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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.

The Latrobe Valley is an industrial region in the southeast of Australia that has experienced large-scale organizational change in the form of restructuring, privatization, downsizing and amalgamation and the loss of approximately 2,000 jobs over the past 15 years (Brown, 1996). While employees in the Latrobe Valley had traditionally experienced high levels of job security and a paternal workplace culture, privatization 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 12 retrospective “bottom-up” narratives of organizational change taken from a larger study involving 22 participants. Using a constructivist approach, we seek to understand how participants talk about their experiences of change in order to discover why particular tales of change are constructed. The 12 narratives featured in this paper focus on experiences of workplace violence that coincided with the implementation of large-scale change in primary industries within the Latrobe Valley[1]. While the term “violence” could easily conjure up images of death and destruction, Mills (1997) suggests that any harassing or threatening behavior sent by employee or employer, physical or psychological, that involves elements of fear, isolation and exclusion, intimidation, assault or abuse constitutes violence. In the context of the present study, initial reports of violence focus on exclusion from decision making, harassment from managers or colleagues, blocking of career opportunities and removal of responsibilities. However, further reports by participants 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, ultimately leading to the end of participants’ careers.

In this paper we discuss these accounts of violence, and also some reports of violence aimed at employees by other employees, in the context of atrocities. Bromley et al. (1979, p. 43)
define an atrocity as any “flagrant violation of ... fundamental cultural value[s]” through an act of physical or psychological violence. Such violations of values can range from the annihilation of humans through to exclusion from day-to-day activities by another (Bromley et al., 1979). Regardless of the scale of the atrocity, experiences are reported by individuals in the form of an atrocity tale, providing those who have experienced violence with a way of framing personal stories in which their responses to violence are justified (Ballis and Richardson, 1997). In this paper 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 invoked atrocity tales to explain that resignation choices were a direct result of violence or whether, instead, resignation outcomes may have occurred regardless of the construction of violence narratives.

**From describing workplace violence to telling atrocity tales**

Acts of violence at work embody a variety of organizational experiences including horizontal violence between colleagues (Duffy, 1995; Farrell, 1999), vertical violence between manager and employee (Jehn, 1997), which can be directed from management or staff, and workplace bullying (Quine, 1999). All of these types of violence have been known to range from shouting and psychological harassment (Thomas, 1992) to physical bullying (Quine, 1999) and even to homicide (Slora et al., 1991). A common characteristic of these types of violence is that each can include elements of physical and/or psychological aggression that is either felt or perceived by an individual (Farrell, 1999). This paper is particularly concerned with psychological violence as all participants reported aggression in this form within their stories. Psychological violence is more difficult to define than physical abuse, as it rarely involves a visible act (Greenberg and Barling, 1999). However, psychological violence at work has been documented as including isolation, exclusion from decision making and normal daily routines, being subjected to cruel taunts or jokes, or being ignored by management and/or colleagues (Farrell, 1999; Greenberg and Barling, 1999; Rayner and Hoel, 1997).

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 thought to be linked to personal changes in employees. Alcorn (1994, p. 94) further suggests that the impersonal nature of organizations and of organizational change “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 and a “hostile work atmosphere” (Mills, 1997, p. 6). 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.

The term “atrocity tale” has depicted accounts of a variety of traumatic and violent social episodes. Within the workplace, atrocity tales have included different types of violence, focusing predominantly on violence that is horizontal or vertical in nature (Duffy, 1995; Farrell, 1999; Jehn, 1997). 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. Furthermore, the telling of atrocity tales enables individuals to justify their responses to violence and find an “inference about why [violence] occurred” (Harvey and Weary, 1981, p. 6).

Atrocity tales are often “anxiety provoking” and “hard to hear” (Frank, 1995, p. 97). Furthermore, the telling of an atrocity tale includes 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 et al., 1979). While atrocity tales have been criticised as being improper stories (Frank, 1995), it has been suggested that they need to be told in order to understand social change in its entirety (Ballis, 1999; Frank, 1995). Citing Lewis (1989), Ballis (1999, p. 58) argues that atrocity tales are authentic accounts of personal experience as they “mobilize and legitimate the persecution of marginal” individuals. Ballis also argues that the construction of an atrocity tale is a form of “frame realignment” in which individuals can “locate, perceive, identify and label” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21) their experiences. The atrocity tale also serves as a sense-making device (Weick, 1995) as it provides the storyteller with additional time and experience to “reconstruct a story” (Charmaz, 1999, p. 372) of violence and organizational change through a present day lens.

This paper aims to uphold the atrocity tale as a realistic and “proper” account of organizational change and argues that such narratives are not necessarily unheard of in organizations, but are merely constructed by voices that are often marginalized (Boje, 1995) in organizational change literature. Although many of these stories depict experiences of “vulnerability, futility and impotence” (Frank, 1995, p. 97), and are illustrative rather than generalizable, 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 a constructivist (Guba and Lincoln, 1998) approach to seek an understanding of the different versions of organizational change reported by participants. As researchers we then reconstruct the “constructions that people ... initially hold, aiming towards consensus but ... [being] open to new interpretations as information and sophistication improve” (Guba and Lincoln, 1998, p. 211). In this sense, the research is hermeneutical in that we seek to find meaning in the respondent’s constructions of change, and dialectical since such constructions of change “can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among investigator and respondent” (Guba and Lincoln, 1998, p. 207). It is noteworthy that as participants’ constructions of organizational change are reported in retrospect, their versions of change are “alterable, as are their associated “realities”” (Guba and Lincoln, 1998, p. 206).
A total of 22 participants were recruited to the larger study of which 12 constructed atrocity tales. To be deemed suitable for the research population, participants were required to have been employed in a primary industry in the past five years for a period of at least five to ten years, to have experienced large-scale change within their employment and, as the focus is on bottom-up narratives of change, to have been employed in jobs ranging from shop-floor through to low level supervisory positions. Rather than selecting one or two single organizational sites, employees were targeted across primary industries in the region in an attempt to focus on the “local and specific constructed realities” (Guba and Lincoln, 1998, p. 203) of individuals, who form the units of analysis. However, the act of selecting participants across a region has limitations, and we recognize that narratives of change constructed within the geographic boundaries of the Latrobe Valley may not be representative of experiences in other parts of the world. Finally, snowball sampling (Neuman, 1997) was used to target a suitable population in which individuals whom where known to us or considered to be key industry employees through their work in the community were able to provide details of participants.

The principle instrument used to collect data was the semi-structured interview, which enabled participants to report the richness of their experiences. As we were interested in each participant’s experiences of change, interview themes were developed rather than deductive-style questions. These themes focused on the employment history of the individual, their experiences at work during the time change was implemented, and participants’ experiences after change. More specifically, individuals were asked about their role in the process of change, the ways in which change had impacted on them, the manner in which change was managed, and how their employment status has been affected. After conducting eight interviews, it became evident that although the experiences of change and violence were unique, there were common features across the narratives in relation to the types of violence experienced. A further four interviews confirmed these patterns and we believed that we had reached the “saturation” point (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 93) where new information would not be retrieved.

The data obtained from the interviews were coded/analyzed using narrative plot and theme analysis (Boje, 2001). In order to bring fragmented stories collected in interview into a meaningful whole, narrative plots can be determined by adding dimensions of temporality and causality, thus emphasizing the way in which events within stories are linked together. For example, one participant, Tom, employed in the electricity industry, stated in his narrative that restructuring of his workplace led to poor employment relations between staff and managers. He believes that a consequence of this demise was his relocation to an empty shed in which he and his colleagues were not given any work and pressured to resign. When linking these storylines together, Tom’s narrative becomes symbolic of a tragedy (Boje, 2001) in which he is defeated by organizational change. In conducting the plot analysis, all participants who constructed atrocity tales told tales of tragedy or tales of satire. Similar to the tragedy tale, the individual is defeated by organizational change in the satirical narrative. However, the satiric remains “overcome by the darkness” (Boje, 2001, p. 109) of organizational change, while for the tragic, “hope exists for those left behind” (Boje, 2001, p. 109).

By exploring narrative plots alone, we risk reducing participant’s experiences into linear lines and narrative typologies. However, adopting a narrative theme analysis enabled us to analyze the narratives according to how participants interpret and sort their stories (Boje,
2001) and explore patterns within the data that may not be evident in a plot analysis. From the theme analysis, unfolding patterns suggested that the way in which participants responded to change determined the type of narrative they constructed. More specifically, participants who constructed atrocity tales responded to change by openly voicing concerns, challenging managers and displaying “inappropriate” (Mumby and Putman, 1992) emotions, such as anger, at work. The consequences of such responses to change are documented in this paper as being subjected to acts of violence and having career opportunities removed. Further thematic analysis also revealed that four specific tales were being constructed within the atrocity narratives, which are discussed in the following sections of this paper.

Types of tales

The context of violence: sanitation, elimination and retribution talk in the valley

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” (Mark, maintenance worker in the electricity industry)[2]. 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” (Gary, engineer in the electricity industry). 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.

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 by “taking work away from us” (Gary), or “moving staff to isolated places where they could not communicate with anyone else” (Tom, electrician in the electricity industry). Several participants believe that such exclusion and isolation was a “deliberate management strategy” (Pete, plumber in the electricity industry). 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 …” (Jack, administrator in the water industry).

In particular, there was a perception among respondents that employees with prior “track record[s]” (Terry, teacher) and “decision making roles” (Chris, teacher) were “excluded from decision-making ... ignored or denied opportunities” (Anna, nurse). One respondent commented on the belief that employees in the Latrobe Region are considered as “second rate” (Jill, nurse). 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 (Jill).

Further, another participant suggested that she may have been “systematically identified as someone who needed to be eliminated” (Anna) from an organization, which she had played a primary role in the supervision of large groups of staff. 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 organization 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 that all participants perceive themselves to be victims of violence due to an unfair process of organizational change and the perception by managers that participants did not support their goals. 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 gallow sometimes (David, maintenance worker in the paper industry).

In contrast, participants believed that employees who were “quieter, less questioning … more puppet like, and subservient” (Anna) 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 (Jill, nurse).

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 leave voluntarily. Such consultants would “shake the tree and a lot of people just jump[ed]” (Tom) out of the organization as a result of “frustration, anger … and fear” (Tom).

Nine of the 12 participants who constructed atrocity tales 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” (Gary) 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” (Gary), 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! (Gary).

Such statements also suggest an ambivalence or resistance to change (Murphy, 1998) may be a typical response to workplace violence.

Victor et al. (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 symbolizes 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[3] (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.

Of the 12 narratives, 11 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 p****d off with the way they treated us (Heather, nurse).

Another felt that:

 [...] there was always pressure on ... at work. They [were] always watching me (Gary).
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 (Tom).

Others likened management to “the Gestapo” (Pete) and claimed that change made employees “hate management” (David). All of the participants recall feeling “very demoralized, very disappointed [and] very doubtful” (Gary) about their futures, stating that management “sure as hell would make it known that you weren't wanted” (Tom). Another participant believed that management behavior was so “horrendous” that she would “be in tears [and] cry all the way home” (Jane, nurse) 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 experienced 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” (Anna):

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 (Anna).

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 on 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 destabilize 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 were Arthur or Martha (David).

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 12 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! (Pete).

**Horizontal violence**

Due to the removal of power and responsibilities discussed above, such vertical conflict between management and employees was considered to be somewhat normal 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 et al., 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 (Anna).

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! (Tom).

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 not supportive and even hostile was reported by participants, while others felt they were targeted by denigrating treatment:

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 b*****s! They’re having a good time you know at our expense”. But we weren't, you know. We were stopping [ourselves] from going insane! (Tom).
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 recognized that excessive levels of stress can be damaging both to mental and physical wellbeing (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 (Anna).

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” (Heather).

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, “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 organizational change.

The rationale behind shifting from atrocity to resignation tale may be twofold. First, 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” (David). In most cases employees “loved the work” (Anna) and enjoyed a “sense of community” (Jack) with their colleagues. While relationships with management were not always sound, participants explain that “the us and them attitude [was] typical of the industry” (Gary). 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. 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 made as a result of a culmination of events such as “being pushed over the edge” (Chris), being treated as “insignificant” (Tom), and having “problems ignored by managers” (Gary). 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 600 people's lives to consider” (Diane, nurse). Some employees stated financial commitments as the cause of remaining in their jobs, while others felt that they “couldn't leave without any [other] employment to go to” (Tom). Only three of the 12 participants resigned from their positions without securing employment elsewhere.

The centrality of violence throughout the narratives of organizational change suggests that ten participants who constructed atrocity tales would not have resigned from their jobs if they had not experienced violence. Such participant's centre their entire narrative on the violence experience. Relevant to this 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, two participants appear to use violence as a rationale for making an exit decision they may have been made regardless of organizational change. Rather than focusing specifically on violence as a high point, these narratives focus on different themes such as animosity towards managers and other staff and a general dislike of the organization and work in general. Comments such as “I couldn't wait to get out of the place” (Mark), and “I was just happy to find an excuse to leave and go and sit on government benefits” (Pete) suggest that tales of violence and pressure from management to leave may have been invoked as a way of retrospectively justifying exit, rather than featuring as a dominant theme that caused them to leave their positions unwillingly. Failing to focus on violence as a narrative highpoint does not deny that this group of participants did not experience organizational violence. Rather, it suggests that violence, whether or not it is “real”, can be constructed in different ways.

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 (Pete).

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 (Mark).

When asked about their resignation choices these participants suggest that management pressured them to exit the organization. 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 (Pete).
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 c**p you're up to today”. I'm just so glad I don't have to work there anymore (Mark).

I see the [company] cars and I just don’t care. Good on them I say (Pete).

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 (Anna).

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 (Tom).

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. It is evident that throughout the process of narrative construction, participants searched for reasons to justify and 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. 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 also 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.

References


