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Backstabbing in Organizations: Employees' Perceptions of Incidents, Motives, and Communicative Responses

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This study examined employees' perceptions of backstabbing in the workplace and an initial typology was developed for backstabbing incidents, perceived motives, and communicative responses. We employed thematic inductive analysis and unitizing to develop the typology and approached this study from the decoder's perspective (the target), whereas previous research on other negative behaviors in the workplace focused on the encoder's perspective (the perpetrator). Results indicated that active incidents (e.g., talked behind back) were more prevalent than passive incidents (e.g., withheld information), perceived motives were primarily self-interest (e.g., self-advancement), and communicative responses included interaction (e.g., confronted backstabber), action (e.g., left job), and inaction (e.g., ignored). Other responses were emotion and cognition. Demographics indicated that this phenomenon cuts across numerous organizations, industries, and hierarchical positions.

Keywords: Aggression; Backstabbing; Communication; Organizations; Typology

Much scholarly research has addressed workplace aggression, primarily focusing on physical acts of aggression directed towards individuals or sabotage directed at companies (Kaukiainen et al., 2001; Spector, Fox, & Domalski, 2006). Considerably fewer

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studies have been done on more subtle forms of aggression in the workplace, which consist of acts that are covert and indirect, yet capable of yielding serious harm to employees' well-being (e.g., spreading rumors, undermining, blaming, lying, taking undue credit, derogating, etc.). These underhanded, "behind-the-back" acts of aggression between employees are far more prevalent and insidious than either physical acts of violence or sabotage aimed at companies (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999; Fremont, 2005; Geddes & Baron, 1997). This hidden type of aggression is commonly known as "backstabbing." Although backstabbing occurs through communication (e.g., lying) and targets also respond to these incidents through communication (e.g., yelling at backstabber), communication scholars have done little research into this construct. A few narrative articles have been written on backstabbing (see Harvey, 1989; Lincoln, Pressley, & Little, 1982), but the prevalence and harmful effects of backstabbing in the workplace warrant empirical studies from communication scholars.

Covert aggression is a common and widespread phenomenon that can generally be found in most organizations and affects a majority of people at some point in their working lives (Geddes & Baron, 1997; Geen, 1991; Neuman & Baron, 1997, 1998; Spector, 1978). One contributing factor could be that in today's workplace employees frequently spend more time on the job in close proximity to coworkers than they spend at home with their families. This close proximity for extended periods of time creates the potential for personality clashes, dysfunctional communication, and competition among employees, all of which may contribute to negative behaviors such as backstabbing. The effects of backstabbing in the workplace can be devastating to targeted employees in terms of damaged psyches, health problems, marred reputations, and ruined careers (Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006). Further, these subtle aggressive behaviors have the power to damage employee morale, attitudes, and behaviors, which in turn have negative impacts upon the organization in terms of productivity and turnover (Fitness, 2008; Herschcovis, & Barling, 2010; Lawrence, 2008; Penny & Spector, 2008).

Descriptions of some backstabbing behaviors can be found mixed in with other types of aggression in the literatures on workplace aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Buss, 1961, 1995; Neuman & Baron, 1997), counterproductive work behavior (Penny & Spector, 2008), toxic employees (Frost, 2003), workplace deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1995), and antisocial behavior (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997). However, communication scholars have not fully examined backstabbing in organizations as a single construct. However, some of the behaviors are discussed peripherally in literatures on workplace aggression, primarily in connection with covert aggression. A couple of existing typologies on aggression include some backstabbing behaviors (e.g., gossip, complaining, Robinson & Bennett, 1995; belittling, Neuman & Baron, 1997), but the backstabbing behaviors are placed in categories with other types of aggression that are not backstabbing (e.g., property deviance, Robinson & Bennett, 1995; defacing property, Neuman & Baron, 1997). Many backstabbing behaviors are not included at all in existing typologies (e.g., taking credit for another's work). We argue that backstabbing is a very specific type of aggression that merits exploration as a distinct construct.

A key component of what may constitute backstabbing, also overlooked in the literature, is the role of perception—specifically the target's perception that backstabbing has occurred and was intentional. This study focuses on backstabbing as a construct in its own right and particularly on employees' perceptions of backstabbing in the workplace: What behaviors they consider backstabbing incidents, what motives they attribute for backstabbing incidents, and how they respond communicatively to backstabbing incidents. The purpose of this article is to develop an initial typology of perceived incidents, motives, and communicative responses for backstabbing in the workplace that can be used to lay the foundation for empirical studies and to help organizations find more effective ways to prevent and address negative behaviors.

Review of the Literature

We begin with a general description of workplace aggression followed by a discussion of bullying. Then we focus on what constitutes backstabbing. Next, we discuss associated aggression typologies and focus on the importance of backstabbing as a unique construct. Then we discuss perceived motives for backstabbing. Finally, we address communicative responses to backstabbing incidents.

Workplace Aggression

Coworker backstabbing falls under the broad category of workplace aggression. Workplace aggression involves intentional ''efforts by individuals to harm others with whom they work'' or organizations (Neuman & Baron, 2005, p. 38). Although workplace aggression includes many different types of aggression, we will focus on the more applicable research that has been done on nonphysical aggression. Studies indicate that many employees engage in nonphysical aggression, that managers are greatly concerned about the impacts, that targets suffer in numerous ways, and that ultimately the organization pays. In one extensive study on employee aggression conducted in several work locations in three southwestern U.S. cities, over 50% of the respondents admitted to acts of nonphysical aggression toward coworkers (Neuman, 1998). Another study of problem employees found that the highest concern of supervisors and managers from major corporations around the country was ''backstabbing'' and ''undermining'' among their employees (Sherman, 1987). A study on the impact of overt and covert aggression on the well-being of employees found that those who considered themselves targets suffered significantly more from psychological, social, and health problems than those who were not targets (Kaukiainen et al., 2001). Those targeted employees also believed their social, psychological, and health problems resulted from the aggression that they experienced. Other research indicates that those who are targets of undermining in the workplace experience negative attitudinal, health, and behavioral outcomes (Duffy et al., 2006).

Not only do employees suffer personally, but the organization feels the negative impact as well. A meta-analysis of 66 samples found that both supervisor and coworker aggression had a strong negative impact on employees' workplace attitudes

(e.g., job satisfaction, commitment, intention to quit) and behaviors (e.g., job performance, interpersonal and organizational deviance) (Herschcovis & Barling, 2010), which in turn can affect other workers in terms of stress, illness, and depression (Yarborough, 1993). Work standards may then decline, which can lead to low morale, decreased productivity, and higher turnover (Sherman, 1987). Ultimately, Murphy (1993) concluded that deviant employee behavior and delinquency produce organizational losses of between $6 and $200 billion each year. Although those figures reflect general aggression and are not limited to nonphysical aggression, they are well worth noting. Today's estimates could be considerably higher given the opportunities for cyber-backstabbing.

Bullying

One form of workplace aggression now gaining attention from communication scholars is bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009). Although there are similarities between backstabbing and bullying, there are also some distinctions. Researchers approach bullying by focusing on the target's perspective. Bullying is defined as a "pattern of persistent, ongoing, hostile communication and actions that targets perceive as intentional efforts to harm, control, or drive them from the workplace" (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2007, p. 82). The definition emphasizes that targets of bullying perceive the act as intentional (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). Targets typically believe the perpetrators knew exactly what they were doing and why (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). We approach the study of backstabbing in the same way: a focus on the target's perspective and the perception that the act was intentional. What distinguishes backstabbing from bullying is that bullying is characterized by acts that are "repetitive (occurring daily or weekly) and ongoing: the average duration for U.S. workers is 18–20 months" (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006, p. 408), whereas backstabbing may consist of a single incident. Bullying is considered a distinct phenomenon based on repetition, duration, and escalation, which differentiates it from a one-time aggressive act (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). Another difference between the two constructs is the type of behaviors exhibited. Bullying most often consists of direct, overt communication behaviors (e.g., criticism, ridicule, insults, yelling, name-calling), whereas backstabbing communicative behaviors are more covert, subtle, and indirect (e.g., spreading rumors, undermining, blaming, lying, taking undue credit, derogating, etc.). Some of these backstabbing communicative behaviors (e.g., gossip, withholding information) could turn into bullying if consistently repeated over time. Even if backstabbing is a one-time incident, the consequences can be just as harmful in the workplace as bullying (e.g., quitting), which indicates the need for further study into this phenomenon.

Backstabbing: What is it?

There is no explicit definition for backstabbing in scholarly sources. However, there are many useful lay definitions of backstabbing, such as "one who attacks (a person)

behind his or her back," "to attack (someone) unfairly, especially in an underhanded, deceitful manner," and "betrayal by a false friend."[1] Although the lay definitions capture the essence of backstabbing behaviors, they fall short of capturing one critical aspect of the backstabbing experience—that of the target. Previous scholarly research, much like lay sources, has overtly taken an encoder orientation; it has focused upon the individual inflicting harm. This perspective of encoder/decoder is concerned with how people attribute intentions to each other. The encoder forms an intention and communicates it to another person with the goal of influencing the other person in some way. The decoder attributes intent based on the observable actions of another and how he or she interprets those actions (Stamp & Knapp, 1990). We approach coworker backstabbing distinctly from a decoder orientation. Because employees attribute psychological, social, and health problems directly to their *belief* that they have been targets (Kaukiainen et al., 2001) and not to another employee's intentions, we contend that an accurate and complete definition of backstabbing ought to incorporate the element of the target's perception. From this perspective the target must believe an act was intentional for it to be considered backstabbing, just as in the definition of bullying: "the target perceived it was an intentional effort to harm" (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2007, p. 82). We thus conclude that coworker backstabbing has occurred when a person has an experience he or she identifies as backstabbing, considers it was perpetrated intentionally by a coworker and believes that it resulted in personal or vocational harm. In this study, we chose to focus on those who perceived that backstabbing occurred and therefore took the decoder's perspective. Another way to further distinguish what backstabbing is as its own construct is by developing a typology specifically for backstabbing, which also distinguishes backstabbing from other forms of aggression.

Typologies

There are scant typologies for workplace aggression and none focus explicitly on communication. These typologies are a good starting point for framing backstabbing as a separate construct. However, many other types of behaviors fall under backstabbing than are listed in these typologies. The primary typology for workplace aggression was developed by Buss (1961). Buss's framework includes eight types of workplace aggression with a total of 40 specific behaviors. Only five or six of those could be considered either backstabbing (e.g., spreading rumors, failing to transmit information) or communication (e.g., belittling opinions, talking behind target's back). The vast majority focus on violence (e.g., homicide, assault), verbal aggression (e.g., yelling, insults), and damage to the organization (i.e., defacing property, theft). According to this typology workplace aggression can be verbal/physical, direct/ indirect, and active/passive.

Baron and Neuman (1996) used Buss's (1961) framework as a basis for their typology and considered the covert form of verbal, indirect, passive aggression to be far more prevalent in the workplace than the overt form of physical, direct, and active (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Beugre, 1998; Neuman, 1998). Although Baron

and Neuman (1996) emphasized the indirect, verbal, passive form of aggression (e.g., failing to deny false rumors) their typology still includes many categories that are not backstabbing (e.g., theft, destruction of property, yelling, physical attack). While many of the examples Neuman and Baron use could be considered to have communication value, there is no mention of communication in their typology.

Another relevant typology focuses on interpersonal and organizational deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Robinson & Bennett, 1995) and also has some overlap with Buss's (1961) typology. Robinson and Bennett's typology consists of four quadrants of workplace deviance. Only the political deviance quadrant contains any backstabbing behaviors (e.g., gossip, blame). The other three quadrants focus on nonbackstabbing behaviors: production deviance (e.g., wasting resources, leaving early), property deviance (e.g., stealing from company, sabotaging equipment), and personal aggression (e.g., verbal abuse, sexual harassment). Communication is not discussed in connection with this typology either.

These typologies primarily focus on deviance in the workplace such as acts against the organization, violence, and verbal aggression with only a few scattered examples of backstabbing. Equally important is the lack of communication focus. Given the importance of communication in organizations, it should be of primary concern to scholars to focus on the role of communication when developing a typology of aggression in the workplace. A more specific typology is needed that is grounded in communication to systematically develop categories for backstabbing to further our understanding of this damaging and pervasive behavior in organizations. A specific backstabbing typology could benefit researchers and practitioners in several ways: (a) a refined and specific classification could be used to help practitioners understand backstabbing incidents, motives, and responses and perhaps find better ways to prevent, to reduce, and to respond to this type of negative behavior in organizations; (b) a typology could provide a starting point to help organizational representatives communicate more effectively in the workplace, especially when dealing with negative behaviors; (c) a backstabbing typology based in communication could pave the way for scholars to conduct empirical studies; (d) a typology could lay the foundation for future research that could examine which responses to backstabbing are most effective or could produce the best result; and (e) a backstabbing typology could clarify specific behaviors that do not fit well with many of the categories in the previous typologies that warrant further exploration.

Existing typologies of aggression focus on behaviors and specific acts in the workplace but neglect perceived motives that targets attribute to backstabbing coworkers. In addition to understanding different categories of backstabbing and what employees consider backstabbing to be, we are concerned with *why* they believe it occurs.

Motives

Perceived motives for backstabbing are important from a communication perspective, especially when the target considers the perpetrator's behavior to be intentional. To the extent an aggressive act is considered intentional, perceptions of the

perpetrator and the perpetrator's motives are more negative (Reeder, 2009). The target looks for an explanation of the behavior and judges whether the perpetrator was justified or not (Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, & Tramifow, 2002). Further, the target's perception of the perpetrator's motive for the backstabbing incident likely influences how he or she responds to it and how the target communicates with the perpetrator and/or others. In addition to perceiving backstabbing occurred and it was intentional, we further contend that targets believe that they know the backstabber's motives as well.

Organizations may benefit by considering motives and dealing with the underlying issues when communicating with employees about backstabbing behaviors rather than just addressing the outcomes. For example, if an employee perceives that he or she was backstabbed because others were envious, an organization may be able to take steps to alleviate those negative feelings by creating a more supportive environment. The harm that results from these backstabbing incidents may be intentional, or it may be a side effect but not the main purpose of the incident.

Affective and instrumental aggression

Two types of aggression are generally found within organizational settings: affective or hostile; and instrumental. The sole purpose of affective aggression is to harm another person (Ramirez & Andreau, 2003). If a person spreads rumors about a coworker with the intention of hurting the coworker, that is affective aggression. Instrumental aggression harms the target, but the main objective is to achieve some other desired result (Geen, 1991; Neuman & Baron, 1997). Instrumental aggression is premeditated with the idea of obtaining a goal such as power, money, or a career advantage. If a person spreads rumors about a coworker with the intent of getting the coworker fired in hopes of moving into his or her job, that is instrumental aggression. The primary goal is to achieve the incentive, not necessarily to harm the victim; although the victim will likely be harmed. Most aggression inside organizations is instrumental (Neuman & Baron, 1997).

Self-interest

Self-interest theory offers an appropriate lens for understanding potential motives for coworker backstabbing behaviors. Self-interest theory is often used to explain deception and lying (Grover, 1993). This theory assumes that behavior is guided by self-interest and indicates that people will use negative behavior such as lying when it benefits them to do so (Grover, 1997). Lewicki (1983) posited that lying is an intentional tactic used to achieve specific desired outcomes. In the same way, self-interest could be viewed as a reason for coworker backstabbing. Workers may backstab another when it benefits them to do so, particularly when they are in pursuit of a goal, even if it hurts the target. Backstabbing for self-interest is consistent with the concept of instrumental aggression. Although this theory and the preceding research has addressed types and possible purposes for aggression, we want to know what

motives *employees* attribute to coworker backstabbing and whether their perceptions are consistent with these traditionally assumed intentions. We also seek to determine how employees react communicatively to their perceptions of backstabbing.

Communicative Responses

There is some research that examines coping responses to various behaviors throughout the communication literature. Very little addresses communicative responses. We are interested in exploring what people do communicatively when they feel that they have been backstabbed, including such things as confronting the backstabber, complaining to the boss, and avoiding the perpetrator. No typology for communicative responses to backstabbing currently exists, so we turn to literature that focuses on related ''dark side'' of communication issues, such as revenge, betrayal, and jealousy. Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, and Eloy's (1995) work on jealousy includes a typology of communicative responses to jealous incidents. Guerrero et al. define a communicative response to jealousy as a ''behavioral reaction that carries communicative value and has the potential to fulfill individual or relational goals'' (p. 272). They further divide those communicative responses into subsets of interactive (face-to-face) and general behavior (it has communication value but is not face-to-face). Because we also want to explore how people respond communicatively when they believe that they were backstabbed, Guerrero et al.'s work serves as a useful frame of reference.

The previous discussion indicates that backstabbing is based on a perception that backstabbing occurred and was intentional. In addition, the target's perceptions of the perpetrator's motives likely affect the communicative response. Several typologies address workplace aggression but do not focus on communication and exclude numerous specific backstabbing behaviors. Backstabbing originates, is carried out and is responded to through communication. This study can help scholars' and practitioners' understanding of the central role of communication in backstabbing, which is a specific type of aggression in the workplace. To pursue this line of research we pose three research questions:

RQ1: What types of incidents do employees report as cases of coworker backstabbing?
RQ2: What motives do employees report for incidents of coworker backstabbing?
RQ3: What communicative responses do employees report in association with incidents of coworker backstabbing?

Methods

Participants

Participants were solicited among graduate students from departments across campus in a midsized U.S. southern university with the expectation that graduate students would likely have more work experience than undergraduates. The head

researcher contacted department chairs from every department that offered graduate classes to ask permission to hand out questionnaires in the classes. A team of researchers collected data from 38 graduate classes with the professors' permission. Participants were primarily students who either previously or currently worked in a nonacademic job or career. Participants represented a wide variety of industries, organizations, and positions in the organizational hierarchy. The industries included education (107), health care (30), miscellaneous (21), hotels and restaurants (16), small businesses (16), media (14), financial (14), and retail sales (9). Table 1 summarizes percentages and frequencies for all demographics. Respondents held a wide range of positions at various hierarchical levels within the organizations from entry level to CEO. However, for the purposes of this study the term "coworker" included all levels of the hierarchy (e.g., boss). Data were collected from 231 people. Four participants were not included in the data analysis since they either indicated they had

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Frequency (%)($N = 227$)	
Sex	
Males	82 (36)
Females	145 (64)
Age Range	M (SD)
21–74	29 (10.33)
Length of Work Experience	
0–5 Years	81 (35.7)
6–10 Years	43 (18.9)
11–15 Years	24 (10.6)
16–20 Years	20 (8.8)
21–25 Years	21 (9.3)
26–30 Years	16 (7.1)
31–35 Years	6 (2.6)
36 Years or longer	3 (1.3)
No Response	13 (5.7)
Industries	
Education	107 (47.1)
Health Care	30 (13.2)
Industries	
Miscellaneous	21 (9.3)
Hotel/Restaurant	16 (7.0)
Small Business	16 (7.0)
Media	14 (6.2)
Financial	14 (6.2)
Retail	9 (4.0)

Note. Fifty-six participants stated that they held management or supervisory positions.

never experienced backstabbing in the workplace or they did not correctly follow instructions for filling out the questionnaire. The final sample ($N = 227$) included 64% females ($n = 145$) and 36% males ($n = 82$). Mean age was 29 years ($SD = 10.33$) and the ages of respondents ranged from 21 to 74. No ethnic or racial demographic data were collected from participants since the study was not focused on that component. See Table 1 for demographic information.

Procedures

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that consisted of demographic questions, questions about length of employment and positions held, and three open-ended questions asking them to describe (a) an incident in detail that occurred at work when they felt they were "backstabbed" or, if they had not personally experienced it, an incident that they observed at work when they felt a coworker was "backstabbed," (b) why they thought they were backstabbed (or if they witnessed it, why they thought the person was backstabbed), and (c) how they responded to the backstabbing incident (or if they witnessed it, how the target responded). The survey was distributed in graduate classes, and the researcher waited while the surveys were filled out during class times. Participants were assured of anonymity, and the surveys were placed into sealed envelopes.

Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive analysis for coding (Bulmer, 1979) and unitizing (Holsti, 1969). Two coders read all of the responses to the three open-ended questions asking participants to describe a backstabbing incident, perceived motives, and responses to the incident. The two coders developed schemes describing the data to each open-ended question. Each coder read through all of the data while developing an exhaustive list of types of backstabbing incidents, perceived motives, and responses. After the coders finished independently generating a list of categories from the responses, they discussed the list of categories that they devised. The categories were then refined: Some categories were combined; other categories were added or deleted. Examples of each category were selected. A final list of 41 categories resulted: eight for incidents, 13 for perceived motives, and 20 for responses. Although we were interested in communicative responses, one category emerged that was not considered communicative: emotion and cognition. This category consisted of emotions experienced internally and internal shifts in perspective, which were not considered communication. After developing a common coding scheme between the two coders, each coder independently coded all of the responses to the open-ended items. One third of the entire data set (76 questionnaires) was checked for intercoder reliability of the categories. Scott's Pi was used as the index of coding reliability of the categories because it accounts for the number of categories in the entire coding scheme and the frequency with which each category is used. This calculation also accounts for the rate of agreement that would occur by chance alone (Keyton, 2001). Scott's Pi was .95.

Table 2   Types of Backstabbing

Backstabbing incidents categories	Examples	Frequency (%)
Incident		283
Active		243 (85.9)
Talked Behind Back: Derogation, rumors, gossip, spread ill will. Backstabber said derogatory things about target to others or spread untrue rumors.	"I was spoken of in a derogatory manner in my absence. He attacked my competence and my character." "She trashed me when I wasn't there."	75 (30.9)
Sabotaged: Backstabber undermined target, interfered with target's job or tried to get them fired.	"He undermined me repeatedly." "A memo was distributed that questioned my capabilities. She tried to get me fired."	66 (27.2)
Lied: Backstabber lied to or about the target.	"A coworker said he would vote for me in an election, but then ran against me and won." "A coworker told others I was complaining about them to the boss when I wasn't."	41 (16.8)
Stole Credit: Backstabber stole credit for target's work.	"I did all the work and he took all the credit." "She took credit for what I did."	33 (13.6)
Blamed or Falsely Accused: Backstabber blamed target for something or falsely accused target of doing something.	"I was blamed for all the problems in my organization by someone who wanted my position." "I was accused by the person who did it."	28 (11.5)
Passive		40 (14.1)
Organization Broke Promise: Organization promised something (i.e., raise, promotion) and target did not receive it.	"I was promised a raise and did not receive it." "I was promised vacation time and they reneged."	18 (45.0)
Coworker Broke Promise: Coworker broke promise or did not follow through with what they said they would do.	"My coworker told me several times she would do something and then intentionally did not do it so it would reflect badly on me."	18 (45.0)
Withheld or Concealed Information: Backstabber withheld or concealed important information.	"He would not give me access to my own clients' records and materials."	4 (10.0)

Five participants left the first question blank or the incident was not backstabbing.

Each coder also unitized or determined the number of units reported for each category that emerged for the backstabbing incidents, perceived motives, and responses. The unit of analysis was defined as a single descriptor in the responses to each question. In many cases, there was more than one unit or descriptor in response to each question. For example, if participants responded that they felt they were backstabbed because the perpetrator was jealous of them that counted as one unit. If they said they felt the person was jealous and wanted their job that would count as two units. Participants listed between one and eight units in response to each question. The total number of units coded during this process was eight hundred and two: 283 for the backstabbing incident, 204 for perceived motives, and 315 for responses. Once all of the unit discrepancies were resolved by the coders, coding reliability of the units was determined on the data with Holsti's coefficient of reliability, which was used because it accounts for the ratio of decisions that coders agreed on relative to the total number of coding decisions made by each coder (Keyton, 2001). The unitizing reliability measured the agreement between the two coders as to the exact number of units in each response. The unitizing reliability coefficient (Holsti, 1969) was .97. To further assess intercoder reliability, a third coder was then brought in, who also coded categories and units for one third of the entire data set (76 questionnaires) to determine both category- and unit-coding reliability. Scott's Pi was .97 for categories and Holsti's coefficient was .96 for unitizing. A complete list of frequencies and examples of each of the categories and sub-categories generated in the study are provided for backstabbing incidents in Table 2, perceived motives in Table 3, communicative responses in Table 4, and emotion and cognitive responses in Table 5.

Results

This section includes data obtained for the three open-ended questions about the backstabbing incident: What specifically occurred, the perceived motive for the incident, and how the target responded. Detailed examples will be given from the major categories with the highest number of frequencies that emerged from each question. A complete listing of frequencies and examples of each category and subcategory that emerged in the study are listed in Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Types of Backstabbing

The first question asked respondents to describe an incident of backstabbing in the workplace. The purpose was to determine what employees believe constitutes an act of backstabbing and what acts of backstabbing they report most frequently. The incidents were deemed either active (i.e., the perpetrator exhibited undesirable behavior that resulted in the employee's perception of personal or vocational harm) or passive (i.e., the perpetrator failed to exhibit desirable behavior, the absence of which resulted in the employee's perception of personal or vocational harm) with five major categories emerging under active incidents (243): *talked behind back* (75),

Table 3   Perceived Motives for Backstabbing

Categories	Examples	Frequency (%)
Perceived Motives		204
Self-Advancement: Backstabber furthered own career, finances, or some other goal at expense of target.	"Her only concern is her own promotional track." "He took the profits."	36 (17.7)
Power Struggle: Backstabber tried to gain control of another or a situation. A conflict may have been involved.	"She was on a power trip and tried to put me in my place." "He was a control freak."	31 (15.2)
Character Flaw: Backstabber had character flaw or psychological problems.	"This person has mental problems and a poor self-image." "It was his character."	23 (11.3)
Impression Management: Backstabber desired to look good or avoid looking bad.	"The incident occurred so the backstabber would look good and get promoted." "He wanted to look good to the boss."	18 (8.8)
Threatened/Insecure: Backstabber appeared threatened by target or was insecure.	"She felt threatened by my presence." "Because of their insecurity."	17 (8.3)
Envy or Jealousy: Respondents felt backstabber was envious or jealous of the target.	"A coworker discredited another worker's ability because she was envious." "She was backstabbed out of pure jealousy. The attention she received was too much for the backstabber."	17 (8.3)
Wanted Revenge: Backstabber wanted to get revenge on someone.	"She did it to take revenge on the other person." "He wanted to get even."	14 (6.9)
Exploited: Backstabber exploited or took advantage of the target or situation.	"He was a laid back person and was taken advantage of." "He was too passive and the coworker knew he could get away with it."	12 (5.9)
Prejudiced: Backstabber was prejudiced due to race, gender, age, etc.	"Because of my race." "I was the youngest one in the group."	11 (5.4)
Work Avoidance: Backstabber wanted to avoid doing work, lazy.	"They didn't want to do the work they were supposed to do." "Out of his own laziness."	9 (4.4)

(*Continued*)

Table 3 Continued

Categories	Examples	Frequency (%)
Favoritism: Backstabber was playing favorites or a personal relationship was involved.	"Because she wanted to sleep with the employee she promoted." "He played favorites."	7 (3.4)
Self-Protection: Backstabber concerned with protecting self in some way.	"I was backstabbed because she wanted to protect herself." "He wanted to keep his job safe."	7 (3.4)
Don't Know: Respondent did not know why the backstabbing occurred.	"I don't know why."	2 (1.0)
Forty-two respondents left the second question blank or repeated what they said in response to question one (e.g., "I was backstabbed").		

Table 4 Communicative Responses to Backstabbing

Categories	Examples	Frequency (%)
Communicative Responses		239
Interaction (Interpersonal): Target interacted face-to-face with others.		102 (42.7)
Confronted: Target confronted backstabber.	"I tried to hit him." "I confronted him."	31 (30.4)
Discussed with or Complained to Boss: Target talked to boss, tried to talk to boss, or complained to boss.	"I complained to my manager for a few weeks." "I tried to discuss it with my boss. He wouldn't listen."	30 (29.4)
Complained to or Discussed with Others: Target complained or made comments to others.	"They vented to me and their family." "I talked to other coworkers."	19 (18.6)
Discussed or Tried to Discuss with Backstabber: Target discussed or tried to discuss with backstabber.	"I discussed the situation but still don't trust him." "I tried to talk to her."	7 (6.9)
Defended Self: Target defended self.	"I emphasized I didn't do it." "I had to demonstrate I was not the cause of the problem."	6 (5.9)
Took Revenge: Target got even with or took revenge on backstabber.	"The Program Director began to try to get even." "I took revenge."	5 (4.9)
Warned Target: Informed or warned target.	"I told her to watch her back." "I informed her of what was going on."	4 (3.9)

(*Continued*)

Table 4 Continued

Categories	Examples	Frequency (%)
Action (Organizational): Target took organizational action or organization took action.		76 (31.8)
Left Job: Target quit or left job.	"I quit on the spot." "I turned in my resignation."	26 (34.2)
Sought Legal Action: Target sought legal action, compensation, or resolution.	"I filed a lawsuit." "I tried to appeal the decision to replace me."	19 (25.0)
Requested Meeting: Target requested meeting or information.	"I asked for a conference with him that was not granted." "I sought information about the cause for my dismissal."	11 (14.5)
Fired: Backstabber fired, suspended or transferred.	"We fired him." "He was transferred immediately."	10 (13.1)
Organization Apologized: Organization issued an apology to target.	"I apologized for the company's lack of compassion." "The manager felt bad and later apologized."	5 (6.6)
Documented: Target documented what occurred.	"I documented these occasions as did other employees." "I documented it."	5 (6.6)
Inaction (Avoidance): Target avoided or ignored backstabber.		61 (25.5)
Ignored: Target ignored backstabber or gave no response.	"I ignored the incident." "No response."	43 (70.5)
Avoided or Withdrew: Target withdrew or avoided backstabber.	"I avoided him like the plague." "I totally withdrew."	18 (29.5)
Eleven respondents left the third question blank.		

sabotaged (66), *lied* (41), *stole credit* (33), and *blamed or falsely accused* (28), and three categories emerging under passive incidents: *organization broke promise* (18), *coworker broke promise* (18), and *withheld or concealed information* (4) (see Table 2). The three largest categories of active incidents and the two largest categories of passive incidents will be discussed here.

The first category of active incidents consisting of the largest number of responses was *talked behind back* (75), which included spreading rumors, untrue gossip, and derogation. For example, a television production coordinator said, "Two employees bad mouthed the supervisor for months." Another respondent, a teaching assistant, said a colleague she considered a close friend "spread 'horrific rumors' about my

Table 5 Emotion and Cognition Responses to Backstabbing

Emotion and cognition responses categories	Examples	Frequency (%)
Emotion and Cognition Responses		76
(Intrapersonal): Target experienced various emotions or views things differently.		76
Various Negative Emotions: Upset, sad, disappointed, frustrated, hurt, etc.	"I cried." "After waiting so long, it was a great disappointment."	35 (46.0)
Anger: Target felt angry or mad.	"I was furious!" "Extreme anger."	26 (34.2)
Betrayed, Loss of Trust: Target felt betrayed or no longer trusted the perpetrator or organization.	"I lost all trust in the Superintendent." "I had been betrayed of trust and earnings."	7 (9.2)
Shifted Focus: Target focused on something else.	"I shifted my attention to the positive teachers." "I focused on other things."	5 (6.6)
Other: Did not fit well into categories.	"The look."	3 (4.0)

sex life, morality, intelligence, you name it." Another teaching assistant said, "A colleague talked behind my back referring badly to my teaching skills and experience." In another response, a psychology technician said he wrote up an employee for not properly restraining a client and "she spread rumors about me."

The second largest category of active incidents that emerged was *sabotaged* (66), which included undermined, interfered with the target's job, tried to get the target fired, or succeeded in getting the target fired. In one case, a public school teacher said several teachers befriended the principal to gain his confidence and trust. They then "looked for his weaknesses" and "created situations to distract him from his duties." They called and wrote anonymous letters to the superintendent saying that they had no confidence in him. They also voiced their opinions in a meeting with the superintendent and then acted like nothing was said when the principal returned to the session. Another respondent, an administrative assistant, reported that a group of colleagues undermined one of their peers by exposing that individual's lack of credentials and malfeasance in appropriating office funds.

The third largest category of active incidents (243) was *lied*: *lied to or lied about* (41). One example of *lied to* was from a public relations specialist who did a marketing piece for a client. To the specialist's face, the client said she liked it; however, the client then contacted the specialist's supervisor behind the specialist's back and said she was very dissatisfied with the piece. As an example of *lied about*, one respondent reported that a principal gave a teacher a signed, written job reference in

a sealed envelope to give to her new prospective employer. The principal then denied writing the letter and told the prospective employer that the teacher had forged the letter.

The largest two categories under passive (40) incidents were *organization broke promise* (18) and *coworker broke promise* (18). In both cases, either the organization or a coworker failed to follow through on something that was explicitly promised. As an example of *organization broke promise* an employee was told repeatedly for a year that she would be getting a raise. The participant said she later found out that her boss never intended to give her the raise and actually had a part in reallocating the money to another department. An example of *coworker broke promise* was an assistant coach who said the head coach offered to pay him for giving private lessons. After he gave the lessons, the head coach refused to give the assistant coach the payments and kept the profits himself.

Perceived Motives for Backstabbing

The second question asked participants why they thought they were backstabbed. The purpose was to explore perceived motives for backstabbing and to determine which categories of motives employees perceived most frequently. Thirteen categories of perceived motives (204) for backstabbing emerged: *self-advancement* (36), *power struggle* (31), *character flaw* (23), *impression management (look good)* (18), *threatened or insecure* (17), *envy or jealousy* (17), *wanted revenge* (14), *exploited* (12), *prejudiced* (11), *work avoidance* (9), *favoritism* (7), *self-protection* (7), and *don't know* (2) (Table 3). Forty-two respondents either left this question blank or their answers did not address the question; several of them simply described the incident again or said something like "I was backstabbed." The three largest categories of perceived motives for backstabbing will be discussed next.

The first category with the largest number of responses was *self-advancement* (36), including job advancement, financial gain, or some other career-advancing goal. For example, a new sales representative compiled and organized a "leads" booklet while working for an insurance firm. A senior sales representative offered to help. The senior representative then copied the selected list of leads to use for his own sales initiatives. The new sales representative believed he did it "for money. All commissions are paid up front." In another example, a retail sales clerk described an incident in which two assistant managers were vying for the job of the manager, who was leaving. Worker "A" switched shifts with worker "B". "A" did not show up to cover for "B" and denied she was supposed to be working for him. He was forced to quit before he was fired. "She hoped to get the manager's job with him out of the picture." In another case, an Army officer referred to a fellow officer who lied about a work incident and accepted credit for a task that he did not complete. He received "credit, praise, and consideration he did not deserve or earn." The army officer believed he did it "to gain credit and 'get ahead' of fellow workers." Some other responses to this question included "to advance position in the organization," "for advancement," and "so she would leave and one could get her job."

The second largest category of perceived motives was *power struggle* (31), in which case the target perceived the perpetrator was trying to gain control of a person or situation, and in some cases, a conflict was involved. Comments included ''It was due to political forces'' and ''They were in a power struggle.'' In another example, a waitress said her supervisor lied to their boss about her, saying that she was leaving her work for others to do: ''It never happened. I think the person wanted to feel 'in control.''' Other responses in this category included such statements as ''It was a power play,'' ''There was a power struggle,'' ''The manager was on a power trip,'' and ''Both coworkers were trying to control the issue.''

The third largest category of perceived motives was *character flaw* (23). The target perceived the backstabber had psychological or mental problems, or personality issues. An economic development employee described an incident that occurred when he did an impact study of the university on the city. He said he did the section to which he was assigned and the group leader ''who never once helped me published my work without giving me any credit.'' He felt the team leader had a problem. ''The team leader was a selfish person with mental issues who had to feel he was the center of attention.'' Another respondent to a different incident said, ''She is a bad and obstinate employee. It's part of her personality to blame someone else.'' In another narrative the subject said, ''This person is emotionally unstable.'' Another respondent said, ''It's part of her character.''

Communicative Responses to Backstabbing

The third question asked participants how they responded to the backstabbing incident. The purpose of this question was to examine the communicative activity that followed the backstabbing incident (i.e., communication responses and responses with communication value). However, we did not want to limit participants to only reporting what was ''spoken.'' We also wanted to find out about responses like quitting and withdrawing, not just what was said. To avoid responses only about what was said, we asked a broader question without the word communication in it. So, in addition to the category of communicative responses, a second category of responses emerged, involving emotions and cognitions.

For communicative responses (239) to the backstabbing incident, three major classifications emerged, each with several categories (Table 4). The first classification is Interaction (Interpersonal) (102), which included *confronted* (31), *discussed with or complained to boss* (30), *complained to or discussed with others* (19), *tried to discuss with perpetrator* (7), *defended self* (6), *took revenge* (5), and *warned target* (4). The second classification was Action (Organizational) (76), which included *left job* (26), *sought legal action, compensation, or resolution* (19), *requested meeting or information* (11), *perpetrator was fired, suspended or transferred* (10), *organization apologized* (5), and *documented* (5). The third classification was Inaction (Avoidance) (61), which included: *ignored* (43) and *avoided or withdrew* (18).

The second category of responses was Emotion and Cognition (Intrapersonal) (76), which included: *various negative emotions* (35), *anger* (26), *betrayed or loss of*

trust (7), *shifted focus* (5), and *other* (3) (Table 5). These were not considered communicative responses because they were internal emotions and cognitions. They could have communicative value if expressed, but respondents did not always indicate whether or not they were expressed emotions and cognitions. We will now discuss the largest categories under each classification.

The largest category of Interaction (102) responses to the backstabbing incident was *confronted* (31). Responses in this category ranged from calmly direct to very aggressive. One case manager whose supervisor failed to get approval in time for her to attend a seminar provided this example: "I was livid and went to the coordinator and she had a meeting with all of us. I blasted her (the supervisor) out. I cussed her." One respondent who worked as a nutrition director said two employees from a different department told one of her subordinates that she was gay and "questioned how safe she was working for me." The nutrition director told their supervisor. They all then attended a meeting with the CEO, and she confronted her accusers. They were suspended for two weeks "without pay." Another respondent said, "I cussed her out." One other participant reported that he responded "almost violently." Another participant "confronted him in a yelling match." In one other example, a lifeguard's subordinate wrote an anonymous letter to their boss about the pool's condition. She said, "We argued and are no longer friends."

The second largest category of Interaction was *discussed with or complained to boss* (30). In this case, respondents attempted to "explain the situation" to their supervisor or complained. Some examples of these responses included: "I explained to my boss what occurred," "I explained to the manager what happened with the assistant manager backing me up," and "I explained to my boss and he was fine with it." Some individuals reported that they attempted to explain, but the supervisor was not always receptive. One respondent described this situation: "I tried to explain. The boss wasn't interested." In other cases, participants complained to the boss. One respondent said, "I complained to my manager for a few weeks." Another said, "I've let my supervisor know I'm not happy."

The largest category of Action (Organizational) (76) was *left job* (26). The target quit, transferred, made a career change, retired or stepped down. A teaching assistant said a fellow teaching assistant was frequently absent due to "serious family problems." One coworker "denigrated her every day and blamed every office mishap and error on her. He criticized her character and took each person aside trying to turn them against her." The target's response was to "tearfully resign." Several other respondents said such things as "I quit right then," "I refused to work in a bad environment. I quit the job and moved on," "I didn't say anything, but I quit the next day," and "I put in my two weeks' notice." Other examples included "He got a transfer," "I had to leave the unit," and "I stepped down from the position and pay raise I'd been waiting for over a year."

The second largest category of Action was *sought legal action, compensation, or a resolution* (19), in which case the target hired a lawyer, sought compensation or requested an investigation. In one case, a middle school teacher said she was hired as a special education teacher six months ago and was recently replaced by someone

who was less qualified than she was. "The principal and administrator both lied about the situation." She said her reaction was to "hire an attorney" because she was "upset every day." In another response, a government worker said a coworker "filed a lawsuit" because someone received a job out of rank who was less qualified than the coworker. Another participant who worked as a physical education teacher said he was accused of breaking some rules of the college because "The people involved didn't enjoy my presence." He asked for an investigation.

The largest category of Inaction (Avoidance) (61) was *ignored* (43). Responses in this category consisted of such statements as "I responded by ignoring it," "Silence," and "No response. No contact." One respondent said a coworker stole everyone else's ideas and this was how they responded: "No one confronted her. We ignored her." Others said, "I never mentioned it to her," "I let it slide," and "I acted as if it did not affect me." A couple of other responses in this category included "I didn't say anything because she was my boss," and "I said nothing." One other participant said, "I pretended not to notice, but find myself pushing hard to be ready for her put-downs."

The second largest category of Inaction was *withdrew or avoided* (18). In some cases, the target completely cut off communication with the perpetrator. A few examples of this group included "I never discussed anything with her again," "I never went to her again for such matters," and "I had nothing more to do with him for years." Others withdrew communication over time rather than abruptly. Examples of this type of response included "I casually withdrew from the relationship and limited contact" and "I just phased her out and gradually didn't include her in my decisions." A couple of other examples from this category are "The coworker still tries to get information from me, but I no longer confide," and "I tried to avoid the person or the same thing would happen again."

The largest category under Emotion and Cognition (Intrapersonal) (76) responses was *various negative emotions* (35). This category included a variety of negative emotions such as feeling cheated, disappointed, hurt, bitter, sad, violated, frustrated, confused, embarrassed, shocked, uneasy, indignant, disillusioned, vindictive, and upset. Participants made comments such as "I felt very frustrated," "I was hurt," and "I feel betrayed. My heart is not in my work." One school nurse said following the incident she felt "irrational and upset for a while but it eventually blew over." A cashier at a discount store said she was told that she was next in line for a promotion, but when the job opened up someone else was promoted. "I was upset. They acted like they did nothing wrong. Like they never promised me the job."

The second largest category of Emotion and Cognition was *anger* (26). Many respondents gave one word answers (e.g., "angry"). In one case, a bank teller disclosed some information in confidence to her boss about another coworker. The boss told the coworker what she said. "I was mad because I had to work with her every day and things were tense." A used auto dealer said a coworker stole another coworker's client. The response: "He got angry. The stabber got the message." Other responses included: "I was very angry and felt extremely cheated," and "He was angry, but didn't file a complaint." Table 6 includes a condensed version of all the categories from each research question.

Table 6 Condensed Backstabbing Incidents, Perceived Motives, Communicative Responses, and Emotion and Cognition Responses

Backstabbing categories	Frequency (%)	Categories	Frequency (%)
Incident	283	Incident	
Active	243 (85.9)	Passive	40 (14.1)
Talked Behind Back	75 (30.9)	Organization Broke Promise	18 (45.0)
Sabotaged	66 (27.2)	Coworker Broke Promise	18 (45.0)
Lied	41 (16.8)	Withheld or Concealed	4 (10.0)
Stole Credit	33 (13.6)	Information	
Blamed or Falsely Accused	28 (11.5)		
Perceived Motives	204		
Self-Advancement	36 (17.7)	Exploited	12 (5.9)
Power Struggle	31 (15.2)	Prejudiced	11 (5.4)
Character Flaw	23 (11.3)	Work Avoidance	9 (4.4)
Impression Management	18 (8.8)	Favoritism	7 (3.4)
Threatened/Insecure	17 (8.3)	Self-Protection	7 (3.4)
Envy or Jealousy	17 (8.3)	Don't Know	2 (1.0)
Wanted Revenge	14 (6.9)		
Communicative Responses	239		
Interaction (Interpersonal)	102 (42.7)	Action (Organizational)	76 (31.8)
Confronted	31 (30.4)	Left Job	26 (34.2)
Discussed with or Complained to Boss	30 (29.4)	Sought Legal Action	19 (25.0)
		Requested Meeting	11 (14.5)
Complained to or Discussed with Others	19 (18.6)	Fired	10 (13.1)
		Organization Apologized	5 (6.6)
Discussed or Tried to Discuss with Backstabber	7 (6.9)	Documented	5 (6.6)
Defended Self	6 (5.9)		
Took Revenge	5 (4.9)		
Warned Target	4 (3.9)		
Inaction (Avoidance)	61 (25.5)		
Ignored	43 (70.5)		
Avoided, Withdrew	18 (29.5)		
Emotion and Cognition Responses	76		
Intrapersonal	76		
Various Negative Emotions	35 (46.0)		
Anger	26 (34.2)		
Betrayal, Loss of Trust	7 (9.2)		
Shifted Focus	5 (6.6)		
Other	3 (4.0)		

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore backstabbing as a distinct construct, specifically focusing on the decoder's (i.e., target's) perspective, and to develop a typology of backstabbing incidents, perceived motives, and communicative responses. Previous research indicates that everyday covert aggression is widespread in the workplace. As we suspected, this study confirmed that backstabbing in the workplace is commonplace and ubiquitous. In fact, many respondents indicated that they had experienced backstabbing so many times that they had difficulty deciding which incident to select. Even though previous research does not focus on backstabbing as a construct in its own right, based on the results of this study, it deserves further research.

As we argued in the introduction, a large part of the backstabbing experience is the target's belief that it occurred and was intentional. Participants in this study supported that contention. In virtually all cases, participants viewed the incident as intentional, with many respondents using the words ''intentional'' and ''purposeful'' to describe it. Whereas previous research in this area focused exclusively on the encoder's perspective, we have provided a more complete picture of backstabbing by exploring the decoder's perspective. If people believe that they were backstabbed, from their perspective it happened, and if they think that it happened, they will likely respond to it.

We now discuss the contributions of our findings related to the incident, perceived motives, communicative responses, and emotion and cognition responses from our typology. The largest categories of backstabbing incidents fell under the active classification, not passive, which distinguishes our results from previous research findings (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999; Fremont, 2005; Geddes & Baron, 1997). The most frequently reported active backstabbing incidents included *talked behind back, sabotaged*, and *lied*, while the most frequently reported passive incidents were *broke promise* (e.g., did not follow through), which were equally divided between the organization and individuals as perpetrators. The passive backstabbing incidents category was substantially smaller than the active category. In the literature, passive is defined as withholding information (Baron & Neuman, 1996). We contend passive encompasses more than just withholding. We considered ''not following through on something that was promised'' to be passive as well, since it does not involve active behavior. This would include allowing something to occur that will harm someone and doing nothing to stop it.

We initially offered self-interest theory as a possible framework to explain backstabbing. As revealed in this study, self-interest theory does appear to offer an appropriate explanatory framework for backstabbing. The largest categories of active backstabbing incidents were *talked behind back, sabotaged* (i.e., undermining, interfering with someone else's job, trying to get them fired, or getting them fired), and *lied*. We contend that *talked behind back, sabotaged*, and *lied* could all be used as means to achieve a goal, which is consistent with self-interest theory (Grover, 1993, 1997; Lewicki, 1983) as discussed in the literature review. Targets in this study

perceived talking behind someone's back as having occurred because the perpetrator had a goal in mind (e.g., to get the target's job) that could be accomplished by belittling them behind their backs. They also perceived *sabotaged* (e.g., interfering with target's job or trying to get them fired) as having occurred due to a goal that would benefit the perpetrator. *Lied* can also be considered a message that is intentionally designed to influence a receiver in such a way as to achieve a particular goal (Backbier, Hoogstraten, & Terwogt-Kouwenhoven, 1997; Buller & Burgoon, 1994; Miller & Stiff, 1993). In this study, *lied* most frequently emerged in connection with a specific goal that would benefit the perpetrator at the expense of the target.

Respondents indicated some strong perceptions and beliefs as to why the backstabbing incident occurred. They perceived the acts as primarily committed with self-interest as the motive—to gain something at the target's expense. The most frequently perceived motives for backstabbing were *self-advancement, power struggle, character flaw*, and *impression management*. Self-interest is inherently at the heart of *self-advancement* (career, finances). When engaging in a power struggle, people are looking out for their own best interests as well. The respondents who listed *character flaw* as the motive frequently made comments like "He had a character flaw. He was selfish and only interested in himself." In most cases they said the person with the character flaw was selfish. *Impression management* also was linked to "looking good," which is in someone's own self-interest.

The decoder's perceptions of both the backstabbing incident and the perpetrator's motives are of vital importance because, as indicated in this study, they lead to many overt communicative responses. Therefore, backstabbing not only results in health, psychological, and vocational problems (Kaukiainen et al., 2001), but it also prompts a variety of communication behaviors (e.g., confrontation) that could have significant impacts on the employees and the organization.

This study stresses the important role of communication in backstabbing incidents and responses. We found that communicative responses to backstabbing, just like Guerrero et al.'s (1995) typology for communicative responses to jealousy, could have a negative (or sometimes positive) impact on those affected. Although a few positive communicative outcomes emerged (e.g., discussed with boss, discussed with backstabber), most of the outcomes were negative for the employees and the organization (e.g., quit, withdrew, took revenge). Therefore, the findings of this study should concern organizations.

The most frequent Interaction (Interpersonal) communicative responses were *confronted* and *discussed with or complained to boss*. The second largest classification was Action (Organizational) communicative responses, which included *left job* or *sought legal action, compensation, or resolution*. The third largest classification was Inaction (Avoidance) communicative responses, which consisted of *ignored* and *avoided or withdrew*. The category of Emotion and Cognition (Intrapersonal) included *various negative emotions* (e.g., sad) in the first category followed by *anger* in the second category. Most of these responses have negative impacts on the employees and the organizations.

The present study made the following contributions: (a) explored backstabbing as a distinct construct, (b) examined the central role of the decoder's perception, (c)

developed a typology of backstabbing incidents, perceived motives, communicative responses, and emotion and cognition responses in organizations, (d) investigated how employees respond communicatively to backstabbing incidents and (e) focused on the role of communication in workplace aggression.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although scholars often criticize self-report as a method because people may not remember experiences accurately, this choice of method was appropriate for this study because we were exploring people's perceptions. One limitation is that we will never know participants' exact behaviors because we are relying on their memories, not observation. It is possible participants may have remembered more incidents that were active than passive because the emotional impact made them more salient. In addition, we only studied part of the picture: the decoder's perspective. Future research may want to consider both perspectives simultaneously to provide a more complete picture. Future researchers might want to consider turning the categories from our typology into items to develop and test a backstabbing scale. Finally, in hindsight ethnic/racial data should have been collected since racism and prejudice could contribute to backstabbing behavior. However, in this study only two participants indicated they felt the perpetrator's motive in backstabbing them was due to racial prejudice. This would still be an important demographic to include in future studies.

We broke new ground by examining how participants responded to backstabbing incidents communicatively. Additional research should delve further into the communicative responses. One area of study could be to explore whether certain incidents or perceived motives trigger particular communicative responses. It would also be worth noting the consequences of the communicative responses employees used. Did they feel that their responses were effective? Did their responses help prevent future problems in the organization? Was the situation resolved? These are some questions to be addressed for the well-being of employees and organizations. We have provided a unique perspective that we hope will stimulate further inquiry.

Note

[1]   Lay definitions of backstabbing came from the following sources: Oxford English Dictionary (1989), www.dictionary.com, www.wikipedia.com.

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