).

5. Now feels Alex is an ineffective manager – difficult to accept even through an adverse experience; Alex was "crappy at the confrontation" p. 26

6. Later (how later?), Alice asked for an intervention to boss (Alex?) to have with Greta.

7. No word from boss – Alice had to follow-up by commenting p. 22 (avoidance?) a week later a meeting invite was sent out

8. Meeting prep: Alice spent the weekend before prepping for the meeting – felt unfair at the timing, needed the weekend to recover; items Alice brought to the meeting:
- hearing issue – human rights
- bullying behavior – harassment, persecution (used the term harassment)
- interference and disregard for her work
- not communicating ie vacation
- correction in public
- difficult pacing – Alice faster than Greta

9. Meeting: Friday before a 3-day weekend with Alex, Betty, Greta, and Alice.
- agenda included three additional business-related items before the actual intervention dialogue (avoidance?)
- Was supposed to be two hours, went over, three hours spent on the first three items
- Alice never got angry, but felt she missed an opportunity to really "speak truth" about the issue
- more – go back to data

10. A follow-up meeting was set – during lunch, "we spoke about trust and I spoke about my part: how I had grown silent and how lots of assumptions can fall into the silence. Alex built on thtat and then talked almost steadily for 45 minutes of the 2 hours allotted. He's very good at

| filling silences and not good at tolerating them." <br> 11. Final meeting was not in private – in an open space; anyone could walk by and overhear; Greta's perspective: felt "submissive and disregarded; though Alice gossiped and was negative – Alice tried to practice active listening and take "ownership" <br> 12. End result – nothing much was done. Both Alex and Betty seemed closed off to further discussion about the issue. Alice felt there was "no course correction" "bully got away with bullying" <br><br> - Adverse experience never resolved <br> - Currently meet with Betty and Greta to solve work problems, not interpersonal problems | | |
|---|---|---|

**Appendix I: Nvivo 12 Nodes Sample**

| Name | Files | References |
|---|---|---|
| **Preliminary Review of Data** | 0 | 0 |
| Comments on this research | 13 | 37 |
| Description of AIE | 4 | 8 |
| Gender and Race | 1 | 5 |
| Individual vs Collective | 1 | 7 |
| Lived Experience of AIE | 1 | 3 |
| Moving through AIE | 17 | 115 |
| What if...What could happen... Hypothetical | 7 | 26 |
| **Secondary Review of Node Data** | 0 | 0 |
| Bullier description | 2 | 74 |
| Earn privileges | 1 | 3 |
| Feels_responses to AIE | 2 | 49 |
| Feminist Lens | 0 | 0 |
| Institutional Support (or lack of...) | 2 | 70 |
| Moving Through | 1 | 14 |
| Pysch Safety | 2 | 4 |
| Quotes | 2 | 37 |
| Resources_Lit to Review | 1 | 2 |

Nodes — Search Project

Description of AIE | Description of Feelings of AIE | Description of AIE Behavior

Not just with me, but with any decision he didn't agree with.

Reference 11 - 0.33% Coverage

But, in this particular instance, he came to my office, and just started screaming and cursing at me.

Reference 12 - 0.77% Coverage

And my boss, the chair, was out of the country. I had no way of contacting him. He just absolutely cursed me out, and just told me that I was an imbecile, and that I had no business doing my job or having that position in the first place.

Reference 13 - 0.74% Coverage

His whole posse was male, everybody that he would bring together was male. He would never include any of the female professors. There was never a rational, "Hey, let's come to a mutual

**Appendix J:  Tentative Manifestations Samples from Data Binder**