

The Co-Construction of Moral Emotions and Employee Treatment in the Workplace

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Approved April 2015 by the  
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2015

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which employees experience moral emotions that violate employee treatment and how employees co-construct moral emotions and subsequent expressions of dissent. This qualitative study consisted of 123 full-time employees and utilized open-coding, content analysis, constant comparison analysis, and concept mapping. The analysis revealed that employees expressed dissent laterally as a series of sensemaking processes, such as validation of feelings, moral assessments, and assessing the fear of moral transgressions. Employees also expressed dissent as a series of risk assessments that overlapped with the ways in which employees made sense of the perceived infraction. Employees' lateral dissent expression manifested as a form of social support which occasionally led to co-rumination. Employees expressed dissent upwardly when seeking a desired action or change. Circumvention was utilized as a direct reflection to the type and degree of moral transgression related to the person responsible for the mistreatment. Results indicated that experiencing moral emotions that led to expressing dissent with a designated audience was determined by where employees were situated in the cyclical model of communicating moral emotions and in relation to the co-construction of both the infraction related to employee mistreatment and the experience of moral emotions. Results contribute to the existing body of literature on dissent and emotions. A discussion synthesizing the findings and analysis is presented, in addition to the implications for future research.

**KEYWORDS:** Emotion, Dissent, Moral Emotions, Sensemaking, Risk-Assessment, Social Support, Co-Rumination

## DEDICATION

I want to thank all of the individuals who have supported this journey. I am fortunate to have a list that could never be finished. My deepest and sincere gratitude is extended to my best friend, my partner, and my biggest supporter – Erik Kamrath. Finally, this thesis is dedicated to all the hard working teachers that have sacrificed and dedicated their lives to the education and betterment of their students.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following thesis was only made possible through the guidance and mentorship of the individuals that contributed expertise, insight, and countless hours to ensure my success. Dr. Jeffrey Kassing, my thesis chair, pushed me beyond my expectations and gave me the confidence and skills to become an advocate for students, teachers, and employees through teaching and research. Dr. Kassing offered advice, support, and timely feedback that has allowed this thesis to come to fruition and has inspired me to continue to push myself as a writer, student, researcher, and teacher. Dr. Kassing's mentorship has gone above and beyond that of a thesis chair and he has generously given me an innumerable amount of hours that have guided me in several decisions regarding pursuing a doctoral degree. Thank you, Dr. Kassing, for listening and putting everything into perspective, especially in the moments I thought I was going to fall apart.

I would also like to sincerely thank my committee members, Dr. Vincent Waldron and Dr. Lindsey Meân. Dr. Waldron incited my interest in emotions in organizations changing my research trajectory in a way in which I could better understand organizational processes that lead to burnout and stress and further providing a springboard for advocating for workers. Dr. Meân challenged me to research areas in which I am passionate about regardless of the popularity or acceptance of those topics. She guided me in conducting research through qualitative methods and the importance of participant voice.

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## Chapter One:

### INTRODUCTION

Organizational dissent and how emotions are communicated at work have been widely researched from a variety of approaches and through multiple lenses (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Fineman, 2000, 2003; Garner, 2009, 2013; Hochschild, 2012; Kassing, 1997, 1998, 2007, 2009, 2011; Miller, Considine, & Garner, 2007; Tracy, 2008, 2009; Waldron, 2012; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Although implicit connections between emotion and dissent have been scattered throughout the existing scholarship, the limited research on explicit connections exposed a gap in the research. Further, specifically researching dissent and emotion from a communicative approach requires an analysis of the communication processes embedded in employee narratives where both dissent and emotion are intertwined.

Through narrative, the experiences of those working in organizations provide rich qualitative data with which to analyze the communication processes that can positively transform work experiences and promote work-life balance. The path that led to my research interests within the areas of dissent and emotion began with my own narrative and anecdotal evidence. Therefore, I begin with a short history of what has guided my research.

I began my MA degree in Communication Studies at Arizona State University while I was working as a public educator at the high school level. Although the evidence at the time was anecdotal, the lack of work-life balance seemed to be widespread throughout the profession. Prior to my exposure to the existing literature, I also lacked the

conversational terminology to conceptualize these processes in terms like ‘emotion,’ ‘dissent,’ and ‘work-life balance.’ The stories conveying the experiences of teachers and administrators intrigued and motivated me to research how communication could provide insight into the functions of organizational practices and could be utilized for practical knowledge to positively transform the lives of employees. I began to take particular interest in emotion in the workplace after being introduced to the book *Communicating Emotion at Work* (Waldron, 2012). My research interests and goals advanced when I discovered research on dissent in organizations.

While working with the respective bodies of literature, I noted generous overlap in the ways in which employees experienced and communicated emotions at work with the ways in which employees communicated disagreement, or dissent, at work. I saw numerous connections between experiencing emotion in the workplace and the expression of dissent. Each of these connections was further propagated by my teaching job and my ability to see practical examples that were analogous with each of the two areas. The explicit connections, however, were only scattered in the existing research and left it difficult to depict any connections within real-life work experiences. Further, the knowledge of how workplaces could be transformed through both existing and continuous research on how to express dissent within the workplace solidified my initiative to take the research further. I was particularly interested in when expressing dissent was too risky and how to better balance and communicate emotions within the workplace, especially within a job like teaching that is so intricately tied to emotions. I later expanded my research to all organizations recognizing that the experiences of

employees representing a wide-array of jobs would provide more insight into the connections between emotion and dissent.

As I continued to see parallels within my coursework and my job, I became specifically interested in how a set of moral emotions was communicated in a five step process described by Waldron (2012) (see Figure 1). In step five of the process, which is the “expressed emotion,” I wanted to determine if employees expressed their emotions through dissent and, if so, to what audiences. This was the guiding premise of this research—to explore the intersection of emotional transgressions experienced at work and how those resulted in dissent expression.

The second chapter of this thesis extends the above intention and furthers the rationale for the research by specifically connecting emotions with dissent expression in organizations. The rationale is followed by a survey of the existing literature regarding both dissent and emotions in organizations from a communication perspective.

Accompanying these concepts, I also review literature related to the co-construction of moral emotions and dissent, such as relational factors associated with expressing both disagreement and emotion in organizations, organizational narratives, organizational sensemaking, and communicating risk within organizations. The theoretical underpinnings of organizational culture as co-created through organizational narratives signify the framework with which the analysis and findings are advanced. Finally, an overview of the cyclical model of the communication of moral emotions is presented as this provides the lens with which I used to interpret the narratives.

Chapter Three details the methodological approach to my research. Focusing on the need for participant voice through the collection of narratives and qualitative research methods, I argue that this is the best approach for a thematic analysis for determining the intersections of emotion and dissent. Following the discussion of methods, Chapter Four discusses the findings. This is accomplished by describing a series of themes that emerged from the proposed research questions. Lastly, the final Chapter (Chapter Five) provides a synopsis of the research findings, study limitations, and implications for future research.

## Chapter Two:

### SURVEY OF EMOTION AND DISSENT LITERATURE

Dissent and the many facets of emotion within organizations have been widely researched from a communication perspective (Garner, 2009, 2013; Kassing, 1997, 1998, 2007, 2009, 2011; Miller et al., 2007; Tracy, 2008, 2009; Waldron, 2000, 2012; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Scholars have connected the different rationales for studying dissent and emotion within organizations to factors that can improve how organizations function, such as improving job satisfaction, as well as elements that are important for organizational success while alleviating the many destructive communication processes, such as burnout, harassment, bullying, and social ostracism (Garner, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher 2009, Sias, 2009; Tracy, 2009; Waldron, 2009; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Moreover, employee treatment and the relational aspects of emotion and dissent can positively and negatively affect productivity, whereas mistreatment can lead to a loss of civility in the workplace — among other damaging outcomes (Kassing, 2011; Mearns, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004; Parkinson, 1996; Waldron, 2000, 2012; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). In order to effectively communicate and manage emotion, whether through dissent or other practices, and to promote a discussion of employee mistreatment, instances of unfair treatment must be examined more closely.

Although the current research shows implicit and explicit connections regarding emotion and dissent, research exploring the connections of employee treatment related to the expression of moral emotions and dissent are limited. Further, explicitly researching ties between emotion and dissent are crucial as the roles of employees continually shift

regarding social demands that require employees to more closely identify with their jobs, coworkers, and organizations. By researching these ties, organizations can begin to identify ways to more effectively promote dissent as a way of positively managing and transforming emotions. In addition, organizations and employees can find more successful ways of utilizing effective emotional communication within the workplace leading to positive outcomes for organizations and the many relationships employees have with and within organizations.

Employees construct narratives that co-create organizational culture through identity building and construct organizational reality through shared meanings and understandings (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, Waldron, 2012). These narratives are built on communication processes and can be shifted to positively transform communicating emotion and dissent. Communication, then, can transform experiences to promote longevity and job satisfaction, while managing and alleviating burnout, stress, and other previously discussed negative outcomes. The close web of communication interactions that provide the context for how employees perceive any particular situation can be enhanced through research on employee treatment from a communicative perspective. More specifically, researching the connections between the types of moral emotions felt due to a given infraction and how that emotion is expressed, whether through dissent, exiting the organization, silence, or other alternatives, is integral in understanding how these experiences are co-constructing organizational narratives. Further, it is important to begin looking at how each person within an organization plays a role in these interactions in order to enhance communication encounters.

## Organizational Dissent

Organizational dissent has been studied and conceptualized by numerous researchers (Garner, 2009, 2013; Kassing, 1997, 1998, 2007, 2009, 2011; Shahinpoor & Matt, 2006; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Kassing (1998) defines *dissent* “as a multistep process that involves: (a) feeling apart from one’s organization (i.e., the experience of dissent) and (b) expressing disagreement or contradictory opinions about one’s organization (i.e., the expression of dissent)” (p. 183). Kassing (1998, 2011) clearly differentiates the experience of dissent from its expression. With regard to communicating dissent, Kassing holds that it is a “communicative act” that centers on the sharing of “disagreement or contradictory opinions” (p. 183). In later work, Kassing (2011) clarifies three key conditions: “first, for organizational dissent to take place it must be expressed to someone; second, that expression must involve the disclosure of disagreement or contradictory opinions; and, third, the disagreement or contradictory opinions must be leveled against organizational practices, policies, and operations” (p. 30).

The ability to communicate and express dissent effectively is important for organizations to maintain a positive work environment, avert turnover, and sustain a loyal workforce. According to Shahinpoor and Matt (2007):

By distinguishing principled dissent from other forms of criticism and opposition, managers and leaders can perceive the dissenter as an important organizational voice and a valued employee. The dissenter...is highly ethically motivated and desires to contribute to the organization’s wellbeing. Recognizing and protecting

principled dissent provides the means of transforming organizations. By restoring dignity to the individual, organizations gain more productive and loyal employees and they create an environment that promotes critical thinking, learning, and a commitment to ethics. (p. 37)

On the contrary, organizations that oppose dissent can end up in costly situations that stifle organizations by foregoing opportunities to correct mistakes, provide constructive criticism, and address the problems giving rise to dissent (Kassing 2011; Shahinpoor & Matt, 2007).

Waldron and Kassing (2011) discuss four key reasons expressing dissent is important, which include dealing with organizational constraints, drawing attention to overlooked issues, exposing unethical behavior and organizational wrongdoing, and providing corrective feedback. Each of the four key reasons are tied to motivational factors and some, I assert, are provoked more heavily by emotion, although all are likely to have some ties to emotion. Thus, dissent is a powerful communicative tool that can benefit organizations if managed properly.

There are a number of different factors involved in whether or not an employee chooses to express dissent, including perception and organizational culture. Kassing (2011) describes theoretical explanations to highlight the ways in which employees make sense of organizational dissent. *Situational factors* are described as a response to accountability and responsibility whereas *motivational factors* include responses to dissatisfaction or perceptions of fairness. *Explanatory factors* are the ways in which

employees make sense of organizational policies and procedures while managing impressions (Kassing, 2011).

The way one chooses to express dissent, or the choice of audience, “can be communicated in various ways and in multiple directions (e.g. upward, laterally, externally)” (Kassing, 1998, p. 183). Kassing identifies three types of dissent throughout his research which are *lateral dissent*, including dissent expressed laterally to only co-workers, *upward dissent*, which would be directed upwardly towards management or a supervisor, and *externally* or *displaced*, which would be directed at family or friends outside of the network and/or organization (Kassing, 2009; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Dissent, then, is expressed to a preferred audience based on the circumstances, organizational experiences, and motivational factors. Based on previous research and existing scales, Kassing (1998) developed the organizational dissent scale to measure organizational dissent expressed to the aforementioned audiences.

### **Dissent-Triggering Events**

Dissent expression begins with an event or incident that moves employees to feel that they must communicate their dissatisfaction. This happens when the incident is understood to be grievous enough to warrant attention. Such events are known as dissent-triggering events (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002; Kassing 2011). Although there are numerous dissent-triggering events, Kassing (2011) has classified these into three domains: organizational processes (decision-making, organizational change), employee treatment, and unethical behavior or wrongdoing. Kassing and Armstrong (2002) further developed a typology of nine dissent-triggering events based on previous research. These

include: employee treatment, organizational change, decision-making, inefficiency, role/responsibility, resources, ethics, performance evaluation, and preventing harm (see Table 1).

Kassing (2011) argues that there is a significant amount of overlap within dissent-triggering events. Many of the triggers bleed into employee treatment or “dissenting about how employees are treated within one’s organization – particularly with regard to fairness and employee rights” (Kassing, 2011, p. 99). Since many of the triggers overlap with employee treatment, this becomes a significant trigger within organizations that will most likely lead to expressing dissent. For example, an employee may view unethical practices (ethics) as something that has implications for unfair treatment of employees or an employee may view changes within the organization (organizational change) as a violation of employee rights. Since employee treatment is interwoven within organizational practices and can be a predominant source of dissent, employee treatment is discussed further and becomes one of the focal points for studying the connection between dissent and emotions.

### **Employee Treatment as a Dissent Trigger**

For the purposes of this research, I will specifically be focusing on *employee treatment*, which emphasizes employee rights and fair treatment and is argued to preserve a sense of civility within organizations so that when violated the act produces dissent. Employee mistreatment prompts a number of emotional experiences that prompt employees to express dissent. Kassing (2011), for example, describes a dissent situation in which embarrassment and humiliation are witnessed by a co-worker. Meares et al.

(2004) argue that “mistreatment is interactional, distributive, procedural, or systemic abuse of employees taking place at both interpersonal and institutional levels” and can lead to “depression, anxiety, and hostility for victims” (pp. 4-5). Although the authors are specifically analyzing mistreatment in relation to cultural diversity, the research suggests that there is a significant impact on employees when they feel they have been mistreated in an organization. Meares et al. (2004) also discuss privileged and muted voices demonstrating the power of organizational narratives and the influence of those narratives on whether an employee chooses to express dissent and to whom. The ways in which employees are treated can have a significant impact on one’s organizational identity and therefore become a motivator for whether or not an employee chooses to express dissent.

**Face threat.** One of the ways in which employees experience employee mistreatment is as a significant threat to one’s identity is through *face threat*. Face refers to an employee’s self- presentation or identity and includes the qualities he or she hopes others will accept. Face threat concerns whether one’s face will be questioned, ignored or rejected. Employee treatment engages employees in a series of risk assessments regarding whether or not to express dissent and becomes a consideration as it threatens one’s identity. Face threat produces a number of emotional responses and Waldron (2012) argues that “emotional reactions of consternation, embarrassment, or humiliation signal that others have questioned, rejected, or simply ignored one’s face” (p. 135). Further “if they [employees] notice displays of embarrassment, co-workers can sometimes swoop to the communicative rescue...” (Waldron, 2012, p. 135).

In many cases face threat leads to expressing dissent for a variety of reasons, such as maintaining or negotiating one's identity within the organization. It is argued that this type of communication becomes emotional when the social order and predictability is disrupted, which can be the case in circumstances where employee treatment leads to dissent. In some cases employee mistreatment and face threat can prompt the need for a solution or action that resolves the unfair treatment. However, doing so is risky and necessitates some consideration of the audience and tactics used for expressing dissent, particularly when the audience is management. This is the case with upward dissent.

**Upward dissent strategies.** There are five strategies which employees use to express upward dissent: direct factual appeals, solution presentation, circumvention, threatening resignation, and repetition (Kassing, 2011). *Direct factual appeals* involve “supporting one's dissent claim with factual information derived from some combination of physical evidence, knowledge of organizational policies and practices, and personal work experience” (Kassing, 2002, p. 196). Using direct factual appeals can be a way for employees to ground dissent in evidence and avoid being seen as presenting an unwarranted opinion or as being unnecessarily aggressive (Garner 2009, Kassing, 2011). *Solution presentation* “provides a plan of action for addressing the concern at hand” (Kassing, 2011, p. 148) and is seen as proactive in that employees are willing to work with management to find a solution (Kassing, 2011).

Both direct factual appeals and solution presentation are viewed as pro-social forms of upward dissent and regarded as the most competent among employees whereas circumvention and threatening resignation are seen as less pro-social and can involve a

great deal of risk. Repetition, which is seen as a more moderate approach than circumvention or threatening resignation involves “repeated attempts to express dissent about a given topic at multiple points across time with the intention of eventually attaining receptivity to the dissent issue” (Kassing, 2002, pp.197-8). Circumvention and threatening resignation can be a result of highly emotionally charged instances of employee mistreatment and are discussed in more detail.

In some cases employees determine that they are unable to express dissent upwardly to their boss for a variety of reasons, such as determining the situation is too risky or in cases where upward dissent has been expressed with little or no resolve. In these circumstances they may have to consider alternative upward audiences like managers higher in the chain of command or human resources personnel. *Circumvention*, then, entails going around one’s immediate supervisor to express dissent. It occurs when employees question their immediate supervisors’ behavior, when they perceive their immediate supervisors are not receptive to hearing dissent, or when they believe supervisors are incapable of responding to dissent effectively (Kassing, 2009).

Circumvention is argued to be particularly face-threatening because it involves going around a supervisor to express dissent and therefore can present a number of risks for the employee (Kassing, 2007). In some cases employees consider circumvention as a result of inaction on the part of the supervisor in response to previous dissent cases while other instances involve judgments about a supervisor’s willingness to address the employee’s concerns (Kassing 2002, 2009, 2011). In any case, circumvention often

surfaces as a result of employee mistreatment and can present an immense amount of risk to the employee.

*Threatening resignation* (i.e., suggesting one will quit if their concern is not addressed appropriately) is used as a form of leverage to prompt responsiveness and action from supervisors and management (Kassing, 2002, 2011). Employees utilize this strategy as a last resort due to the tremendous amount of risk involved by placing their job on the line. In addition to the risks involved with employment, employees can be presented with a tremendous amount of face threat that has implications on one's identity and relationship with both co-workers and management (Garner, 2009; Kassing, 2011). There are a number of reasons employees are pushed to utilize threatening resignation, but it too often stems from employee mistreatment. Kassing (2011) identifies three situations in which threatening resignation occurs: 1) when employees are placed at risk 2) when they confront a serious affront to their integrity and image and 3) when situations with either supervisors or employers have reached an impasse and become intolerable. One can see that face threat is experienced or implied in these situations. Not surprisingly, each of these motivators is connected routinely to feelings of mistreatment and unethical behavior. In some cases, even utilizing risky upward dissent strategies does not give employees a sense of resolve and they choose to exit the organization.

Employee treatment is a powerful dissent trigger. One that can lead employees to use comparatively less competent and more face-threatening means for expressing dissent. Mistreatment gives rise to emotional responses in the workplace, which are most likely understood as moral emotions that result from an assessment of what is "right" or

“wrong” in an organization. Communicating emotions in organizations, and specifically experiencing moral emotions, are interrelated with the experience of employee mistreatment, the decision to express dissent, and how one goes about expressing dissent.

### **Emotion in the Workplace**

Emotion within organizational settings and communicating emotions at work have been widely studied by organizational communication and management scholars (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Fineman, 2000, 2003; Hochschild, 2012; Miller et al., 2007; Miller & Koesten, 2008; Tracy, 2008, 2009; Waldron, 2000, 2009, 2013; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Emotion, therefore, is conceptualized from many different perspectives. Fineman (2003) captures the breadth of these conceptualizations by addressing four key factors regarding emotion: 1) the subjective element, or what we feel and show, 2) the social construction of emotions, or our emotional performance, which is influenced by social conventions and the impressions we wish to convey to others, 3) the idea that feelings are short-term and attached to an object or occurrence in addition to frequently being mixed, uncertain, or ambivalent and 4) that moods are feelings that linger and are not linked to any particular object or event.

Because emotions are present in the workplace, workers and organizations must successfully address *emotion management*, which is “the communication processes associated with feeling, eliciting, regulating, expressing, and fabricating our emotions and interpreting those expressed by others” (Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Additionally, scholars have drawn distinctions between *emotional labor*, in which the production of emotion is not simply a reaction to work but rather it is the work, and *emotional work*, in

which the work itself is emotional and the feelings are authentic (Hochschild, 2012; Waldron, 2009, 2012; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). *Surface acting*, in turn, refers to inauthentic displays of emotion and is argued to be a crucial component of many service jobs like flight attendants, cashiers, or customer service representatives. Emotional work may entail *deep acting* when “employees internalize and come to own the feelings they are expected to have on the job” (Waldron, 2012, p. 7), such as employees at Disney who are encouraged to develop emotional connections with the Disney ideology (Waldron, 2012; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989).

Waldron (2012) further discusses many of the ways emotional labor is co-constructed with co-workers. For example, *relational emotion* co-constructed with colleagues in the workplace can arise from both positive (shared pride realized through collective accomplishments) and negative interactions (workplace bullying) with co-workers (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Waldron, 2012; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). *Emotional boundary spanning* refers to the ways in which employees bring emotions home from work and *emotional effects*, or emotion toward work, are the emotional effects or consequences of working (Waldron, 2009, 2012; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). Within the existing organizational communication literature, much of the focus is on the negative effects of emotion management through surface acting, deep acting, inhibiting emotion contagion through emotion regulation, and/or the elicitation of unwanted or negative emotions (Fineman 2000, 2003; Hochschild 2012; Waldron, 2009, 2012; Waldron & Kassing 2011). While the existing research has provided scholars with

vast and lasting contributions, research specifically regarding positive emotion management and transformation through dissent expression or other tactics is limited.

Many of the experiences of emotions within organizations relate to morality or what an employee views as “right” or “wrong.” *Moral emotions* have unique and specific ties to both employee treatment and expressing dissent and therefore provide a vantage point with which to analyze employee experiences of mistreatment and dissent expression. Moral emotions are a specific type of emotion that are tied to organizational narratives of “right” and “wrong” and are further connected to social norms and scripts of how to act appropriately within society and organizations (Waldron, 2012). Moral emotions, then, become another focal point of this research as they relate to how people make sense of perceived injustice in the workplace. Waldron (2012) created a typology of moral emotions and their social referents (see Table 2), which illustrates the breadth and range of possible emotions and their causes.

### **Co-Constructing Moral Emotions and Dissent**

Many researchers discuss the relational aspects of communicating emotions in the workplace in a variety of ways, such as the co-creation of meaning, the implications of employee treatment in relation to moral emotions, the correlation of employee engagement and physical health to positive social interactions, and the co-construction of workplace narratives representing organizational culture, identity, and goals (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate, & Fletcher, 2011; Tracy, 2009; Waldron, 2000, 2012).

Waldron (2000) explores the relational aspects of communicating and experiencing emotions within organizations. By citing the contextual factors, emotion becomes a co-created experience whereby meaning is shared in organizations, or in other words an illustration of “how organization members collaborate to produce emotion as part of their work” (Waldron, 2000, p. 79). Waldron (2000) relates “emotion tactics” to the relational aspects of work in saying, “organizational members manage work relationships with communication tactics designed to manipulate emotion” (Waldron, 2000, p. 73). Communicating emotion and utilizing emotional communication tactics is highly relational and contextual and can be described as a “collective performance” (Waldron, 2000, p. 75). The relational aspects of emotion in organizations become the way emotion is understood and further the ways in which emotion can be communicated at work.

Researchers identify a hierarchy of processes such as non-verbal cues, language, narratives, and rituals (Waldron, 2012), as ways to positively manage and transform emotions within organizational contexts. Narratives within organizations become particularly important because they are so closely tied with eliciting, labeling, regulating, and transforming emotions. Narratives create and reinforce organizational cultures and identities and therefore create and reinforce ones identity within that culture. The role of emotions will be reliant on how communicating emotions at work fits into the organizational culture and narrative.

Much of the existing research, then, suggests a process of co-construction when experiencing and communicating emotions and expressing dissent that occurs within the

framework of the existing organizational culture. Garner (2013) redefines dissent as a “co-constructed process” that considers “how previous experiences shape dissent” and “dissent interactions over time as a process rather than a one-time event” (p. 373). The experience of employee mistreatment and moral emotions would factor into both the previous experiences that shape dissent and the process of determining whether or not one will choose to express dissent and to whom. Garner (2013) argues that “co-construction recognizes that, as two or more people interact their social constructions of reality are also interacting, overlapping, and/or conflicting” (p. 375). For example, repetition will likely result in repeated attempts to resolve the situation with one’s boss or with co-workers and when that does not transpire then many employees choose to circumvent their boss. The circumvention does not happen independently and outside of the interactions that occurred prior to the circumvention and is most definitely not removed from prevailing organizational narratives and the experience of moral emotions.

Garner (2013) argues, then, that dissent should be approached through a “process approach,” which “characterizes a phenomenon as a sequence of events that lead to particular outcomes rather than characterizing the phenomenon through a series of related variables” (p. 377). Dissent expression is motivated by the experience of unfair treatment that further leads to the experience of moral emotions. The existing research prompts the necessity to understand these processes and must include an analysis of the experience of moral emotions that lead to expressing dissent and how these experiences are co-constructed as part of organizational identity and within the organizational culture.

When employees co-construct emotional occurrences and dissent experiences they engage in sensemaking and risk assessment. Organizational sensemaking is the process “through interaction with others that employees come to know and understand their organizations and their place within those environments” (Kassing, 2011, pp. 83-4). In relation to the process of organizational dissent, sensemaking “concerns how we make sense of organizational events that diverge from the expected” and “is critical to how we form our identities at work” (Kassing, 2011, p. 84). The ways in which employees make sense of organizational events is a co-constructed process based on perceptions of past events and negotiated with co-workers within the organizational culture.

Sensemaking is an important component of risk assessment for employees. According to Waldron and Kassing (2011), “employees negotiate perceptions of risk through a cycle of communication involving four interlinked phases (attending, sensemaking, transforming, and maintaining)” (p. 15). *Attending* “is initiated with the task of detecting and attending to the nature and magnitude of potential risk” (Waldron & Kassing, 2011, p. 16). This phase relies heavily on nonverbal cues and perception forming in order to look for warning signs. *Sensemaking* requires employees “to more fully explore the meaning and magnitude of the risk” (p. 16). This phase “is a collective process” and relies heavily on how employees make sense of organizational rules and codes as co-constructed with other employees. *Transforming* can be done through “individual initiative or collective actions” in which “employees can change risky situations – for better or for worse” (p. 17). Transformative communication behaviors “protect identities, preserve or strengthen relationships, and alter organizational practices

that are unsafe, unethical, and ineffective” (p. 17). Lastly, *maintaining* happens “once employees perceive that risk levels have changes” and “they may engage in practices that stabilize risk at current levels” (p. 17).

The co-creation of organizational narratives, culture, and identity is a process that involves making sense of the experience of moral emotions as a result of employee mistreatment. The process is very complex and understanding the connections to dissent in relation to these experiences can be difficult. In order to provide a framework with which to understand and analyze these processes I have utilized Waldron’s (2012) cyclical model of the communication moral emotions (see Figure 1). The model provides a framework for interpreting employee narratives about mistreatment, emotion, and dissent. Accordingly, Waldron (2012) provides a cyclical model to describe the communication processes that surround moral emotions. There are five steps in the model. The first step involves identifying a presumed infraction of the societal or organizational codes of conduct that apply to the workplace. The second step entails assessing the emotion the infraction has triggered. The third, addressing the emotion felt. The fourth step involves assessing the risk associated with expressing the emotion. And the fifth and final step considers how the emotion actually gets expressed. Each of the steps provides an opportunity for understanding experience of moral emotions related to employee mistreatment and the co-construction of that experience. By unpacking these steps one can decipher how sensemaking and risk assessment contribute to dissent as the outcome of a felt and expressed moral emotion.

## **Research Question**

The purpose of this thesis is to apply the cyclical model of communication of moral emotions as a framework with which to analyze how moral emotions connect with dissent in organizations with particular interest in the co-construction of organizational experiences. As previously discussed, organizational dissent and emotion in the workplace have been conceptualized in previous research (Fineman, 2003; Hochschild, 2012; Kassing, 1997, 1998, 2007, 2009, 2011; Miller et al., 2007; Tracy, 2008; Waldron, 2012) and are utilized in this research in order to study their connections with the goal of looking for emerging patterns of how employee treatment is connected to moral emotions through dissent expression. More specifically, my purpose is extended to looking at how workers react to wrongdoing or injustice, which requires looking at the specific set of emotions in the workplace labeled “moral emotions.” How employees talk about these emotions by linking them to “right and wrong” is significant to the construction of organizational culture through co-constructed narratives that identify what is socially acceptable in any given organization (Waldron, 2012). These processes are communicative and can be transformed and challenged by analyzing the communication processes by which moral emotions are expressed. By looking at the felt moral emotions in relation to employee treatment, then, researchers can develop a basis for further research on how organizations can positively transform and manage employee emotions and employee treatment.

Lastly, if an employee chooses dissent as the way in which they communicate emotion in response to employee treatment, then looking for emerging patterns of how

employees assess the risk and consider all factors beyond the felt emotion could be telling as well. Accordingly, I am interested in exploring the type of audience to which employees choose to express dissent and if they chose to express dissent in response to mistreatment. In addition, employee narratives are a way to gain insight into emerging patterns about the ways in which employees' co-construct experiences of moral emotions and subsequent expressions of dissent.

To better understand the co-construction of moral emotions and dissent, the following research question is offered:

RQ: How do employees co-construct moral emotions and subsequent expressions of dissent?

The next chapter explains the methodology used to analyze this research question. In addition the ways in which the data were collected and the sample of participants used to gather data are presented.

Chapter Three:  
METHODOLOGY

**Data Collection and Instrumentation**

The study was cross-sectional, utilizing an open-ended qualitative survey questionnaire except for demographic questions. I solicited participants, and in some cases organizations, to volunteer to participate in the study with the goal in mind to vary the types of organizations from which I collected data. The purpose was to alleviate confounding variables that may have been present if only a few organizations were represented.

Participation was voluntary and a cover letter explained to the participants that their responses would remain anonymous. Participants offered informed consent by reading and accepting the study description provided in the survey cover letter. I removed any identifying information and used caution when reporting results regarding narratives that might reveal a specific situation that would breach a participant's anonymity.

Surveys were self-administered using an online system and link (via SurveyMonkey) that was accessed using a variety of computer-mediated sources, such as e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter. A snowball/network process for recruiting additional participants, then, also was employed. Respondents were asked to forward the e-mail to any family, friends, or co-workers they thought would be willing to participate. Social media sites also were used in this way and respondents were asked to repost the survey link to their Facebook wall and/or share their e-mails via private message on Facebook, and/or retweet the link on Twitter.

In order to recruit a larger pool of respondents, students enrolled in a large online course at a major university were also approached with the opportunity to recruit 10 participants by gathering e-mail addresses. The opportunity for students to find recruits was completely voluntary and students were offered an alternative opportunity if they did not wish to participate in recruiting participants. Students were required to present the cover letter to possible recruits and remain unbiased if recruits did not want to participate. After presenting the cover letter and ensuring participants met the criteria, students gathered e-mail addresses with the assurance that no other identifying information was collected. The additional group of possible respondents was then contacted via email by the primary researcher with an invitation to participate in the study.

In order to participate, respondents needed to be able to recall a specific time in their work experience when they felt mistreated by their organization or management and felt the need to say something about it to others. More specifically, participants needed to recall a time in which they (a) felt a strong emotion because they believed they were treated unfairly and (b) felt the need to say something to someone inside or outside their place of employment. Respondents were also required to be 18 years of age or older and currently working full-time, which was defined as 40 hours a week or more.

Within the questionnaire, respondents were given a brief and non-specific explanation of how employee treatment can lead to disagreement and how employee treatment is often a breach in codes of conduct that can lead to an emotional response. I did not provide a specific list of moral emotions and their social referents as I felt this might limit the discussion of the felt emotions. I also did not provide a specific list

identifying the particular audience (upward, lateral, displaced) to which dissent can be expressed as I wanted the narratives to be completely open-ended and unrestricted.

On the survey questionnaire, respondents were given the following brief explanation of key concepts prior to responding to the question(s) in order to clarify employee treatment, codes of conduct, and breaches in workplace codes:

On occasion employees feel mistreated in the workplace due to organizational policies and practices. Many times codes of conduct are broken in regards to employee treatment. These codes are understood whether or not they are written down, for example in an employee handbook or elsewhere, by co-workers, managers, or others within the organization. As a result, when a breach occurs in workplace norms, many employees feel a strong emotional response that results in the need to say something to someone.

The survey required respondents to answer an open-ended question about a time in which they had experienced an infraction (see Appendix C). A follow up set of questions were used to help guide respondents in composing a narrative response. These included: (1) What was the nature of the issue that caused you to say something? (2) What was the behavior that you determined was a breach in codes of conduct? And what particular code of conduct was breached? (3) Describe the emotion(s) triggered by the perceived infraction. (4) Describe any risk assessment you took into consideration before determining you needed to say something, such as consequences to your relationship with co-workers or managers and/or if there would be retaliation against you. (5) To whom did you express the emotion and say something to? (6) Why did you choose this person or

audience? These guiding questions were mirrored after the model of the communication of moral emotions. The fifth step in the cycle, the ‘expressed emotion,’ was modified to specifically gather information about dissent expression and the audience to whom the respondent choose to express dissent.

These guiding questions provided me with qualitative data which I coded to specifically make connections between employee treatment, the moral emotion felt, the expression of dissent and the audience to which the respondent chose to express dissent. Since respondents gave a narrative response, further analysis was done in order to identify emerging patterns or themes.

Demographic questions also asked about employees’ years of experience in their present organization, years of work experience overall, number of full-time employers for which they had worked, current rank or classification at their present job (upper-management, management, non-management, or other), classification of their current organization, classification of the organization in which the infraction occurred, age, sex, and race/ethnicity. Upper-management and management were able to participate in the study given that both groups could potentially provide insightful information regarding employee treatment, emotion, and dissent.

## **Participants**

Participants consisted of a nonrandom convenience sample of 123 full-time employees (i.e., 40 hours or more a week) working for a variety of organizations throughout the United States. Participants’ age ranged from 19-61 years of age ( $M = 36.9$ ,  $SD = 12.34$ ). The sample was 64.17% female and 35.83% male with the majority of

respondents identifying as Caucasian/White (70.25%). The majority of participants identified as non-management at 64.91%, with 28.95% identifying as management, and the remaining 7.02% identifying as top management. The range in which respondents cited working in their present organization was 1-41 years ( $M = 6.1$ ,  $SD = 7.27$ ). Respondents' total work experience in all organizations ranged from 1-45 years ( $M = 16.2$ ,  $SD = 11.38$ ) with the total number of organizations respondents cited they had worked for in a full-time capacity ranging from 1-21 ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = 4.59$ ). Respondents indicated a variety of classifications in regard to their current organization with the largest number of respondents working in some type of education field (33.91%) and similarly the largest number of respondents citing education as the classification for the organization in which the infraction occurred (29.91%).

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis was twofold. Something more akin to a content analysis was followed by a second pass through the data with the intention of recognizing patterns within and across the accounts. Of the 123 cases, 18 were dropped because the narrative did not reveal a time in which the employee expressed dissent and/or an emotion was not listed or identified that corresponded to those listed on the table of moral emotions. For example, one respondent described her experience as a bank teller in which another employee knew both combinations to a merchant teller safe and was not supposed to have this information. The respondent did not identify any emotions as a response to the experience and I was unable to identify an emotion based in her response using the moral emotions table. In addition, she described that she did not express disagreement due to

her fear of the employee in which the infraction occurred. In this case, while there may have been a breach of a moral code, there was no emotion or dissent expression identified. Therefore narratives like this one were not utilized in the data analysis.

Each of the 105 remaining narratives was first coded using an open-coding process. Each scenario was coded independently using open coding to determine (a) the emotion felt, (b) to what degree the components of the cyclical model were present, and (c) to which audience dissent was expressed. During this phase of the analysis I initially organized the data into the three previously discussed categories and the emotions were coded as described by the respondent.

Through a content analysis I was able to code the moral emotions felt, the dissent audiences, and the points on the cyclical model. In the content analysis I further labeled the emotions as moral emotions using the moral emotions and social referents table (see Table 2). For example, a respondent described a time where they found it difficult to trust their supervisor discussing constant feelings of animosity or holding a grudge. Reading further into the narrative revealed feelings of bitterness and betrayal according to Table 2 and the moral emotions were coded as such.

In another case, the respondent engaged in the sensemaking process in order to understand that the actions of the new employee did not parallel the existing organizational culture. Although the respondent discussed the felt emotions as “anger” and “frustration,” the narrative also revealed feelings of bitterness and envy. The feelings of indignation became co-constructed when the co-workers in the scenario went to the boss and the boss “did nothing about the situation.” Although Waldron (2012) does not

claim that the list of moral emotions and their social referents is inclusive of all emotions, the table allowed me to label the emotions that may not have been explicitly listed due to the limited vocabulary of how emotions are recalled and discussed. This gave me additional insight into the moral assessment of the situation and the severity of the infraction based on the experience of moral emotions.

I also color coded the points on the cyclical model for 1) the perceived infraction (i.e., the behavior that was determined to be a breach of codes of conduct) and moral assessment (i.e., the particular code that was breached), 2) the felt emotion (i.e., the emotions triggered by the perceived infraction described), 3) the risk assessment processing revealed in the narrative, and 4) and the audience to whom dissent was expressed. I coded moral assessments with the perceived infraction as respondents were describing these interchangeably and what emerges later in the analysis is the co-construction of these moral assessments. The cyclical model, the list of moral emotions, and the established audiences for hearing dissent expression were used as the typologies from which this content analysis was conducted. Not all responses followed the cycle completely or in some cases the narrative only revealed parts of the cycle showing the complexity of experiences.

Each of the guiding questions discussed previously provided me with qualitative data which I utilized in order to specifically make connections between employee treatment, moral emotions felt, expression of dissent and dissent audiences. Since respondents gave a narrative response, I was able to further analyze the process using a constant comparative method to identify other emerging patterns or themes. More

specifically the open coding was used to understand the moral emotion felt, the subsequent communication that followed, how that led to dissent, and to whom it was expressed. Since respondents' narratives could describe any situation in which the employee communicated emotions, themes began to emerge in regards to the proposed research question during the coding process. I was then able to use the information to begin analyzing the data to see if the connection posed in the research question was present.

With these aspects of the accounts identified, I mapped each of the shared narratives and this revealed the co-construction of moral emotions and dissent expression. Through the mapping of each narrative, it allowed me to identify patterns across narratives. This was accomplished by utilizing a constant comparative approach to identify emerging themes across accounts. I was also able to identify how someone worked through the cycle, which again allowed me to see the complexity of these processes and how they are interwoven within employee experiences. Mapping each of the narratives revealed that respondents did not necessarily follow the cyclical model, jumped around to different stages, traveled through each of the stages listed in the model, and/or went through the stages multiple times. This revealed the co-construction of moral emotions and dissent at multiple points. For example, if a respondent's feelings were validated and the respondent gained social support showing the severity of the infraction through lateral dissent then this could lead to another round through the cycle where the respondent would express dissent upwardly or through circumvention. Another process of co-construction would ensue through the expression of upward dissent. In some cases

the manager or supervisor would downplay the severity and no action would be taken setting the respondent in motion again to travel through the model and perhaps experience different points on the model, such as possibly expressing lateral dissent regarding the new infraction or even exiting the organization.

I further assessed the overall ways in which employees expressed dissent or provided corrective feedback within their organization. The results not only gave me a summation of the ways in which dissent was used by employees, but it also was helpful in providing insight when analyzing how moral emotions moved employees to express dissent. Further, I was able to analyze how employees co-constructed and negotiated their experiences as a process that is inherently intertwined with organizational culture and past experiences. The results of these combined processes are discussed in the section that follows.

## Chapter Five:

### RESULTS

Employee narratives provided rich data producing a number of themes that described the ways in which employees expressed dissent in relation to experiencing moral emotions through a process of co-construction. The results indicate a generous amount of overlap in experiencing moral emotions and expressing dissent, which reveals an explicit connection between communicating emotion and dissent in organizational settings.

The results revealed four themes which were 1) *Perceived Infractions and Moral Assessments through Sensemaking*, 2) *Moral Assessments as Lateral Dissent to Enroll Social Support*, 3) *Assessing the Fear of Moral Transgressions through Dissent Expression*, and 3) *The Co-Creation of Moral Emotions through Co-Rumination → Risk Assessment → Dissent*. The first theme revealed that respondents assessed and co-constructed the perceived infraction through the process of sensemaking, which involved individual sensemaking, co-constructed sensemaking, the validation of feelings, moral assessments, and assessing the fear of moral transgressions. The findings of theme two suggest that respondents used lateral dissent as a way to assess the infraction and gain the social support of co-workers. In theme three, respondents gauged the varying risks involved in the experience of mistreatment. Further, through expressing lateral dissent employees would evaluate the moral assessments of the infraction, assess the fear of moral transgressions, assess the said and unsaid codes regarding dissent expression, and assess the status of those involved in the infraction, all within the parameters of the

organizational culture and through a process of co-construction. Lastly, theme four highlighted that the co-construction process had the potential to lead to co-rumination when cases of employee mistreatment lingered and warranted additional movement through differing points of the cyclical model multiple times. Each of the four themes is discussed in detail, highlighting evidence from the narrative responses reflecting the co-construction process of emotion and dissent.

### **Perceived Infractions & Moral Assessments through Sensemaking**

In order to further understand the association of dissent expression within the experience of moral emotions that refer to social actions or conditions that violate employee treatment, I analyzed how employees perceived the experience as an infraction and further how that infraction was assessed morally through a process of sensemaking. As discussed in Chapter 2, “sensemaking activities are particularly critical in dynamic and turbulent contexts, where the need to create and maintain coherent understandings that sustain relationships and enable collective action is especially important and challenging” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). Once an employee perceives that an infraction took place, the context begins to take shape and the sensemaking process begins. Employees rely on the organizational culture that is shaped by organizational narratives to begin to make sense of the infraction.

The first step in the sensemaking process was for employees to make sense of their perception of the infraction by aligning it with the organizational culture to determine whether or not the actions paralleled the moral codes, or rather the said or unsaid rules, built within the organizational culture. If the actions within the

organization, whether displayed by a manager or another employee, did not align with the organizational culture then many times the respondent perceived these actions as an infraction.

Organizational culture “emphasize[s] the ways people construct organizational reality” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 313) and as such it is “a process of reality construction that allows people to see and understand particular events, actions, objects, utterances, or situations in distinctive ways” (p. 313). Littlejohn and Foss (2011) argue that how one understands and constructs the reality of organizational culture also becomes the framework or reference point for one’s own behavior within that organization.

Although organizational culture can be deeply rooted in the historical factors of an organization, and further within society, the culture is fluid and can continue to be created and co-created as organizational narratives shift. The shifts in organizational culture can be seen as an infraction and cause employees to experience moral emotions related to these shifts. When this occurs, employees engage in the sensemaking process in order to understand actions that do not parallel the existing organizational culture. For example, one respondent discussed how a new hire interpreted a rule in a way that was incongruent with the existing organizational culture:

*An employee was hired during this time frame and took advantage of this rule and had very little regard for others in the office. The employee would change into workout gear just after lunch if the employer was not in the office. The workout*

*clothing that this employee chose left little to the imagination. Everybody else followed the rules except for this employee. (#2)*

Although the respondent describes the rule regarding office attire as something that was in place for an extended period of time, the new employee made sense of the rule in a way that disregarded the existing organizational culture and this became an infraction for the respondent. The respondent expressed anger and frustration leading the employee to become bitter and envious of the co-worker that seemingly did not have to follow the same rules as the other employees. The employee providing the account expressed dissent laterally in order to make sense of the new employee's inability to follow the same rules as the rest of the organizational members. Further, she validated her feelings through her expression of disagreement, in which her co-workers provided her validation through social support. As the respondent gained social support, the narrative shifted pluralistically to "we" and led to upward dissent expression to the manager in order to seek action and resolve the situation. This in turn suppressed her own fear of further committing a moral transgression by expressing disagreement to a manager. When the manager chose not to take action this led to co-rumination amongst the employees, and eventually the exit of the employee who recalled this situation. The respondent described the situation as "toxic" leading to "unrest" amongst employees with the same job classification that were following the rules. In many instances, a loosely interpreted rule that did not coincide with the existing organizational culture prompted employees to experience moral emotions and express dissent, exposing the power of existing organizational cultures.

Organizational culture is co-created through a process of sensemaking that allows employees to interpret both said and unsaid moral codes and rules. Another employee narrative reveals the actions of a manager that were in direct conflict with the “emphasis,” or values, of the company and the respondent perceived this conflict as an infraction. The respondent discussed the actions of a fellow manager that clashed with company policy:

*Our company emphasizes how employees can go to upper management with any questions or concerns without fear of judgment or retaliation. He broke this trust by gossiping about our conversation and speaking ill about me to one of my colleagues. (#5)*

Here the respondent discussed how the formal rules did not match the actions of those functioning within the organization. Organizations that claimed particular values and morals but failed to endorse those in certain instances led employees to perceive that an infraction took place. This employee discussed how the experience of betrayal by another manager left the respondent feeling “extremely upset,” “angry,” and “extremely disappointed.” This led to lateral dissent to another manager (this employee also held a managerial position) to be sure he/she “wasn’t overreacting,” in order to further assess the fear of committing a moral transgression. Through the lateral dissent process, the respondent experienced social support as the other manager described experiencing a similar situation, clearly validating the respondent’s feelings. The respondent’s narrative also shifted to “we” as the two managers circumvented the manager with which the

infraction occurred and expressed dissent to a human resources representative in order to seek action and a resolution.

It is evident that the process of sensemaking is negotiated within the context of the organizational culture. When an employee experiences a violation that is perceived as disjointed and non-representative of the organizational culture, employees engage in a process of sensemaking that involves both individual perceptions and those of their co-workers through lateral dissent expression. Then experience of moral emotions as a result of an infraction sets the individual sensemaking process in motion but ultimately the process is relational and co-created, which brings dissent expression to the forefront in a variety of ways. Expressing dissent laterally to co-workers becomes a way for employees to assess the morality of the situation, or how “bad” the infraction is. It also serves to gauge the risk involved with further expressing dissent to seek action or resolve.

There are several examples provided below that show how this unfolds, each illustrating the cycle in response to different moral reasons. In some cases the employee perceived an infraction due to some type of organizational change, which did not align with the organizational culture and further broke said or unsaid moral codes. As discussed earlier, there is considerable overlap in the types of dissent-triggering events labeled and discussed by Kassing (2011). For instance, organizational change produced feelings of unfairness and mistreatment, which caused employees to experience an infraction associated with moral emotions and led them to express dissent. One respondent discussed the unfair treatment of a mandated schedule change that gave rise to feelings of mistrust, betrayal, and “animosity:”

*Then two new individuals came into the office to replace two that had transferred to other departments. They must not of liked the schedule that had been working just fine since behind our backs they drafted an entire new one and our supervisor approved it. The supervisor never discussed any details of the change with the remaining crew. (#6)*

Although the process of sensemaking through expressing dissent to co-workers in order to gain social support was not discussed in detail, the respondent switched to using plural pronouns (e.g., “we”), showing solidarity in the feelings of mistreatment amongst those that had been in the office for “many years.” This narrative also demonstrates how someone can manipulate the situation to their benefit and the respondent sees this as mistreatment due to managerial ineffectiveness or the inability to see the problem. The respondent reported:

*We ended up having to cancel planned vacations...When we approached the supervisor, we were told “This is Best” (#6)*

The co-created feelings as a result of the expression of mistreatment created an alliance between workers and gave them solidarity to express upward dissent with regard to mistreatment. The feelings of betrayal and “animosity,” however, due to both the change and lack of response created a division between the “new” workers and the “old” workers. In this case the employees did not get the improved future they sought and therefore the experience or cycle of moral emotions through mistreatment began again.

In a different case, another respondent discussed the feelings of humiliation when the changes implemented by a new manager began to fail:

*A new manager took over and instead of incorporating what was already working with her new way of doing things she completely overhauled the system, it ended up backfiring on her and instead of stepping up and taking ownership she put the blame on the shoulders of all us employees. (#8)*

In this instance the respondent described a mass exodus of employees that resulted from the organizational changes implemented by the new manager. Things came to a head when the new manager humiliated the respondent in front of a large group of the employee's co-workers. The feeling of shame and the evidence of other co-workers previously leaving the organization led this employee to interpret the infraction as severe and warranting the immediate expression of upward dissent. When no action or resolution was given on the part of upper-management, this employee decided to follow suit and exit the organization as well.

The narratives provide evidence that organizational change can prompt feelings of mistreatment and wrongdoing that cause employees to gauge the situation as "good" or "bad," or in other words assess the morality of the situation. These cases further highlight the themes that represent how expressing dissent regarding individual and relational sensemaking in order to co-construct the perceived meaning and degree of the infraction is co-constructed. Once social support is attained through lateral dissent expression and meaning making occurs, many shift their narratives to speak in terms of "we" rather than "I." In cases where the severity is high and no response or action is taken when an employee voices their concerns, the employees chose to exit the organization. In cases where employees voiced concerns that were unmet, many

employees made sense of the exit through social support with other co-workers who had exited or were also exiting the organization.

Other infractions occurred as a result of co-worker relationships that shifted due to a change in one employee's status or position. Such changes materialized as disruption in the relationship and caused a perceived infraction. These infractions, in many cases, caused a deep felt moral emotion. Waldron (2000) reframed emotion as a relational phenomenon by arguing that emotion can act as a resource by which organizational relationships are created, interpreted, and altered. He further argued that emotions can arise "from a perception that personal loyalties have been betrayed in favor of allegiance to the organization" (p. 69). With regard to relational infractions, one respondent discussed the feelings of degradation and humiliation that emerged after exposure to constant ridicule in front of his/her co-workers:

*I had looked forward to working in the office because the people who would be my first and second line supervisors had been friends for many years. But when I got there, it quickly became apparent that my first line supervisor was intimidated by the experience I brought... (#17).*

In cases of a dissolution of a co-worker relationship, the respondents had a much more difficult time with the sensemaking phase because they had a lack of social support requiring them to assess the morality of the infraction and to determine the risk on their own. These situations tended to go on for longer before the employee decided to express dissent by circumventing their boss with whom they had once shared a close bond and/or

friendship. Respondents reported feeling hurt and humiliated, followed by feelings of resentment and bitterness.

Another respondent recalled feelings of helplessness because of the inability to make sense of the situation and validate the feelings of mistreatment.

*I felt comfortable with this situation since my new supervisor was someone I knew and considered a friend instead of someone whom I didn't know, such as her newly hired manager...Initially the situation was fine...Gradually I could tell that there was a shift in the interactions between myself and my supervisor. I went from receiving excellent reviews, co-worker's praise and customer compliments to not being capable of handling even the simplest task correctly...(#15)*

The inability to utilize co-workers to gain social support through lateral dissent expression proved to draw out the experience of moral emotions and make it difficult to assess. The findings evidence the utility of social support and the co-creation of meaning through dissent expression. Lateral dissent expression becomes an integral part of understanding the experience of moral emotions and assessing the risk of seeking action or resolve through upward dissent expression or circumvention.

Many respondents that described an experience involving the deterioration of a workplace friendship perceived the infraction as highly unjust and described a wide array of moral emotions, such as hurt, humiliation, shock, and suffering (Waldron, 2012). “Emotional expressions are regulated by cultural understandings of right and wrong feelings and they simultaneously function to enforce those social codes (Waldron, 2012, p. 136). Employees make sense of injustice and wrongdoing as a result of both the

organizational culture and the larger societal culture. Employees begin with a process of individual assessment about the infraction and its morality but then use lateral dissent as an additional mechanism for sensemaking, moral assessment, and social support.

### **Moral Assessments as Lateral Dissent to Enroll Social Support**

Organizational culture is co-created through employees' sensemaking and organizational narratives. If the behaviors and actions within the organizational culture conflict with said and unsaid moral codes, then this leads to a perceived infraction and possibly the expression of dissent. In my findings, and discussed throughout the analysis of the previously presented narratives, I found that respondents expressed dissent laterally to co-workers in order to gain social support and as a form of relational sensemaking. If respondents' stories were corroborated by co-workers through co-created dissent expression then co-workers often would express dissent upwardly in order to elicit some type of action or result.

Sensemaking processes are social and lead to the creation of organizational narratives that guide behaviors through said and unsaid moral codes. "Organizational sensemaking is a fundamentally social process: organization members interpret their environment in and through interactions with others, constructing accounts that allow them to comprehend the world and act collectively (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). One of the motivations for lateral dissent, then, was to aid in the assessment of morality in regard to the infraction. After reaching an individual assessment that an infraction did indeed occur, employees would seek out the support of co-workers to further make sense of the infraction and in some cases to understand the varying degrees of each infraction.

Employees express dissent to co-workers in order to further categorize the moral emotion and this means of categorization is what Waldron (2012) terms “audience presence.” Waldron argues that “The presence of co-workers makes moral codes more salient, intensifies emotional reactions, and assures that the emotional experience is collective, not just individual” (p. 139). While co-workers can intensify pleasant emotions, they are crucial in making sense of less pleasant emotions that clash with organizational norms and violate expectations. Waldron (2012) contends that co-workers, or “audience presence,” make others aware of the ways in which these infractions have occurred or that moral standards have been violated. Employees utilize the existing organizational narratives regarding these said and unsaid moral codes to assess the infraction and further make sense of the types of emotions the individual is experiencing as a result of the infraction.

The narratives supporting the utilization of lateral dissent expression as a means of evaluating the morality, assessing the risk, and utilizing the co-creation of meaning to further assess the fear of violating organizational norms through engaging in moral transgressions themselves were evidenced throughout the findings. Respondents often wanted to gauge their take on the infraction. For example, one respondent shared:

*I discussed the situation with another manager who had been with the company longer than me. I wanted to be sure I wasn't overreacting. (#5)*

Or they hoped to test the accuracy of claims made against them, which they deemed to be moral transgressions. For example, the employee in another case sought confirmation of reportedly rude behavior on her part.

*I finally felt comfortable enough with them [co-workers] to ask what they honestly thought of my behavior towards them and if it was being accurately reported to me by our supervisor. It was a surprise to be told that not one of my co-workers knew anything about even one of the many times where I was supposedly rude or disrespectful. (#15)*

And in other cases, collective discussion about infractions informed people's decisions about whether or not to express dissent.

*I was strongly discouraged by my co-workers [to talk to the director of the school] though I often talk to my partner teacher about the burdens of the job and the lack of communication and support from administration. (#14)*

As discussed previously, in many cases respondents would even recall their stories in the form of “we” versus “I” demonstrating the experience was collective rather than individual and solidified by a group of people rather than a single employee. Doing so appears to have engendered an increased motivation to express dissent upwardly. The account below, although written individually, frames a collective need to share concerns about this questionable colleague.

*It was very disturbing when one of the members on our team decided that she did not want to cooperate with us. She skipped meetings, berated children (yes, we heard it) and on one occasion came to school hung over. We felt she did not have the children or us as a priority. We were extremely upset... We were unsure... (#4)*

The relational role of lateral dissent as a means of social support and assessment is significant in understanding the complexity and overlap in experiencing moral emotions,

communicating emotions at work, and in expressing dissent within organizations. Lateral dissent expression was not only a means for validating the emotions felt and assessing the morality of the situation but also a way of understanding the potential risks involved in both communicating that emotion and expressing dissent—a theme developed in the next section.

### **Assessing the Fear of Moral Transgressions through Dissent Expression**

Risk assessment presents another motivation to express dissent — risk assessment of introducing a second moral transgression. Risk assessment, therefore, presented feelings of additional emotions, such as nervousness, fear, guilt, and/or embarrassment. Accordingly, responses to moral transgressions may get construed as additional moral transgressions when organizational cultures dictate which emotions can and should be expressed and shared. For example, employees might be made to feel shame or humiliation when expressing dissent about employee treatment. And as a result employees may choose to refrain from expressing dissent and remain silent. For example, one respondent described a situation that produced feelings of nervousness and fear due to the possibility of being labeled a ‘troublemaker’:

*We were unsure how our boss would respond to our issues as she never wanted to be bothered. Also, we knew we could be labeled as trouble-makers...(#4)*

Interestingly, the data suggest that co-workers (audience) are key in how emotions are experienced and expressed. Additional infractions can occur in making sense of the initial infraction, all of which may cause additional moral emotions to be felt and

processed. Each of these factors then contributes to whether employees are motivated to express emotion and dissent and to which audiences.

Risk assessment is also a reflection of the organizational culture reflecting and prompting additional emotions. In discussing the communicative approach to risk in organizations, Walron and Kassing (2011) argued that “certain communication behaviors are inherently risky because they are used to harm or hurt” and “communicative behaviors cue us to the possibility of risk” (p. 11). They described risk as something that is in constant flux reflecting the employees’ perceptions of organizational and societal norms. In addition, as employees make sense of risk, they “explore the meaning and magnitude of risk” starting with “a review of the relevant cultural, organizational, and relational rules” (p. 16). Ultimately though “sensemaking is a collective process, whereby, employees offer speculations about motives and goals, explore hypothetical explanations, and negotiate over the magnitude, clarity, and seriousness of the situation” (p. 16).

Given the ongoing process of assessing risk and sensemaking that occurs in organizations, it is not surprising that in this work there were instances in which respondents’ perceptions of organizational norms regarding ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behavior motivated them to remain silent as a result of concerns about looking bad, being labeled a troublemaker, overreacting, or being perceived as too emotional. Although respondents chose to be silent in some cases, the decision was still a result of risk assessment through lateral dissent expression. Respondents expressed dissent laterally to make sense of the perceived infraction and to assess the risks associated with emotionally responding to it.

Evidence of this type of risk assessment negotiated through lateral dissent is presented in the excerpts below:

*I saw her do it but I didn't say anything because I didn't want her to know that I told on her because she was mean to me already (#30)*

*I did not want others in the agency to become aware of a lack of poor judgment on behalf of the deputy director. Also, I did not want others to doubt our (me, the EA, Deputy Director) ability as a team. (#83)*

*I didn't want to seem like a "whiner" so I trucked along and tried to accomplish the task, however, I was set up for failure. (#92)*

*"...I didn't want to have my supervisor view me as a tattletale or "that guy..." (#54)*

Different reasons surface for remaining silent in these cases (e.g., fear of retaliation, undermining a team's reputation, avoiding stereotypical whining or tattletale behavior and the fear of face threat). The prevailing organizational culture framed the fear of moral transgressions and employees utilized lateral dissent expression as a way to either justify those impressions or negotiate that fear to allow them to take action and further express dissent upwardly.

As evidenced in the narratives, and discussed by Waldron (2012), risk assessment, in some cases, involved several rounds of interaction as co-workers and the respondent

that perceived the occurrence of unfair treatment contemplated their communicative options and considered the moral track record of the organization in regard to its procedures for “bad” behavior. Expressing dissent was found to be a form of risk assessment and sensemaking and was understood against the backdrop of organizational norms created and co-created within the organizational culture. The motivation to express upward dissent was co-created and further assessed through lateral dissent (and sometimes displaced). In some cases, the process intensified the existing emotions and further progressed by co-creating new and/or additional moral emotions experienced by the individual.

In many cases, respondents expressed disagreement through lateral dissent and this began a process of co-rumination leading to the evolution of additional felt moral emotions and the potential for other employees expressing lateral dissent to additional co-workers. The development of the collective experience of the infraction through co-rumination involved multiple levels of risk assessment, dissent expression, and the continuous creation and co-creation of the original and subsequent felt moral emotions.

**The Co-Creation of Moral Emotions through Co-Rumination → Risk Assessment  
→ Dissent**

While it is evidenced in the findings that lateral dissent expression is utilized as a means of positive social support through sensemaking processes and attending to the risks involved with expressing dissent upwardly or through circumvention, in some cases the process led to co-rumination, which is characterized as “negative” by researchers (Boren, 2013; Rose, 2002). Co-rumination is characterized by “frequently discussing

problems, discussing the same problem repeatedly, mutual encouragement of discussing problems, speculating about problems, and focusing on negative feelings” (Rose, 2002, p. 1830). Boren (2013) discusses the distinction between social support and co-rumination in saying:

“As co-rumination involves two people interacting with an inherent goal of mutual support, it is an element of the social support process. While a socially supportive message may help to solve a problem, a co-ruminative message tends to be more problem-centric with little direction toward a solution. In this sense, a co-ruminative interaction may escalate a small problem into something perceived as being much larger.” (p. 6)

The findings in this work suggest that assessment of infractions can lead to more extensive co-rumination about those infractions as lateral dissent unfolds. Furthermore, co-rumination seemingly engages once social support has been achieved but not a resolution to the original infraction. In these instances, co-rumination serves a unique function as it allows for lateral dissent to continue often in the service of strategizing about how to direct said dissent upwards.

Although co-rumination is conceptualized as a negative construct focusing on problems and negative feelings (Boren, 2013), I would argue that in some cases it motivated employees to perceive the infraction at a higher degree and seek action or resolution by expressing dissent upwardly particularly at times through circumvention. As discussed earlier, many respondents described their experiences using “we” or “us” rather than “I” or “me.” Infractions not only became collective experiences through the

process of social support, but in some cases lingering problems of employee mistreatment became breeding grounds for co-rumination leading to a more compelling motivation to express upward dissent and seek action and/or a solution. Co-rumination, then, was not only a form of social support, but the interactions became another source of collective risk assessment. The first example represents a narrative in which the respondent did have a negative outcome on the employee, which produced a feeling of “apathy” towards his/her job:

*I often talk to my partner teacher about the burdens of the job and the lack of communication and support from administration. After several times of this I began to feel apathy towards my job. A sort of “not my problem” feeling. (#14)*

Another, respondent, however described a situation that led to employees engaging in co-rumination over a co-worker that lost her job due to a pregnancy. The continuous focus on the “problem,” which in this case was the feeling that another co-worker was being unfairly treated, led to the upward dissent in support of their co-worker:

*My colleagues and I were outraged. (Break) I, along with other colleagues decided to say something to our director once we heard Mary would be sent home. (#62)*

Although the initial building of the problem led to a group of co-workers advocating for one another, when no action was taken on behalf of upper management the respondent described feelings of indignation and bitterness for the rest of the year, discussed as an “unfavorable sentiment.”

In another narrative the respondent described the continuous mistreatment he/she endured at the hands of a colleague. The respondent began to gain social support and as the social support grew into co-rumination the respondent began to document everything. The mistreatment finally led to a breaking point in which the respondent expressed dissent to the co-worker.

*I shared my emotion with fellow co-workers and [now] everyone is glad that I hold her accountable and have a zero-tolerance policy with her” (#86)*

In this case the respondent first made sense of the current situation involving a co-worker through talking to other co-workers (lateral) and his/her partner about the issue (displaced dissent). The respondent verified that others agreed with the assessment derived through these conversations, began documenting the mistreatment experienced from the colleague, and eventually confronted the problematic colleague. Co-rumination, then, helped move from dissent to resolution of the problem.

In conclusion, clear patterns emerge with regard to how perceived moral infractions (experienced as employee mistreatment) generate dissent. Dissent in turn serves to gauge and assess risk, to determine the likelihood subsequent emotions will be deemed moral transgressions, and to provide social support through the sensemaking process. Additionally, sensemaking and risk assessment can extend into co-rumination when employees collectively continue to consider infractions and the appropriate and measured responses to those. Doing so can lead to the deployment of specific strategies for seeking resolution that involve upward dissent, possibly circumvention, but also

remaining silent. The final chapter of this thesis reflects on the findings generally, discusses the inherent limitations in the work, and offers directions for future research.

## Chapter Six:

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the experience of moral emotions that violate employee treatment in order to better understand dissent expression. Whereas previous research discussed implicit connections (Garner, 2009; Kassing, 2011; Waldron, 2012; Waldron & Kassing, 2011), the findings from this study indicate explicit connections in communicating moral emotions and expressing dissent within organizational settings, specifically the patterns that emerged related to expressing dissent to a particular audience. Previous research on communicating emotions and expressing dissent were not studied in conjunction with one another so it was important to employ a prompt that allowed respondents to consider emotion and dissent as a collective experience within the context of organizational culture and specifically through the lens of experiencing mistreatment.

Results showed that participants traveled through the cyclical model of communicating moral emotions that was reflected in *Perceived Infractions and Moral Assessments through Sensemaking* and began with a process of *sensemaking* involving *individual sensemaking, validation of feelings, moral assessments, and assessing the fear of moral transgressions*. The process of sensemaking guided participants in the ways in which they were experiencing moral emotions referring to social actions or conditions that violated employee treatment. Further, the sensemaking process guided participants through creating and co-creating the meaning of the perceived infraction by 1) assessing

the degree of the “perceived infraction” 2) the “moral assessment” of that infraction and 3) the different types of emotions felt (felt emotion).

Another significant finding was discussed in *Moral Assessments as Lateral Dissent to Enroll Social Support* and revealed how participants navigated the process of assessing the fear of moral transgressions, or rather whether or not expressing disagreement in regard to employee treatment was seen as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ within the organization. This sense of fear, combined with how each participant co-created the meanings of the initial infraction and felt emotion, led employees to assess whether or not reporting the infraction would lead to experiencing a moral transgression through the act of expressing dissent. Further, employees utilized lateral dissent as a way to gain social support in regard to the co-created experience of moral emotions and employee mistreatment.

As discussed in *Assessing the Fear of Moral Transgressions*, by making sense of the experience of the infraction, employees were guided through a series of *risk-assessments* that overlapped with the process of sensemaking. Employees engaged in risk assessments in order to *assess the fear of moral transgressions* and to further evaluate the possible harm to oneself or position by *assessing the said and unsaid codes involving dissent expression* within the context of the existing organizational culture. Many respondents engaged in *assessing the status of those involved in the infraction* within the existing organizational culture. Employees utilized their co-workers by expressing dissent laterally only to co-workers that were not directly involved in the infraction (although they may have witnessed it) as a way of assessing the implicated risk. They also

expressed dissent laterally to the co-worker directly involved in the infraction or upwardly to a supervisor in order to seek action or resolution. In cases in which a supervisor was directly involved in the infraction, the risk assessment was sought out through lateral dissent expression to co-workers and entailed gauging the perceived risk of whether to express dissent upwardly to the supervisor or manager with which the infraction occurred or to circumvent their boss.

Lastly, as discussed in *The Co-Creation of Moral Emotions through Co-Rumination* → *Risk Assessment* → *Dissent*, in some cases the support of co-workers was apparent in the form of *co-rumination*. Employees were motivated to express dissent laterally during the sensemaking and risk assessment phases in order to gain social support from co-workers, and in some cases engage in co-rumination, by involving co-workers that 1) witnessed the infraction 2) witnessed a similar set of infractions 3) experienced a similar infraction themselves and/or 4) felt empathy or sympathy for their co-worker. Through the process of expressing dissent laterally and gaining social support, and at times a process of co-rumination, employees were motivated to seek further action by expressing dissent upwardly and particularly through circumvention in some cases. The insights revealed here offer contributions to the existing literature on emotion and dissent and a variety of future research directions, some of which specifically pertain to practical applications.

### **Contributions to Emotion and Dissent Literature**

The insights regarding the particular connections between dissent expression and emotion build on the existing literature in those areas in a variety of ways. The current

study utilized qualitative data through analyzing and coding employee narratives whereas much of the existing research on dissent (Garner, 2009; Kassing, 2011) applies the use of quantitative research methods and scales. By allowing employees to describe their experiences through the use of narratives the respondents were given voice to recount their experiences in their own words rather than molding to existing categories. Doing so allowed for the conceptual overlap to become manifest and apparent where it previously was only presumed to be. That is, these findings draw clear links between emotion and dissent in specific narrative cases. As such the data revealed how these concepts connect and play out side by side and concurrently. This is perhaps the most valuable contribution this work makes to research in organizational communication.

The experience of moral emotions in reference to conditions that violated employee treatment proved intense — generating a variety of emotions that expanded beyond the list of moral emotions discussed by Waldron (2009, 2012). The employee narratives allowed me to examine these emotions within the context of the behaviors that resulted in an intense emotional experience and the intent, or motivation, behind those behaviors. By allowing respondents to have a voice through narrative, the analysis revealed additional themes and motivations that stretch beyond the set of proposed dissent message types (Garner, 2009). By examining the intersection of emotion and dissent, I was able to decipher how employee mistreatment unfolds emotionally and moves to and through the need to express dissent.

The findings showed that the experience of emotion and dissent is a co-constructed process that involves a series of steps, such as sensemaking and risk-

assessment. Experiences of mistreatment within organizations demonstrate an assessment of the existing employee culture and the co-construction of narratives regarding those experiences. Lateral dissent expression overlaps with the sensemaking and risk assessment phases as employees express disagreement to their co-workers as a way to make sense of the infraction, the emotions experienced as a result of the infraction, and the risks involved with further expressing dissent upwardly. Lateral dissent becomes a co-constructed process in which employees gain social support and/or co-ruminate about a lingering issue of employee mistreatment.

By using the model of communication of moral emotions I was able to test the model specifically regarding expressions of dissent in relation to the experience of moral emotions. Using the model as a framework, then, I found that the process is much more complex when specifically analyzing how the model impacts dissent and how each of these steps is impacted by the co-construction of these experiences. Through my research I expanded the model to focus on Step 5 (Expressed Emotion) as dissent and develop the processes intertwined with the co-construction of the experiences of employee mistreatment, moral emotions, and subsequent expressions of dissent.

### **Limitations**

Although the findings have contributed to the existing research by making explicit connections between the experience of moral emotions and the process of expressing dissent, the open-ended survey methodology limited the ability for clarification and follow-up. I was unable to ask follow-up questions that could have potentially delved deeper into the experience of moral emotions and the connections to dissent. The

narratives clearly show this as I am often left with data that only tell part of the story or a certain version of it. And while clear themes did emerge from the data, overstating their significance is clearly a concern. Any conclusions drawn thus must be considered tentative. In addition, respondents did not have the ability to ask questions for clarification and therefore the description of mistreatment and moral codes, in addition to the survey prompt, was open to interpretation. Thus, while rich, the data is clearly limited in several ways.

In some cases, my inability to seek further information left questions about the existing organizational culture and background in regard to any infractions preceding the experience of mistreatment discussed in the narrative. Despite this limitation there were, however, clear cases where I was able to identify and unpack the sensemaking and risk assessment occurring among employees. Thus, even with less context and isolated accounts I was still able to identify fractures between existing organizational cultures and behaviors enacted within those culture and how perceived infractions in these instances moved employees to identify and experience moral emotions, leading to the expression of dissent. Yet the fact remains that I was unable to gain greater insight into both the organizational culture and the predominant organizational narratives that guided the said and unsaid moral codes and behaviors within these organizations.

Lastly, many of the processes are so complex and intertwined that it tended to be difficult to identify those independently in the narratives. In particular, the cyclical model presented by Waldron (2012) proved difficult to deploy as many of the prescribed processes did not function in order or independent of one another. Although Waldron

(2012) discussed the complexity of the processes, the interconnectedness of these processes must be described and understood as fluid, continuous, and ongoing. Some of this overlap and disjointedness can be attributed to the recollection of an experience that is re-told in the form of a narrative but much of it demonstrates that the complexity of these processes cannot be captured completely within a single multi-step framework. Nonetheless, the cycle still provided a useful framework for breaking down the communication processes within the prompt for the respondent and I was able to initially categorize all of the findings into these processes. Future research could include interviews in order to better understand the existing organizational culture and narratives and additional background information about the perceived infraction.

### **Future Directions & Practical Implications**

Emotions within organizational settings and emotional communication have been widely studied by organizational communication and business scholars, yet the practical application of how this research can be used by organizations is underdeveloped. The move from research to practical application is necessary with the influx of burnout, stress, and the inability to balance work-life. Further, the importance for organizations to stimulate employees to function at an optimal level by increasing employees' ability to cope with anxiety, stress, and burnout, while managing emotions in a way that promotes health and optimal performance, is beneficial to both the organization and the employer.

Waldron (2012) introduces a number of "tactics" as "the more concrete communicative practices used to implement the strategy," which are created and co-created through "nonverbal cues and language practices" (p. 49). These tactics can be

used to re-frame what is thought to be “good” and “bad” within the organization to allow for the communication of emotion through dissent practices and can be used to negotiate and transform the emotion itself. The insights from this research can promote tactics regarding positively managing and transforming emotions that can be used by organizations, team leaders, employees, managers, and other role players within organizations to create a positive shift in organizational narratives to further perpetuate work-life balance. Although this research found dissent as a tactic with which employees managed and transformed emotions, future research can delve deeper into the practical implications of the use of dissent and other tactics that can cultivate dissent and positively transform emotions.

Future research in this area can inform how social support and co-rumination contribute to or detract from employees’ assessment and enactment of moral emotions and dissent. Doing so would provide additional insight into how these processes shape the experience and resolution of moral transgressions in the workplace. This approach assumes that infractions will continue to be present in organizations as they stem from incongruity between cultural understandings and actual practices, but contends that responses to those infractions can be better dealt with through a richer understanding of emotional reactions and dissent expression in the workplace generally and the role sensemaking, social support, and co-rumination play specifically.

In order to promote positive emotional communication and work-life balance researchers can begin looking at the prevalent narratives within organizations in order to better understand: 1) What types of narratives are prevalent in organizations that promote

wellness and/or positive emotional communication? and 2) What types of messages in organizations engage employees in positive emotional transforming tactics? Each of these questions should be directly tied to dissent expression as a tactic for positive emotional communication. Much of the existing research tends to be focused on the negative side of workplace relationships, workplace communication, and more specifically communicating emotion at work. Although the differences in organizational culture across varying organizational settings must be considered, research specifically looking at positive communication tactics regarding communicating emotion and expressing dissent can be utilized as practical implications for organizations in general.

Our identities have become enmeshed in our jobs and our occupation is in many ways how we describe who we are. There is an abundance of research showing the necessity to have a balance when it comes to work-life (Hochschild, 2012; Tracy, 2008, 2009; Waldron 2009, 2012; Waldron & Kassing, 2011; Wieland, Bauer, & Deetz, 2009) but the research is lacking when it comes to the ways in which organizations can incorporate positive emotional communication within the workplace. Organizational researchers/scholars, consultants and various other audiences could benefit from this research. Researching positive workplace communication can provide practical knowledge and applications for organizations – both employers and employees – and continue to promote the necessity for work-life balance through positive communication interactions.

My primary goal in this work has been to research the connections of emotions and dissent in order to delve deeper into the emerging patterns of employee treatment.

This work stems from the belief that better understanding emotion and dissent in organizations can lead to efforts designed to improve quality of work life for employees. Thus, I contend that by looking at the felt moral emotions in relation to employee treatment researchers can continue to develop a basis for how organizations can positively transform and manage emotions. Furthermore, researchers can consider how employees can better assess the risk of different felt moral emotions and how those emotions are communicated and expressed. The current findings suggest that lateral dissent is an important part of this process as it provides a mechanism by which employees can gauge their reactions, test their ideas, and alter their plans if necessary. Future research should explore in greater depth the role lateral dissent plays in shaping employees sense of stress, burnout, and quality of work life. My professional experience suggests that this would be particularly helpful to consider in educational settings.

Organizations have become such a colossal part of who we are, how we live, who we become, how we teach the next generation, and so much more. Thus, better equipping organizations and employees with practical communication research is necessary to alleviate some of the negative effects like stress and burnout that have become commonplace in organizations. The ability to maintain and communicate emotions effectively through positive emotion management and dissent expression can go a long way toward transforming work-life balance. This work begins to explore these connections and in so doing initiates an important conversation that ideally will continue.

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Table 1: Typology of Dissent Triggering Events

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Employee Treatment	Dissenting about how employees are treated within one's organization—particularly with regard to fairness and employee rights.
Organizational Change the	Dissenting about organizational changes and implementation of those changes.
Decision-Making and how organization.	Dissenting about organizational decisions decisions are made within one's organization.
Inefficiency	Dissenting about inefficient work practices and ineffective processes.
Role/Responsibility	Dissenting about one's work role and responsibilities or the roles/responsibilities of others.
Resources	Dissenting about the use and availability of organizational resources.
Ethics	Dissenting about unethical practices that exist within one's organization or about expectations to act unethically.
Performance Evaluation	Dissenting about how one's work, coworkers' efforts, or both are evaluated. Dissenting about the performance review process.
Preventing Harm	Dissenting about things an organization does that endanger employees, coworkers, or customers.

Table 1: Typology of Dissent Triggering Events

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Supervisor Inaction	Dissenting about supervisors' failures to respond directly to initial and often repeated expressions of dissent in a timely manner or to respond to the degree employees expected.
Supervisor Performance	Dissenting about routine and prolonged displays of supervisors' poor management, communication, and/or organizational skills or supervisors inappropriate enactment of managerial roles.
Supervisor Indiscretion	Dissenting about ethically, legally and morally questionable behavior on the part of one's immediate supervisor including theft, harassment, and abuse of or neglect for organizational policy.

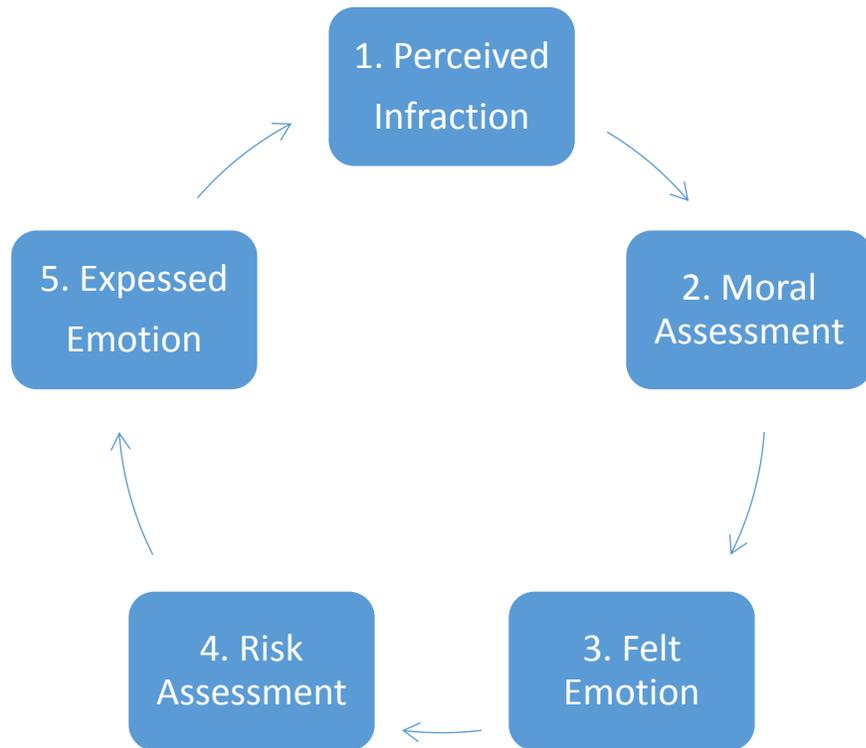
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Adapted from Kassing and Armstrong (2002) and Kassing (2009b).

Table 2: Moral Emotions and their Social Referents

Emotion	Social Referents
Admiration	Success of deserving others
Anger	Hurtful or immoral behavior committed by others
Embarrassment	Acts which reveal moral failures or create an appearance of moral failure
Envy	Desire for the qualities, possessions, or accolades possessed by others
Guilt	Responsibility for wrong doing
Humiliation	Threats to dignity; dehumanizing behaviors
Humility	Exposure to transcendent moral forces
Indignation	Ire at the unfairness of a social situation or system
Jealousy	One's rightful role in a relationships is threatened by rivals
Outrage	Fury aroused by the offensive acts of others
Pride	Personal or group accomplishments; recognition by valued others
Regret	having hurt others or made a serious mistake
Resentment	Sustained or acute ill-treatment others
Scorn	Someone or something held in contempt
Schafenfrude	Shame experienced by another brings joy to the self
Shame	Disgraceful, unworthy, or dishonorable behavior
Shock/Surprise	Unexpected moral violations by others
Sympathy	Pain or distress of another brings feelings of pity or sorrow

Figure 1, Communication of the Moral Emotions



APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL FORM

<b>SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL INSTRUCTIONS AND TEMPLATE</b>		
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Instructions and Notes:

- Depending on the nature of what you are doing, some sections may not be applicable to your research. If so, mark as “NA”.
- When you write a protocol, keep an electronic copy. You will need a copy if it is necessary to make changes.

## **1 Protocol Title**

Expressing Emotion and Disagreement at Work

## **2 Background and Objectives**

Provide the scientific or scholarly background for, rationale for, and significance of the research based on the existing literature and how will it add to existing knowledge.

- Describe the purpose of the study.
- Describe any relevant preliminary data.

Dissent and emotion within organizations has been widely researched from a communication perspective. Although the current research shows implicit and explicit connections regarding emotion and dissent, research exploring the connections of employee treatment, the expression of moral emotions, and the expression of dissent are limited. Explicitly exploring connections between emotion and dissent become crucial as the roles of employees continually shift regarding social demands that require employees to more closely identify with their jobs and thus many times resulting in the prevalence of communicating emotion, such as through the expression of dissent. By researching these ties, organizations can begin to identify ways to more effectively handle dissent, in addition to more successful ways of handling emotional communication within the workplace leading to positive outcomes for organizations and the many relationships employees have with and within organizations. Organizational dissent and emotion in the workplace have been conceptualized in previous research and by scholars, which will be utilized in order to study their connections with the goal of looking for emerging patterns of employee treatment. It is important to cite connections that have been implicitly and explicitly made through existing research in order to ground the subsequent research. More specifically, looking at how workers react to wrongdoing or injustice requires looking at a specific set of emotions in the workplace labeled moral emotions. By looking at the felt moral emotions in relation to employee treatment, researchers can develop a basis for further research on how organizations can better handle employee

emotions and employee treatment through communication processes. Lastly, if an employee chooses to dissent as their reaction to a breach in moral codes in regards to employee treatment, then how employees assess the risk and consider all factors, not just the felt emotion, will also enhance communication between employees and organizations in order to increase the desired result by both the employee and the organization.

### **3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Describe the criteria that define who will be included or excluded in your final study sample. If you are conducting data analysis only describe what is included in the dataset you propose to use.

Indicate specifically whether you will target or exclude each of the following special populations:

- Minors (individuals who are under the age of 18)
- Adults who are unable to consent
- Pregnant women
- Prisoners
- Native Americans
- Undocumented individuals

To be eligible to participate, people must be:

1. 18 years of age or older
2. Currently working full-time (a minimum of 40 hours per week)

### **4 Number of Participant**

Indicate the total number of participants to be recruited and enrolled: 150 - 200

### **5 Recruitment Methods**

- Describe when, where, and how potential participants will be identified and recruited.
- Describe materials that will be used to recruit participants. (Attach copies of these documents with the application.)

Research participants will be recruited and invited to participate by the research team. Possible participants will be drawn from the social networks of the researchers. Once contacted, potential participants will receive a cover letter that provides a URL link to the online survey questionnaire. The cover letter will detail the purpose of the research, describe the parameters of participation, and inform potential respondents of the risks associated with participating. The questionnaire should take approximately fifteen minutes for participants to complete.

### **6 Procedures Involved**

Describe all research procedures being performed and when they are performed. Describe procedures including:

- Surveys or questionnaires that will be administered. (Attach all surveys, interview questions, scripts, data collection forms, and instructions for participants.)
- What data will be collected including long-term follow-up?
- Lab procedure and tests and related instructions to participants
- The period of time for the collection of data.
- Describe the amount and timing of any compensation or credit to participants.
- If the research involves conducting data analysis only, describe the data that that will be analyzed.

The research team will contact possible participants. Respondents will be provided with a cover letter describing the purpose of the research. This letter will provide a link to the survey questionnaire that will be available for completion via an online data collection service (e.g., Survey Monkey). The survey questionnaire will prompt respondents to give a narrative response, which will be analyzed in order to identify patterns or themes of employee treatment in relation to expressing emotion and dissent. In addition a set of demographic questions related to the respondents' work experience will be included. The researchers will ask possible participants to provide an email address that can be shared with the research team. A member of the research team will send a reminder to complete the survey to those possible participants in an effort to increase the response rate. Only one reminder will be sent to possible participants. No other contact will be made with them. The research team will have no way of tracking whether or not someone completed the survey questionnaire or not, so the email reminder will stipulate that the email should be ignored if those receiving it have already completed the survey questionnaire.

Data collection will last between 2 and 4 weeks. The results will be used for a student thesis. Respondents will receive no incentive for participation.

The survey questionnaire and cover/recruitment letter are included with this application.

## **7 Risks to Participants**

**List the reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or inconveniences related to participation in the research. Consider physical, psychological, social, legal, and economic risks.**

There are no foreseeable risks to participants as the data will be collected anonymously. Any names listed in the narrative accounts will be changed when reporting the data.

## **8 Potential Benefits to Participants**

**Realistically describe the potential benefits that individual participants may experience from taking part in the research. Indicate if there is no direct benefit. Do not include benefits to society or others.**

Participants will benefit from reflecting upon their communication behavior in workplace settings, particularly with regard to how they express disagreement and emotion after being mistreated by their organization or management.

## **9 Prior Approvals**

**Describe any approvals – other than the IRB - that will be obtained prior to commencing the research. (e.g., school, external site, or funding agency approval.)**

None

## **10 Privacy and Confidentiality**

Describe the steps that will be taken to protect subjects' privacy interests. "Privacy interest" refers to a person's desire to place limits on with whom they interact or to whom they provide personal information.

Describe the following measures to ensure the confidentiality of data:

- Where and how data will be stored?
- How long the data will be stored?
- Who will have access to the data?
- Describe the steps that will be taken to secure the data (e.g., training, authorization of access, password protection, encryption, physical controls, certificates of confidentiality, and separation of identifiers and data) during storage, use, and transmission.

Data will be collected and stored electronically and will not be able to be connected with specific participants who provided those data. The data will be stored as necessary to publish results of the study. This should not exceed several years.

## **11 Consent Process**

Indicate the process you will use to obtain consent. Include a description of:

- Where will the consent process take place
- How will consent be obtained

*Non-English Speaking Participants*

- Indicate what language(s) other than English are understood by prospective participants or representatives.
- If participants who do not speak English will be enrolled, describe the process to ensure that the oral and/or written information provided to those participants will be in that language. Indicate the language that will be used by those obtaining consent.

*Waiver or Alteration of Consent Process (written consent will not be obtained, required information will not be disclosed, or the research involves deception)*

- Review the “CHECKLIST: Waiver or Alteration of Consent Process (HRP-410)” to ensure you have provided sufficient information for the IRB to make these determinations.

*Participants who are minors (individuals who are under 18)*

- Describe the criteria that will be used to determine whether a prospective participant has not attained the legal age for consent to treatments or procedures involved in the research under the applicable law of the jurisdiction in which the research will be conducted.

Participants will be provided with a cover/recruitment letter that describes the research protocol. It will indicate that completion of the survey questionnaire constitutes informed consent.

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## **12 Process to Document Consent in Writing**

If your research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to participants and involves no procedures for which written documentation of consent is normally required outside of the research context, the IRB will consider a waiver of the requirement to obtain written documentation of consent.

(If you will document consent in writing, attach a consent document. If you will obtain consent, but not document consent in writing, attach the short form consent template or describe the procedure for obtaining and documenting consent orally.)

The cover letter states “Completion of the questionnaire will be considered your consent to participate”. Thus, participants will only complete the online questionnaire if they consent to do so. Due to minimal risk of harm and a data collection procedure (survey questionnaire) in which written consent is not normally sought a waiver of written consent is warranted.

### **13 Training**

Provide the date(s) the members of the research team have completed the CITI training for human participants. This training must be taken within the last 3 years. Additional information can be found at:  
<http://researchintegrity.asu.edu/training/humans>

Jessica K. Kamrath 9/5/2012  
Jeffrey W. Kassing — 8/24/2012

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

## Expressing Emotion and Disagreement at Work

January 13, 2014

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student in the Communication Studies program at Arizona State University under the direction of Dr. Jeffrey W. Kassing. My research focuses on how employees express disagreement in the workplace when they feel they have been treated unfairly. I am particularly interested in which types of emotions were felt and the response that followed when people felt the need to say something.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve completing a survey questionnaire that should take about 15 minutes. The questionnaire linked below asks you to recall a specific time in your work experience when you felt mistreated by your organization or management and felt the need to say something about it to others. To qualify for participation in this study you need to be able to recall a time in which you: (a) **felt a strong emotion because you believed you were treated unfairly** and (b) **felt the need to say something to someone inside or outside your place of employment**.

You must also be:

1. 18 years of age or older
2. currently working full time (a minimum of 40 hours per week)

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can skip questions if you wish. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your responses to the survey will be used to develop greater insight into how people express disagreement in relation to employee mistreatment. To ensure that your responses remain anonymous no identifying information (e.g., name, phone number, etc.) will be collected. Thus, your responses will be anonymous. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be known. Results will only be shared in the aggregate form.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact a member of the research team, Jessica Kamrath, at [jkamrath@asu.edu](mailto:jkamrath@asu.edu) or Dr. Jeffrey Kassing at [jkassing@asu.edu](mailto:jkassing@asu.edu) or (602) 543-6631. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can

contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Completion of the questionnaire will be considered your consent to participate. Click on the link below or cut and paste it into your web browser to access the survey.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/J2KVXDM>

Sincerely,



Jessica K. Kamrath  
Ph.D.  
Graduate Student



Jeffrey W. Kassing,  
Professor

APPENDIX C  
EMOTION AND DISSENT QUESTIONNAIRE

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. ALL OF THE INFORMATION THAT YOU PROVIDE WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS.

On occasion employees feel mistreated in the workplace due to organizational policies and practices. Many times codes of conduct are broken in regards to employee treatment. These codes are understood whether or not they are written down, for example in an employee handbook or elsewhere, by co-workers, managers, or others within the organization. As a result, when a breach occurs in workplace norms, many employees feel a strong emotional response that results in the need to say something to someone.

Keeping the idea of such breaches in workplace codes in mind, describe a time in which you experienced something like this. In the space provided below please give as detailed an account as possible of this situation. Be as specific as you can when describing how you handled the situation and please be sure to identify individuals only by role or relationship rather than name. Consider the following in your description:

What was the nature of the issue that caused you to say something?  
What was the behavior that you determined was a breach in codes of conduct?  
And what particular code of conduct was breached?  
Describe the emotion(s) triggered by the perceived infraction.  
Describe any risk assessment you took into consideration before determining you needed to say something, such as consequences to your relationship with co-workers or managers and/or if there would be retaliation against you.  
To whom did you express the emotion and say something to?  
Why did you choose this person or audience?

Finally, please provide the following information about yourself.

1. To the nearest year, how long have you worked at your present organization?

\_\_\_\_\_ years

2. To the nearest year, what is your total years work experience in all organizations?

\_\_\_\_\_ years

3. Overall, how many full-time employers have you worked for?

\_\_\_\_\_ full-time employers

4. In your present job, would you classify yourself primarily as (check one):

top management \_\_\_\_\_ nonmanagement \_\_\_\_\_

management \_\_\_\_\_ other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

5. How would you classify your organization?

- Advertising
- Banking/Financial Services
- Computers/Information Technology
- Corrections
- Education
- Engineering
- Food Service
- Government/Public Service
- Health Care
- Insurance
- Legal/Law Enforcement
- Manufacturing
- Mining
- Non-profit
- Publishing
- Real Estate
- Recreation
- Religious Organizations
- Retail Sales
- Sales
- Service
- Telecommunications
- Transportation

- Utility Services
- Other (Please specify)

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Using the list above, please specify how you would classify the organization in which the infraction you described occurred.

same as above \_\_\_\_\_ other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

7. Please indicate your age as of your last birthday... \_\_\_\_\_ years.

8. What is your gender? (check one) \_\_\_\_\_ male \_\_\_\_\_ female

9. What is your race/ethnicity? (check one)

Asian/Pacific Islander _____	African-American _____
Caucasian/White _____	Other/Multi-Racial _____
Hispanic _____	Native American/Alaska Native _____
Decline to Respond _____	

***THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!!!***