Theory of Workplace Trauma: A New Perspective for the Management Field

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Abstract

The theory of workplace trauma as presented in this paper builds upon the fundamental principles of the betrayal trauma theory. In response to the family level of hierarchy that is established and the increased level of betrayal to those employees who are dependent, the management industry needs a theory to understand the experiences that happen within the organization. As leaders, we are responsible for creating a positive working environment for our employees but all too often that is not the situation that they experience. Half of all employees in the United States can expect to work for an abusive leader at least once in their lives. This means eighty million people can expect to experience destructive culture because their leaders are playing favorites, humiliating, bullying, publicly criticizing, name-calling, and making threats. Destructive culture affects employees by causing depression, anxiety, low job satisfaction, reduced performance, health

problems, and trauma responses. Organizations can expect to have reduced employee morale, decreased productivity, and increased turnover.

Keywords*: workplace trauma, abusive leaders, leadership betrayal, negative work environment, destructive culture*

Introduction

"He kept screaming and saying things like "if I wanted a trained monkey, I'd go to the zoo and if he didn't need bodies to work today, he would send me home. [The manager asked], "Why are you like this? I can get people who are in high school that will do a better job." I saw two people working at the station outside his office when I left. It was humiliating knowing they, and the rest of the kitchen, had heard me being berated." -Participant 1C

In the United States, half of all employees can expect to experience an abusive leadership relationship in their careers. The impacts of these relationships are felt by the organization, the individual, and the team environment. There are many detrimental effects that this can cause such as employee silence, reduced productivity, and destructive culture (Biscontini, 2018; Lam & Xu, 2019; Reed & Norton, 2016). Although many leadership theories have provided evidence, typically only the personality traits and behaviors were considered. For the management sector, we need a theory that is multidimensional and considers the interactions between the leader and subordinate, the situation, organizational outcomes, and individual effects.

Literature Review

Maslow's Hierarchy of needs explores how humans have aspects in their lives that must be satisfied (Maslow, 1981). Some of these aspects are basic, and some are much more complex. Humans vie to fill their most basic needs first. If these needs are not met, the person will not be satisfied and will lack motivation. When needs are denied, it often results in the person becoming isolated, anxious, and developing depression. These traits cause a deterioration of the psychological well-being of the person.

Resources provided by the organization either help to fulfill or provide fulfillment directly to the employee. For example, steady employment and income, vacation time, paid time off, peace of mind from fear, intimidation, and abuse, and growth potential are all listed in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Starting with the psychological needs: water, food, and shelter would be provided indirectly to the employee based on income earned by the employee from the organization. Safety needs such as employment, peace of mind from fear, intimidation, and abuse, and resources are expected to be directly maintained by the organization. Lastly, the opportunity to advance and become a better employee speaks to self-actualization and again is expected to be maintained directly by the organization. Maslow's Hierarchy is important because employees are motivated to achieve or maintain their fulfillment of the five levels of needs. To sustain basic everyday life, the lower levels must be met. The higher levels are referred to as growth desires. Organizations should strive to fulfill as many of the levels as they can for their employees' well-being, although it is unlikely that they can all be fulfilled at the same time. The higher the level of fulfillment provided by the organization, the higher the motivation level of the employee becomes.

Many organizations strive to provide a positive and fulfilling environment for their employees. But unknowingly, they are supporting leaders that do not have the same morals. In a

study I completed in 2022, the result was six out of six participants had experienced working for an abusive leader in their career. Participants shared a total of ten negative experiences with numerous abusive leaders. Three of the participants shared at least two separate experiences from different times in their lives and various organizations. They were in situations where their needs were not being met or were being threatened daily. In the Appendix, you will find excerpts from the interviews that speak to their experiences as employees as it is grouped by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. All ten experiences shared one commonality: abuse at the hands of their leaders.

The Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT) has been used for years to explain the interpersonal trauma that a person experiences and the related health implications of such exposure. Currently, this theory is used to explore relationships with major attachment figures like a parent or caregivers. The health issues that can arise are posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and physical pain (Gagnon et al., 2017). The BTT was explained by Freyd (1998) and offers a unique lens to evaluate outcomes based on exposure. The main focus was on the trauma that occurs when a person depends on other people, and they are violated by them significantly. It is typically used to describe a child depending on their guardians for support and resources. The trauma could range from physical or sexual to psychological. Zimmerman et al. (2017) explained that there would be a different outcome if they were betrayed by someone, they were not close with.

Platt et al. (2017) explained that the introduction of abuse into an employee-organization relationship creates a negative environment. A situation would occur where the employee feels they need to adapt and accept the abuse to keep their job and maintain the resources they are receiving. Participant #3 stated, "Walking into the building would turn my stomach, but it was a

job." Several other participants expressed similar statements being that they tried to keep themselves out of trouble and took the abuse to maintain their employment.

The intensity of betrayal varies among employees and situations. For example, if an employee was being written up for calling in sick, a seemingly unavoidable situation would yield a lesser trauma response because the resources were threatened but not lost completely. But if an employee was fired for the same situation, the trauma response would be much higher because of the loss of resources. Platt & Freyd (2015) stated that the greater the betrayal trauma levels, the greater the outcome of PTSD, anxiety, or depression.

Many organizations formulate "families" among employees. An example of this is the culinary industry. The culinary industry is more likely to have these characteristics because of the high stress, long shifts, and fast-paced environments. All of these are conducive to abusive leader-follower relationships forming. When the employees view their relationships closely, as you would within your family, the level of betrayal trauma is higher, should it happen. Many industries use a similar form of hierarchy within their organizations. Usually, there is a top, main, a presidential leader such as an executive chef, who makes the final decisions in all situations. This would be like the "dad" in the family relationship. The "mom" would be the secondary leader, such as a manager, assistant manager, sous chef, or the like. The "children" would then be the workers, most likely hourly paid employees, who are the most dependent on the "parents". The creation of this family hierarchy increases the likelihood of a negative trauma response when betrayed. Unfortunately, the development of an organizational hierarchy is important to the success of the business and is usually unavoidable.

Proposed Management

I am proposing the creation of an alternative view of the BTT to fill a need in the management industry. The management industry needs an avenue to identify the characteristics and experiences of employees who are exposed to trauma at the hands of their leaders. The theory of workplace trauma (TWT) would look through a similar theoretical lens to identify the experiences of employees who are subjected to trauma or abuse in their workplace. The focus on employees is important because just like children depend on their guardians for resources, employees do as well. This makes the trauma response even more extensive because employees depend on the organization to continue providing the resources and fulfilling their needs.

Methodology

This study was completed using a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The goal was to improve the understanding of lived experiences of culinary industry employees who had been affected by an abusive leadership relationship. These were not one-time events; they were relationships that occurred and grew over time. The phenomenological design was selected because as stated by Moustakas (1994), researchers can interpret different accounts of the same phenomenon to derive a common understanding. A hermeneutical design was chosen because the data analysis circle allowed me to generate an intense understanding of the experiences of the participants. It also allowed them to illustrate their real-world stories, based on their experiences. The research paradigm was interpretative because it supports the belief that truth lies within the experiences of participants (van Manen, 2017).

The primary research collected in this study was one-on-one recorded interviews. These were in-depth and lasted approximately two hours per participant and yielded a total of 316 pages

of transcripts. Due to Covid restrictions, the interviews were held using an online collaboration platform, GoToMeeting. Both audio and video were recorded to evaluate the facial language cues during the interviews and add to the depth of analysis (Patton, 2015). The interviews were semi-structured and contained both open-ended and demographic questions. Open-ended questions were asked to determine a detailed description as shared by the participants (Peoples, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña, 2016). Demographic data were used to put the experiences within a context that could be compared to other participants' experiences but were coded to protect their identities.

For this study, I had predetermined criteria, so I used a purposive sampling strategy. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were created to allow for both individual analysis and group analysis. This also ensured that participants would have different characteristics such as age, gender, and length of employment (Palinkas et al., 2015). The following were the inclusion criteria for the study:

- Self-identify that you have experienced an abusive leadership relationship within the culinary industry.
- Between ages 21-65.
- Have worked in at least 2 organizations as a paid employee.
- Are not associated with Walden University in any employment capacity.
- Are not associated as a current student with the researcher, Louise Black

I used a social media page to access culinary industry employees. First, I requested an initial phone call to confirm their eligibility for the study and then scheduled a recorded interview. The goal of the interviews was to reach saturation where I had gained enough data that I was experiencing redundancy and no new themes were emerging. With the tenth experience discussed, I reach this point where no unexplained phenomena were in the data.

Evaluation of Proposed Management

Table 1 shows the participant identifier along with their position titles and the type of organization they worked for during the experienced abuse. To ensure the reliability of the data, one criteria point was that participants had to have worked for at least 2 organizations as paid employees. The time that participants were employed in their field ranged from 4 years to 49 years.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Participant identifier	Gender	Age when the abuse occurred	Education	Time employed in culinary (total years)	Types of organizations	Position of participant	Position of leader
1A	M	30	Undergrad	17	Fast/casual restaurant	Assistant general manager	General manager
1B	M	31	Undergrad	17	Fast/casual restaurant	Assistant general manager	General manager
1C	M	35	Undergrad	17	High-end resort	Cook	Executive chef
2	F	18	Undergrad	4	Fast/casual restaurant	Cook/prep	Store manager/supervisor
3	F	35	Graduate	25	Education	Instructor	Executive chef
4A	F	18	Undergrad	18	Fast/casual restaurant	Cook	Store manager/supervisor
4B	F	19	Undergrad	18	High-end resort	Pastry chef	Store manager/supervisor
5	F	17	Undergrad	19	High-end resort	Pantry cook	Executive chef
6A	M	34	Graduate	49	Corporate food service	Supervisor	Executive chef
6B	M	43	Graduate	49	Corporate food service	Director	Vice president

Correlations and Further Research

The ten experiences shared within this study yielded a multitude of data. While the age range of participants was from 17 to 43 years old; the female average age was 21.4 years old, and the average male age was 34.6. With this information, it shows that the female experiences happened when they were younger with the males experiencing abuse as there are about 10 years older than the women. This brings the comparison to their education levels. Seven experiences happened to participants that have undergraduate degrees. Three participants experienced the abuse later in life and held their graduate degrees. Out of ten types of organizations, four were fast/casual, three were high-end resorts, two were corporate food service, and one was education. Lastly, the top two positions of leaders were Executive Chefs and General Managers.

Future research recommendations based on this study are as follows:

1. Despite receiving abusive treatment, focus on why employees stay in the culinary industry.
2. Expand on the potential connection between the age and/or sex of participants and the outcome of abusive leadership.
3. Explore the potential connection between the type of leader and the occurrences of abusive treatment.
4. Reach a larger population by using a survey method.
5. Research whether younger employees with lesser degrees are more likely to experience abusive leadership than those who are older and have a higher degree.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as organizational leaders, we have a responsibility to our employees to provide a fulfilling and positive environment. The management industry needs a theory to explain the experiences of employees when they have worked for abusive leaders if we are to improve working conditions and uphold our responsibilities. When leaders fail to provide resources, our employees develop a trauma response that is passed along to other employees and our customers. When this occurs, we see the negative effects on employee morale, company revenue, and turnover.

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Appendix: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Excerpts

Physiological needs: food, water, warmth, rest

"if I wanted a trained monkey, I'd go to the zoo and if he didn't need bodies to work today, he would send me home." -P1C

"when it came to me, I was reprimanded instead of complimented, and, of course, didn't receive the same gifts, or monetary return stipend that other people did." -P6A

"She said we have to show the proper temperature or, or there will be consequences, from above that we're not doing our job properly." -P1A

"I would get in trouble for not completing tasks that weren't mine." -P4A

"you were fearful of retaliation from this individual in some way, shape, or form." -P3

"as trying to advance sexually towards a lot of the women there but would use that against him if they denied his advances." - P4A

"publicly reprimanding them, things like making them clock out to go use the restroom in front of everybody."-P4A

"I worried about getting fired."-P4A

Safety needs: security and safety

"you would expect to be objectified, to be treated differently because you're female, not held to the same standards as the men." -P5

"he closes the door, closes the blinds, and started yelling at the top of his lungs." -P1C

"it made me feel uncomfortable and not secure."-P1A

"I hated it there, I couldn't wait to say, OK enough is enough"-P1B

"I was uncomfortable to start with, and I had asked him for a bigger shirt. I said I need at least a large. It was humiliating." -P2

"I just felt gross, I was trying to figure out what I was doing to encourage the behavior. " - P2

"do not go back into that store at all. Nobody's there to help you if something goes awry."-P2

"I honestly hated being there. And I was looking over my shoulders all the time."-P2

"He called me into the office to discuss my schedule, and it was very uncomfortable, because he made the motion to come sit on his lap." -P5

"I remember just trying my hardest to get out of that room, not try to upset him, because I wanted to keep my job." -P5

"they made my life unbearable in order to get me out of there." -P6B

Belongingness and love needs: intimate relationships, friendship

"My boss, and my boss's boss always seem to sweep me under the rug, whether or not it was intentional. I just wasn't important." -P1B

"I developed this persona of being the toughest, I have to have thick skin, nothing can affect me, I need to attack you first before being attacked" -P5

"He probably didn't like me. I felt that way ever since I got hired there. Like, he was always looking for a way to get rid of me." -P1C

"It was humiliating knowing they, and the rest of the kitchen, had heard me being berated."-P1C

Esteem needs: prestige and feeling of accomplishment, respect by others

"I felt worthless. Like I didn't matter. Like the two years that I've been working for the company didn't count for anything. That the fact that I turned the restaurant around, doesn't matter. All the hard worker put into that restaurant doesn't matter." -P1B

"It wasn't about us as a team working together to promote our department, or to promote a common goal. It was his goals. It was what he wanted, and who he wanted on board with him."-P3

"I wasn't included in meetings, and I had to work in an additional two hours unpaid, due to my being on the third shift." -P6A

"HR set up meetings between us, they were trying to resolve the issue and he would either blow off the meetings or, show up like 45 minutes late." -P2

Self-actualization needs: achieving ones full potential including creative activities, opportunities for advancement

"the men are getting praised and promotions because they're actually good at their jobs. I'm valuable because I'm a good looking, young, female, and entertaining. Not because I'm a good cook. I'm only getting praise because I look good." -P5

"Some companies have policies that they follow where the job has to be posted internally, as well as externally for someone else outside the company. We didn't even know that the district manager was seeking someone to fill a position until the new GM walked in the door." -P1B

"There were no rules, we had a new sheriff in town every 6 or 7 months", "everybody was out for themselves.", "you were either a cowboy, or you were an Indian, and excuse the expression." -P3

"I was up for that position and told physically actually told me that he was passing me out for it because I wouldn't give it to his advances." -P#4A

"Things like telling them that they would never get to promote to the positions that they wanted to." -P4A

"I was told there was no chance for a promotion." -P6B

"He would work with the other supervisors to perfect their skills, but not with me." -P6B