

## Analysis of Effects of Workplace Bullying on Bystanders in Manufacturing Sector

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### ABSTRACT

*Organizations can spend exorbitant amounts on employee engagement and turnover only to experience high employee turnover and low employee engagement. Researchers have found numerous organizational behaviors that impede an employee's ability to perform to their abilities and remain engaged in their job function, as well as remain aligned with the goals of the organization. The purpose of this qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of manufacturing employees who had witnessed workplace bullying and the meaning they ascribed to their bullying experience and management's efforts in combating workplace bullying. Data were collected using a formal, semi-structured interview approach with eighteen participants who represented current or former employees of eleven different manufacturing firms in Northwestern, Pennsylvania. Five essences were revealed from the data, and three stages were further investigated. The three stages (the experience, the reaction, and the personal effect) suggested that the bystanders endured emotional turmoil both psychologically and physiologically towards the workplace bullying act they witnessed. The research findings further suggest that the participants defined their experience as a determinant of engagement with the organization and management. The bystanders viewed bullying as a shortcoming in leadership, as many participants shared their expectations that management must address the bullying situations to ensure a safe, comfortable working environment for all employees.*

**Keywords:** Workplace bullying, bystanders, workplace aggression, organizational effects, employee engagement

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Workplace bullying can present in different forms and is destructive for targets, bystanders, and the organization (Ada Manga et al., 2023; Karatuna et al., 2020). The focus of most studies has been on understanding the antecedents of bullying behavior (Parzefall & Salin, 2010) and how bullying behavior impacts the target (Heames & Harvey, 2006). However, research over the last decade indicates the spillover effects this phenomenon is having on bystanders and witnesses who were not direct targets (Emdad et al., 2012; Sims & Sun, 2012) and, until recently, qualitative

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research directed toward the role of the bystander has been under-represented in literature (Thompson et al, 2020).

When there are more than two or three witnesses to bullying, there is a diffusion of responsibility that creates inactivity on the part of the witnesses, and typically, none of the witnesses intervene because they feel someone else is going to. Commonly known as the “bystander effect,” this passive response was introduced and documented by Darley and Latane in 1968. The authors suggested that understanding the relationship among bystanders would provide a greater benefit in understanding bystander intervention than trying to understand the relationship between the bystander and the target of bullying. Research on workplace bullying has also documented notable evidence that bystanders tend to behave in this passive manner (Rai & Agarwal, 2018). The lack of intervention is often the result of fear of becoming the next target, which may result in feelings of guilt and anguish (Hoel et al., 2003; Rayner, 1999). The negative effects of bullying on targets and bystanders (Rhodes et al., 2010) cause overwhelming feelings of stress (Coyne et al., 2019; Georgakopoulos et al., 2011) and desires to seek alternate employment (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006), indicating a systemic problem throughout the organization (Georgakopoulos et al., 2011; Tuckey et al., 2022). Working in an environment where bullying appears to be tolerated and accepted demoralizes everyone (Rhodes et al., 2010).

The U.S. manufacturing sector, comprising 12.72% of the national workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023, 2024), is an industry segment opportunistic for researching the dynamic between victim, perpetrator, and bystander. Antecedent organizational conditions associated with bullying, such as emotional upheaval associated with downsizing and outsourcing (Salin & Hoel, 2003), are found in the manufacturing sector (Georgakopoulos et al., 2011). Manufacturing organizations require a significant amount of interaction and teamwork among the workers and, therefore, engaged workers are important to the success of the manufacturing organization (Shuck & Reio, 2014).

Gallup (2024) reported a 2% decrease in employee engagement in the U.S. between 2020 and 2022. Witnessing bullying behavior negatively affects productivity by creating employee disengagement (Hollis, 2015), making it an important area of research to understand how it affects bystanders and witnesses. This study presents the lived experiences of bystanders and witnesses of workplace bullying in manufacturing, and the findings may add to the literature by shifting focus from a single-victim approach to one more inclusive of bystanders within an industry group for which there is limited bullying research. Although researchers use varying terms to define workplace bullying, most researchers agree on three defining elements: (a) repetition of harmful and corrosive act(s), (b) over a period of time, (c) that result in negative reactions from targets (Nami & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Parzefall & Salin, 2010). The target is badgered, intimidated, humiliated (Sloan et al., 2010), and personally ridiculed using persistent verbal and non-verbal behaviors (Tehrani, 2012). In work-related bullying, the bully intentionally withholds information the target needs to perform his or her job, eliminates some of the target’s responsibilities, unduly increases the target’s workload, or ensures that the target is not credited for work that he or she has performed (Tehrani, 2012).

Researchers have studied the varying effects leadership practices have on workplace bullying (Hauge et al., 2011; Mathisen et al., 2011). Hauge et al. predicted close to a 40% variation in bullying for fair and supportive leadership practices and role conflict, whereas role ambiguity indicated a significant zero-order relationship with bullying at the department level. The authors identified departmental characteristics as likely factors related to workplace bullying while Zapf (1999) suggested that the complexity of workplace bullying requires more explanation than one or two factors alone could suffice. Supervisors who are low in conscientiousness (Mathisen et al., 2011) or possess neurotic traits of insecurity and uneasiness would be inhibited from having the

courage needed to intervene in conflicts. Mathisen et al. (2011) found that a combination of the target individual's personality characteristics and the work climate factors all play a role in exposure to workplace bullying. Aquino and Thau (2009) posited that avoidance and leaving the situation were the most effective ways to cope with workplace bullying, and these behaviors are used as coping mechanisms (Rai & Agarwal, 2018). Berthelsen et al. (2011) indicated that individuals exposed to higher levels of workplace bullying behaviors are likely to be on sick leave or disability and experience varying levels of health deterioration (Hansen, 2018), suggesting that management and employers cannot assume it will just take care of itself.

The 2013 Workplace Bullying Institute's (WBI; Namie, 2013) *Bullying by Industry* survey showed 27% of the respondents prone to workplace bullying were from the healthcare industry and 23% of the respondents were from education, with 12% representing higher education, and 11% representing secondary education. Nursing and education were the most represented overall by industry, with every other industry representing proportionately smaller parts of the overall proportion of participants who had been bullied at work. In the field of higher education, the phenomenon of workplace bullying is quite prevalent and has only recently gained the attention of researchers in the United States (Lester, 2009). Hollis (2012) indicated that employees in higher education faced bullying 58% more often than individuals in the corporate world and found that as much as 62% of the respondents in her study confirmed they had been bullied or had witnessed bullying, causing them to be disengaged from their job and their work tasks.

European researchers reported that manufacturing organizations account for the largest number of bullying incidents within the private sector (Hubert & Van Veldhoven, 2001), the manufacturing population is underrepresented in bullying research in U.S. populations. Sims and Sun (2012) conducted a study in two midsized manufacturing plants in China to investigate the relationship between the effects of witnessing workplace bullying behaviors and employees' attitudes and intentions to leave the organization. The findings indicated that witnesses experience an increase in physical and emotional strain and report lower levels of job satisfaction and a decreased commitment to their organizations as workplace bullying increases. The authors further proposed that an individual only needs to be an observer of workplace bullying to experience an increase in physical and emotional strain related to this act.

There is a plethora of research on workplace bullying primarily focused on the target and perpetrator, yet WBI's 2021 *U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey* of employed individuals indicated that 22% of the respondents had witnessed workplace bullying. The WBI estimated this percentage on the approximate 160.5 million employed workers in the U.S. according to the published records of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics from December 2020. This percentage increased significantly from the 12% shown in WBI's 2007 survey (Namie, 2013). Barling (1996) explained that workplace bullying is not an interpersonal issue, but an organizational dynamic that affects all who are exposed. Researchers have shown that witnessing workplace bullying is nearly as deleterious as there is often a direct concern that the witnesses will be the next targets of the bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020; Georgakopoulos et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2020). Non-bullied witnesses report higher negativity and stress, lower levels of job satisfaction, higher turnover rates, and an overall lower rating of their work experiences (Einarsen et al., 2003; Emdad et al., 2012; Georgakopoulos et al., 2011).

The nature of bystander behavior and the factors that determine these behaviors (organizational, social, personal) are an important research area. D'Cruz and Noronha (2010) explained that withdrawal from bullying victims caused the participants to feel guilt and remorse for abandoning their friends. When an employee feels empathy towards an individual who has been bullied, he or she feels a commitment or a responsibility to help the individual. Of the seventeen participants in their study, nine decided to leave the organization due to the perception that the

organization failed to provide sufficient support for the employees in the situation; conversely, the remaining eight participants were still unsure of future continuity with the organization (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2010). Salin and Notelaers (2020) confirmed the negative effects witnessing workplace bullying has on bystander attitudes, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. Additionally, Salin and Notelaer’s study showed that the lack of intervention by the organization reduced work attitudes aligning with psychological contracts and feelings of betrayal and anger.

A final component of the literature review considered the findings related to vicarious trauma—the term applied to the negative effects on the secondary victim (Jankoski, 2010). While the elements and effects of vicarious trauma are generally unique to specific trauma work, elements of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishments were listed as well (Bell et al., 2003). Workers exposed to the negative environment created by bullying are also in need of a support system. Observing the trauma inflicted on others creates an emotional and mental drain on the bystanders and motivates the intention to quit (Rai & Agarwal, 2018).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Originally pioneered by Kahn (1990), employee engagement is a premise that workers have behaviors they use and express in role performance. Personal engagement and personal disengagement are the terms Kahn (1990) used to reference behaviors by which individuals would “bring in or leave out their personal selves during work role performances” (p. 694). Kahn further explained that given the appropriate conditions, these behaviors drive personal energies into physical, cognitive, and emotional labors. Grounded in Kahn’s early study of personal engagement, Brown and Leigh (1996) suggested that the psychological workplace climate “represents the lens employees use to understand and interpret their work environment relative to the social and physical structures of their environmental cues in relation to preserving their own sense of well-being” (p. 45).

The conceptual framework for this study was formed around the premise that the bystanders who are witnesses to workplace bullying may view the negative impact of the situation as a personal attack on them as an employee and coworker in that organization. The negative impact of the situation perceived by the bystanders may have a profound effect on the level of engagement expended by the workers after the bullying or as the situation continues. Researchers have found employees who work in negative psychological climates or those who may have experienced negative emotions because of their work are less likely to experience positive emotions (Brown & Leigh, 1996; Shuck et al., 2011).

The extant literature provides more of a focus on the bully and the target than on the bystanders of the bullying event or the organization in which the event occurs. The findings from this study are more inclusive relative to the bystanders who witnessed workplace bullying. Therefore, utilizing transcendental phenomenology, this study aids in developing a deeper, richer understanding of the bystander experience of workplace bullying in the manufacturing industry than currently exists in the literature by seeking answers to the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of employees who witness bullying episodes at work?
2. What feelings are evoked among employees as they witness workplace bullying?
3. What feelings are evoked among witnesses to workplace bullying because of management’s actions or inactions to incidents of workplace bullying?

The first question allowed each participant to describe the phenomena they witnessed and the degree to which they would describe it. In the event the participant had witnessed two or more

occasions of bullying, the participant was given a chance to describe each experience separately. The second question allowed each participant to share the emotional responses and thought processes evoked in them, and the third question enabled each participant to describe their emotional experience with management's efforts in combating workplace bullying. If the experiences had been in the same workplace, the participants compared their levels of emotions and the emotional understanding of management's efforts between different experiences.

### **Background for Study Interest**

Researcher one worked in manufacturing for thirty-six years. During this time, she witnessed two different, extensive incidents of workplace bullying. The first incident lasted for several years, and to the researcher's knowledge, management never addressed the situation. The female bully inflicted her behavior on other women by focusing her efforts on one female co-worker for an extended period until she eventually made her way through each one and circled back. One could see how the current victims would stressfully and cautiously behave around this individual and found it difficult to perform her own job because it required obtaining information from the perpetrator. The second situation involved another female who was very demanding, vocal, and disrespectful to both males and females, usually targeting one or two co-workers for an extended period. In this incident, management spoke to the perpetrator several times but essentially allowed the bullying behavior to continue until the bully terminated her employment. As a witness to these experiences, the researcher took an interest in this type of behavior and started to research workplace bullying. In her research efforts, she found many studies on the perpetrator and the target but a limited number of studies on the effect of this behavior on those who were not directly involved but had to work in this type of toxic environment.

Researcher two worked in manufacturing for eight years. As the nature of the manufacturing business was cyclic, with business expanding and contracting continuously, bullying behavior by seasoned employees was rampant, and management did not pay attention due to the high rate of attrition and layoffs. The researcher worked in the engineering department and witnessed the bullying actions both on the shop floor and in the office environment where people who did not submit to the toxic culture were not given advancement and fulfilling projects. Given his data analysis expertise and familiarity with the topic, he aided the researcher one in the analysis and drafting of this study.

### **Method**

A transcendental phenomenological design was used to study the reactions of bystanders to workplace bullying. In phenomenology, researchers do not preconceive or predict what the interrelationships may be, nor do they construct hypotheses to be verified (Applebaum, 2012), allowing researchers to study the phenomenal experiences of individuals as these experiences are lived, viewing these experiences as conscious (van Manen, 1990), and arriving at the essence of these experiences (Moustakas, 1994) by identifying patterns in the participant's experiences (Bouzioti, 2023).

Examining the lived experiences of individuals was accomplished using a qualitative research method and design. The advantage of a qualitative methodology is the ability to focus on naturally occurring and ordinary events in natural settings, allowing the researcher to obtain insight into what real life is like from those who experienced it (Amaratunga et al., 2002). Qualitative research is appropriate for studying the meanings individuals place on their perceptions of events, processes, structures of their life's assumptions, prejudgments, and presuppositions and for

connecting these meanings to the social world around them through emphasis on lived experience (Amaratunga et al., 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Five common phenomenological methods among human science researchers that utilize qualitative methodologies include ethnography, grounded theory, hermeneutics, empirical phenomenological research, and heuristic research (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology, as presented by Husserl (1913), is set apart from the other phenomenological methods in that Husserl preferred to use intuition over deduction. Moustakas (1994) explained that Husserl's phenomenology is transcendental because it addresses what is discovered through reflection on subjective acts and their objective correlates. Whether an actual object exists is not important to the researcher; it is the experience that arises out of the outward appearance of something and how the experience looks inside one's head based on memory, meaning, and image (Moustakas, 1994).

In this study, phenomenology was employed to discern the components of the participants' consciences while striving to gain an understanding of the essence of the experiences. In a qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument of measure (Patton, 2002); in terms of credibility, it is important to ensure the skill and competence of the researcher in both data collection and analysis. Patton (2002) asserted, "Qualitative methods facilitate the study of issues and in-depth detail . . . without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis that contribute to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry" (p. 14). The use of quantitative methods allows researchers to measure the outcomes of many participants with a limited number of questions for statistical aggregation of the data and a broad, generalizable set of findings. In addition, qualitative research methods produce rich, detailed information about much smaller groups, increasing the depth of understanding yet reducing generalizability (Patton, 2002).

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected in confidential interviews using a semi-structured interview format with open-ended questions. The data were collected over 30 days during 2018, and the qualifying participants were current or past employees of established manufacturing plants in Northwestern Pennsylvania who had witnessed workplace bullying over an extended period. The interviews were analyzed to best portray the commonalities as per the steps of the modified van Kaam method suggested by Moustakas (1994), and such commonalities were integrated into a textural and structural whole that captured and synthesized the meaning of the entire group's experience.

## **Study Participants and Recruitment Procedures**

The sample for this study was eighteen adult individuals who were currently or previously employed in northwestern Pennsylvania in the manufacturing industry. The participants represented eleven manufacturing facilities and worked in various non-management positions, including factory/non-factory workers and full-time or part-time employees. Factory workers represented 62% of the sample and non-factory workers represented 38% of the sample. The respondents were evenly represented between male and female. Age (Table 1) and gender data were collected to identify any noticeable effects of these factors. The number of years worked for a manufacturing firm was also collected to discern differences in the length of service and emotional perspectives of the participants. Some of the participants witnessed multiple bullying experiences, for a total of 23 witnessed experiences among the 18 participants. As a witness, 30% of the participants experienced the phenomenon between 18 and 25 years of age, and 40% witnessed bullying when they were between 26 and 45 years of age.

**Table 1***Current Age Group of Participants*

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
18 to 25	3	16%
26 to 45	1	6%
46 to 65	13	72%
Over 65	1	6%

The qualitative data was collected through an audiotaped recording. The researcher took notes to capture the elements that could not be captured on the audio and compared participants in later analysis. Through open interviews (Table 2) and employing different sources of information from diverse participants, the researcher was able to improve the validity of the findings. The use of a semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to guide the interview and keep it on track (Leedy & Ormond, 2012) while allowing time for the participant's lived experience to unfold (Bouzioti, 2023). All participants were asked to review and sign an Informed Consent Form before the interview. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality, and all participants gave their permission to be audio-recorded. The researcher gave each potential participant a few minutes to read the written definition of workplace bullying and ask questions. The potential participant was also asked what his or her position was with the company they worked for when they witnessed the bullying behavior. The researcher scheduled the first two participants for separate interviews at a place and time that allowed the participants to choose to use these as the pilot study.

The interview process in the pilot study made the researcher aware of three areas wherein the experience was not being captured at the depth desired. As a result, three additional probing questions were added to the questions list (Table 2), which allowed the researcher to gather data on how the experience made the participant feel as an employee and their job performance, the emotional thought processes they went through to make changes in their job because of the experience, and how the participant applied meaning from the overall experience to their level of engagement/productivity. Upon completion of the pilot study, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim and asked the participants to review the transcriptions to ensure validity and completeness.

**Table 2**  
*Semi-Structured Interview Questions*

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How many years have you or did you work in manufacturing?  
 How many years did you work for, or currently work for, your employer?  
 Have you worked for more than one manufacturer? How many?  
 Are you still employed in manufacturing?  
 What was the position you held in manufacturing?  
 Are you a factory or non-factory employee?  
 What age group do you currently fall in? 18-25; 25-35; 36-45; 46-65; 65+  
 What age group were you in when you were a witness to workplace bullying? 18-25; 25-35; 36-45; 45-65; 65+  
 What is your gender?  
 How would you describe your experience as a witness to workplace bullying?  
 What were the circumstances surrounding your having witnessed this act? Are they always the same with the same individual?  
 What was your first reaction?  
 What were you thinking as you were witnessing this act(s)?  
 What was the difference in the internal rationalization of your thinking between the first time you witnessed the act and any of the times afterwards?  
 What feelings were evoked as you witnessed workplace bullying?  
 What emotion(s) do you recall having that was stronger than another?  
 What feelings did you have regarding helping the target or distancing yourself from the situation?  
 What feelings were evoked in you because of management's actions or inactions to incidents of workplace bullying?  
 If you reported the bullying to management, how did it make you feel?  
 How would you describe the experience as it relates to how it makes you feel as an employee and how you perform your job?  
 What emotional thought processes have you gone through to make changes in your job because of this experience?  
 How would you describe the effects of the overall experience of being a witness to workplace bullying in terms of how it affected your level of engagement or disengagement and your production levels?

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Practicing epoché, the researcher removed all preconceived notions and reduced bias during the interview process and listened as if hearing it for the first time. The participants discussed the experience(s) free will, disclosing whatever information they felt was important and applicable. Before the process of epoché and during the research process, the researcher would bracket the phenomena of interest (Moustakas, 1994). Immediately before data explication, the researcher bracketed any prior knowledge or experiences towards workplace bullying until the collected data had been put through textural and structural synthesis on their own, and the researcher presented the final analysis.

The data were transcribed into Word and uploaded into Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis software, enabling the researcher to group like data and eliminate data that were not relevant to the study. The data were analyzed to best portray the commonalities using the steps of the modified van Kaam data analysis method suggested by Moustakas (1994). There are three steps in the modified van Kaam process, which entail eight procedures (Moustakas 1994). The researcher implemented each step with the corresponding procedures and detailed the outcome. The data were



sorted for relevant expressions and clustered and themed into a textural (what happened) and structural (how it happened) whole that captured the meaning of the entire group and synthesized the experience.

## **Results**

Phenomenology enables the study of phenomena from first-person experience. In this study, the lived experiences of participants were reconstructed by studying not only each experience but also its germane conditions.

### **Step 1: Reduction**

Twenty-six invariant constituents representing the textural meanings were carefully examined and clustered into five different emerging themes. Table 3 presents the five identified themes, along with sample expressions from several participants.

**Table 3**  
*Themes and Sample Expressions of Witnesses to Workplace Bullying in Manufacturing*

<b>Experiences</b>	<b>Sample Expressions</b>
Theme 1: The bullying situation created deep emotional and visceral reactions in the witnesses towards the situation, the bully, and the organization.	<p>“Who is protecting this person? Somebody in management or an owner . . . either this person is having a relationship with somebody, or somebody is protecting this person that would let or allow this to go on.” (Betsy*)</p> <p>“I would say less valued. It didn’t seem to bother management that people were unhappy.” (Maria*)</p>
Theme 2: The experience of being a witness created emotional upheaval in the witnesses towards the perpetrator.	<p>“Anger toward the person doing the bullying – wanted to smack the shit out of them – reverse it.” (Lucy*)</p> <p>“I couldn’t believe that she was actually being that mean, that rude.” (Priscilla*)</p>
Theme 3: The various bullying tactics observed by the witnesses elicited a gamut of emotions towards the situation.	<p>“I was scared the first time I saw this happening because I was cornered while it was taking place.” (Sadie*)</p> <p>“How can grown adults not just go to work and do their jobs on all realms of it? Whether you are in production or a manager, it’s like high school.” (Marvin*)</p>
Theme 4: The bystander felt the experience reflected negatively on management.	<p>“I figured I could help with morale and was basically told to just do your own job and don’t worry about what everyone else is doing.” (Peter*)</p> <p>“She was sent home and that was overridden by another owner so that just empowered her.” (Sam*)</p>
Theme 5: The bystanders noticed the bullying situation created a change in the working environment.	<p>“Kind of like whatever. I guess you get used to it.” (Maria*)</p> <p>“It’s hard to do your own job when they (management) aren’t helping like they should.” (Morgan*)</p>

*Note.* \*Participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy

***Theme 1: The Bullying Situation Created Deep Emotional and Visceral Reactions in the Witnesses towards the Situation, the Bully, and the Organization***

The individuals who participated in this phenomenological study witnessed the bullying acts portrayed next in Theme 2, but in Theme 1, the participants shared the unique instinctive reactions and emotions elicited in direct relation to being a witness. Table 4 presents the visceral reactions the witnesses had by presenting the invariant constituents relating to the theme, the number of times reported by the participants, and the number of participants reporting.

**Table 4**

*Theme 1 – Visceral Reactions of the Bystander*

<b>Invariant constituents</b>	<b>Number of times reported</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Hindsight and regrets	15	7
Helpless / Powerless	10	7
Resignation	9	6
Frustration	6	5
Downplaying the situation	4	2
Questions absurdity of situation	4	4

Almost half of the participants experienced a time of regret during or after the experience. Susan talked about the feelings that were evoked in her as a witness to workplace bullying, expressing the anger, sadness, and intimidation she felt, stating, “I felt like something should be done, but I didn’t do anything, so I was upset with myself.” Many participants felt helpless or powerless in their experience, which later led Sadie to be resigned to the fact that “no matter what you do, it’s not going to make a difference.”

***Theme 2: The Experience of Being a Witness Created Emotional Upheaval in the Witnesses towards the Perpetrator***

Table 5 shows how many times the bystanders mentioned the varying acts and what emotional thoughts and feelings were ignited within the participants.

**Table 5**

*Theme 2 – Emotional Experience of Bystander as Related to the Bully*

<b>Invariant constituents</b>	<b>Number of times reported</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Bully actions observed	40	18
Anger towards bully	9	6
Expressed feelings toward bully	8	4
Desire to have someone report bully	5	4
Desire for bully to self-check actions	2	2

The bullying acts included acts of sabotage, verbal abuse, harassment, purposely setting up individuals to fail, etc. The participants shared how the acts were inflicted verbally and through email. Marvin stated, “I saw people [the perpetrator] taking different hardware and throwing it . . .

taking and mixing it up so people [next shift] wouldn't make rate." The employees were paid according to the quantity produced, so if their production level was lower, their pay would be lower. Many of the participants expressed the anger they felt toward the perpetrator, and four of the participants questioned the perpetrator's professionalism and maturity level.

***Theme 3: The Various Bullying Tactics Observed by the Witnesses Elicited a Gamut of Emotions towards the Situation***

The bullying situation ignited varying degrees of emotional responses within the participants. Table 6 displays the number of times the bystanders mentioned the emotions and feelings that were evoked.

**Table 6**

*Theme 3 – Emotional Experience of Bystander as Related to the Bullying Situation*

<b>Invariant constituents</b>	<b>Number of times reported</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Personal feelings evoked as witness	33	14
Internalizing involvement level	26	15
Empathy for target	11	9
Nefarious situation	9	6
Fear of repercussions of involvement	7	6

As shown above, 14 participants divulged the personal feelings and emotions evoked in them as they pertained to the *perpetrator* or, for others, how the *bullying situation* had an emotional impact on them. Nichole revealed how the situation made her “uncomfortable,” and stated, “I was scared to go to work.” Randy revealed how angry he was, stating it was “because the person is in a position being over somebody to use that power to manipulate that person to lose their job I did not like that.”

All but three of the participants shared the internal struggle they went through because of their involvement level in the bullying. While others tried to help the target when they could. Roger was the only participant who vehemently stated, “I don't want to get involved,” while Peter did involve himself by trying to help and then felt “like a snitch” after the fact. Nine of the participants displayed visible empathy for the target. Mark shared how he “would help the person [target] in private didn't want the situation to escalate.” Six of the participants verbalized thoughts pertaining to the experience as a nefarious situation. Susan shared, “how horrible it is,” and Roger's reaction toward the situation was “kind of like disgusted.”

***Theme 4: The Bystander Felt the Experience Reflected Negatively on Management***

The participants had varying views, thoughts, and emotional responses toward management and how the bullying situations were addressed as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7***Theme 4 – The Bystanders’ Feelings Toward Management*

<b>Invariant constituents</b>	<b>Number of times reported</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Reaction to managerial response	22	13
Visceral reactions towards management	11	7
Desire to know outcome	2	2
Anger towards management	2	2

Reaction to managerial response was reported by 13 of the participants who viewed the bullying situation as two-fold. One view was to focus on the perpetrator and his or her actions while the other view was to question how management was going to deal with the situation. Three of the participants were surprised by the response they received when they tried to address the situation with the managers. Two of these participants were told to mind their own business and worry about their jobs.

Four of the participants strongly felt that management made no attempt to correct or control the situation. Randy felt management “kind of turned a blind eye to it.” Three other participants felt management tried to handle the situation inadequately. Morgan stated, “That they would let it get to the point it did, I just think they should have addressed it more.” Additionally, four other participants felt like management were protecting the perpetrator. Sam felt there was a reason management did not do anything to try to rectify the situation as he stated, “Old school management pretty much condoned it.” Seven of the participants shared visceral intuitive reactions toward management. Betsy said she “always looked at it as, well, let’s stir things up, you know, and see how things get worked out in the pecking order.”

*Theme 5: The Bystanders Noticed that the Bullying Situation Created a Change in the Working Environment*

Table 8 lists and quantifies the invariant constituents concerning the personal turmoil felt by the participants.

**Table 8***Theme 5 – The Experience of the Situation in the Working Environment*

<b>Invariant constituents</b>	<b>Number of times reported</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Effect on personal productivity level	21	18
Effect on bystander’s engagement level	14	15
Desire to leave toxic environment	13	11
Actions taken / emotional effect	12	9
Disrupting working environment	11	7
Becoming desensitized	6	5

The effect on personal performance-level was directly/indirectly stated by all of the participants. Six participants felt the bullying situation negatively affected their productivity levels. Lucy felt the situation made her “less productive,” while Robert shared, “The bullying situation would make you not pay attention to your job because you are looking over your shoulder to see who is going to do something to you.”

Six other participants made a conscious effort not to let the situation affect their personal performance levels. Nichole shared how the situation made her uncomfortable, but she “still performed” her job. Priscilla also shared, “I just strove to do the best I could and didn’t allow her [bully] to bother me.” Other participants were emotionally affected by the situation. Maria shared how it made her feel “less valued” as her perception was “it didn’t seem to bother management that people were unhappy.” Fifteen participants specifically discussed how they felt the situation affected their engagement level. Peter perceived management did not care, causing him to develop the attitude, “I didn’t care either.” Maria felt like she would “put up a shield...for a while you are engaged, but after a while you give up.”

The bullying environment created personal struggles for nine of the witnesses in relation to their personal conflict in reporting and any resulting implications. Mark reported one of the situations he witnessed and how it made him feel like he was “righting a wrong.” However, in another situation, he did not feel he could report it, and he chose to “help them [target] in private” instead because he “didn’t want the situation to escalate.” Darren also shared that he felt “unaccomplished” for reporting as he was told to “worry about yourself, not other people.”

### **Step 2: Imaginative Variation**

By integrating the invariant constituents and themes, a textural-structural description of each participant's experience was prepared. The process of data analysis begins to move away from facts and measurable entities and towards a focus on meanings and essences.

### **Step 3: Synthesis**

Synthesis is the final step, in which fundamental textural and structural descriptions are combined to provide a merged statement of the essences of each participant’s experience. Table 9 lists the essences that emerged from the data in addition to the three corresponding stages of the bullying experience that emerged from the essences.

In stage one, the participants witnessed the bullying and the actions or inactions taken by management (experience). In stage two, the participants decided to help the target directly/indirectly by reporting the incident to management or not at all (reaction). In stage three, the participants made a conscious or unconscious decision about the effect of the bullying situation on their job performance and engagement levels (personal effect).

**Table 9**

*Essences and Corresponding Stages of Witnessing Workplace Bullying*

<b>Essence</b>	<b>Stage</b>
Essence 1 - Thoughts and feelings ignited while witnessing workplace bullying	Stage 1 – The participants witnessed the bullying acts and the actions or inactions taken by management (experience).
Essence 2 - Personal thoughts toward management and management’s response	Stage 2 – The participants decided to help the target directly, indirectly by reporting the incident to management, or not at all (reaction).
Essence 3 - Deciding what a bystander’s role should be in the experience	
Essence 4 - Dealing with decision made to get involved or refrain from involvement	Stage 3 – The participants made a conscious or unconscious decision about how the bullying situation would affect their own job performance and engagement levels (personal effect).
Essence 5 - Deciding effect on personal productivity and engagement level	

***Essence 1: Thoughts and Feelings Ignited While Witnessing the Bullying Act***

Every participant shared their emotional reaction to the bullying situation and their personal assessment of management’s efforts to rectify it. Three participants had a hard time accepting the situation for what it was at first. They thought the perpetrator was just joking around or questioned the validity of what they were witnessing. Seven other participants were angry at the perpetrator for the actions they displayed toward a fellow coworker. This group of participants had descriptive names for the bully and expressed that the bully displayed a lack of professionalism and maturity. The thought process for the remaining participants focused less on the bully and more on why no one was addressing the situation. Betsy, like several other participants, tried to internally rationalize the situation and said,

I kept thinking who is protecting this person, someone in management or an owner. either this person is having a relationship with somebody, or somebody is protecting this person that would allow this to go on.

The others discussed how they became numb, desensitized, and accustomed to the situation due to its frequency. Essence 1 addressed research questions 1 and 2. The participants felt anger, frustration, confusion, and surprise when they witnessed bullying.

***Essence 2: Personal Thoughts towards Management and Management’s Response***

Every participant’s experience evolved from Stage 1. Fifteen participants specifically discussed management’s inaction to resolve the situation. Most participants believed that management was aware of the bullying and condoned what was going on, causing the witness to feel less valued.

Frustration, anger, surprise, and disappointment were the terms used to describe how the participants felt about the management’s lack of response and follow-through. Incidents in which

management did speak to the perpetrator ignited the same frustration and anger because the situation still did not change. Most situations witnessed by bystanders ended because the perpetrator or the target left the company. The remaining participants were unsure of the outcome because they either left the company or the department to escape the toxic environment. Rebecca and Sam both shared that they lost respect for management.

Essence 2 aligns with RQ3, as the participants shared the thoughts that ignited in them because of management's response. The participants revealed how management's actions made them feel as an employee as well as the emotional thought process they went through to make changes in their jobs due to management's actions.

### ***Essence 3: Deciding What Bystander's Role Should be in the Experience***

The beginning of Stage 2, Reaction, started with Essence 3 and proceeded to Essence 4, discussed in the next section. There was a common fear among the participants that they would become the perpetrator's next target. The participants struggled with their course of action because they felt empathy, anger, and frustration towards the situation, creating a desire to help somehow. Darren shared how he would get "real irritated, real frustrated. You can't go to a boss or higher up . . . they won't do anything about it." When someone in management was the bully, the decision to get involved became much harder.

The feelings evoked while witnessing the act created a desire to address and stop the bullying acts, but the question was always who? Betsy feared retaliation or being known as a "whistleblower." In each situation, the bystanders wrestled with their feelings towards the situation and the perpetrator.

Essence 3 aligns with RQ2, as the participants shared and questioned the feelings evoked in them as witnesses. The participants began working through the emotional thought process of handling the situation.

### ***Essence 4: Dealing with the Decision Made to Get Involved or Refrain from Involvement***

Stage 3, Reaction, is also reflected in Essence 4. As the participants continued through the thought process of deciding which course of action to take, only four out of fourteen participants reported the bullying situation to management. The participants who reported felt unsatisfied and like snitches because management did not do anything. One participant who reported feeling better afterward did not elaborate on how the situation changed.

Although many of the participants refrained from reporting, they decided to help the target somehow. Several tried to intervene between the target and perpetrator; others offered support or advice. Marvin said, "I did get involved at times, and at times I didn't. You are going to put a target on your back, so that is when I didn't get involved."

Essence 4 aligns with RQ 2, as the participants shared the feelings and thoughts that were evoked in them as witnesses. The participants were faced with mixed emotions about reporting, helping the target, or refraining from helping. Several of those who did not report the incident were still dealing with regret at the time of their interview.

### ***Essence 5: Deciding Effect on Personal Productivity and Engagement Level***

The final stage, personal effect, encompasses Essence 5. In this final stage, the participants decided whether to allow or forbid the bullying situation to influence their productivity or engagement. Two participants left manufacturing for self-employment and felt they were better



employers because of their experiences.

Several participants remained in the situation, consciously trying to maintain their productivity or improve; they knew they were good at their jobs and would not let the situation demean them. When a manager was the perpetrator, the participants did not want to give the manager a reason or opportunity to turn on them as well. The situation caused some witnesses to feel beaten down, while others felt distracted by the situation and unable to work well. Half of the bystanders felt that witnessing the bullying situation decreased their engagement level. Sadie shared that it “makes you care a little less because you know no matter what happens, it’s not going to make a difference.”

Essence 5 aligns with RQ3, as the participants shared how management’s actions or inactions regarding the situation evoked different feelings within them. The participants’ production levels were affected by the perpetrator’s actions, whereas engagement levels were influenced more by management’s actions.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study is to capture the lived experiences of manufacturing employees who have encountered bullying in the workplace. The study further aims at decoding the emotional responses and thought processes evoked in the employees, and further how they felt towards management’s efforts in combating workplace bullying. The following three open-ended research questions were the focus of the study:

1. What are the lived experiences of employees who witness bullying episodes at work?
2. What feelings are evoked among employees as they witness workplace bullying?
3. What feelings are evoked among witnesses to workplace bullying because of management’s actions or inactions to incidents of workplace bullying?

The following lists a summary of the findings as they relate to each research question.

### **Research Question 1: What are the Lived Experiences of Employees Who Witness Bullying Episodes at Work?**

The broad spectrum of participants supports the findings by Tuckey et al. (2022) on the impact of the systemic problem caused by workplace bullying. The participants did not accept or condone the behavior, and witnessing the acts evoked negative feelings towards the perpetrator. They experienced emotional turmoil from trying to rationalize the situation and their role and questioned their value as employees. The data from this study also revealed several other conclusions. The first conclusion is that survival was paramount among the witnesses. None of the participants accepted the behavior, and all worked towards self-preservation. Secondly, the participants revealed three reactions to the situation including visceral, emotional, and reactional. The third conclusion was that the participants felt there was no solution for themselves or the situation.

### **Research Question 2: What Feelings are Evoked Among Employees as They Witness Workplace Bullying?**

Findings from this study concur with Coyne et al. (2019): increased stress levels due to fear of being the next target and high levels of remorse for not getting involved. The findings also align with those of Giorgi (2010), that a negative work climate and an increased perception of bullying

are attributed to a decreased perception of the psychological health of the workers. Several participants expressed a desire to leave the organization, but not everyone did. Others left the department to remove themselves from the toxic environment, reinforcing the findings of Rai and Agarwal (2018) and Parzefall and Salin (2010) that workplace bullying increases a desire to seek alternate employment. The findings from this study align with the construct that employees enter a working relationship with an unspoken expectation of a safe working environment (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). In addition, the findings from this study align with those of Keashly (2001) that an individual expects his or her organization to respond to mistreatment.

### **Research Question 3: What Feelings are Evoked among Witnesses to Workplace Bullying Because of Management's Actions/Inactions to Incidents of Workplace Bullying?**

Except for only a few participants, there was a consensus among the participants that they were frustrated and did not know how or what to do to fix the negative work environment they were forced to endure daily. This agrees with Tepper et al. (2006), who found that bullying is perceived as a culturally accepted organizational norm when leaders or managers bully. Many participants felt they would be setting themselves up to become the next target. A few of the participants were also concerned about jeopardizing their jobs or becoming known as a whistleblower or snitch. Management's lack of engagement left employees with doubt and insecurity. Finally, the discussion of the above research questions can yield two further themes: the effect of bullying behavior on bystanders' engagement and productivity and the vicarious trauma caused by witnessing the bullying behavior.

#### **The Effect on Bystander Engagement and Productivity**

Workplace bullying provides a breeding ground of mistrust wherein perceived injustice develops and further enhances work-related stress, causing employees to distance themselves from the mission of the organization (Vartia, 1996, 2001). The data in this study on the bystanders suggests that while some participants expressed mistrust and distanced themselves from the mission of the organization, others made a conscious effort to perform their jobs to avoid being the next target without any increase in personal commitment toward organizational goals or endeavors. Most participants in this study had a stronger reaction towards the perpetrator than leadership, except when both were the same. Hollis (2015) portrayed a disengagement of targets and witnesses to workplace bullying from their job responsibilities. The data in this study aligns with the findings of these researchers. The data also suggests that the level of organizational citizenship is dependent on how the bystanders perceive the actions of the perpetrator and the management.

#### **The Effect of Vicarious Trauma**

Most of the participants in the study shared feelings of empathy for the victim and frustration for not helping. When the participants were unable or unwilling to confront the perpetrator, they decided to talk to the target in confidence and advise them just to ignore the bully. When the participants were unable or unwilling to talk to the target, they chose to indirectly help by warning others instead. The inability to help where the participant felt a strong disconnect and empathy for the target created emotional exhaustion over time, as well as years later. Their belief system and sense of self were altered by management's inaction and the participant's inability to act. In several cases, the participants voiced concern for workplace safety. From the above findings and themes, we can derive the following implications for academic researchers and industry

practitioners.

### **Implications for Theory and Research**

This study adds to the literature by providing data on the effects of bullying from bystander's experience. It portrays how the bystanders go through psychological and physiological struggles deciding on the course of action. Incorporating this study's findings with current literature provides a greater understanding of the triadic effects of workplace bullying. It allows readers to gain a greater understanding of everyone involved. The results from this study provide the lived experiences of the participants so that social scientists and leaders within organizations may gain a better understanding of this phenomenon from the perspective of the bystanders and the importance of establishing policies and procedures. Additionally, the findings may add to the literature by shifting the response focus from a single victim to including bystanders. The findings from this study also add to the limited research published on bullying in the manufacturing industry in the United States and provide bystander insight into how the phenomenon affects worker engagement.

### **Implications for Practice**

Researchers have documented that engagement is a strong indicator of performance, satisfaction, and organizational success (Rich et al., 2010; Shuck et al., 2011). The participants in this study have shared how witnessing bullying creates a negative experience for the bystander. The emotional and physical effects of workplace bullying affect the employees' attitude and perception of management and camaraderie with their coworkers. The findings from this study can be used by managers and leaders to understand workplace bullying and how to address it by not accepting or condoning it and developing effective training and education programs. Educating workplace bullies on how others experience their actions may make the bully more aware of the effects.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of employees in the manufacturing industry who have witnessed workplace bullying. The study was also designed to understand the feelings evoked among witnesses towards the act, as well as management's actions/inactions. The participants shared how they experienced emotions as they progressed through various stages. The participants struggled with their level of involvement and trying to reason out the actions of the perpetrator and management. Hindsight of the situation left many with remorse and regret but, at the time, they were not equipped with the tools necessary to intervene.

The findings of this study provide important implications for both theory and practice. In addition, the study's findings provide a trustworthy analysis to add to current literature while filling the gap in researched data on the effects of workplace bullying on bystanders in the manufacturing sector. Practitioners can use this study's findings to understand the experience and create and initiate successful training, awareness, and educational programs within their organizations. The participants in this study provided actual accounts of the experience(s) they endured while providing implications of management's involvement or lack of action to address it. The participants shared their expectations and desires to have management provide them with policies and procedures to follow when faced with workplace bullying. The data from this study suggests that bystanders who work in an environment that negates their beliefs over a long time may create

negative implications for the entire organization.

### **Limitations of the Study**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument used to conduct a phenomenological study. As the implied instrument, possible researcher bias is a limitation of this study. Data collection was limited to under-researched manufacturing workers in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Given the time span allowed, it is possible that the experiences that were witnessed 15 to 20 years ago were not as clear to the participants as those who witnessed situations more recently. The final limitation of this study is the identification of targets. The assumption was made in each situation that the bystanders were indeed witnessing a situation that was perceived by the target as bullying.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The first recommendation would be to conduct a study on workplace bullying with the leaders of the organization as the participants to understand the leader's perspective. This future study could add to current research by providing the effects of leadership behavior on the bystanders. The second recommendation would be to repeat the study but to assess participants' educational and socioeconomic levels to ascertain whether these may have had an influence on their reaction to bullying situations. The final recommendation for future research would be to recreate the study but use an engagement-level measuring technique. For example, The Gallup Organizations Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement model includes twelve crucial questions that measure important elements of employee engagement (Gallup Organization, 2024). The outcome of the questionnaire, combined with the data collected from the interviews, would allow the calculation and analysis of an engagement index to assess the engagement level of bystanders.

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