

Fear and intimidation at work

Research report to the Finnish Work Environment Fund

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Abstract

This research report presents the current results that have been obtained in the LEAR (Leadership, Power and Fear) research project, carried out in the department of management studies in the University of Tampere, Finland. The project continues until the end of 2010, so only the current results of the qualitative analysis of 101 stories about fear at work are presented in this report.

The LEAR project invited everyone to tell about their experiences of fear at work. An online research platform was developed, built and launched in the project. Via the platform people were able to submit their stories about fear at working life. Both subordinates and bosses were invited to tell their stories. The platform was opened in June 2008 and closed in March 2009.

Intimidation at work has been easy, since the deep depression of Finland between 1990-1995 and its various outcomes has sustained in the memory of people. Contemporary downsizing wave in Finnish companies serves to keep alive this threat in everyday interactions and media. The LEAR project is concerned with the ways in which fear manifests itself at work: what kinds of roles do fear, intimidation, insecurity and anxiety play in the everyday working life in Finland?

Survival and exhaustion, the dimensions of fear and the tensions in the boss-subordinate relationship are explored and discussed

This report also deals with the challenges and solutions of data gathering and analytical approach to the data. The results are presented in the empirical chapters and discussed in the conclusion.

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Tiivistelmä

Tutkimusraportti käsittelee tämänhetkisiä tuloksia, joita LEAR hankkeessa (Leadership, Power and Fear; johtajuus, valta ja pelko) on saatu. Hanke toteutetaan johtamistieteiden laitoksella Tampereen yliopistossa ja se jatkuu vuoden 2010 loppuun saakka. Niinpä tässä raportissa keskitytään kuvaamaan tuloksia, joita on saatu 101 työelämään sijoittuvan ja pelottelua käsittelevän tarinan laadullisen analyysin tuloksena.

LEAR-hanke kutsui kaikki kertomaan kokemuksistaan työelämässä. Tätä varten hankkeessa kehitettiin ja julkaistiin verkossa toimiva tutkimussivusto, jonka kautta ihmiset saattoivat jättää tarinoita pelottelusta ja pelosta työelämässä. Sivusto avattiin kesäkuussa 2008 ja suljettiin maaliskuussa 2009.

Pelottelu työpaikoilla on ollut helppoa, sillä vuosien 1990-1995 syvän laman jäljet ja muistikuvat ovat edelleen ihmisten mielissä. Tämänhetkinen leikkausten ja lomautusten aalto on myös omiaan ylläpitämään epävarmuutta työelämässä. LEAR-hanke on erityisen kiinnostunut tavoista, joilla pelko ilmenee työelämässä: millaisia merkityksiä ja rooleja pelolla, pelottelulla, turvattomuudella ja ahdistuksella on jokapäiväisessä työelämässä Suomessa?

Pelon ulottuvuudet, selviämisen ja uupumisen kulttuuriset merkitykset ja johtaja-alaisuuden jännitteet tulevat käsitellyiksi empiirisissä luvuissa.

Tutkimusraportti käsittelee myös haasteita ja ratkaisuja liittyen aineiston keruuseen ja menetelmälliseen lähestymistapaan. Tulokset esitellään empiirisissä luvuissa ja johtopäätöksissä.

Tutkimushankkeen rahoittajina ovat toimineet Suomen akatemia sekä Työsuojelurahasto.

1 Introduction

Recently the mainstream studies of effective leadership are challenged by the features of violent and bad leadership. In 2007, *Leadership Quarterly* published a special issue on “Destructive Leadership” and proposed the notion one of the growing concern and worthy of additional research attention (Tierny & Tepper 2007). The effective and constructive notion of leadership seem to entangle with destructive, toxic emotions and toxic leaders as syndromes of failing organizations (Frost 2003, Manzoni & Barsoux 2002). Negative side of leadership is discussed in the studies of mistreatment at work (e.g. Olson-Buchanan & Boswell 2008) as well as models of anger in organizations (e.g. Geddes & Callester 2007, (see Eriksson 2009).

There seem to be a lot of anxiety, anger and fear embedded in the work organizations. The previous studies describe, how the un-intended harms emerge and develop and, how difficult it is to break the “vicious circle”. The economic and human costs of bad leadership are estimated huge (e.g. Kellerman 2004). Hakanen (2009) points out that the fulfillment of emotions and motivations can have a significant role in the success of corporations and other organizations.

The interest in leadership by fear in this research project was originally based on role and significance of emotions in the processes of leadership influence in expert organizations. In this report we are interested how the concept of destructive leadership and fears experienced in the Finnish expert organizations in order to advance our understanding in “Leadership by fear”. During the last decade, emotions have developed into a sub-discipline in the organization and management studies (e.g. Ashkeansy et al 2000, Fineman 1996, 2000). Rather than relying on psychological terms and meanings or physiological reactions, the approach adopted in this analysis is based on the social construction of fear. Hence, the way people account for it is in the focus of the inquiry (see Eriksson 2006).

Three research questions are proposed for the study for the study:

1. How the key elements of destructive leadership constitute the phenomenon Leadership by fear?
2. How to study the experiences of fear in the Finnish expert organization?
3. What kinds of mechanisms and cultural features of fear can be identified in the processes of leader –follower –organizational context (structural, cultural, societal features) of interaction?

Expert organizations in particular provide a context where rapid re-organization of the knowledge work has taken place and “leadership in and by fear” may be suggested. New organizational forms, implying collective expertise and shared authority, and new control systems have developed in parallel. Such negative emotion as “fear” is playing a central role in preventing the organizational collaboration and knowledge sharing (Eriksson 2006 a,b,c; Parviainen & Eriksson 2006).

The roles that fear, intimidation, insecurity and anxiety play in the everyday working life in Finland are quite significant. As fear is a very strong emotion, its use in leading people can be efficient. Intimidation has been easy, since the deep depression of Finland between 1990 and 1995 has sustained in the memory of people at work. Contemporary downsizing wave in Finnish companies also keeps this threat alive in media. Fear is utilized as a means of leadership and manifests itself in, for example, the so called “management by perkele¹” in order to enforce decisions with authority and to suppress any resistance. However, the traditional command and control style of management is no longer successful. In particular in expert organizations it can have a debilitating effect on innovation and teamwork (Eriksson 2006 a,b,c).

A particular interest of LEAR (Leadership, Power and Fear) research project² is to study the perceived managerial practices of people working in professional organizations and in particular how these are described to impact the experts and middle managers at work. For expert organizations ideal and effective knowledge-sharing involves that a process of mutual perspective taking where distinctive individual knowledge is exchanged, evaluated and integrated with that of others in the organization. While human motivation is considered as a key to the success of knowledge management initiatives, in the majority of writings on organizational knowledge, discussion of power is typically absent. The mainstream literature on knowledge management has not focused on issues of power as being important in shaping and understanding organizational knowledge processes.

This report presents and discusses the results as well as the methodological and analytical choices taken in a subproject of the LEAR research project. The project as a whole is concerned with fear at work and also the role it plays in the media through the interviews and comments by the top executives of Finnish corporations. This report presents the current results of a subproject that was concerned in the analysis of qualitative story data about the day-to-day Finnish working life.

Stories about fear at work were collected through an online data collection platform (www.panoptika.fi; now closed) that was launched in June 2008 and closed in March 2009. Most of the stories are from employees, who have faced intimidation at work, but there are also stories from people in leadership positions. The platform has provided an outlet for people who have faced fear of intimidation at work in some point of their career: the research project has received positive feedback through the platform.

It could be asked how, then, is it possible to get any meaningful results from stories that involve many parties and yet are accounted for by only one of them? It could also be debated whether this introduces bias to the data and, consequently, to the results. Furthermore, the quality of data obtained through such an online system needs to be

¹ Perkele is a Finnish curse word. “Management by perkele” means strong, authoritarian management style where decisions are not negotiated but enforced with authority.

² The project is carried out in the department of management studies in the University of Tampere, Finland under the supervision of project leader professor Marja Eriksson. For more information on the project see LEAR website <http://lear.uta.fi/>.

questioned. The following sections on methodology tackle these challenges and present solutions to these issues.

Primarily, the analysis will not focus on the experiences of individual people (let alone judging individual events and outcomes to any extent) but, rather, sets narrative structures and language use to the focus of inquiry. Hence, cultural resources and discursive work that enable people to make sense and legitimately account for such events are revealed through the analysis. As a result, new and important insight about fear in organizations is gained.

2 The data and analysis

2.1 The online research platform

As a part of the project a data set comprising of numerous stories about fear at work was collected. During 2007 and early 2008 an electronic platform was developed and built which is geared towards online data collection. With means of this platform, narratives about mistreatment and experiences of fear at the work place were collected.

This online research platform invited people to participate the research. Story authors were given instructions about how to submit their unique stories. Authors were asked to provide some essential background variables such their sex, the branch and size of the organisation etc. They were also asked to describe what they were afraid of and why, what lead to the situation and by what means were they intimidated.

In case the author himself or herself had resorted to intimidation, he or she was asked to tell about it and its consequences. The authors were advised to tell whether the situation created an atmosphere of fear and how this manifested itself at the workplace (e.g. in the interaction between co-workers) and encouraged to write up their story in their own style as long as they tell about their own experiences. They were also reminded not to disclose the identities of the individuals of in the stories and the specific organisations.

Furthermore, authors were instructed that as they write their story, they can submit it as completed or as a draft. Drafts were possible to edit later if the author so wished. Having submitted the story the authors were given a chance to further elaborate they things they thought could have been beneficial to the situation: how the conflict could have been avoided and how to build better leadership. The researchers were able to present follow-up questions to the story authors anonymously via the encrypted (and subsequently destroyed) Panoptika research platform email data.

The data were stored on the website database and could be accessed by the researchers. The research platform offered some basic utilities to search and group the data. It was then retrieved to a desktop computer for further analysis. The data were created and stored in a

form that can be readily imported into a software package facilitating qualitative analysis. In this case, QSR NVivo 7 & 8 software were utilised during the course of the analysis to facilitate the qualitative inquiry.

The dedicated research platform software was developed within the project. As the Panoptika site enabled anonymous follow-up questions (the researchers cannot at any time see the actual email addresses), the databases and the user interface had to be designed with particular emphasis on anonymity. However, as the database included email addresses (even if they were not used in any way in conjunction with the research data) special technical and legal inquiries were carried out and solid measures were taken so that the platform complies with Finnish legislation about data registry.

2.2 Stories provided as examples

In order to provide some ideas about how to write about fear and intimidation a few examples of stories were given. These examples were in essence fictions produced in the LEAR project, written in such a manner that they can be seen as realistic. Their fictional nature was addressed on the website. The research project chose not to publish any true stories in full length (even anonymised) so as to provide best possible anonymity to the participants. These examples can perhaps encourage people to write up their own stories even if they are not used to express their emotions and experiences in writing.

The stories provided as examples consist of descriptions of events that can cause fear and stress at the workplace. Fictional as they are, they are obviously not analysed or included in the data. They do, however, deal with issues that are common with many real stories submitted via the platform. Due to this we were prepared to change and introduce new examples in case it happened that we only got similar stories and descriptions. This turned out to not be the case. Ultimately, these fictions made use of many of the same shared cultural resources that were utilised in real stories as well. This was to be expected and is not an unwelcome situation – rather, this would only confirm that the examples have utilised culturally shared values and resources in a believable way.

The analysis is not limited to these given themes – available in public discourse – only. Instead, we found a rich variety of descriptions that were not bound but rather stimulated, by the examples. To put particular emphasis to this, we also placed some instructions in conjunction with the examples:

“these stories may share some elements of your own experience. Perhaps they bear some resemblance or none at all – be sure to tell your own unique story! ”.

During the data gathering it became abundantly clear that people indeed wanted to share their unique story instead of tailoring it according to the examples.

2.3 Story examples as a part of culture

Fear and intimidation at work are issues that are shared culturally. People are generally aware of this phenomenon and have either experienced fear personally or heard about it in the news or perhaps discussed about it with peers and friends. Every now and then these issues surface in the media as some particularly striking case is fought over in the court or otherwise revealed to the public. As such, they are a part of the culture in which humans – as members of the culture – act and take part in as they lead their day-to-day lives. Awareness of such issues and the ability to discuss them, thus questioning and evaluating them, is part of the “cultural toolbox” (Potter & Wetherell 1987) that people possess.

Individual discussions, magazine articles and such are a part of a cultural flow in which various issues are constantly being renegotiated and questioned. This flow consists of verbal face-to-face interactions but also of media texts, diaries, laws, presentations and other such materials (Juhila 1999, 174-186)

Various issues can be dealt with in a multitude of forms and interactions. As some issue, say, sexual harassment at work, is being discussed between friends or on a national level, it is constantly being renewed and renegotiated in and through this activity. On the other hand, parts of it may resist change as there can be discourses so strong that they are not easily challenged but, rather, can be used effortlessly and without the need to provide further explanations as they are so widely shared and accepted (Suoninen 1997).

Understanding and utilising such culturally shared values and ways of describing various phenomena is a part of using the “cultural toolbox” mentioned above. Such understanding may also contribute to theory development in qualitative research (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007). The researchers in the LEAR research project have amassed knowledge and experience about fear and intimidation at work both as scientists and as members of culture. Utilising the culturally shared values and public discourse available to them they have constructed “fictional” stories that are provided as examples and a source of stimulus to the authors using the Panoptika research platform. Hence, the fictions are a part of the same social reality in which the other stories, the data, are produced. Thus, the fictional stories can be seen as being relevant but the researchers must stay alert so as to recognize their effect on the diversity of submitted stories and remove or change them if required.

These kinds of shared cultural understandings have also been utilised as research data (Suoninen 1997; Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 111-118): people have been asked to write up stories within guidelines given by the researcher. For example, a brief beginning of a storyline has been provided and the participants were asked to write up a conclusion to it. Alternatively, they can be asked to write up a story about what has happened before the part of the story provided by the researcher. People will use their imagination and cultural understanding to come up with sensible stories that fit the elements in the storyline

provided. A variation of this method is role playing where people play out the situation using roles given to them.

As people write the stories, they utilise their cultural toolbox in order to come up with sensible descriptions. By varying the storylines provided, the researchers may gather a variety of stories pertaining to the studied phenomenon. Clearly, such a method produces data that is borne out of the shared cultural resources that people have internalised as members of society. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 113-117). These kinds of shared cultural resources have also been utilised to come up with the fictions on the Panoptika website.

2.4 The data in a nutshell

103 stories were submitted. 5 storytellers provided more than a one story: two of them two stories and three of them three stories. One of these authors provided three stories about the string of events. One story was rejected as it included numerous details about recognizable people (names etc.). The author then replaced it with another version. One story cannot be used as the author had likely misunderstood the purpose of the data and could not comply to the terms of the data use. As a result, the number of unique storytellers is a bit under 100 and the number of stories that can be analysed is 101.

Almost half of the stories were submitted from the area surrounding Helsinki, the capital of Finland. Fifth of them were submitted from Western Finland (Länsi-Suomen lääni). The biggest group of story tellers were employees. 35-44 and 45-54 years old were the most prominent age groups. 44 tellers had a university degree, 26 had a senior secondary school or a vocational education.

Most of the stories were about organisations that had over 200 employees and a quarter of the stories were from organisations of 50-199 people. 77 stories were submitted by women and 26 by men. A vast majority of the stories were from the few recent years. Management & clerical jobs as well as health care workers were groups that provided most stories, closely followed by services, IT industry and scientific work. Most story tellers were full time regular workers.

2.5 The methodological approach

2.5.1 Stories and their narrative character

Telling stories is a form of information management that is common to humans (Hänninen 2000; Eskola & Suoranta 1998). As we listen to everyday talk, we hear stories. Face-to-

face conversations as well as news, movies and articles in magazines are brimming with all kinds of stories. Telling stories is, indeed, a central way of talking in human culture: it is something that people do “naturally”. Stories, often referred to as narratives, are a very basic structure that is typical of human thought (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 22-23).

Scientific study of narratives is based on the analysis of stories. It is a diverse field of inquiry and dates back to Aristoteles’ studies on poetry (Hänninen 2000). Narrative analysis has been carried out on a great number of diverse subjects such as drinking stories and TV series (Alasuutari 1999). Life stories, identities as stories, and the grand narratives of the history can also be studied as narratives.

As people account for various things, thus producing narratives, they are not often easily recognizable as potentially rich data. For example, accounts about leadership in working life may be brief or seemingly “obvious”, but it is necessary to notice that as people describe various events, they usually have a reason to do so. Thus, the challenge posed for the analyst is to understand what the narrative is about and what the issues are behind the immediate, literary content of the narrative. These issues are rarely explicit but rather can only be revealed through systematic study of the narrative.

In the analysis of the stories gathered via the Panoptika website the narrative summaries created (for an example see the following section “the analysis of narrative elements and the language used in the stories”) were be grouped in order to come up with a typology of the stories.

The preliminary typology of narratives is as follows:

1. Survivor: normal and balanced situation at work → disturbance inciting fear → assessment of the situation → efforts to regain balance & control → autonomy and balance are achieved → the fear dissipates → Autonomous agency is maintained and reinforced

This story type is one of the most prominent in the data. There is great variety to the reasons behind the fearful situations as well as the strategies and actions taken in order to regain control and losing the fear. Individual agency and autonomy are given very high value and accomplishing them through one’s own activities is described as a particularly empowering achievement.

2. Exhausted: normal and balanced situation at work → disturbance inciting fear → symptoms, illness and exhaustion → giving up as there is no choice → adjustment (getting bitter or an ongoing “chronic” process) or quitting the job.

In the data, fear and intimidation are described as initiating a process of gradual weakening of health and well-being. Health related problems and exhaustion can grow so big that the narrator effectively positions him or herself as unable to fight for one’s rights. This can

result in a bitter and perhaps “chronic” situation or having to quit the job. There are several pathways to these results and this story type includes all this variation.

3. Observer: A toxic situation at the workplace (or various phenomena of working life in general) → the narrator manages him or herself, but sees how many other people fall victims of the situation → positions him or herself as an “immune” or a “detached” observer. → Ethical contemplations and ideas that might help others.

Bad practices at the workplace are in the focus in these stories. This story type consists of accounts that are best characterized as events that go against expectations. Specifically, the authors hold certain premises regarding working life and what is fair and acceptable in general. Various values and ideals are contrasted against the anomalies they have observed. The narrator typically observes various regrettable events and processes but remains unharmed him or herself. This type is somewhat related to the survivor, but the authors position themselves as not too involved in the process. Rather, they are “immune” at least so far – perhaps due to their own characteristics and skills – but nevertheless recognize these issues and discuss them.

However, stories cannot be exhaustively reduced to plot summaries. A story forms an aggregate of elements: on top of the narrative structure the stories consist of meanings and descriptions that are relevant to the study:

Narrative is thus always more than words or windows into something else. Narrative discourses are cultural meanings and interpretations that guide perception, thought, interaction, and action. Narrative discourse organizes life–social relations, interpretations of the past, and plans for the future. The way people tell stories influences how they perceive, remember, and prepare for future events.
(Daiute & Lightfoot 2004)

In this research project the narrative summaries and their clusters were created simply to provide paths for further inquiry. The narratives are understood as strings of chronological events described in the stories about fear at work. Hence, the analysis begun by studying the narrative elements of the stories. Summaries of narratives were produced and these are used to facilitate further inquiry and to specify the focus of the research.

2.5.2 Stories as language use

In the analysis of the stories we focus on the language use and see how people describe these situations and what sort of meaning structures are invoked so as to make the reader understand what the author wants to say. Hence, the premises of the described events and their outcomes, ideals about leadership and corporate activities, various other values and

norms as well as the argumentative logic of the accounts are of interest. Based on the analysis, various moralities are also produced as people discuss tensions that have occurred at the workplace. These moralities are rooted in culturally shared values that dictate our expectations of good working life.

This process of meaning making through language use is seen as the primary focus of analysis. The stories are not seen as windows to the “reality” pertaining to each story, but, rather, as samples of contemporary Finnish culture within which the phenomenon of fear and intimidation at work takes place. Such an approach enables us to understand the meanings this phenomenon is given by the authors. The focus is not on the individuals but on the culturally sound ways of accounting for fear and intimidation (Luomanen, forthcoming).

The accounts given in the stories tell us about the culture in which they were produced. The fact that these accounts were, in the first place, asked for and then given by the authors signals the fact that the phenomenon of fear and intimidation at work is not a clear-cut issue: rather, it is a complex mesh of tensions fuelled by various culturally shared values. These values are available to and internalised by the authors as members of culture.

Language use is also directly linked with the construction of one’s identity as it provides individuals with a multitude of subject positions. These positions are accomplished via discursive means in social interaction. (Jokinen & Juhila 1999, 68; Alasuutari 2004, 127).

These positions are produced in and through social interaction:

An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate (Davies & Harré 1999, 35).

These positions are accomplished and assigned to others through discursive practises in social interaction. The focus is on the ways in which the story authors are constituted with these practises. The story logic depends on the way things are accounted for and what kinds of positions are available for the author. Individuals can produce a multiplicity of positions in various contexts. The positions are, in essence, fragments in the discursive production of personhood. (Davies & Harré 1999; Davies & Harré 1990).

2.5.3 The analysis of narrative elements and the language used in the stories

In this study language is treated as a constitutive part of the phenomenon, as a means to produce and sustain a plurality of parallel understandings of fear at work. Discourse analysis is a method that takes into account the basic premises of social constructionism. (e.g. Hänninen, 2000). Notably, it is not within the scope of discourse analysis to discover mental processes (separate from the verbal outcomes), causal relationships or “objective” facts outside the language (Jokinen 1999, 40-41). Rather, the focus is on the language and interaction – the things that can be done via language use (Potter and Wetherell 1987; also Potter and Wetherell 2001; Jokinen 1999).

The analysis begun by the reading of the stories about fear and intimidation and proceeded to make narrative summaries of each story. These summaries grasp the main components of the story, such as entering a new job, working hard on it, receiving intolerable comments or threats, trying to cope with the situation and finally quitting the job. Obviously, there is great variation to these stories and the summaries will help in gaining an initial understanding of the processes that fear and intimidation may set afoot at workplaces.

Furthermore, the premises for each event and the story-internal logic is studied: how do people account for the situations and justify their own actions. As there will be a narrative summary of each story and these summaries will be placed in a typology, it will be interesting to see how these types are produced via language use. For example, it will be studied how people justify their actions and how do they accomplish and sustain their speaker positions in various contexts. The analysis will also pay attention to the management of morality and placement of responsibility with discursive means (Luomanen, forthcoming; Nikander 2002; Sneijder & Molder 2005; Kurri and Wahlström 2005).

Below is an example from the actual data (story id: LEAR0000002) where an employee accounts for the practises regarding sick leaves. A narrative summary (falling into the story type 2. exhausted) of the story is presented first:

1. The story teller works in a company as an employee
2. The story teller gets sick
3. The sick leave is thoroughly questioned by the boss
4. The boss requires extensive and over-the-top explanations for sick leaves
5. Continuous suspicion and the fear of getting sick again add to stress experienced by the story teller.
6. The story teller is so exhausted that she cannot muster enough strength to pursue the matter with industrial safety authorities
7. The story teller finally quits the job due to the anxiety-ridden atmosphere

As the story unfolds several questions become relevant. What is the story-internal logic? How are the key events described in order to accomplish a legitimate and justified position. How are the tensions accounted for? What are the premises for arguments in support for the author's actions? How is blame being placed in the account?

In this story the lawful right to have a sick leave based on a medical certificate (issued by a nurse) is questioned by the boss, who then requires extreme measures in order to prove that one really is sick. A thorough lack of trust between the employer and the employee is described. The author accounts for the normal practises of the health care system that she abides by and the over-the-top demands set by the boss. As a result, a great tension is created and the stress keeps mounting until finally she quits her job.

Below is an excerpt from the story³.

**Female, ≤24 years, upper secondary school graduate / vocational education
(LEAR0000002)**

It crossed my mind that I could have pursued this matter further with the help of for example the industrial safety authorities. But I was also physically in such a bad condition that I hardly had the energy to do that.

Mielessäni kävi, että olisin voinut lähteä viemään asiaa eteenpäin esimerkiksi työsuojelun kautta, mutta olin fyysisestikin niin huonossa kunnossa, ettei siihen juuri ollut voimia.

Through this discursive work the story teller accomplishes a position as a person who is not afraid to pursue the matter further with the authorities as she is confident about her being right. However, her physical condition was so bad as to prevent her from doing this. Thus, her bad condition gets further proved by this and also justifies the fact that she did not stand for herself in this manner, even though she was confident about her rights regarding the sick days. Furthermore, the right to be sick when one really is sick is emphasised: in this description it emerges as a basic right backed up by laws and authorities and should not have been questioned to the extent that the boss did.

Good work ethics and hard working personality are highly appreciated in our culture and any man or a woman possessing these qualities is deemed in very positive light in most societies. Serious sickness is a condition that is widely accepted as a legitimate reason in our culture to stay home from work. In advanced societies hardly anyone is willing to question this right in public. The boss is not described as overlooking this right completely

³ The author has translated the texts with the goal that the original meaning is conveyed in the best possible way. Thus, the translation is not concerned with specific grammatical structures or conjugations of words but, rather, the meaning of the text. (See Luomanen, forthcoming; Nikander 2002).

but his or her questioning about the severity of sickness and the integrity of the employee is accounted for as being deeply insulting. Conversely, a good boss would abide by agreed upon practises of working life while a bad one ignores these or stretches them to the extreme causing fear and anxiety.

Clearly, various cultural values and recourses are invoked in the accounts so as to make sense and to accomplish a legitimate position regarding the matter. Such meaning production via language use allows the authors to position themselves among cultural values in a way they prefer. Readers of the stories can understand these accounts since they are a part of the same culture. This is an important point: even the researchers cannot escape language and culture as they talk about them, nor should they try it since these can fruitfully be turned into the focus of the inquiry and be laid out for view in the research reports.

As the stories and all the situations and events within them are analysed, it is necessary to study the cultural resources invoked in them and to pay attention to the discursive work carried out in order to deepen our understanding of fear and intimidation in work life. It is of particular interest to see why certain cultural resources are used again and again. In the case of the story above, another important observation is that the author accomplishes a position as a person with active agency: she gains some control of the situation by her own actions and ultimately by quitting the job.

The online research platform also enables the researcher to ask follow-up questions about the stories. The sense making between authors and the researcher, including the researcher's contribution, results in a discursive display that lends itself to empirical analysis. The researcher does not have to pretend to be a "talking questionnaire" who asks these questions in a neutral and passive way, uncontaminated by his or her membership of the surrounding culture (see e.g. Potter & Wetherell 1987, 163-165). Rather, the language use by both parties can be analysed.

3 Fear and intimidation at work

3.1 Dimensions of fear at work

During the narrative analysis it was useful to keep a focus on the ways in which fear was described in the data. The dimensions of fear described in this section are the result of the preliminary content analytic reading of the data while the following empirical sections are based on a discourse analytic approach on the data analysis.

In the data, fear at work is accounted for to manifest itself through a wide spectrum of effects. These effects are related to various dimensions such as the following:

- Interaction
- The perceived consequences of the situation (e.g. position, reputation, income, conflict)
- Ideals related to the work
- Personal investment to the job and the perceived appreciation of it
- Agency – the ability to stay in control and the scope of action available to the person who faces the fear.
- Personal well-being and health

An individual who is being intimidated at work may account for drastic changes or conflicts along these dimensions, severely undermining his or her ability to perform at an optimal level.

In the stories the authors describe the intimidation they have faced using at least these dimensions in order to make sense about what they have been going through. As the situations and event are accounted for, the authors typically invoke various cultural resources (in and through their language use) so as to position themselves in a legitimate way. Such position is then contrasted against the debatable practices and events that have resulted in fear at the workplace. This is how such negative events can be talked about without “losing face”.

The mechanism of fear takes place in interaction: the authors have been given hints or straightforward threats about forthcoming negative events that can possibly or likely happen. These negative outcomes may influence the whole workforce or just a single person. Typically, the author (and possibly other people as well) are expected to behave or work in a certain way, possibly submitting to very strict rules, in order to avoid the negative outcomes. The dimensions above are central in this process: their significance in the data is prominent.

The perceived consequences of the situation (e.g. position, reputation, income, conflict) are typically accounted for in detail. Trying to fight against intimidation might result in severe changes in one’s position in the labor markets. Not only can income be affected but the authors also describe their fear of getting a tarnished reputation. In many specialized fields bad reputation can seriously inflict one’s opportunities to get a new job. Hence, these consequences play a major role in the process of fear and intimidation.

In order to restore and maintain the fearless and balanced situation that has been ruptured by the threats people describe the process of assessing the scope of action that is available to them. For example, submitting to new rules could alleviate the situation but it could also mean going against some values that the authors have about their work. These values can be about the significance and justified way of working, possibly related to some ideals about one’s profession and the ethics that are related. The authors may want to defend these ideals even though it might result in personal losses or a weakened position at work, thus contributing to the scope of action described as available to them.

Ideals related to work also include the pride one gets from a job well done. Authors describe their personal investment to the job and their skills, thus positioning themselves as professionals who possess valuable insight. If the organization fails to appreciate this insight, people rather describe their loyalty to their own work than to the organization that they are working for. Being intimidated to go against one's insight is accounted for as particularly frustrating.

However, the scope of action that is available to the authors is typically a result of various negotiations in the stories. Out of all the possible actions (such as quitting, going against the intimidation, talking about the situation in public, refusing to follow orders) the authors choose the ones that strike an acceptable balance between their ideals and the fears they have and the demands that have been presented to them.

The observations from the data suggest that individual agency and control in such situations are highly valued. The authors account for a strong will to stand for what they feel is right. Such activities are described justified since they are motivated by strong ideals about what the work should be like or how people in general should be treated. Typically, the accounts are premised with strong cultural values, such as being polite and respectful in one's interactions with other people.

Personal well-being and health are described as central issues insofar as they have a profound effect on the capabilities of the authors. Should the toxic atmosphere and stress wear them out or even push them to complete mental and physical exhaustion, there's little they can do to pursue their goals. On the other hand, mental or physical illness caused by the extended stress may also provide the authors a legitimate reason to not fight back with all they have got. Individual agency and control are highly appreciated, but serious health problems are accounted for as necessitating giving in to some demands without a serious battle. On the other hand, the anticipation of health problems may promote some drastic activities (such as quitting the job) as good health is seen as an essential component of good life.

Clearly, fear is playing a central role in preventing organizational collaboration and knowledge sharing (see e.g. Eriksson 2006 a,b; Parviainen & Eriksson 2006). The data gathered so far suggests that this is the case in organizations where people are afraid of weakening their own position and tired due to the negative atmosphere.

3.2 The tensions in the scope of boss-subordinate relationship

3.2.1 Sources of tensions

In order to understand the boss-subordinate relationship we will ask what kinds of things do people account about as they make sense of bad and good leadership. What are the premises of the accounts and what kinds of shared cultural resources are invoked in order to align the descriptions (and the actors within them) with the values of the surrounding culture? We will not set rigid boundaries between what constitutes "good" and "bad"

leadership, but, rather, we will analyze the continuum of accounts where leadership is being discussed, debated and negotiated in and through language use.

Naively, one could ask why, after all, there are so many accounts about the nature of leadership: since an employee is compensated for his or her time, why should they care so much about what sort of decisions are made at the workplace. Why would they not be content to follow their bosses' orders so long as they are not dangerous or illegal? The next sample provides some insight into this.

Female, >55 years, bachelor of arts/science, (LEAR0000012)

Generally speaking, you can ask. Really honestly you can just ask: how are you, what's up. One would think that that sort of genuine interest would be an innate characteristic of a businessman since that sort of interest will result in the pleasant sound of the cash register working hard. Hey, we are humans, not just executors of tasks; we have ideas, suggestions, and feelings. We try to lead a good life through work, during the working hours as well.

(Yleensäkin voi kysyä. Ihan aidosti voi kysyä, miten menee, missä mennään? Se aito kiinnostus luulisi olevan yrittäjällä myötäsentyistä, se kiinnostus helisee kassassa varsin pian. Hei me ollaan ihmisiä, ei pelkkiä työsuorittajia, meillä on ajatuksia, ehdotuksia, tunteita. Pyrimme hyvään elämään työssä, työaikana myös).

In this sample, employees are described as active participants of the decision making process and the whole process of the work getting done. In order to tab this resource to its fullest, interaction is accounted for as being of great importance. According to this, the employees cannot be used as mechanical task executors since this is not how humans work. In this logic the aim to make money as a corporate goal is not being disputed, rather, it is described as a "natural" part of it. A reference to good life is also constructed: fulfilling one's true potential at the work is depicted as an element of it. The argumentative logic within this discourse stipulates that lack of interaction and respect towards the employees erodes the potential of this fulfillment and leaves the workers puzzled and frustrated as they feel they are not given the chance to give their best output.

Based on the data, motivation can be interpreted to suffer if this sort of fulfillment is prohibited. Since doing a good job is deemed important and pleasurable, indeed a part of good life, it is accounted about being hurtful if this cannot be achieved simply because the lack of interaction. In the data it is described as the management's problem to fail to listen to the workers.

However, simply lacking adequate interaction is not the only problem accounted for in the boss-subordinate relationships. What little interaction there is, can be damaging as is described in the sample below.

Female, 35-44 years, master of arts/science, (LEAR0000008)

At the same time we have been threatened with many kinds of other downsizings and degradation of living conditions. Interaction with personnel by the management has been random and condescending. Words regarding issues that have already been

agreed upon have been eaten without any explanations or the explanations have been totally bogus.

(Samalla on uhkailtu monenlaisilla muilla supistuksilla ja elinolojen heikkenemisellä. Keskustelu henkilöstön kanssa on ollut satunnaista ja ylimielissävytteistä johdon suunnalta. Jo sovittuja asioita on pyörretty ilman selityksiä tai sitten selitykset on tuulesta temmattuja.)

In the data even all kinds of direct threats are prominently accounted for: either directly or indirectly, the management can bully and intimidate the workers by threatening to fire them, to change their tasks, to lower their salary, to spread devastating rumors about them or a host of other things with potentially damaging effect on the employee. Apart from these threats, fearful atmosphere can be created by constantly and/or randomly changing practices and policies. What is more, if these changes are not based on any legitimate reasons (as described by the storyteller) but, rather, they are described as means of bullying and being detrimental to the atmosphere.

Trust is an issue which can be further magnified by the way the management utilizes the power relations between them and the employees. Through language use the management is described to emphasize the fact that dispositionally the employees cannot really be equal participants in the interaction. Lack of explanations and condescending attitude are given as examples of this in the data.

What is more, further tensions in the boss-subordinate relationship can be created by a conflict in the ideals presented by the management and those internalized by the worker. These ideals can vary a lot depending on the profession, context and other factors. The sample below provides an example.

Female, 45-54 years, bachelor of arts/science, (LEAR0000055)

It's characteristic of me to be careful and systematic and I want to learn things well and thoroughly. Unfortunately in this company the biggest priority was to go through as many calls as possible, the client's problems were secondary. And it was supposed to be a customer service job.

(Olen luonteeltani huolellinen ja järjestelmällinen ja haluan oppia asiat hyvin ja perinpohjin. Valitettavasti tässä yrityksessä tärkeintä oli mahdollisimman monen puhelun vastaanottaminen, asiakkaan ongelmat olivat sivuseikka. Ja kyseessä piti olla asiakaspalvelutyö).

People at the workplace face tensions between the way they aspire to pursue their own goals following their own values and the goals set by the management. Here, the will to really serve customers is described as a virtue that was questioned by the management. The will to pursue qualitatively good customer care is accounted for as being in direct conflict with the quantitative demands. The significance of customers is mentioned in the data in many contexts: good quality customer care is described as a significant goal by many story authors. Also, simply the fact of doing a "good job" regardless of the management's actions is accounted for in the data as being important.

On the other hand, the data not only contains descriptions of bad leadership, but several attributes are given to good leadership as well. It is important to notice, that leadership, when good, is described as an important asset for the workplace. The following sample gives some examples of the elements of good leadership.

Female, >50 years, upper secondary school graduate / vocational education, (LEAR0000054)

The management should be very careful as they promote or otherwise seek people to managerial positions. These days it should be mandatory to require interactional skills, empathy and the ability to justly handle the issues and work of various people.

(Yritysjohdon pitäisi olla erityisen tarkkana, kun se nostaa tai muuten hakee ihmistä esimiesasemaan. Nykyisin pitäisi vaatia esimieheltä vuorovaikutustaitoja, empatiakykyä ja oikeudenmukaisuutta käsitellä erilaisten ihmisen asioita ja työpanosta.)

Again, the significance of interaction is described as an essential component of good management. Also, similar attributes are described here as those that were lacking in the previous samples. The ability to see workers as active members of the work process is regarded highly. Justice is another value that is typically in the core of these accounts: the management should be transparent and just, without “inner circles” and skewed individual agendas. In the data transparency, activity and good interactional skills are accounted for as key attributes of good leadership.

Furthermore, as people construct good leadership in their accounts, equality is seen as an essential component. Equality between e.g. sexes, people of different skin color, age are accounted as being equal. Should the management not appreciate this, a strong tension is created at the workplace. Consider the following extract for example:

Female, 35-44 years, Primary school education (position at work: expert) (LEAR0000075)

It were the young, attractive men who were not sensitive towards authorities that did best in the community. Conscientious character, age and being a female were clearly factors that made my boss to attack people. Furthermore, the scare and blaming tactics she used were most effective with conscientious people.

(Parhaiten yhteisössä pärjäivät nuorehkot, viehättävät miehet, jotka eivät olleet herkkiä auktoriteeteille. Tunnollisuus, ikä ja naissukupuoli olivat selvästi tekijöitä, jotka saivat esimieheni kohdistamaan hyökkäyksensä. Lisäksi hänen käyttämänsä pelottelu- ja syyllistämiskeinot tehosivat parhaiten tunnollisiin).

The premise of this account is that as the management deviates from equality between employees based on their age or personal characteristics, they break the culturally very strong value of equality between people. Thus, in this story strong tensions are described as a result of the unfair attacks by the boss.

Not only are such attacks described in many stories but also further attempts by the management to control the way employees interact among each other. Even such a basic issue as the right to talk freely with fellow employees has been violated by the management. The next extract is a good example of this.

Female, >55 years, bachelor of arts/science, (LEAR0000012)

We are not even allowed to actively contact former customers. It's been denied several times as well as talking to the employees of the parent company. They are partly in the same building, use the same door to the factory; they walk through my work space.

Emme saa itse aktiivisesti ottaa yhteyttä edes entisiin asiakkaisiin. Tämä on useasti kielletty samoin kuin keskustelu emoyrityksen työntekijöiden kanssa. Ovat osittain samassa rakennuksessa, käyttävät samaa tehdasovea, kulkevat työtilani kautta. Mutta erityisesti on minuakin kielletty puhumasta heidän kanssaan. Ja jos joskus joku on nähty puhuvan kanssani, on kyllä muistettu painostaa kaikin keinoin, ettei virhe toistuisi.

In the data there are descriptions about such violations against the freedom of speech but also against the freedom regarding union membership. These are considered basic rights that are accounted for as being clearly out of the management's domain. In modern society, such rights are expected to be in effect without any debate. As these issues are questioned by the management it is described as a violation against basic rights.

What is more, as people construct bad leadership in the stories; these displays of discursive work on moral order law are also supported by descriptions about the meaning of law in our society. Working life is guided by legislation but in the stories the practises at work are often accounted for as being against the law and hence condemnable. Consider the next extract which is a good example.

Female, >55 years, Master of arts/science, (LEAR0000052)

According to our union lawyers this is not possible but the HR department manages to get away with it. However, there was this top drawer professional hired to the HR department who then quit after six months. People say he / she was amazed by this nonsense.

Liittojen lakimiesten mukaan tämä ei ole mahdollista, mutta HR onnistuu sen tekemään. Tosin HRään vuodenvaihteessa ulkopuolelta palkattu huippuammattilainen sanoutui irti puolen vuoden kuluttua. Kerrotaan hänen olleen äimistynyt tästä pelleilystä.

The above example is about the questionable and illegal practices concerning the way employees were treated. The actions of the human resources department are constructed as legally impossible and "amazing", even to the extent that not only lawyers but also a

“highly competent professional” working there have been astounded by them. What is more, these occurrences of breaking the law are typically described as being skillful or arrogant instead of being mistakes.

Even physical violence is not outside the domain of working life. There are several descriptions of physical attacks in the data. Typically these are described as incidents borne out of the heat of the moment as the next sample illustrates.

Female, >55 years, bachelor of arts/science, (LEAR0000052)

Once the boss got so angry that he attacked me. I immediately realised that that's it. It happened less than a year after I had begun working there. A string of sick leaves followed as I could no longer go to the company. As a result, I had to seek psychiatric help, followed by a four month sick leave and regular visits to a psychologist. I wouldn't quit the job myself, even though I was pressurized to do that, as I rather would have reported the police of this offence.

Erään kerran johtajalla meni hermo niin pahasti, että hän kävi päälle. Tajusin välittömästi, että tämä oli sitten tässä. Tämä tapahtui alle 1 vuoden siitä, kun olin aloittanut. Alkoi sairaslomakierre, koska en voinut mennä enää firmaan. Jouduin tämän seurauksena hakeutumaan psykiatrin hoitoon, josta seurasi 4 kuukautta sairauslomaa sekä säännöllinen hoitojakso psykologin vastaanotolla. En suostunut sanomaan itseäni irti, vaikka siihen painostettiin, koska enemmän olisin tehnyt johtajasta rikosilmoituksen.

Violations against one's physical autonomy are described as very severe occurrences: they are instantly condemned and little or no justifications are offered for them. The consequences are also accounted for as being extremely severe and detrimental not only to the physical but particularly mental well-being. However, even though the occurrences of physical violence are traumatic and difficult to overcome mentally, they tend to give the person attacked some leverage as they can always sue the attacker if they want to. Thus, they can use this threat in order to pursue some of their own goals.

Physical autonomy can also be threatened or violated in the form of sexual harassment. In the data there are descriptions of bosses touching their subordinates in inappropriate ways. This too is against prevailing cultural values where equality between sexes and physical autonomy are very strong values. Breaching these inevitably has grave consequences and at least social sanctions.

Another basic premise in the accounts is that good health is essential for any individual in order to lead a good life and to perform well at work. See the next data excerpt where the story author positions herself and her failing health as the victim of poor management.

Female, 35-44 years, master of arts/science, (LEAR0000038)

I am angry, bitter, emotionally damaged and full of revenge not only towards my superior but all the little managers and pencil pushers of this faculty, department and the university management due to their substandard HR policy and management.

After all these years of intimidation, malpractice, discrimination and emotional violence I am at the edge of sanity.

Olen vihainen, katkeroitunut, henkisesti vaurioitunut ja täynnä kostonhimoa paitsi esimiehelleni myös muille tämän tiedekunnan, laitoksen ja keskushallinnon pikkuvirkamiehille ja johtajille ala-arvoisesta henkilöstöpolitiikasta ja -johtamisesta. Kaikkien näiden alistuksen, väärinkäytön, syrjinnän ja henkisen väkivallan vuosien takia olen mielenterveyteni rajamailla.

Failing health is a prominent theme in the data and invariantly described as the direct result of poor management or that other conditions at work have at least contributed to illness and symptoms. The variety of illnesses and symptoms described in the data is a great one. Depression, trouble sleeping and stress are perhaps most often accounted for. Furthermore, heart conditions, various psychological problems and loss of strength among others are mentioned.

Health is not only an issue when a full-blown illness strikes but also before it. People account for this in the data as the fear of losing health. This fear motivates them to pursue after better working conditions e.g. in the form of getting another job. The next excerpt is a good example:

Female, 35-44 years, Master of arts/science, (LEAR0000024)

Myself I left voluntarily. Had I stayed, I would have lost my health. Players do well whereas honest and open people who are proud of their work either leave or fall. The worst thing is if you cannot leave anymore. There are those too. And it shows.

Itse lähdin vapaaehtoisesti pois. Jos olisin jäänyt, olisin menettänyt terveyteni. Pelaajat pärjäävät, avoimet ja rehelliset, työstään ylpeät joko lähtevät tai kaatuvat. Pahinta on se, jos ei enää pysty lähtemään. Niitäkin on. Ja se näkyy.

3.2.2 Ruptures in equilibrium – going against what is seen as good working life

The sources of tension at work are described as conflicts between what a person expects – based on his or her experience of life and the value system they subscribe to – and what is expected of them. In the data the descriptions of going against the following values are used as the premise for the story authors feeling offended or violated.

The pool of values (illustrated in the above samples) that forms the premise of accounts about tensions at the workplace can be summarized as follows:

- Equality
- Respect of other people
- Freedom
- Honesty
- Health
- Obedience of the law
- Physical autonomy
- Doing a good job

Equality entails such issues as racism related to skin colour, religion and age. Furthermore, equality between co-workers and sexes is described as ultimately important in the stories.

Respect for other people is about treating employees as individuals that are intelligent and potentially innovative members of the workforce who can contribute to the functioning of the organisation.

Freedom of speech and organizational activities are constructed in the data as essential. Any efforts by the management to inhibit discussions or union membership are described as unjust.

Honesty is about acting and behaving according to what is true. Management should only provide explanations to their actions that are truthful instead of smoke screening their activities. What is more, any spreading of false rumours about an employee or the organisation is accounted for as being condemnable.

Health is constructed in the stories as a basic premise of good life. Poor management and tensions at the workplace are described as directly eroding health, leading to illness and symptoms, sick leaves and even permanent occupational disability.

Obedience of the law is an ideal that is expected of all actors at the workplace. Law stipulates many things from working conditions, vacations, sick leaves and fees to various crimes and offences. Management is described as an actor that should always abide by the law.

Physical autonomy is a particularly strong norm in the Finnish society. Physical violence is unacceptable in any form whatsoever. Similarly, sexual harassment and unwanted physical contact are described as condemnable.

Doing a good job is a value that entails the whole spectrum of issues that comprise of professional pride, care about the customer and the work related ethics that the person subscribes to.

These values all contribute to the way people perceive and describe “normal” working life. Here, the word normal denotes practices and actions that are deemed acceptable and justified. When these culturally shaped expectancies are broken, tensions arise (and

processes take place that end up as stories in our data). Figure 1 below presents this in the context of dispositional power.

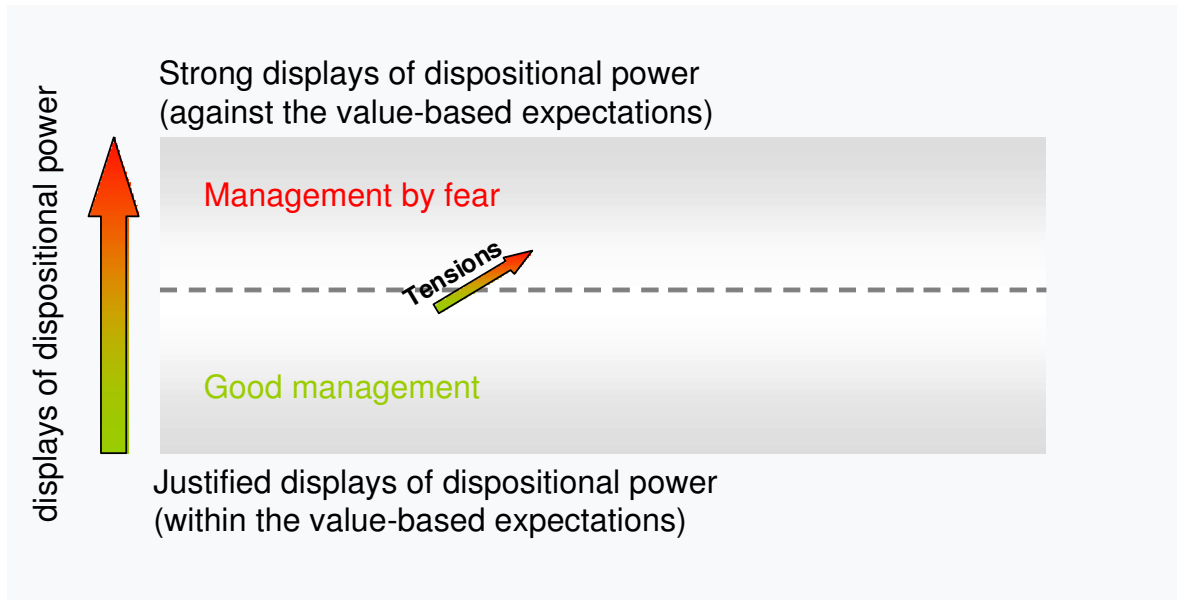


Figure 1. Tensions in the boss – subordinate relationship.

At left on the vertical axis displays of dispositional power are presented. This means the practices and actions that are related to the power relations at the work place. The case of boss yelling and threatening to fire an employee is an example of a strong display of power relations.

In our data, it is the ruptures towards management by fear that most motivate the stories. Most stories begin by descriptions of the situation before fear and intimidation have taken place. At that point things at the workplace fit the expectations of the employee and the actions of the management and co-workers are accounted for as being just or at least understandable. At some point, however, the story tellers account for unjust actions that are in conflict of their understanding of good and fair working life. These are the ruptures towards management by fear. These ruptures create tensions as the people involved in the situation pursue to maintain their own opinions and ideas on an appropriate way forward.

However, figure 1. does not take into account the situations where management is poor due to the boss refusing to take leadership and avoiding any responsibility. Consider the figure 2. that expands on the concepts in the previous figure.

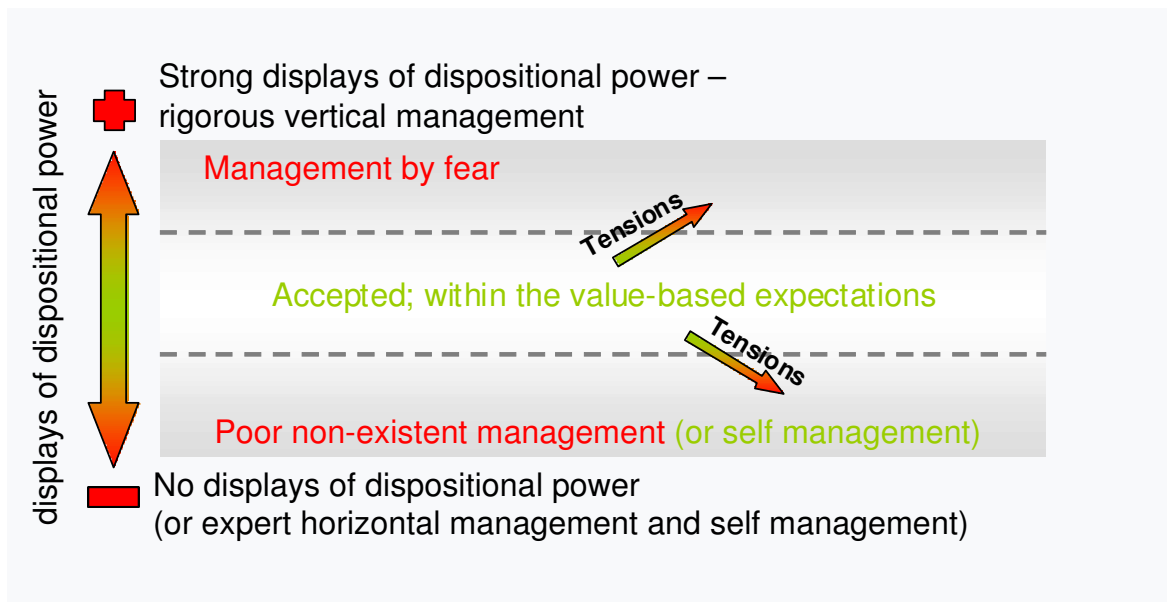


Figure 2. The green zone of the boss – subordinate relationship. In the middle there is a zone where the core values of working life are met adequately. Note that the lack of displays of dispositional power can be a good thing in the case of flat, horizontal organizations where experts self manage their own work.

The need and appreciation of good management is further emphasised in figure 2. Excluding the case of flat expert organisations displays of dispositional power are indeed needed in order to provide the employees with a framework within which they can carry on their duties, knowing they have the management’s support.

As these tensions are described in the data, the story tellers make sense of the situation by accounting for the premises of situations. These premises are anchored to and utilise the shared cultural values that exist in the society. A good example is a story where it is described how the manager tries to make a pass at the employee, implying sexual motives or a story where someone is harassed due to his religion and skin colour. Both types of actions are widely considered unjust harassment in developed societies. Therefore the reader is given the premise as to why the actions described are condemnable and causing fear.

3.3 Survival and exhaustion – the construction of individual agency amidst fear and intimidation

3.3.1 Exhaustion

The construction of individual agency in stories about survival and stories about exhaustion and giving up is important because it enables us to deepen the understanding of the processes that lead to survival and exhaustion. This inquiry is based on the observation in the data that as individuals face fear and intimidation, they account for their reactions in order to assess and alleviate the situation. From such conflicting situations there are many paths that lead to “survival” and many paths that lead to exhaustion, bitterness and giving up. The identity work carried out in these accounts as well as the diversity of these “paths” will be explored.

Exhaustion, illness and various symptoms are described along with the fear and intimidation at work. Consider the next excerpt that is a good example.

Female, >55 years, bachelor of arts/science, (LEAR0000012)

Sick leaves in our little circle have increased dramatically. High blood pressure, depression, sleeping disorders, symptoms of heart disease. Hardly surprising. None of our little circle feels well. No matter how hard we pursue good results the feedback is threats, bashing, and further pressing. I'm sure this will end soon enough, but these have been long three years. And they have left their mark on everyone's health.

(Pienen piirimme poissaolot sairauden takia ovat alkaneet kasvaa, verenpaineen nousua, masennusta, unihäiriötä, sydänoireita. Tuntuuko ihmeeltä. Yksikään pienestä piiristämme ei voi hyvin. Vaikka kuinka vääntäisimme tulosta - palaute on uhkaa, haukkumista, painostusta. Kyllä tämä loppuu varmastikin melko pian, mutta pitkiä nämä reilut kolme vuotta ovat olleet. Ja jokaisen terveyteen ne ovat jälkensä jättäneet).

In the data, these kinds of descriptions regarding physical and mental health are rather common. Continuous oppressing atmosphere is accounted for as taking a severe toll on peoples' resources, thus rendering them not only stressed and with various illnesses, but also unable to function at an optimal level at work. In the sample above it is noteworthy how the interaction with the management is described as being particularly abrasive and consequently disheartening.

In the section “The analysis of narrative elements and the language used in the stories” there was a data sample (LEAR0000002) about exhaustion where the author justified her lack of counter actions by her mental and physical condition. The significance of individual agency and control were also discussed.

Peter Frost (2003) introduces the pathological effects of organizational life and how pain grows into toxicity. Toxicity is described as the outcome of emotionally insensitive

attitudes and actions of managers and of the practices of their companies. It drains vitality from individuals and the entire organization, potentially causing everything from missed deadlines to a mass exodus of the staff.

Very straightforward links between management styles and illness are made in the data. The repetitive nature of these accounts in the data supports the interpretation that this is indeed a severe problem in the surrounding culture. These links can, in fact, be rather drastic, as is seen in the sample below.

Female, 35-44 years, Master of arts/science, (LEAR0000053)

It was like we got a fresh supply of oxygen in the air. My workmates were laughing that they had never seen such a miracle healing that happened to me as a result. Just before the CEO left I had just suffered 12 migraine attacks in two weeks and even my physician was already desperate. I had a medical certificate (for long term inability to work, B-lausunto in Finland) in my hand, ready to be mailed to the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (KELA in Finnish). Then the migraine and other symptoms disappeared within a month.

(Oli kuin happea olisi taas alkanut virrata ilmaan. Työtoverini nauroivat, etteivät olleet koskaan nähneet sellaista ihmeeparantumista kuin minulle tästä seurasi. Vähän ennen tj lähtöä olin saanut 12 migreenikohtausta kahden viikon aikana ja lääkärikin oli jo epätoivoissaan. Minulla oli jo B lausunto kädessäni lähetettäväksi Kelaan. Nyt migreeni ja muut oireet hävisivät kuukauden kuluessa).

The illness can be made sense of by describing it as a direct consequence of bullying and fear. Culturally, this type of a description is legitimate, as most of us are aware of the wide ranging effects that prolonged stress can have on one's health. However, it is notable that these illnesses are described as directly being caused by the harmful actions of the management. Thus, as was seen above, the working life is seen as enabling good life at best, but also as potentially robbing one of the most precious things that one can have: health, happiness and well-being. Hence, a lot is at stake when it comes to management.

In the stories exhaustion is described as depressing and humiliating state. People account for their professional pride and the conflict it is in with the inability to cope with an intimidating situation. Failing to pursue one's goals at work is described as a shameful event. The next sample illustrates this. The story is about intimidation at her workplace and her fear that the boss will ruin her reputation with baseless rumors.

Female, 35-44 years, Master of arts/science, (LEAR0000029)

I never would have thought I'd write this story as my own. Never. These events are recent and at the moment fear and worry about future dominate my whole being. I'm on a lengthy sic leave due to moderately difficult depression initiated by burn out. This likely reflects on my writing.

...

Most of all I'm amazed by some people are able to hit a person who's already down and crying. Regardless of whether they are guilty of what they are being accused of. It was quite simply cruel. I don't want to go back to my workplace, I don't want to see anybody from there. I don't want to tell my story to anybody because I start to

cry: a strong woman crying like a child. I'm ashamed of myself, my bad judgement, my inability to listen to myself. I deeply regret that I believed in their promises. All this even though I know I have done right and to the best of my ability. As I think about it I understand that it is beyond belief but my feelings seem to have a life of their own. I don't even have the strength to defend myself. I'm finished.

Koskaan en olisi uskonut kirjoittavani tätä tarinaa omana tarinanani, en koskaan. Tapahtumat ovat tuoreita ja tällä hetkellä koko olemustani hallitsee pelko ja huoli tulevaisuudesta. Olen pitkällä sairauslomalla työuupumuksen laukaiseman keskivaikean masennuksen vuoksi ja tämä todennäköisesti näkyy kirjoituksestani.

...

Eniten minua hämmästyttää tässä ihmisten kyky lyödä jo maassa olevaa, itkevää ihmistä. Oli tämä sitten syyllinen tai syytön esitettyyn. Se oli yksinkertaisesti julmaa. En halua palata työpaikalleni, en halua nähdä ketään sieltä. En halua kertoa tarinaani kellekään, koska purskahdan itkuun: vahva nainen pillittää kuin pikkulapsi. Häpeän itseäni, huonoa arvostelukykyäni, kyvyttömyyttä kuunnella itseäni. Kadun syvästi, että uskoin heidän lupauksiinsa. Kaikki tämä vaikka tiedän toimineeni oikein ja parhaani mukaan. Järjelläni ymmärrän sen olevan käsittämätöntä, mutta tunteeni elävät ihan omaa elämäänsä. En jaksakaan edes puolustautua. Olen loppu.

Above, exhaustion is accounted for as a result of intimidation that can strike even the hardest working and diligent person who has not violated any laws or rules. The story teller constructs herself as a person who had absolutely no reason to believe that anything like this could ever happen to her. She first gives herself the position of a strong professional worker but ends positioning her as being helpless and in shame. The injustice at work has been so taxing that she no longer can muster the strength to fight for her rights. She accounts for her awareness that she indeed should fight but finds it impossible as she is "done".

These types of situations can be accounted for as having become prolonged or chronic, with no easy solution anywhere in sight. The next sample illuminates this issue.

Female, 35-44 years, Bachelor of arts/science, (LEAR0000022)

These days I just obediently eat my pills and will probably never recover from my moderately difficult depression. Neither will I sleep without sleeping pills. So, all in all, I'm forced to ask to be put back to shift work but as a regular this time, as there's a threat of new lay-offs in the air. Time will tell how I make it through these new challenges.

Nykyään minä syön kiltisti pillereitäni enkä toivu varmaan ikinä keskivaikeasta masennuksestani enkä liioin nuku ilman lääkkeitä. Ja summa summarum, olen pakotettu pyytämään siirtoa takaisin vuorotöihin mutta nyt vakituiseksi, sillä firmassa uhkaa tulla jälleen irtisanomisia. Aika näyttää kuinka selviän tulevista haasteista.

Since the work is such an important element in most people's lives, it is described as very difficult or impossible to leave voluntarily. In the case there are no other job opportunities,

the stories of exhaustion end in a situation where one simply has to “bite the bullet” and go on even though the expectations of good working life have been shattered.

3.3.2 Survival

In some of the stories, however, fear at work is described as being abolished through the storytellers’ actions. Many story authors account about this process with such emphasis that it is fitting to call these their survival stories. We use the term survival since the narrative structures clearly support this interpretation: situations are described so that only if the author can muster the strength to fight back (in whatever way that is assessed suitable in any given situation and context) can his or her balance and control at work be restored. The next data excerpt is a good example.

Male, 25-34 years, Master of arts/science, (LEAR0000003)

I don’t know whether there was that much fear in this, but at least the mode of leadership was simply being an asshole / putting people down. The only fear at that time was the continuous soaring of the VISA bill due to the ever growing gasoline expenses. Since I wouldn’t submit to the constant knocking down, the only option was to find a new job which I luckily did. It just happened that I also responded to his fucking with me but I decided not to write down those discussions in detail.

(En tiedä liittyikö tähän sen enempää pelkoa, mutta johtamistapa oli ainakin vittuilu/nujertaminen. Ainoa pelko oli tuohon aikaan Visa-laskun jatkuva kasvaminen aina vain kohoavien bensakulujen takia. Kun en alistunut nujertamiseen, ainoa vaihtoehto oli vaihtaa työpaikkaa, minkä onneksi teinkin. Taisinpa myös lopulta vastata vittuiluun, mutta jätin yksityiskohtaisemmat keskustelumme kirjoittamatta).

Individual actions are described as crucial in maintaining uncompromised agency and control. Not only does the author account about landing a new job, but also about settling the score verbally with the manager that had caused him hard time. As a result, through these discursive strategies, the author emerges as a person who took charge of the situation and got through it unscathed.

Furthermore, a conflict can be accounted for between the feedback from the clients and the management. Even if scary tactics of intimidation are being employed by the management, the storyteller can construct his or her position as a solid one based on customer feedback and a good position in the labor market. Consider the following sample:

Female, 45-54 years, upper secondary school graduate / vocational education, (LEAR0000047)

After one of these meetings I sent the HR department my resignation. I got a nice deal after 15 years of service. I got a message that seemed like an automated reply where my resignation was accepted. Nobody came and asked or said anything. After the three month compulsory work period I just returned the employer’s equipment

and closed the office. My clients sent me flowers and gifts. The employer never paid any attention. I walked out of the building with my head held high.

I immediately got another job. But first I had an 8 week recovery holiday.

Yhden tilaisuuden jälkeen lähetin henkilöstöhallintoon oman irtisanoutumisilmoitukseni. 15 vuoden palvelusta sain mielestäni hyvän paketin. Sain automaattivastaukselta vaikuttaneen vastauksen, jossa irtisanoutumiseni hyväksyttiin. Kukaan ei tullut kysymään tai sanomaan yhtään mitään. 3 kk:n työvelvoitteen jälkeen palautin työnantajan tarvikkeet ja suljin toimiston. Sain asiakkailtani kukkia ja muita lahjoja. Työnantajani ei huomionnut millään tavalla. Poistuin itse talosta, pää pystyssä.

Sain heti uuden työpaikan. Pidin ensin 8 viikon toipumisloman.

The storyteller gains a strong position as a professional worker as she describes the positive feedback from her clients and the way she immediately got another job. Due to this expertise and the control she had in the situation she is able to describe having total control and pride in the situation. Not all of the survival stories are as dramatic though, as is illustrated by the next sample.

Female, >55 years, Master of arts/science, (LEAR0000048)

Luckily I work in a big organisation. I got to discuss with an executive superior to my own boss. I got a new assignment where I can utilise my expertise. My self esteem came back. These days the people who were related to my previous assignment can really be seen nowhere really.

(Onneksi olen isossa organisaatiossa. Pääsin keskustelemaan oman esimieheni yläpuolella olevan henkilön kanssa. Sain uuden tehtävän, jossa voin hyödyntää osaamistani. Itsetuntoni palasi. Nykyisin edellisessä toiminnossani olevat henkilöt ovat hyvin vähän missään näkyvillä).

Here, the survival means getting a new assignment despite the actions of the author's closest manager. Achieving this is also accounted for as bringing the author's self esteem back. Having lost one's self esteem is also repetitively described in the data, underlining the significance that work can have on one's well-being. The notion of personal victory is supported by the fact that the people who were related to her situation earlier are described to no longer hold any high profile positions in the organization. It can be difficult to fight for survival, since there are many factors that inhibit actions that could be taken in order to restore the balance that has been shaken by fear and intimidation. For example, the fear of making the conflict "public" can be very strong.

Organization psychology introduces the powerful psychological factor of "fear of ostracism and social death" (Lipman-Blumen 2005), which explains our compliance to the organizational rules and practices that continuously harm our personal well-being - toxic leaders among others. The fear of ostracism – or social death – keeps discontented followers from protesting the leader. Subdued by their fear of isolation, followers hide

their dissent. Several cases have been reported how confronting the toxic leader has led to professional and social suicide. (Lipman-Blumen 2005, 40).

The mistreatment at the workplace has been studied mainly from the perspective of personal traits of boss or subordinates. The persons who purposefully use intimidation and threatening are proposed to be aggressive in their nature. Those persons are also supposed to easily use physical or mental violence. This type of leadership may consist of verbal threats as well as silence, public humiliation and critics to performance, overloading work or decreasing the responsibilities etc. The subordinates has been reported to suffer stress syndromes, bad sleep and their self-esteem is low, they feel themselves uncertain, feel shame and guilt (e.g. Lipman-Blumen 2005). However, our data clearly suggest that not all intimidation happens in boss-subordinate relationships but also between co-workers. Furthermore, subordinates can also intimidate their boss in many ways.

3.3.3 Individual agency and coping with fear at work

As long as the core values related to good working life are met, the storytellers account for their satisfaction or at least some level of contentment about their jobs. At this point, they can sufficiently control and accept – based on their culturally shaped expectations – what happens to them and how they are being treated.

The data has numerous descriptions where the accepted norms of good working life are being ruptured. This is when fear is described to strike the employee (or the whole workplace): will he or she be able to resolve the conflict between the expectations of the management and his or her own expectations that are premised in the core values of working life. This rupture in the equilibrium of good working life creates tensions that people account for in their stories.

Depending on described individual control and agency the tensions may be resolved in a good way and the person “survives” the ordeal. On the other hand in some stories the lack of control and weak agency are accounted for as people make sense of the factors that lead to exhaustion. Figure 3 presents this dual nature of our data in graphical form.

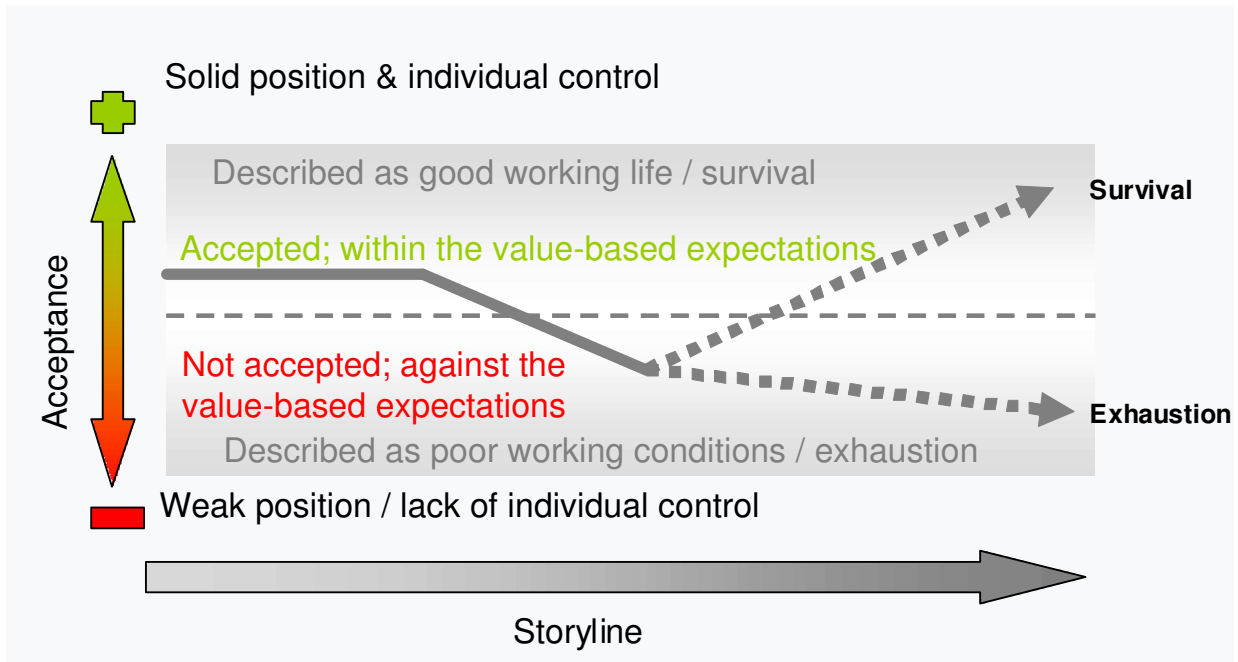


Figure 3. The story line in the accounts of survival and exhaustion as the function of the described individual agency & control.

4 Conclusions

This report is concerned with the analysis of stories about fear experienced at work: what kinds of roles do fear, intimidation, insecurity and anxiety play in the everyday working life in Finland. Previous chapters have discussed the methodology for analysing story data gathered by an online research platform, the narrative structures and two discourses that make sense of fear and power relations at work.

During the data gathering phase story authors were provided with story samples that are fictional although constructed so as to be realistic. Hence, these samples are a part of the shared resources available to members of culture. Obviously, they are not analysed but serve as stimulants (and examples about maintaining complete anonymity) to authors.

The authors (people in Finland) were invited to unanimously share (via the platform) their experiences about fear and intimidation at work. The nature of the online data gathering device is discussed in detail. The tasks of preserving authors' anonymity and ensuring compliance with current data registry legislation were carefully carried out throughout the research process.

The analysis of the stories about fear at work posed challenges. This report discussed a methodological approach that seeks to take into account the strengths and weaknesses of the data. While the narrative character of the data is acknowledged via the narrative summaries and producing a typology out of those, the data is also treated as a sample of the present day culture in Finland. This sample is in a form of language that lends itself to analysis based on the key assumptions of social constructionism.

The data were analysed firstly as narratives and narrative summaries are produced. This initial analysis and the summaries facilitate further analysis and help to specify the research questions. The narrative summaries were used to create a story typology. A preliminary typology was presented and its role in the analysis discussed briefly.

These types were then taken further by analysis that focuses on the language use and discursive work carried out in the stories. Hence, a discourse analytic approach was adapted in the analysis.

The way story authors assign meanings to various events and issues in their stories was of particular interest. As the emphasis in the analysis was in the discursive work carried out in the stories instead of the individual experiments, the stories emerge as a stage where meanings are assigned and negotiated and sense is made by invoking various cultural categories that enable the authors to accomplish and assign various positions to themselves and others. For example blame can be placed with discursive means to other people while the author maintaining a legitimate position within the framework of the story.

This approach to the analysis enabled the researchers to study such discursive work instead of trying to comprehend and report what “really” happened and what went wrong. Instead, fear and e.g. bad leadership practises were seen as social constructs that can be accounted for in specific ways in the surrounding culture. The researchers obviously only have accounts by single people whereas the situations described typically involve many people, even whole organizations. Clearly, trying to judge these situations as if the stories mirrored the “reality” as it unfolded would be a misguided effort. A solution to this was to approach the stories as arenas of cultural sense making that takes place in and through language use.

The six dimensions of fear that people described were discussed in some detail. These included various elements that are related to the individual position and well-being of the story teller as well as interaction and values related to work. 1) Interaction is an important dimension of fear as threats, yelling and other sorts of intimidation take place in interaction. Furthermore, when the atmosphere at work is toxic, interaction with certain people is increased while interaction with other people may stop altogether. 2) The perceived consequences of the situation (e.g. position, reputation, income, conflict) also play an important role in the experience of fear. In such intimidating or scary situations, a lot is at stake. 3) Ideals related to the work are important as they dictate the extent to which an individual is willing to adjust in any given situation. 4) Personal investment to the job and the perceived appreciation of it is also significant as people describe their loyalty

rather towards the current project they're involved with or their personal professionalism rather than their current employer. 5) Agency also plays a significant role. It consists of the ability to stay in control and the scope of action available to the person who faces the fear. Based on the descriptions in the data, losing this control increases the risk of ending up exhausted and ill because of the situation. 6) Personal well-being and health are key issues, as they have an impact to the job performance and they are also issues that are highly valued by the story tellers. No-one accounts for willingness to sacrifice their health because of fearful atmosphere at work.

Tensions in the boss – subordinate relationship were explored through the discursive work undertaken in the stories. These stories are premised with several conditions on how good (or simply tolerable) working life should be. Various values come into play here and when the actions at work come to conflict with these values, tensions are created. Based on the data, the following core values were identified: 1) equality, 2) respect of other people, 3) freedom, 4) honesty, 5) health, 6) obedience of the law, 7) physical autonomy, 8) Doing a good job. These values are utilised in the accounts about bad practises or intimidation at work. Data samples were given in order to illustrate the use of these values.

The tensions in the boss - subordinate relationships were also summarized in two figures (Figure 1 & 2), where the displays of dispositional power in relation to the value-based expectations at the workplace were illustrated. Tensions are accounted for as soon as the management comes up with non-justifiable actions that are against the value based expectations. Strong, non-justifiable displays of dispositional power, then, equal leadership by fear. A “green zone” of good management was also illustrated.

The discourse of survival and exhaustion was presented and the pathways to both of these ends were discussed. This discussion was strongly related to the tensions and values presented in the previous empirical chapter. The inquiry was based on the data grounded observation that as individuals face fear and intimidation, they will react in order to assess and alleviate the situation. From such conflicting situations many paths are described that lead to “survival” and many paths that lead to exhaustion, bitterness and giving up. As long as the core values related to good working life are met, the storytellers account for their satisfaction or at least some level of contentment about their jobs. At this point, they can sufficiently control and accept – based on their culturally shaped expectations – what happens to them and how they are being treated. This agency is crucial in the accounts about surviving or being devastated by the fearful atmosphere at the workplace.

In the heart of the discourse of survival and exhaustion is acceptance. The extent in which the practices and actions at work are acceptable within the framework of values that the individual subscribes to. In case the employee has means to regain or maintain control, he or she can survive the situation and achieve a position where he or she is being treated in a way that is acceptable. In case one does not have these means, the fearful situation can lead to exhaustion and bitterness particularly if the situation is prolonged. In figure 3 these pathways were illustrated in relation to value-based expectations of tolerable working life.

The research contributes to the sociological understanding of fear and intimidation at work. Insight was gained as to what sort of shared values contribute to the logic of the stories – how they play a part in producing sensible descriptions of fear and intimidation at work. The story typology illuminated the essential processes related to fear and the language-centred analysis carried this inquiry further by analysing the cultural foundations of such processes at work.

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