

## THE TELLING OF VIOLENCE: ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND ATROCITY TALES

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### Abstract

This paper explores the retrospective construction of atrocity narratives of organizational change in primary industries of the Latrobe Valley, located in southeast Australia. Within their narratives, participants discuss various forms of workplace violence aimed at employees by management and, in some cases, other employees. In addition, shifting narratives from violence to resignation are explored. As all participants are no longer employed in the organizations described in the narratives, causal associations between workplace violence and resignation choices are of particular interest. In this context, atrocity narratives are presented in a deliberate effort to extend the theorizing of organizational change into domains that are neither attractive nor progressive.

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# THE TELLING OF VIOLENCE: ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND ATROCITY TALES

## INTRODUCTION

The Latrobe Valley is an industrial region in the southeast of Australia that has experienced wide-scale organizational change and the loss of approximately two thousand jobs over the past fifteen years (Brown, 1996). While employees in the Latrobe Valley had traditionally experienced high levels of job security and a paternal workplace culture, privatisation of the state of Victoria's electricity supply industry since 1990 has changed the nature of employment in the Valley. In particular, the introduction of new management strategies such as downsizing and contract-based employment has caused ongoing industrial disputation throughout the region (Bryant, 1996).

This paper explores narratives of workplace violence, generated as a result of organizational change, in the region's major industries of electricity, paper production, water, education and healthcare. Initial accounts of violence within these narratives include exclusion from decision-making, blocking of career opportunities and removal of responsibilities. However, further reports of violence suggest that uncertainty and fear caused by organizational change led to more aggressive acts of violence such as intimidation, humiliation and bullying of employees by managers.

In this paper we discuss these accounts of violence and also some reports of violence aimed at employees by other employees. In addition, we also explore shifting stories within the narratives from workplace violence to resignation. Since all of the participants were no longer employed in the organizations described in the narratives, we further investigate the causal associations between workplace violence and resignation choices. Here we examine whether participants felt it necessary to account for resignation choices through invoking *atrocious tales* of organizational change or whether, instead, resignation outcomes were invoked to account for the telling of atrocious tales.

## FROM DESCRIBING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE...

Workplace violence is characterised by elements of fear, intimidation, assault and abuse brought on by menacing, threatening behavior (Mills, 1997) sent by one employer or employee to another. While organizational change has not been directly linked to workplace violence (Greenberg and Barling, 1999), effects of organizational change, such as job insecurity and perceived injustice in the workplace (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984) are believed to be linked to personal changes in employees. For example, it has been found that increased anxiety and reduced commitment may eventually lead to workplace aggression (Ashford, Lee and Bobko, 1989), which can subsequently lead to increases in absenteeism (Kivimaki, Elovainio and Vahtera, 2000) or employee turnover. Allcorn (1994, p. 94) further suggests that the impersonal nature of organizations "not only facilitate[s] supervisors who strive for dominance and superiority over employees but also prevent[s] employees from expressing their feelings of injustice, frustration and anger", thus causing disequilibrium in employment relations. Mills (1997, p. 6) suggests that turbulence in the organization's internal environment, caused by such factors as organizational change (McClure, 1999), may lead to a "hostile work atmosphere". This in turn is believed to foster violent relations due to increases in stress amongst employees (Mills, 1997). At the extreme, some such experiences may involve the sorts of infringements that can be understood as atrocities.

## ...TO TELLING ATROCITY TALES

Often described in terms of individual experience, atrocities can include an "event which is viewed as a flagrant violation of a fundamental cultural value" (Bromley, Shupe and Ventimiglia (1979, p. 43). Thus, the term *atrocious tale* has depicted accounts of a variety of traumatic social episodes. Within the workplace, atrocious tales of organizational change episodes have included different types of violence, including horizontal violence (Farrell, 1999) and vertical conflict (Jehn, 1997). Duffy (1995, p. 9) defines horizontal violence as "overt and covert non-physical hostility" that is usually directed at employees by their

colleagues. Alternatively, Jehn (1997) explains that vertical violence is hierarchical in nature, thus directed at employees by managers and supervisory staff. Both of these types of violence have been known to range from shouting and psychological harassment (Thomas, 1992) to workplace bullying (Quine, 1999) and even to homicide (Slora, Joy and Terris, 1991).

Thus, as Hunt and Benford (1994, p. 499) suggest, an atrocity tale does not require strong lines of physical violence, but rather can be an “account of...inhumane or immoral happenings”. Atrocity tales focus on the “dark side” of social change in an attempt to reflect the trauma and tragedy that individuals experience during different transformation processes. Frank (1995) argues that atrocity tales provide people with a means of repairing the damage inflicted on them as a result of traumatic change. More specifically, Bemmels (1991, p. 548) proposed that individuals will form attributions as to the causes of a situation when they need to “decide on a response to the behavior of other individuals”. By using attribution processes to understand workplace violence, participants attempt to find an “inference about why [violence] occurred” (Harvey and Weary, 1981, p. 6).

A common feature of the atrocity experiences is that the events are not lived with an imposed order; they are lived without temporality of sequence. As such, individuals are unable to make sense of atrocity events until they retell the tales with some order and sequence attached to them (Frank, 1995). Telling retrospective accounts of atrocities provides the storyteller with additional time and experience to “reconstruct a story” (Charmaz, 1999, p. 372) through a present day lens.

While such tales may be “anxiety provoking” and “hard to hear” (Frank, 1995, p. 97), their telling may allow the expression of a mix of emotions experienced during a process of change in an effort to deal with feelings of loss, imposed guilt and removal of personal power (Bromley, Shupe and Ventimiglia, 1979). While it has been suggested that atrocity tales need to be told in order to understand social change in its entirety, they are not always considered by managers as “proper” stories (Frank, 1995, p. 97) at all, for they are secondary accounts that may or may not represent a lived truth. Thus, in terms of both its content and (potential lack of) representation, this paper concerns the telling of improper stories. Although many of these stories depict experiences of “vulnerability, futility and impotence” (Frank, 1995, p. 97), and are illustrative rather than generalisable, we present them here in a deliberate effort to extend the theorizing of organizational change into domains that are neither attractive nor progressive. Within this research atrocity tales are considered to contain different elements of workplace violence, thus may refer to stories of isolation, workplace bullying, denial of career opportunities, or other forms of aggression between employees and managers, or employees and their colleagues.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts an interpretivist (Guba and Lincoln, 1998; Schwandt, 1998) perspective of investigating employee perceptions of organizational change. This perspective has been chosen in an attempt to “clarify what and how meanings are embodied” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 222) within narratives of change. By implementing an interpretivist approach this research also aims to focus on the employee dimension of change in an attempt to recognise that multiple voices and stories exist in organizations (Boje, 1995; Boje, Luhman and Baack, 1999).

Twenty-two Latrobe Valley residents were recruited via a snowball sampling technique (Neuman, 1997). By using snowball sampling cases could be selected from “a specialized population” (Neuman, 1997, p.206), or more specifically, a population of people who had experienced large-scale organizational change in the region. Several initial contacts were obtained to snowball into the different industries. These contacts were either known to the researcher, or considered as key industry figures within the community. Once an adequate sample size was recruited, semi-structured interviews (Wengraf, 2001) were conducted. The semi-structured interview was used as the principal instrument to gather data precisely because it enables participants to report the richness of their experiences in a way that a more structured interview format merely succeeds in eliminating. The data obtained from the interviews was then subjected to an inductive thematic narrative analysis (Boje, 2001) with the narratives themselves being selected as the unit of analysis.

The analysis of narratives provides a useful tool for examining stories of organizational change (Mandler and Johnson, 1977). Accounts of change generated by managers tend to focus on grand narratives (Boje, 2001), or a consistent and “top-down” story that it accepted as normative of the organization’s overall experience. By focusing on narratives this study aims to understand stories of change at the individual level. This is achieved by exploring how employees retrospectively construct their positions within the organization through a process of “systematic introspection” (Ronai, 1992, p. 103) during the interview. Within the process of introspection, participants are able to evoke “strips of personal experience” (Goffman, 1981, p. 174) in order to “construct coherent pasts that make sense of the present” (Svensson, 1997, pp. 72-73) and organize memories “into meaningful episodes” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1).

By conducting an inductive narrative theme analysis (Boje, 2001) unfolding patterns in the data became evident. After completing approximately ten interviews it became obvious that participants were constructing four specific types of narratives: hero narratives, conversion narratives, escape narratives and atrocity narratives. Subsequent interviews enabled the researchers to “continue to search for additional narratives and for important contrasts among...the...narrative types” (Boje, 2001, p. 124). Within hero and conversion narratives participants tend to tell macrostories (Boje, Luhman and Baack, 1999) or “models of stories [people] ought to tell” (Frank, 1995, p. 78-79) about organizational change. Another feature of the conversion narrative is that participants refer to themselves as “heroes”, focusing specifically on personal success gained from the process of organizational change. Alternatively, participants who told escape and atrocity narratives tend to reflect microstories, or stories that focus on individual interpretations of change rather than organizational interpretations. Consequently, atrocity narratives introduce the audience to a “very different set of stories” (Boje, 1995, p. 39) often portraying the participant as a “victim” of the change process, and focusing specifically on tales of abuse, aggression, and resignation.

Atrocity narratives have been chosen as the focus of this paper for several reasons. Firstly, they reflect the chaotic and indeterminate nature of organizations (de Cock, 1998). Secondly, they suggest that individual experiences of organizational change are unique and vary greatly from “organizational stories of change”, and, finally, atrocity narratives suggest that even the most extreme tales can be subject to shifting interpretations. Accordingly, the following sections of this paper will firstly explore the types of tales told within atrocity narratives before examining the links between tale telling and tale endings.

## **TYPES OF TALES**

### **The Context of Violence: Sanitation, Elimination and Retribution Talk in the Valley**

Indeed, a common feature of the atrocity narratives is the way that violence was initially perceived in the workplace. Rather than experiencing blatant attacks of verbal aggression, the first instances of violence were experienced as exclusion from decision-making processes and a general feeling of “being ignored by managers” (16)<sup>1</sup>. Several participants believe that past patterns of power and responsibility play a large role in the rationale behind workplace violence and that such patterns may be “seen as a threat to managers coming into the organization” (8). With the introduction of new management teams into some of the organizations discussed, such participants felt that their skills and knowledge were overlooked and that new management teams preferred to employ their own staff rather than use staff already in the organization. Thus, the removal of opportunities, responsibility and power was a recurring theme across these narratives. The following sections of this paper aim to mimic the sequence of participants’ narratives of violence, focusing firstly on the more covert encounters through to aggressive acts.

Past inefficiencies were often described as causes of the need to downsize workplaces across the Latrobe Region. While some organizations determined a target of the number of positions that needed to be downsized, others reduced the number of employees through amalgamations of departments. Employees perceived that if they refused to resign, management would place direct pressure on them to leave:

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<sup>1</sup> Participant numbers appear in round brackets for this and subsequent quotations

They took us out of the shop and put us in this shed...We got put in this rigger's drying room and there were six of us there and it would have been probably three paces wide by about a dozen or so long. We were expected to sit there and we had no work...We sat there for nearly three years in that box and it was a waste of our trade, it was a waste of our experience, we learned nothing! It was amazing to see how guys who were so committed to their work...it was amazing to see how the company would just turn them around! (5)

Several participants believe that such exclusion and isolation was a "deliberate management strategy" (17). For example, subsequent to the amalgamation of two Latrobe Region organizations, an external management company was introduced to reissue jobs to existing employees. "You sort of get told in an obscure way "don't apply for your job". You had a conversation with someone who said "don't take this the wrong way but, and I'll deny it but..." (2). Another respondent suggested that the system used to reissue jobs "lacked merit" (9). For example:

I don't think that the way it was done is the way it should have been! I don't think it was totally fair and equitable...There was no doubt that I was the best person for the job. No doubt! And I didn't get the job. Yeah so you lose faith I suppose in the system. The frustrations were that...all the associate unit managers were job matched. They weren't even interviewed (9).

In particular, there was a perception amongst respondents that employees with prior "track record[s]" (13) and "decision making roles" (12) were "excluded from decision-making...ignored or denied opportunities" (1). One respondent commented on the belief that employees in the Latrobe Region are considered as "second rate" (2). As she explained: "Management had not shown a lot of faith in Latrobe Valley [workers]...We were [considered as] incompetent. They were constantly telling us we couldn't do things and we were bad which made it easier for them to push us out because everyone was in defeatist mode by then" (2). Further, another participant suggested that she may have been "systematically identified as someone who needed to be eliminated" (1) from an organization, which she had played a primary role in the supervision of large groups of staff. Prior to the implementation of change she played a role in decision making on behalf of her colleagues. As she recalls:

External people were brought in [to implement the change] and...the whole approach became quite different. That's when there was secrecy...We did come up with a proposal to restructure ...that was quite innovative...and cost effective. It wasn't wanted because it came from the staff. It was interesting to see further down the track...that it was implemented because it was seen to be legitimate...elsewhere. But it wasn't wanted from our staff (1).

This participant suggested that the introduction of new senior managers initiated a series of attacks to her occupational and personal credibility, including isolation, being ignored, being pressured to leave the organisation and bullying. Brodsky (1976, p.2) defines bullying as "treatment which persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates or otherwise discomforts another person". Rayner and Hoel (1997) further add that violence can be recognised as bullying when attacks are repeated. It is noteworthy that Turnbull (1995, p. 24) suggests that access to opportunities, for example, promotion...being blocked" is a common way in which workplace bullying will become manifest. Adams (1997) also suggests that exclusion from decision-making processes is an initial stage of workplace bullying. Such actions by managers are usually "designed to humiliate and to undermine and to reduce a person's input to a trivial and unrewarding level" (Adams, 1997, p. 178).

### **From Exclusion to Aggression: Escalating Stories**

Regardless of the particular rationale participants use to explain workplace violence, a common feature across the narratives is the perception that employees who were considered unsupportive of management's goals were more likely to be victims of workplace violence. A participant who believes management violence was aimed at him because of his attitude commented: "I hate empires. So no matter what empire's there I [will try] to pull it down...[but] it can be like walking off a gallows sometimes" (4). In contrast, participants believed that employees who were "quieter, less questioning...more puppet like, and subservient" (1) to new management teams were provided with more career opportunities within their

organization. For example: “I know if I pulled my head in management would leave me alone, but I just can’t do it with all the things that go on” (9).

Another participant believed that bullying in the workplace coincided with management strategies to downsize. The participant suggests that direct pressure tactics were used in an attempt to “push” employees out of the organization by refusing to pass on vital information and by introducing consultants into the organization to convince employees to voluntarily leave:

They employed human relations people to ...shake the tree and a lot of people just jump[ed]...We weren’t privy to information...and we’d hear the rumours...[You’d] come away with nothing but frustration, anger, um despondent to the point where I’d say “well stuff it! I’m going to leave too!” [We] just got sick and tired of the bullshit. There was no other way and it was just orchestrated bullshit! (5)

Nine participants attribute both pressure to leave and active violence directed at them to their performance during and after the implementation of change. For example, one employee argues that while he had worked for “the benefit of the company” (8) in the past, the failure of management to inform employees of proposed changes was overwhelming. He further suggested that the only method employees could use to be considered by management was industrial action; an action he believed led to violence being directed at his work group. While industrial action was seen mainly in the form of “go slows” (8), the participant explained that work to rule bans were also implemented: “We didn’t refuse duties. We’d just say it was too unsafe or we don’t know this trade properly, or that we require [different staff] to do these duties...Management were not very happy!” (8). Such statements also suggest that ambivalence or resistance to change (Murphy, 1998; Piderit, 2000) may be a typical response to workplace violence.

Victor, Trevino and Shapiro (1993, p. 255) suggest that management will punish those who violate organizational norms, commenting that such punishment is justified for the sake of maintaining “behavioral standards” and symbolises the “value of norm conformity” within the organization. Using the notion of retributive justice, the justification of workplace violence is that if employees who are seen to deviate from organizational expectations are not punished, the social order of the organization becomes unbalanced (Miller and Vidmar, 1981). However, the participants in this study did not believe that the violence they experienced from management and colleagues was justified. Rather, they tell atrocity tales that focus on the abuse of management power and the manipulation strategies that management used in an attempt to pressure workers to resign from their organizations.

### **From Managers to Monsters**

Vertical violence is often seen as the source of workplace abuse, commonly experienced directly between employees and their managers (Mantell and Albrecht, 1994). Such violence is usually felt by employees who “are controlled through a culture of suppression and fear” (Mantell and Albrecht, 1994, p. 42). While this behavior may not always be intentional, it is not uncommon for managers in organizations to “bolster their self-esteem” (Allcorn, 1994, p. 97) through aggression towards those lower on the organizational hierarchy.

Eleven narratives indicate that after organizational change was implemented “unbalanced power” (Rayner and Hoel, 1997, p. 182) between management and employees became apparent. Prior to change the participants felt that while hierarchical power differentials did exist between management and employees, employees were in control of their own work. However, the employment relationship dynamics were altered with the implementation of organizational change that, participants believe, also contributed to the development of workplace violence. As a participant recalls, “management attitudes changed...and I get pissed off with the way they treated us” (6). Another felt that “there was always pressure on...at work. They [were] always watching me” (8).

Participants expressed shock and disbelief at the way management behavior changed after organizational change. “The worst thing was the mistrust...you’d ask management a question and they wouldn’t give you a straight answer” (5). Others likened management to “the Gestapo” (7) and claimed that change made

employees “hate management” (10). All of the participants recall feeling “very demoralised, very disappointed [and] very doubtful” (8) about their futures, stating that management “sure as hell would make it known that you weren’t wanted” (5). Another participant believed that management behavior was so “horrendous” that she would “be in tears [and] cry all the way home” (3) from work.

Aggression and bullying were constant for some employees who experienced increasing levels of pressure to leave the organization. In some cases, this was experience through direct abuse, whereas in others it was a more passive form of pressure. A participant gave an example of being constantly “intimidated, bullied, coerced and told that it would be much better if I left” (1):

Every step of the way [I was] ignored or denied opportunities...I was also subjected to quite a significant amount of bullying...to the extent that on one evening I was working towards the end of my allocated time...[and] for an hour and three quarters was barred from exiting my door and was stood over by the executive director...and told in words of one syllable that it would be much better if I left (1).

Participants feel that direct aggression experienced in “abusive language [and] humiliation” (Farrell, 1999, p. 539) from management and colleagues caused a great deal of emotional and mental distress. Rayner and Hoel (1997, p. 183) suggest that the violence experienced by the participants involves the “threat to professional status” and “personal standing” in the organization, as well as “isolation”. Isolation is evident in the more subtle form of passive aggression, represented by the denial of opportunities in the workplace as well as the constant ignorance of managers and colleagues in regards to career opportunities. Rayner and Hoel (1997) suggest that violence of this nature is common in the workplace and that most psychological violence is directed from immediate supervisors and colleagues, rather than senior managers (Adams, 1997).

To some participants the threats and psychological pressure placed upon them by managers were unbearable. Some employees were taunted by managers who would joke about lack of job security and limited careers in the organization. Participants believe that behavior of this nature was an attempt to destabilise and belittle them (Rayner and Hoel, 1997) so that they would resign. Such tyrannical management practices (Ashforth, 1994) caused confusion and uncertainty in the workplace to the point that, as one participant remembers, “blokes were going around and didn’t know whether they Arthur or Martha” (10). Another participant remembers the reaction of employees towards the manager responsible for downsizing the organization: “We had a bloke...he...was basically the hitman and the guys hated him. He just walked into a group and would sort of say “well fellas, it’s good to meet you all and you know we’re entering an era of change and I dare say that within twelve months...only half of you will be here”. I couldn’t understand how someone with less common sense...didn’t walk in with a gun and try to knock him off!” (7).

In reaction to vertical violence, one participant recalls being involved in a workgroup who acted in a (similarly) violent manner towards managers as a form of retaliation.

There were a number of things...one morning I got to work...someone threw a lump of scaffolding, down three floors into a car... Another [story] there was this manager who...was trying to sell his house...so the guys went out there and painted what they thought of him all over the road, the windows, the garage...they absolutely went berserk (5).

### **Horizontal Violence**

Due to the removal of power and responsibilities discussed above, such vertical conflict between management and employees was considered to be somewhat “acceptable” to the participants of this study, who considered themselves to be an oppressed group (Duffy, 1995). While these participants felt that aggression between colleagues was unacceptable, their lack of ability to direct frustration at management eventually led to a more “destructive way of venting aggression”(Roberts, 1983, p. 9) towards co-workers. Indeed, several participants suggested that tyrannical management styles and unfair practices such as re-issuing of jobs and downsizing became the source of horizontal violence between colleagues who, prior to organizational change, had worked together in harmony.

Within the discipline of nursing, horizontal violence has been defined as a form of inter-group conflict between employees and their colleagues (Chaboyer, Najman and Dunn, 2001; Farrell, 1999). Such horizontal violence is usually experienced as a means of venting frustration that cannot be vented towards the actual cause of conflict (Duffy, 1995; Farrell, 1999). As Roberts (1983) suggests, if an aggressor is unable to direct frustration to the actual oppressor, it may instead be directed towards those immediately surrounding him or her, causing both distress and unrest between individuals within work groups (Farrell, 1999). For example: “The situation was created where people were...manipulated into competing for the same positions...and that created problems...The whole process facilitated some people taking camps, looking after themselves, making decisions that hurt others” (1). One instance of physical violence between employees was also documented: “There was this guy...he picked me up one day and threw me clean across the room! He slammed another bloke! I actually ended up with a broken cheek! That was just out of a dispute! And disputes were only...brought up because people were frustrated!” (5).

Most participants reported perceiving general feelings of dislike directed at them from other employees while others perceived that they were being ignored or denied information. A general feeling that colleagues were being “hostile and unsupportive” (Allcorn, 1997, p. 94) was reported by participants, while others felt they were targeted by denigrating treatment (Allcorn, 1997): “What happened was there almost became sort of a personal thing against [us] in our section. They’d [colleagues] look at us and say, “Look at these pricks! They’re having a good time you know at our expense”. But we weren’t, you know. We were stopping [ourselves] from going insane!” (5).

Research on workplace violence has found that violent behavior towards employees can have detrimental effects on both the health of employees and the organization. While the receipt of violence can cause obvious damage to self-esteem and confidence (Adams, 1997), it should also be recognised that excessive levels of stress can be damaging both to mental and physical well being (Harris, 2001). In this study, many participants indicated that they were physically affected by violence in terms of stress-related illnesses. One participant recalls “waking everyday with heart palpitations and nausea” (6) while another was recommended to leave work for the sake of her health. “Physically I got oesophagitis, duodenitis and an ulcer...I thought I was okay, I didn’t think I was stressed...my doctor [was] telling me “I think you should quit your job, I think you should leave...you’re sick”...that made me think” (2). Indeed, the participants who reported workplace violence all exited the organization in order to seek career opportunities elsewhere, and we now address the causal links between atrocity tales and organizational exit.

## **TALKING ABOUT ATROCITY OR TELLING ATROCITY TALES**

A feature of the atrocity narrative is the way in which participants shift their tale from workplace violence to a tale of resignation choice. Ford (1999, p. 488) suggests that “when someone shifts a conversation, they shift what people talk about and pay attention to”. The shifting of narratives suggests that participants move to the resignation tale in an attempt to provide perspective and closure (Ford and Ford, 1995) to events that have happened in association with organisational change.

The rationale behind shifting from atrocity to resignation tale may be twofold. Firstly, atrocity tales may be recalled in order to justify the resignation choice, or, secondly, the resignation story may be told in an attempt to account for the telling of confronting stories. Participants who resigned as a result of continuous violence believe that constant atrocities led them to a turning point (Ebaugh, 1988) in their careers. Prior to organizational change, employees expressed that they “worked for the good of the company” (10). In most cases employees “loved the work” (1) and enjoyed a “sense of community” (2) with their colleagues. While relationships with management were not always sound, participants explain that “the us and them attitude [was] typical of the industry” (8). However, the introduction of violence changed the dynamics of workplace relationships, which eventually led to employees’ resignations.

Leymann (1990, p. 122) argues that repeated violence might cause individuals to become “socially maladjusted” or “voluntarily unemployed”, thus having grave effects of their mental health and career standing. Within this research, participants state that resignation choices were determined purely by workplace violence. Continuous violence pushed employees “over the edge” (12) and “beyond the breaking

point” (3). As a result, employees believe that the final decision to leave was spurred by events that were deemed as “almost insignificant” (8) in “the scheme of violence” (2) they had experienced. Ebaugh (1988) argues that it is often the events that appear insignificant that enable individuals to reduce cognitive dissonance and make the final decision to leave the organization.

Resignation choices were also made as a result of a culmination of events: “we went to our supervisor...with our problems...and [it] fell of deaf ears. So after a while we came to the realisation that no matter what we did we weren’t going to get any work” (7). Several participants stated that they wanted to resign earlier but felt unable to do so for various reasons. A union representative recalls “I didn’t feel like I could morally leave with five or six hundred people’s lives to consider” (4). Other employees had financial commitments: “I’d just been married...and we had kids...and a mortgage” (9). “I had teenage kids at home and I wanted to have a bright future for them” (11). Most employees felt that they “couldn’t leave without any [other] employment to go to” (5) arguing that there was “dignity involved in working” (12) and that they were not prepared to “go on the dole [welfare] and be seen as a dole-bludger” (8). Only three of the twelve participants resigned from their positions without securing employment elsewhere.

The difference between those who use narratives of violence to account for resignation choices and those whose resignation outcomes are invoked to account for atrocity tales can perhaps be determined by the centrality of violence throughout the narrative of organizational change. For participants who eventually resigned as a result of workplace violence centre their entire narrative on these experiences. Relevant to this first group, narrative theory (Labov, 1972) suggests that narratives will gravitate around “one or more high points” (Bamberg, 1987, p. 5) that are most significant to the participant’s experience of organizational change. Ronai (1992, p. 103) also argues that narratives will shift “forwards, backwards and sideways through time” but will return to the theme of significance. The retelling of the high point provides a form of authentication (Gordon, 1997) and is used as a “linguistic tool that serve[s] to order experiences [and] construct reality” (Lempert, 1994, p. 411).

Alternatively, participants who limited their use of atrocity tales to justifications for their resignations tended to focus on violence only when attempting to account for their resignation decision. Such narratives fail to centre themselves on high points may be considered as “a product of imaginative construction” (Mink, 1978, p. 145). Failure to focus on atrocity tales as a high (or low!) point of the narrative may suggest that although a discourse of violence may be evident in the Valley, that discourse may be invoked as a retrospective justification rather than as a dominant theme. This is not to deny that this group of participants did not experience organizational violence, but is to suggest that violence, whether or not it is “real”, can tell differing tales.

While narratives that centred on violence portrayed atrocities experienced by the teller, the narratives that fit into this second category described less direct workplace violence, and tended to focus, instead, on the experiences of other employees and on a general dislike towards managers. For example: “I just couldn’t be stuffed doing anything for them [management] when change came in...I would try and make it as difficult as possible” (7). As another participant added: “Change stuffed the joint...they [management] tried to explain it to me but I couldn’t be bothered listening to anything they had to say” (6). When asked about their resignation choices these participants suggest that management pressured them to exit the organization. “I was on Work Care and I couldn’t do my trade...So they had me teaching...a new computer system...I said to the department head “will I have a job carrying on this line after the course finishes?” He goes, “oh you’ll definitely be back on the tools”. And I said that I didn’t want to be on the tools, I’d just had my knee done and he said, “Well you’d better leave them”. So I did” (6). Another resignation choice by a participant was justified with the following story: “They [management] introduced multi-skilling and that really stuffed the place up...I didn’t know if I would make it...but I didn’t like working there with that anymore” (7).

In addition to differences in causal attributions, these accounts of resignation choices differ from the central and direct accounts of bullying, intimidation and humiliation experienced in a third way. When reporting how they felt after their resignations, participants who did not focus on a narrative high point stated that, “I drive past the place and think, “you poor suckers, I wonder what crap you’re up to today”. I’m just so glad I don’t have to work there anymore” (6). “I see the [company] cars and I just don’t care. Good on them I say” (7). However, participants who resigned as a result of workplace violence reflect on their workplaces in a

different manner. Some reflect emotions such as sadness: “I look back at the building and think well you know it might only be bricks and mortar but there’s an awful lot more than that” (1), while others feel anguish and guilt: “I know I am better off but I feel so guilty about those poor guys I left who weren’t able to get a job elsewhere” (5).

Overall, the narratives suggest that the resignation choices of those who experienced ongoing violence were not easy decisions to make. Rather, participants express feelings of guilt, sadness and concern for the welfare of colleagues and family members who may be affected by their choice.

## **CONCLUSION**

The process of organizational change in the Latrobe Valley has initiated and introduced a plethora of changes to workplace practices and management strategies. The most obvious of these changes to employees is the lack of job security and the removal of paternal, community based cultures within workplaces.

In this small study, participants reported narratives of violence including bullying, humiliation, removal of career opportunities and pressure to resign from their positions. Within their stories they searched for reasons to justify the make sense of violence from managers and colleagues. However, the incidences of violence become too much for employees to tolerate and, as a result, participants resigned from their organizations. Resignation decisions were also explored, suggesting that participants who experienced ongoing violence were eventually pressured to leave the organization. However, most participants suggest that resignation decisions were only made once alternative employment was secured. In making their decisions to leave the organization, participants also tell stories of the emotions involved in resigning. - Alternatively, several participants resigned from their positions and used tales of violence as a method to account for their choice. Rather than violence, other factors such as fear and uncertainty may have formed the basis for these decisions.

Regardless of the resignation choices made by participants, the subject of violence from managers and colleagues was a common feature across the narratives of organizational change. Although participants attempted to find a rationale behind the actions of managers and colleagues, many believed that the violence they experienced was not justified. As a result, participants felt that they had been forced to resign from careers and occupations in which they might have otherwise continued throughout their working lives. While we believe that accounts of workplace violence and the telling of atrocity tales within settings of organizational change offer rich opportunities for extending understanding of narrative flows, attributional and representation processes, and conflict in the workplace, we feel that the pain in these particular tales of working lives should not be theorised into the background of such future work. While this study also revealed many other facets of organizational change in the Latrobe Valley, valley talk was violent talk. And like all atrocity tales, such talk is hard to tell and may also be difficult to hear.

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